

Confronting macrosocial worries: Worry about environmental problems and proactive coping among a group of young volunteers

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Available online 26 December 2006

Abstract

Studies indicate that young people's interest in and worries about global issues, including environmental problems, often are connected with pessimism and inactivity. The purpose of this interview study, therefore, is to explore whether we can learn how to cope proactively with environmental worries from young people who are already actively engaged in environmental and global justice organizations. How do these young volunteers experience and reflect upon their worry? Which individual and collective coping strategies are used? The results are analyzed in relation to existential and emotion theories, and it is concluded that if we want to promote both an active stance towards the global future and psychological well-being among young people, it is not the ability to get rid of worry that should be sought after but rather the capacity to face worry, to learn from it, and to use it for constructive actions. In this regard, cognitive strategies for activating positive emotions and positive aspects of being actively engaged are important to acknowledge, since they could help the young to take on this difficult task.

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1. Introduction

Few would deny that environmental problems such as climate change, resource depletion, and an increase in the use of hazardous chemicals are among the most vital challenges that face humanity on a worldwide scale today. As these problems are intertwined with the global pattern of production and consumption, technical solutions are

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not enough. It is also necessary to form new global political structures and to get the public involved in the strivings for an ecologically sustainable society. In order to create a global society that will bring ecological justice to people living in economically deprived countries, and that will last for generations to come, there is a need for creative images of the future on all levels of society. Because young people are those most likely to suffer the negative consequences of today's environmental problems, and since they are the future leaders of society, one could argue that this group is especially important to include in societal deliberations about environmental issues.

Unfortunately, studies have found that although many young people show an interest in and worry about global issues, this worry is often connected with feelings of pessimism, helplessness, and apathy [1–3]. Young people's images of the future on a global scale are fragmentary, mainly consisting of negative descriptions [2–4]. Additionally, people in this age group often lack a sense of how they themselves can contribute to these large and abstract questions [4,5]. This rather bleak picture is further supported by research showing that young people in many western countries are not collectively engaged in societal issues [5–7], and by studies which indicate that, on a private level, the gap between pro-environmental attitudes and actual pro-environmental behavior is largest among the young [8]. To top it off, recent studies show a decline in general psychological well-being, with increased levels of anxiety and depression, among youths living in different western countries [6,9,10]. These studies illustrate that there is a great need to pinpoint factors that could contribute to the transformation of macrosocial worries—in this case worry about global environmental problems—into constructive actions. This is important both if we would like to achieve a sustainable ecological society and if we want a thriving democracy where our young generation takes an active part in societal decisions.

The present study, therefore, is inspired by a new research tradition, mainly in psychology but also in social science at large, called “positive psychology”. This school of thought criticizes the one-sided focus on the negative characteristics of individuals, groups and society that is usual in the social sciences, and instead emphasizes the positive and constructive aspects of human nature [11]. Hence, the overall aim of this study is to explore whether we can learn how to deal constructively with worry about global environmental problems from young people who are active in the environmental and justice movement.

There already are some studies concentrating on actively engaged people as positive examples [12–16]. However, these studies have primarily been interested in lifestyle pioneers, often adults who have reached an exceptionally high degree of involvement in their organizations. Furthermore, these studies do not focus on emotions to any large extent, and when they do, they at least implicitly seem to follow the usual path of looking at negative emotions in general, and worry in particular, as solely negative things.

In the present study, the focus is instead on a group of ordinary young people between the ages of 19–25 who are actively engaged in environmental and justice organizations concerned with global issues. People belonging to this age group are still not part of the elite focused upon in the studies above, however, they are not so young that their engagement could primarily be seen as a reaction to pressures from peers or parents, or as a fashion fling. Another reason for concentrating on this age group is that nowadays in the western world identity development seems to take place later on in young people's lives. Therefore the expression “emerging adulthood”, a period between the late teens and the mid-to-late 20s, has been coined [17]. This is a time for exploration, not only in love and

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