



Transforming Despair: Narratives on Global Warming and its Effects

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Introduction

Understanding the implications of climate change can leave people at a loss, pushing them into a state of despair. Lertzman (2012) argues that emotions associated with negativity and despair can be transformative; only by acknowledging negative emotions can we become able to address climate change.

However, other research shows that talking about negative emotions can lead to defensiveness and disengagement. This project will answer the question of whether acknowledging negative emotions (despair, sadness, incapability) about environmental degradation and climate change can help us to more effectively respond to the crisis, and if so, how to best acknowledge and transform these emotions into positive action.



Literature Review

Psychologist Renee Lertzman argues that we should empathize with and acknowledge negative emotions rather than ignoring them, and meet people where they are, not where we want them to be. She believes that instead of sticking “a smiling face on everything,” we should adopt an approach rooted in an authentic acknowledgment of both reality and possibility. She argues that constantly seeing positive images (eg., happy communities, gardening) and messaging without seeing the negative (eg., landfills, oil rigs) could encourage in citizens the feeling that all is well and no further action on their part is needed. We plan to test this assertion empirically.

Environmental Messaging: Focus on the positive

In recent times the pro-environmental movement has often focused on positive messaging. Rather than acknowledging the detrimental consequences of human behavior on the environment, messaging has typically focused on the positive effects, such as the benefits recycling and biking. Some campaigns have used fear tactics (what will happen if we don't act), but rarely has messaging directly addressed despair.



This positive promotion extends to Oberlin's own Environmental Dashboard in its Community Voices section. Community Voices appears on public screens throughout Oberlin, and celebrates environmental stewardship and action. The Community Voices slides generally depict happy Oberlin citizens or peaceful nature scenes coupled with positive quotations about the Oberlin community and the sustainable actions they undertake.

Methods

Study 1

Student interviewers will interview people who live in an area where there was an environmental disaster on the nature of their personal, as well as community negative experiences, whether they transformed them, and if so how. An online survey of adults will ask people to describe how they respond to negative events more generally. The responses from both studies will inspire and inform the environmental messaging used in Study 2.

Study 2

A mock community voices slideshow incorporating negative unvarnished, negative transformative, call to action and positive quotes will be shown on an online survey of adults.

Examples:

- **Negative unvarnished:** “300 geese died because of city pollution.”
- **Negative transformative:** “300 geese died because of city pollution, but the city rallied together to clean the pond and save the remaining geese.”
- **Call to action:** “If pollution leaks into nature, it is our duty as polluters to reduce our waste and make selective choices in the materials we use.”
- **Positive:** “Our community makes sure no pollution gets in the nearby pond by maintaining trash cans.”

Immediately following this slideshow, participants will be faced with at least one of the following

- stem completion task (to measure the extent to which positive or negative emotions are activated)
- free association questions (to measure thoughts and feelings evoked from messaging)
- closed ended measures of environmental concern

I predict that the negative transformative will have the greatest effect in changing participant belief and stance on pro-environmental behavior.

Significance

If our predictions are supported, it could call for a change in the way Community Voices and other forms of environmental messaging address negative events and emotions. Future research will measure people's environmental behavior, policy preferences and willingness to take political action to promote sustainability in response to these messages.