



A cautionary note about messages of hope: Focusing on progress in reducing carbon emissions weakens mitigation motivation



Matthew J. Hornsey*, Kelly S. Fielding

University of Queensland, School of Psychology, Campbell Rd., St. Lucia, Australia

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ABSTRACT

For the first time this millennium, growth in carbon emissions has slowed. Indeed, the year 2014 was the first time in 40 years that the planet saw zero growth in emissions. We examine whether this message of progress can be effective in motivating people to engage in mitigation efforts. This question dovetails with commentary suggesting that gloomy messages about climate change risk fatiguing the population, and that alternative approaches are necessary. It is also informed by work suggesting that hope is a motivating force in terms of engaging in collective action and social change. Study 1 ($N = 574$) showed that negative emotions were strongly related to mitigation motivation and feelings of efficacy, but hope-related emotions had a much weaker relationship with these constructs. In the main experiment (Study 2: $N = 431$) participants read an optimistic, pessimistic, or neutral message about the rate of progress in reducing global carbon emissions. Relative to the pessimistic message, the optimistic message reduced participants' sense that climate change represented a risk to them, and the associated feelings of distress. Consequently, the optimistic message was less successful in increasing mitigation motivation than the pessimistic message. In sum, predictions that the optimistic message would increase efficacy did not transpire; concerns that the optimistic message would increase complacency did transpire. Recent progress in curbing global carbon emissions is welcome, but we found no evidence that messages focusing on this progress constitute an effective communication strategy.

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1. Introduction

One factor that unifies many of the people reading this article is hope: Hope that through public policy, technological advance and individual action, carbon emissions can be reduced sufficiently to mitigate climate change. This hope helps sustain us in the face of difficult and slow progress (Lazarus, 1999). Furthermore, there are emerging signs that this hope may be well-founded. In 2015 there was a global agreement on the reduction of climate change in the Paris World Climate Summit. In the same year the International Energy Agency announced that 2014 global emissions were unchanged from the previous year, the first time in 40 years the planet saw zero growth in emissions.

This information is encouraging for those people concerned about climate change. The question posed by this paper is whether these signs of progress can also form the basis for effective communications designed to promote more climate-friendly intentions in the population. Traditionally, messages designed to raise awareness about climate change have focused on relatively gloomy themes: the increasing rate of carbon emissions, for example, and the dramatic consequences of that for the planet (Hart and Feldman, 2014). But some commentators have suggested that extreme negativity can be overwhelming for people, causing them to tune out or reject the climate science (Feinberg and Willer, 2011; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009). This has led some researchers to examine whether climate change frames that focus on more constructive themes would have more success in creating positive engagement with mitigation efforts; for example the potential for action on climate change to promote green technologies (Bain et al., 2016; Bain et al., 2012) or to protect a valued way of life (Feygina et al., 2010). In this spirit, the current paper asks: Would a positive message of progress be a useful

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: m.hornsey@uq.edu.au (M.J. Hornsey), k.fielding@uq.edu.au (K.S. Fielding).

alternative in terms of catalyzing efforts at mitigating climate change?

Theoretically, focusing on the recently improved trajectory of climate emissions should have a positive effect on motivating mitigation efforts because it should promote efficacy. Specifically, knowing that the tide is turning with regard to carbon emissions should increase people's perceptions that climate change is reversible; that individual and collective efforts can make a difference. In turn, research has shown that efficacy with respect to mitigating climate change is strongly and positively correlated with individuals' intentions to reduce their carbon footprint (Hornsey et al., 2015; Milfont, 2012). So it would seem a short logical leap to predict that optimistic messages of progress would promote perceptions of efficacy, which in turn would motivate future mitigation efforts. This possibility – which we refer to as the motivational model – is summarized in the right-hand side of Fig. 1.

The link between hope, efficacy and behaviour has long been demonstrated in the broader field of collective action and social change. Feeling that the desired outcome is achievable is a major contributor to whether people will join in collective action to further a cause (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Relatedly, feelings of hope have been linked to efficacy, and messages of hope have also been associated with efforts to create social change (Greenaway et al., 2016).

To our knowledge only two studies have examined hope with respect to climate change. Smith and Leiserowitz (2014) asked people to rate the intensity with which they experienced various emotions when thinking about global warming. They also rated their support for various policies designed to mitigate climate change (e.g., cap and trade; funding for renewable energy sources). When all the emotions were included in a simultaneous regression, a single-item measure of hope emerged as a modest but significant predictor of support for mitigation policies ($\beta = 0.19$), although the predictive power of hope was much smaller than that of worry ($\beta = 0.49$).

