Improving Flood Risk Communication by Focusing on Prevention-Focused Motivation

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Abstract
This article proposes an approach to flood risk communication that gives particular emphasis to the distinction between prevention and promotion motivation. According to E. Tory Higgins, the promotion system and the prevention system are assumed to coexist in every person, but one or the other may be temporarily or chronically more accessible. These insights have far-reaching implications for our understanding of people’s reasoning about risks. Flood risk communication framed in terms of prevention involves the notions of chance and harm, woven into a story about particular events that necessitate decisions to be more careful about safety issues and protect one’s family and oneself from danger. The article describes how the insights worked out in practice, using a flood risk communication experiment among a sample from the general population in a highly populated river delta of the Netherlands. It had a posttest-only control group design (n = 2,302). The results showed that risk communication had a large effect on the participants’ responses and that this effect was higher among chronic prevention-focused people than among others. Any information that increased the fit between a prevention-framed message and a person’s chronic prevention motivation produced stronger situationally induced, prevention-focused responses. This may significantly improve communication about risks. In contrast, the notion of water city projects, featuring waterside living, had more appeal to promotion-focused people.

Keywords
Communication, flood risk, motivation, prevention.

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