

Climate impact experiences and the psychological distance of climate change

Climate change tends to be seen as a psychologically distance phenomena – empirical levels in the UK explored in our paper [The psychological distance of climate change](#)¹. Our research has found that experiences with climate impacts such as flooding impacts perceptions of climate change. People who have experienced flooding tend to be more concerned about climate change, feel more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, feel like climate change is more personally relevant to them, and actually feel like their behavioural choices are better able to have an impact on climate change. Importantly these perceptions also lead to intentions to be more sustainable in behaviour choices. See our paper [Perceptions of climate change and willingness to save energy related to flood experience](#)² for further details.

We extended this research by demonstrating that people who have experienced floods are more likely to experience negative emotions, such as sadness, anxiety, or anger. Details in our paper [Experience of extreme weather affects climate change mitigation and adaptation responses](#)³. In addition to being more likely to make sustainable personal behaviour choices, people who had experienced flooding were more likely to support policies designed to tackle sustainability issues. Perhaps



unsurprisingly, people who'd experienced flooding were more likely to undertake actions to adapt to flooding risks but interestingly they were also more likely than others to adapt to heatwaves, another potential climate change impact likely to affect the UK.



More recently we have also examined power outages as an experience that might draw people's attention to energy issues in the UK and perhaps also climate change indirectly – see our paper [Sustainability following adversity: Power outage experiences are related to greater energy saving intentions in the UK and Mexico](#)⁴.

Extreme weather often results in power outages. These have increased in the past 30 years and are expected to continue to increase due to changes in the climate⁵. Our preliminary studies⁴ here have found that people who have experienced power outages in the UK were more likely to be concerned about climate change and energy security issues. Our research here has also, for the first time, examined subsequent individual and social sustainable behavioural intentions separately⁴ (here energy saving intentions were examined) and found relationships between experiences of power outages (a similar pattern was subsequently found with flooding experiences), with social behavioural intentions, but not individual behavioural intentions. We conclude that the shared adverse experiences may promote prosocial interactions around environmental issues particularly.

Notably, only some people relate experiences to climate change, and as yet it is unclear if people do often relate power outages to climate change. This implies it may be useful to encourage people to link their experiences to climate change where relevant in order to promote sustainable behaviour. Given that adverse experiences particularly appear to promote social sustainable behavioural intentions where people collaborate with others, it may be particularly opportune to support community actions following adverse events such as flooding. It will be interesting to see if positive experiences that link to climate change, e.g. tree planting, have similar impacts on people's perceptions and subsequent behaviour.

References

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