More recently, Feldman and Hart (2016) exposed Americans to four types of messages about climate change: (1) an internal efficacy message (reinforcing how easy it is for Americans to provide feedback on a proposed government climate change plan); (2) an external efficacy message (reinforcing the notion that the

government would take feedback into account); (3) a response efficacy message (reinforcing the notion that the government can help stop the negative impacts of climate change); and (4) a no-efficacy control. The experiment showed that the efficacy-related messages indirectly increased climate-related political participation via hope.

It should be noted that the motivational model (shown in Fig. 1) is also consistent with one reading of fantasy realization theory (e.g., Oettingen et al., 2001). Fantasy realization theory is a goal regulation theory that distinguishes between expectations and free fantasies. Expectations are perceptions of how likely it is that certain future outcomes will occur (sometimes operationalized as efficacy). Free fantasies are thoughts and images in the mind's eye about an ideal future. In the context of our paper, one might imagine a future fantasy in which carbon emissions have been reduced to the point that the threat of climate change has been eliminated. The expectancy-based route to goal-setting occurs when people contrast their future fantasies with a negative current reality, and elaborate on the fact that the negative reality is an obstacle to their desired future. The theory then specifies how expectancies influence one's commitment to reach the ideal: "A strong goal commitment will emerge when expectations of success are high; when expectations of success are low, goal commitment will be weak" (Oettingen et al., 2001, p. 737). In the context of our study, we might interpret an optimistic message as encouraging high expectations of success, whereas a pessimistic message sets low expectations of success. This would be consistent with the motivational model: goal commitment is higher when the expectations of success are higher.

There are, however, theoretical reasons to be cautious about using hope as a communication frame. By definition, hope is an emotion that pairs positive feelings about the future with a desire for present circumstances to change (Lazarus, 1991). But if one is led to believe that circumstances are *already* changing, then the urgency to create change might be diluted. Indeed, it has been shown that high levels of faith in scientific progress and/or the competency of governments to cope with crises reinforces people's sense of control and order in the face of vast and unfathomable threats (Rutjens et al., 2010, 2013; Shepherd and Kay, 2014). This in turn buffers the anxiety associated with threats, and the associated

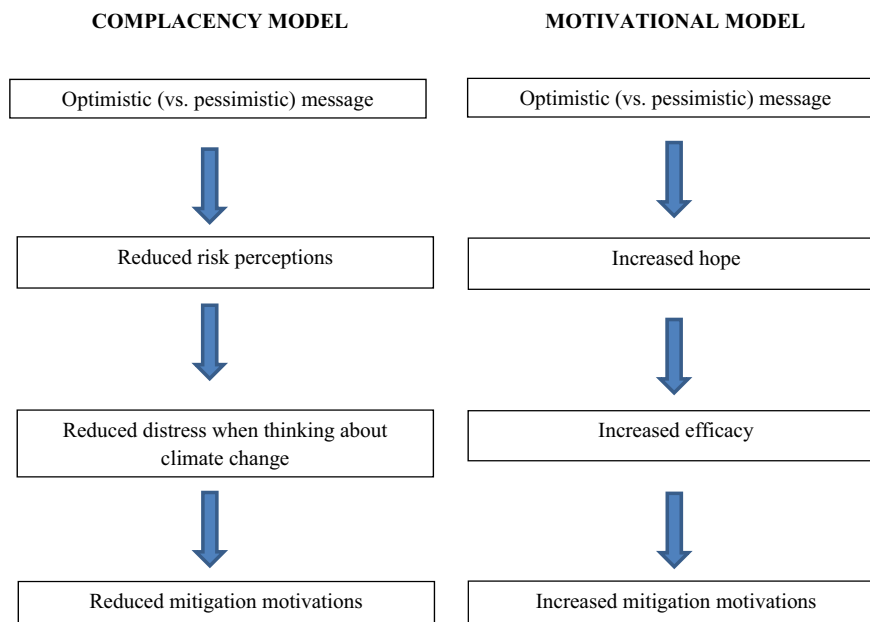


Fig. 1. Two models of how optimistic (versus pessimistic) messages about carbon emissions might influence mitigation motivation.

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