

Bouncing Back and Motivating Action on Environmental Issues: The Power of Positive Meaning

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Research Goals

The goal of our research is to assess how the way that people make meaning of the issue of climate change shapes their actions to advance that issue. We are interested in assessing how the cultivation of positive issue meaning about a challenging environmental issue equips individuals with psychological resources that facilitate taking action on the issue. By psychological resources, we mean “entities that are centrally valued in their own right or act as a means to obtain valued ends” (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307). Positive issue meaning refers to sensemaking beliefs, attitudes and appraisals about the significance, implications and consequences of an issue that imply something good, desirable or beneficial for the issue interpreter or someone or something that the issue interpreter cares about. For example, positive issue meaning could include meaning appraisals such as that the issue is seen as controllable or the issue is seen as significant for humankind.

We are interested in studying two primary effects of positive issue meaning. First, positive issue meaning may affect individuals’ level and range of proactive behaviors intended to improve the environment. Proactive behaviors refer to anticipatory action that individuals take to impact themselves and/or their environments (Grant & Ashford, 2007, p. 2). Second, positive meaning may build individuals’ resilience by allowing them to bounce back more quickly and effectively when they are confronted with issue setbacks and challenges. Both proactive behaviors and resilience arise from our theory that if individuals can construct and elaborate positive meanings about environmental issues (such as climate change), they are more resourceful in responding to the issue.

We will examine three types of primary resources. First, positive expectancies get created when individuals feel efficacious about an issue, and make calculations that they can make a difference for that issue (Vroom, 1964). Second, belongingness gets created when individuals locate their advocacy of an issue within a larger social community. We assume there is a basic human need for social connection with others (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), that when met, has motivational consequences (Walton and Cohen, forthcoming). Third, transcendence gets created when individuals attach a connection between an issue and a larger whole (such as society). Our main hypothesis will be that these three resources increase the range of positive emotions individuals experience when thinking about an issue (Fredrickson, 2001), quicken their recovery from negative emotions (Fredrickson, 1998), and serve as a motivational foundation for action and resilience. Psychologists argue that these emotional states affect individuals by altering the underlying physiological responses to challenging events, equipping individuals to respond differently. We contrast this resourcing perspective with what we call a “doomsday” approach. The doomsday approach focuses on the urgency of responding to an issue such as climate change by invoking catastrophic images, such as the pending destruction of the planet. Our central theoretical claim will be that will a doomsday approach might produce short term proactive behaviors, but it will not produce the resilience necessary for longer term, sustainable action to promote environmental issues. The doomsday approach creates resources needed for

proactive behaviors but does not produce the requisite resources needed to cope with adversity and subsequently bounce back from setbacks.