The social-psychological determinants of climate change risk perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours: a national study

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THESIS SUMMARY

The social-psychological determinants of climate change risk perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours: a national study

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Keywords: climate change; risk perception; behaviour change; environmental education.

Synopsis
Although human-caused climate change is one of the greatest societal challenges of the twenty-first century, insights from the social and behavioural sciences remain underrepresented in the mitigation debate. This is surprising given that the collective potential for reducing national carbon emissions through changes in individual lifestyles and behaviours has clearly been demonstrated. Accordingly, this thesis provides a more systematic understanding of the public’s perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. It does so specifically by examining the social-psychological determinants of climate change risk perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours using a longitudinal UK national survey (N = 808, wave 1 and N = 501, wave 2).

In the first part of the thesis, a social-psychological model of climate change risk perceptions is advanced. The model proposes that public risk perceptions of climate change are influenced by three key psychological dimensions, namely; (i) cognitive (e.g. knowledge), (ii) experiential (e.g. affect) and (iii) socio-cultural (e.g. values, social norms) factors. Results confirm the model’s validity and show that nearly 70% of the variance in public risk perception can be explained by the model’s components. Main findings also provide empirical support for a distinction between personal and societal risk judgments and highlight important differences in their psychological antecedents.

In the second part, a Domain-Context-Behaviour (DCB) model is advanced. The purpose of the model is to causally conceptualise the social-psychological determinants of pro-environmental attitudes, intentions, and behaviours. A key aspect of the DCB model is the notion that environmental values (i.e. the ‘domain’) and climate change cognitions, norms, and emotions (i.e. the ‘context’) do not influence specific mitigation intentions and behaviours (e.g. energy conservation) directly. Rather, they influence a broad and general orienting intention to help reduce climate change. This general intention in turn activates and predicts specific mitigation intentions directly as well as indirectly via behaviour-specific determinants. Important differences emerge between high-cost and low-cost behavioural changes. Overall, the DCB model explains 66% of the variance in general intentions, 57% in specific mitigation intentions, and 35% of the variance in mitigation behaviour. The thesis conclusion explores key implications of the findings for...
environmental education, risk communication, and behavioural public policy interventions.

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