Linking climate change to natural disasters influences charitable aid

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When natural disasters strike - droughts, typhoons, floods - the media, charities, and science organizations appeal to the public both for aid to the victims and to communicate the causes of these events. Increasingly, as scientists link extreme weather events to climate change, people are mixing the discussion about climate change and aid. But a new study offers caution: Researchers found that linking a natural disaster with climate change caused climate change skeptics to justify the withholding of aid from victims.

When typhoon Haiyan struck in Philippines in 2013, killing more than 6,000 people, Daniel Chapman of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, was especially interested in the news reports framing the event as the product of human-caused climate change. He and his adviser Brian Lickel started to wonder how "speculation about this connection to a topic as politicized as climate change may influence how people think about the disaster and the victims," Chapman says.

"We are constantly trying to gain a better understanding of the influence of psychological processes in major world events," Chapman explains. "Climate change is a pressing global issue that possesses significant implications for human societies."

So Chapman and Lickel designed a study in which online participants read one of two hypothetical news stories about a famine in Sub-Saharan Africa. Both articles described the disaster but one of them also described possible links between the droughts causing the famine and

human-driven climate change; the other article had no mention of climate change. Both articles concluded by highlighting the need for aid relief in the region.

After reading the articles, the researchers surveyed the participants about whether they felt there was a big need to help alleviate the victims' suffering, whether they believed that the victims might be partially at fault for their situation, and several other measures of their perceptions of the disaster. They also asked whether the participants thought they might donate to the relief efforts and then about their political and climate change beliefs.

As published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* today, those participants who were highly skeptical of climate change reported greater justifications for not helping the victims when the disaster was attributed to climate change. And Chapman adds that: "In spite of there being a modest correlation between conservatism and skepticism, our results suggest that it is skepticism about climate change in particular, and not conservatism more generally, that drives our observed findings."

Past research has shown that individuals are motivated to construe facts and evidence in ways that align with their preexisting beliefs, for example misconstruing evidence about scientific consensus in the field of [climate science](#). But Chapman and Lickel wanted to see if there was an additional effect, such that linking a real-world event with a politicized topic could also affect individuals' perceptions of this event.

At the same time, they wanted to extend recent research that has highlighted the importance of a disaster's cause in influencing individuals' support for humanitarian relief operations. "Our work highlights that linking humanitarian relief efforts with politicized topics has an important influence on support for humanitarian aid." Outside of this research, he said, the majority of psychological research on

charitable giving has not explored these kinds of political dimensions.

To charities and media reaching out to the public after a natural disaster, Chapman offers caution in mixing the discussion of climate change-disaster links with appeals for aid: "Speculation about whether a disaster may or may not be caused by climate change appears to have negative rather than positive effects for some individuals' perceptions of disaster victims and willingness to help."

Chapman points out, too, that this phenomenon likely is not limited to climate change. "It is equally plausible that other politicized issues, such as gun control, nuclear energy, and the use of GMOs, could evoke similar responses in other contexts," he says. Future work will explore some of these links.

"Ideological beliefs shape our reactions to the world around us and mold how we interpret world events, but this is often not a conscious or deliberate process," Chapman says. "We hope that our findings and other related research can help raise individuals' awareness of how their own strongly held beliefs can influence the ways they evaluate scientific information and how they perceive world events."

They ultimately hope that this awareness can help to make individuals resilient against these processes. Says Chapman:"We hope future research will continue to expand the scope of investigation on charitable giving to better understand the multitude of processes affecting individuals' donation decisions."

  More information: The paper, "Climate Change and Disasters: How Framing Affects Justifications for Giving or Withholding Aid to Disaster Victims," by Daniel A. Chapman and Brian Lickel, was published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* online on June 16, 2015. spp.sagepub.com/content/early/ … 50615590448.abstract