Dismal messages about global warming may increase scepticism

Dire messages about the impact of global warming may increase scepticism because they contradict a commonly held belief that the world is a just and orderly place. This is the conclusion of new psychological research which investigated the reaction of individuals to messages about global warming.

Despite the increasing amount of scientific evidence for global warming, there appears to be an increasing number of people who consider global warming to be non-existent or unrelated to human activities. Public appeals to increase pro-environmental behaviour often emphasise the severity of potential impacts of climate change. Ironically, it could be that these appeals are increasing scepticism in global warming.

The study investigated the role of “just world beliefs”, which are beliefs that the world is a fair and orderly place where rewards and punishments are delivered to those that deserve them accordingly. Information on the devastating impacts of climate change can threaten these “just world beliefs”, as they suggest a chaotic future in which innocent children will suffer. In order to hold onto their beliefs, individuals may deny or discount the evidence of global warming, resulting in increased scepticism and ultimately a decreased willingness to change their behaviour.

Using a sample of undergraduate students in the USA, the study indicated that the greater the belief in a just world, the more likely participants would become sceptical about climate change after reading a newspaper article that detailed the devastating consequences of global warming. However, if they read an article that communicated some positive messages in terms of finding solutions to carbon emissions, then the level of belief in a just world had no effect on scepticism.

The researchers further investigated the link between just world beliefs and scepticism about global warming. They experimentally manipulated the level of belief in a just world by exposing participants to just world beliefs in a language comprehension test. They discovered that those who had been exposed to just world statements demonstrated higher levels of scepticism after watching a 60 second video with a dire message about global warming, compared with those who had been primed to believe in an unjust world. Those exposed to just world beliefs were also less willing to change their lifestyle to reduce their carbon footprint.

The research indicates that dire messages about global warming which aim to encourage pro-environmental behaviour could in fact backfire and produce more scepticism and less positive behavioural change. This could be because the message challenges deeply held beliefs about the fairness of the world. However, if messages are delivered in a positive frame that refers to potential solutions then beliefs in a just world are not confronted so strongly and we remain open to global warming and our ability to contribute towards mitigation.

The study only involved Americans and researchers suggest that Americans may hold stronger just world beliefs than other nationalities. More research in this area is needed with other populations and to investigate more specifically which part of just world beliefs, e.g. fairness or predictability, conflict with negative global warming messages.


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