Emotions predict policy support: Why it matters how people feel about climate change

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Climate change
Emotion
Care
Identity
Field theory
Psychological distance

ABSTRACT

Current research shows that emotions can motivate climate engagement and action, but precisely how has received scant attention. We propose that strong emotional responses to climate change result from perceiving one’s “objects of care” as threatened by climate change, which motivates caring about climate change itself, and in turn predicts behaviour. In two studies, we find that climate scientists (N = 44) experience greater emotional intensity about climate change than do students (N = 94) and the general population (N = 205), and that patterns of emotional responses explain differences in support for climate change policy. Scientists tied their emotional responses to concern about consequences of climate change to future generations and the planet, as well as personal identities associated with responsibility to act. Our findings suggest that “objects of care” that link people to climate change may be crucial to understanding why some people feel more strongly about the issue than others, and how emotions can prompt action.

1. Introduction

The psychological study of climate change has progressed toward answering some major questions, such as why some accept and some deny the existence or severity of climate change, what barriers prevent action, and how to frame the issue to encourage acceptance and action. We now understand many reasons why people may not consider climate change a serious problem, and may not act. These range from limited cognitions that evolved from a different time, to factors involving trust, risk, social norms, and perceived efficacy of action (Gifford, 2011). There is also an extensive literature around the individual factors that predict climate change action, such as environmental values (Steg and Vlek, 2009; Van der Werff et al., 2014), and traits such as self-transcendence and connectedness to nature (Gifford and Nilsson, 2014; Cheung et al., 2014; Brügger et al., 2011), which touch on feelings of closeness to the planet. Through this research, we have come to understand some of the social, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of climate change. However, the precise role emotions play in understanding responses to climate change has received relatively little attention (Roesser, 2012).

Over time, awareness of climate change has increased. More than ever, people think that climate change is happening now, and will affect people and places near them, but emotional responses such as worry and concern remain low (Steenjes et al., 2017). Greater recognition of the role of emotions will help us understand not only how climate change is perceived by individuals, but also other interactions around climate change where emotions play a role: in activist groups and collective action movements (Harth et al., 2013), anti-climate change demonstrations, in climate change denial and avoidance (Norgaard, 2006), and in portrayals in media (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009).

Current research shows that emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt can motivate climate change action (Bamberg and Möser, 2007; Bissing-Olson et al., 2016; Ferguson and Branscombe, 2010; Harth et al., 2013; Lu and Schuld, 2016; Mallett et al., 2013; Rees et al., 2015). From this, two inferences have been made: 1) that those who care about climate change feel such emotions, and 2) inducing these emotions will elicit climate change action in other individuals. These inferences form the basis for interventions designed to emotionally appeal to the public. However, we suggest that groundwork for these inferences is under-developed. First, we know of no studies that have focused directly on people who care about climate change, or defined what it might mean to care about climate change. Second, there is little information about why people feel specific, or any, emotions about climate change.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.03.002
Received 22 August 2017; Received in revised form 22 January 2018; Accepted 4 March 2018
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1.1. To care about climate change

Little is known about what it means to “care about climate change”, possibly because it is difficult to define what caring means here. The verb “to care” has three relevant meanings in this context: to attach interest or importance to the object of care; to feel emotions such as anxiety or affection toward it; and to protect or safeguard it (i.e., to care for something).

Here, “climate change” is not the object of care, because it is not an object of affection, or a thing to be protected. Rather, it is a threat to things about which we care. To care about climate change is paradoxically not about climate change itself, but about the things that it will harm or take away from us. A similar idea has been put forth in research on environmental movements (Stern et al., 1999) and the consequences of environmental loss (Brügger et al., 2015; Albrecht et al., 2007), where implications for valued objects, or “objects of care”, are central to understanding human responses to environmental decline.

If we accept this interpretation of what it means to care about climate change, these objects of care could be viewed as connectors, ones that make the issue of climate change seem personally relevant to the individual.

The idea of “connectors”, introduced in ecological psychology, describes the influences on an individual in spatial terms. Lewin (1951) theorised that the individual can be understood as a function of spatial maps representing their entire physical, social, and inner mental environments. Within this framework, any entity that can influence the individual (e.g., a person, place, value, goal, or event) is represented as a region of space. All these regions can not only affect the individual, they can affect each other too. For instance, if we look at the spatial environment of a person who has a child, the child can be understood as a region of influence that can affect the individual’s thoughts and actions (Lewin, 1951). If the region “child” is perceived to be threatened by another region “climate change” then this may influence the individual’s thoughts and actions. As another example, a person may have a close attachment to a social or ideological group, and if this group is concerned about climate change, the group may serve to bring the issue closer to the individual. Yet another example is a person influenced by strong core values that are perceived to be threatened by climate change. By connecting the self to climate change, objects of care may bring the issue of climate change closer.

