

Generational Narratives about Climate Change Worry but do not Motivate Young People ^{1, 2}

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INTRODUCTION

Older generations have contributed the most to climate change but future generations are expected to face the worst of its consequences. Activists from social movements often highlight this generational unfairness as a way to motivate young people to engage with environmental issues, but doing so may have unintended consequences. For example, highlighting differences between groups can undermine motivation to take collective action with others to mitigate and adapt to climate change. We present an experimental test of whether thinking about the climate change conversation as an intergenerational issue affects young people's climate motivations and their perceptions of older generations. We also tested whether cross-generational collaboration can be enhanced by highlighting similarities in concern about the environment.

DATA AND METHODS

A sample of 500 young people, aged 16 to 24 years, took part in the online experiment. Participants read a short text about climate change. Half were selected at random to read a version of the text written using a generational narrative, inspired by activist speeches that have garnered widespread media coverage. For example, participants read that there has been scientific agreement about climate change for over 30 years but “older generations did not do enough to stop it” and that “future generations are more likely to experience the worst effects.” Other participants read the same text but with no generational narrative. They then responded to questions about how worried they are about climate change and how worried they perceive older people and other young people to be.

¹ This Bulletin summarizes the findings from: Timmons, S., Andersson, Y. & Lunn, P. D. (2024). Communicating climate change as a generational issue: Experimental effects on youth worry, motivation and belief in collective action. *Climate Policy*.

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After rating how worried they *perceived* older people to be, half the participants were randomised to see the *actual* responses of older people to the question, based on data previously collected in Ireland. Participants then answered further questions, including about their belief in collective action for climate change mitigation (i.e., that others will play their part) and their intentions to engage in pro-environmental behaviour in the future.

RESULTS

The young people who read the generational narrative text reported being more worried about climate change than those in the control condition. They also reported higher levels of perceived worry among their friends and other young people.

However, the generational narrative had no effect on young people's intentions to engage in climate action.

The generational narrative also did not alter perceptions of older people's worry. Regardless of which version of the text they read, most young people (75%) underestimated how worried older people are. Furthermore, those participants who had underestimated and were then shown the correct response subsequently expressed greater belief in the likelihood of collective climate action to tackle climate change.

CONCLUSIONS

Generational differences in contributions to climate change and exposure to its consequences are difficult to deny, but focusing on these differences may have some negative impacts. Our results show that doing so increases worry among young people but does not motivate them to act. Most young people already underestimate how worried older generations are about climate change and correcting this misperception may be of benefit. More broadly, conversations about climate change that highlight commonalities between subgroups of the population, rather than differences, may encourage the kind of cooperation necessary to mitigate and adapt to climate change.