

Regulating worry, promoting hope: How children, adolescents, and young adults cope psychologically with climate change

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Introduction

Research indicates that many young people experience pessimism and helplessness regarding global environmental problems such as climate change. It is, therefore, important to explore how young people cope psychologically with this threat. Two empirical studies are presented: Study 1 is an explorative study with children/early adolescents (n=90) (mean age=11.7), late adolescents (n=146) (mean age=16.4), and young adults (n=123) (mean age=23.5). The aim was to investigate how these groups cope with worry and promote hope in relation to climate change. Study 2 is a quantitative study with a group of 12-year-olds (n=293). The main aim was to investigate the relations between different coping strategies concerning climate change and subjective well-being (positive and negative affect, life satisfaction) and environmental engagement (environmental efficacy and behavior).

Study 1

The three groups answered a questionnaire where they rated their worry and hope about climate change quantitatively and wrote freely about how they cope with worry and how they go about evoking hope. The qualitative coding (TA) of the young people's statements revealed several coping themes such as; denial, avoidance, positive reappraisal, trust in different societal actors, problem-focused coping, and existential hope. Notable differences between the age-groups were: That the children did not use as much problem-focused coping, and used more avoidance strategies to cope with worry compared to the two older groups. Concerning sources of hope the children used less positive reappraisal and instead had trust in researchers and technological development to a higher degree than the two older groups.

Study 2

In this study, the coping themes identified in study 1 were measured quantitatively in a group of 12-year-olds. A PCA revealed three reliable coping strategies; problem-focused coping (searching for information), distancing (including both denial and avoidance in the form of "I don't care") and positive reappraisal including trust. Problem-focused coping and positive reappraisal had positive associations with measures of environmental engagement, while distancing had negative associations with engagement. Furthermore, problem-focused coping was positively related to general negative affect, which was explained by the tendency for highly problem-focused children to worry more about climate change. In contrast, the more positive reappraisal the children used the less they experienced negative affect, and the more they experienced life-satisfaction, general positive affect and optimism. Finally, moderation analyses revealed that for children high on problem-focused coping, positive reappraisal, and optimism worked as buffers against negative affect.

Conclusion

Young people use diverse strategies to cope with climate change and among a group of 12-year-olds these strategies are shown to have different significant associations with measures of subjective well-being and environmental engagement. The results are discussed in relation to theories about the importance of positive emotions for constructive coping. Practical implications for education for sustainable development are elaborated upon.

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