Communicating Psychological Science: Global Threat Without a Global Consensus

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Climate change threatens humanity, but there’s no global consensus on how to combat it. In a 2022 survey, 87% of Europeans said that their government has moved too slowly to address climate change, while 74% of people in the United States said the same. In addition, though 92% of Europeans want to prioritize educational programs to increase children’s awareness of sustainable consumption, only 81% of Americans viewed such education as a priority (European Investment Bank, 2022). These numbers clearly show that Europeans are eager to see active educational and policy strategies.

Norway, for example, has an ambitious plan to fight climate change. In 2017, the country passed the Climate Act to decrease its greenhouse-gas emissions by 40% by 2030 and transition to a low-emission society by 2050. Norway already achieved a 34% reduction in fine particulate matter between 2005 and 2018 (Climate & Clear Air Coalition, 2023).

How do intervention practices work in a country like Norway, which has already met its commitment under the Gothenburg Protocol? Nature in Your Face, a project funded by the Norwegian Research Council, uses disruptive communication methods to trigger societal transition for fighting climate change. Psychological researchers Erica Löfström and Christian A. Klöckner and their team at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology are collaborating with social scientists, artists, environmental researchers, educators, and local and national stakeholders to create behavioral change in the areas of mobility, housing, food consumption, and use of plastic.

What is the Gothenburg Protocol?

The Gothenburg Protocol is a multi-national treaty that aims to reduce pollutants (e.g., sulfur dioxide) that are harmful to humans and affect global warming. First signed in 1999, the protocol came into effect in 2005 and was updated with amendments in 2012. Countries from North America, Europe, Eastern Europe, the Caucuses, and Central Asia are part of the protocol.

Central to the project is a set of methodological choices that create emotional responses. Recent research shows that when people engage with environmental content that triggers emotional reactions—such as a documentary that shows animals suffering in their natural habitat because of climate change—they are more likely to take individual climate actions than when they process environmental content passively, such as in mass media campaigns indicating the harms of environmental change (Klöckner, 2015). The project’s first study was based on this theoretical principle and took place in 2020 in collaboration with the Kristiansund municipality in the Nordmøre district of Møre og Romsdal county. The group created a vision workshop using pictures of plastic waste from a local plastic recycling plant and analyzed children’s responses at a local primary school.

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After looking at pictures of plastic waste, learning about the harmful effects of plastic for nature, and working on environment-themed art posters, children participated in qualitative interviews with the researchers. Their responses focused mostly on fear and frustration, the amount of plastic they saw in the pictures, and the positive or negative value of using plastic. Four main cognitive categories emerged
from children’s perception and understanding of plastic littering: eco-anxiety, denial, self-efficacy, and cognitive dissonance. The results showed that the psychological mechanisms children use are consistent with the literature on emotional responses triggering environmental action (Löfström et al., 2020).

The Nature in Your Face project aims to provoke responses in public spaces, as well. In September 2023, as part of a public workshop titled Exploring the Future of Humanity, the group created an audiovisual installation called the Lung Tree. The installation, which uses a combination of sound and light, presents information about the state of air quality in 250 cities around the world. During the workshop, the research group worked with a diverse group of participants, including children, to brainstorm what it means to be human today and what the future holds for the needs of humanity (Visit Norway, 2023). The results of this workshop could show whether creating interactive and disruptive art events successfully changes individual mindsets and behaviors related to climate change.

In a country where 93% of the population prioritizes educating children on climate change, it’s easy to find funding and public support for environmental interventions. But would this type of public event work in other countries?

Although there is public support for educational programs to fight climate change in the United States, legislation ties instructors’ hands. For example, the state of Ohio created constraints for educators with the recent passage of the Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act. Under the regulations of this act, colleges and universities are required to teach climate change by presenting “both sides” of the issue. This means that whenever educators use research results to address the reality of climate change, they will also need to state the ideas of groups who deny climate change. Higher education institutions will also face serious obstacles implementing sustainability initiatives under this bill (Waldman, 2023).

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This creates a challenge for imagining intervention measures. While Norwegian scholars are able to run workshops in collaboration with local schools, some U.S. scholars might feel that they need to walk on eggshells when they address the issue at the higher education level. This highlights the need for supportive policies to elevate the power of science and to educate the public about climate change. Without a collective effort at the policy, education, and research intersections, efforts to guide the public on sustainable behaviors will stall.

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References


