

Asking if behavior can be changed on climate crisis

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Watkins and her co-author found that when people had reflected on past sacrifices they were more likely to report feeling a sense of moral obligation to future generations. They then asked whether they'd be willing to pay a higher tax or make other actual sacrifices in their daily lives to help future generations deal with climate change, but In this they found no effect, but there was a strong correlation between a sense of moral obligation to future generations and willingness to sacrifice for the environment. Credit: UMass Amherst

One of the more complex problems facing social psychologists today is whether any intervention can move people to change their behavior about climate change and protecting the environment for the sake of future generations.

Now researchers Hanne Melgård Watkins at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Geoffrey Goodwin at the University of Pennsylvania report after their recent experiments that an intergenerational reciprocity approach—asking people to reflect on sacrifices made in the past by others for their benefit today—may generate gratitude and a sense of moral [obligation](#) to people in the future.

Details of their studies exploring this are online now in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

As Watkins says, "The question is how to motivate people to care for [future generations](#). Other researchers have shown that reciprocity can be a powerful motivator. If someone does something for my benefit, that creates a sense of obligation to reciprocate, but if I can't reciprocate directly for some reason, I might instead try to "pay it forward." In our experiments, we tried to take that idea and scale it up to get people to feel a moral obligation to future generations by having them reflect on what people in previous generations had done for them."

She adds that intergenerational reciprocity research has shown that this approach can work, at least with people playing games. "If the last participant in a game paid their winnings forward, people are more likely to do the same for those coming along after them."

Overall, Watkins and Goodwin, who conducted this study while Watkins was at UPenn, state that "our studies revealed that such reflection—on

sacrifices made by past generations—predicts and causes a heightened sense of moral obligation towards future generations, mediated by gratitude. However there are also some downsides, for example, feelings of unworthiness, and perceptions of obligation do not substantially affect pro-environmental attitudes or motivations."

Further, "while reflecting on past generations' [sacrifice](#) can generate a sense of intergenerational obligation, it is limited in the extent to which it can increase pro-environmental concern." Watkins adds, "Feeling is one thing, actually doing is another."

With climate change, the researchers note that they had chosen a rather broad topic "more distant and diffuse" than some others investigated in previous studies on intergenerational reciprocity. Thus their survey asked respondents to reflect on past sacrifices made by their families or others during the fairly clear sacrifices made such as in the Great Depression, World War II, or by parents who scrimped and saved to put children through college; "big sacrifices that cannot be directly reciprocated," Watkins notes.

For this work, she and Goodwin conducted five experimental online studies where at least 200 participants and sometimes as many as 500, were asked to write reflections on either sacrifices made by past generations or, for the control condition, to write on fashion choices made by past generations. Subjects were Americans, half male, half female and though the sample was "not representative but a fairly well varied population," Watkins points out. At least one of the five studies was a replication of the first survey.

They found that when people had reflected on past sacrifices they were more likely to report feeling a sense of moral obligation to future generations. "We then asked whether they'd be willing to pay a higher tax or make other actual sacrifices in their daily lives to help future

generations deal with climate change," Watkins notes. "In this we found no effect," but there was a strong correlation between a sense of moral obligation to future generations and willingness to sacrifice. "This correlation may exist without any intervention," she adds.

Finally, Watkins reports that in a mini-meta-analysis of their five experiments, they did observe a small but significant effect on willingness to make sacrifices for the environment after reflecting on others' past sacrifices.

"It's nice that this might make a difference, but it's not clear whether it's large enough to use, to implement as an intervention," she points out. "We feel it is valuable to have explored the question, but if you want action on [climate change](#) you might be better served by trying something else. Maybe contact your local representative."

More information: Hanne M. Watkins et al, Reflecting on Sacrifices Made by Past Generations Increases a Sense of Obligation Towards Future Generations, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167219883610](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167219883610)

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