As implied by the term “bring closer”, each region may be located psychologically close to, or distantly from the individual, and these distances can change. Lewin used the term “locomotion” to describe the various interactions that regions may have with one another (Lewin, 1936). For instance, an “approach” interaction may reduce distance, while an “avoid” interaction increases distance. In the previous example, a parent may experience an approach response to “climate change” to protect their child, whereas a person without children may not. As will become clear next, these concepts are important to understanding why people care about climate change.

1.2. Psychological distance

Psychological distance – an indicator of how close or distant people feel from a particular object, event, or person – is of growing importance to climate change research, in part because in many studies, people report feeling distant from the impacts of climate change, and perceive that they will be largely unaffected (Howe et al., 2015; Leiserowitz, 2005; Spence et al., 2012; Steentjes et al., 2017). Correlational studies have shown that psychological distance relates negatively to pro-environmental action (Spence et al., 2012; Mcdonald et al., 2015), and consequently, several studies have tested interventions crafted to bring climate change closer to the individual – but the results of such studies have been mixed (Brügger et al., 2015; Mcdonald et al., 2015; Mcdonald et al., 2013; Scannell and Gifford, 2011; Spence and Pidgeon, 2010).

One reason for the mixed results may be the operationalisation of psychological distance in the context of bringing climate change closer. Psychological distance is typically measured through perceptions of personal risk from climate change, such as when and where it will occur, the likelihood with which it will occur, and who will be affected by it (Spence et al., 2012; Brügger, 2013). The argument is that proximalising climate change can make the issue seem more personally relevant, and more emotionally evocative (Brügger et al., 2015; Mcdonald et al., 2015).

However, this approach to reduce psychological distance assumes that the “self” and those people and places near to it are the only objects of care; climate change is close if people perceive themselves to be affected by it, or distant if they do not. This method only captures one reason for engaging with climate change. For this reason, it has been critiqued for presuming that proximity to self is necessary – and all that is necessary – to care about climate change (see Devine-Wright, 2013, for a discussion).

The psychological distance concept can be more broadly useful to explain the relationships between objects of care and the self. According to Lewin (1936), emotions such as fear, hope, and guilt serve as guides for behaviour, they are triggered by objects that shape the structure of one’s internal spatial environment. Fear, for instance, is an aversive response to the perception of an undesirable psychological future. “Objects of care” that appear threatened by climate change may trigger such emotional responses.

Only a handful of studies have looked at emotion as a part of psychological climate change (Brügger, 2013; Van Boven et al., 2010; Hackenbracht and Gasper, 2013; Davis et al., 2011). Objects and people that are psychologically close to us elicit stronger emotions than those that are distant (Hackenbracht and Gasper, 2013), and conversely, feeling strong emotions can reduce perceptions of psychological distance from an object or event (Van Boven et al., 2010). In the context of climate change, reducing distance can, by increasing risk perceptions, have similar consequences on behavioural intentions as manipulating negative emotion (fear) (Brügger, 2013). And while proximalising climate change can lead to greater emotional responses, the effect is reversed too: distancing oneself from climate change is thought to be a coping mechanism for potentially overwhelming feelings (Caillaud et al., 2015; Ojala, 2012a; Norgaard, 2006; Dickinson, 2009).

For many people, climate change is a threat that is happening now, and yet it remains a distant issue emotionally (Steenjtes et al., 2017). With a broader understanding of psychological distance, we can begin to understand why this might be the case.

1.3. Emotions and caring about climate change

Emotions tend to have a motivating effect on climate-relevant behaviour. The experience of negative affect relates to self-reported pro-environmental behaviours (Leviston and Walker, 2012), and climate change policy support (Leiserowitz, 2006; Smith and Leiserowitz, 2014). Even the incidental occurrence of emotions – emotions triggered by events unrelated to climate change – can influence mitigation policy preferences (Lu and Schuldt, 2015). Notably, the relationship between emotions and climate change action is not consistent in all contexts, particularly those that attempt to induce the former to produce the latter. For instance, some research suggests that negative emotions enhance perceptions of risk (Slovic et al., 2004), and greater perceptions of risk from climate change may then lead to increased action motivation. However, fear appeals–persuasive messages that stir negative emotions–can sometimes be counterproductive (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Similarly, messages of hope have been found to increase action in some cases (Myers et al., 2012; Ojala, 2012b) and reduce it in others by lowering risk perceptions (Hornsey and Fielding, 2016).

As Chapman et al. (2017) argue, such approaches tend to treat
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