

# ENGAGING WITH CLIMATE CHANGE

An extract from the Introduction of Sally Weintrobe's *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. New Library of Psychoanalysis Beyond the Couch Series and Routledge: London (2012)

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## **Themes**

Here I outline as signposts for the reader only some of the major themes this book covers. These themes are picked up and elaborated in different ways in most of the chapters. I also highlight some distinctions drawn and issues raised.

### **Three forms of denial: denialism, disavowal and negation**

Climate change denial is an important topic in the book, and three forms are distinguished. These are denialism, disavowal and negation. This brings new and much needed clarity to the subject. It is important to distinguish the three as each form is radically different in cause and has different effects.

1. Denialism involves campaigns of misinformation about climate change, funded by commercial and ideological interests. Denialism seeks to undermine belief in climate science, and authors such as Monbiot (2006) have charted the techniques it uses. Denialism has been termed an industry and doubt is its main product (see Orestes and Conway 2010).

Cohen (author of *States of Denial*, 2000) points out in his discussion of Hoggett's essay (chapter 4) that 'denialism is expressed in a learned, shared public language; the activities of claim makers and moral entrepreneurs are organized, planned, intentional and – sometimes less obviously – ideological'. Hamilton, in chapter 2, charts the way that: 'global warming has been made a battleground in the wider culture wars' in the United States. He points out that denialists have 'adroitly used the instruments of democratic practice to erode the authority of professional expertise'. He means scientific expertise in particular. He observes that one can now predict a person's attitude to global warming if one knows their attitude to same-sex marriage, abortion and gun control.

2. Negation involves saying that something that is, is not. Negation defends against feelings of anxiety and loss and is often resorted to when the first shock of a painful reality makes it too much to bear, for now, all in one go. In a psychoanalytic account this is the first stage of mourning, where a person may begin by saying 'it's not true', then angrily accept it is true, and only then start to feel grief and acceptance.

3. In disavowal reality is more accepted, but its significance is minimized. In his discussion Cohen writes: ' "True denial" requires the special paradox of knowing and not-knowing at the same time.' His definition of 'true denial' corresponds with the psychoanalytic concept of disavowal.

The distinction between negation and disavowal is an important

one when looking at climate change denial. On the face of it, to deny reality in an outright way (negation) can seem a more serious evasion than seeing it, but with one eye only (disavowal). However, when one looks beneath the surface and studies the underlying structure of the defences in each case, disavowal is a more serious and intractable form of denial. Negation is a more transient defence and can be a first step towards accepting the painful reality of climate change. And, while negation says no to the truth, it does not distort the truth. Disavowal, by contrast, can be highly organized at an unconscious level and can become entrenched. It distorts the truth in a variety of artful ways. Disavowal can lead us further and further away from accepting the reality of climate change, with murderous and suicidal consequences. This is because the more reality is systematically avoided through making it insignificant or through distortion, the more anxiety builds up unconsciously, and the greater is the need to defend with further disavowal. In the long run disavowal can lead to a spiral of minimizing reality with an underlying buildup of anxiety and this makes it dangerous.

Because disavowal involves an entrenched 'quick fix' approach to problems, it actually only stores them up for later with interest accrued. It involves a destructive attack on the rational mind and is anti-meaning. Disavowal can arise in individuals or in groups of people, and it can also characterize a culture. Hoggett describes in illuminating detail the features of a perverse culture of disavowal. The prevailing view across the chapters is that currently denialism and disavowal are the dominant forms of climate change denial in Western societies.

## **Destructiveness**

Many essays address how we most disavow our destructiveness. One caricature of a psychoanalytic view is of mankind as inherently destructive – a position that does not give sufficient weight to our loving and reparative wishes and

behaviour. The psychoanalytic point is different, however: that what is truly destructive is disavowing our destructiveness. When the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal (1987) said (about the issue of nuclear weapons) 'silence is the real crime', she meant silence about our destructiveness. In states of disavowal of reality our destructiveness is minimized and a delusional state of inner tranquility is maintained as our own dissenting and protesting inner voices are silenced.

Different aspects of our destructiveness are highlighted in the chapters. One aspect, raised by Keene, is the sadism and glee we can take in destroying things quickly that it takes so long to build and repair. Brearley, in his discussion (chapter 7), quoting Homer on Sin and Prayer, conveys this inner situation beautifully:

*'Destructiveness, sure-footed and strong, races around the world doing harm, followed haltingly by Prayer, which is lame, wrinkled, and has difficulty seeing, and goes to great lengths trying to put things right'* ( The Iliad, Book 9: lines 502ff, Brearley's own translation).

Keene also discusses disavowal of guilt and pain about our destructiveness to others and to the Earth, especially through our current levels of Western exploitation. He cites the Seattle Convention (1999) in arguing for continuing economic growth, 'chillingly describing as "zones of sacrifice" those whose environments or communities are destroyed in the process'. Keene writes, 'I would add here as long as they can remain out of sight and so out of mind'.

One theme is how disavowing destructiveness can go together with feeling part of a superior in-group and viewing the out-group with an eye that distorts it with dehumanizing prejudice. Rustin describes the way we split into groups of superior us and inferior them. I give examples of this kind of splitting in chapter 9 in relation to how we denigrate animals we then exploit and

maltreat. It is easier to exploit others and treat them with violence if they are seen as denigrated and not sharing common ground and common cause with 'us'. Cohen talks of the way we create 'distant others': if we can keep our emotional distance, we can exploit people more easily. In the chapter on nature I suggest how the 'distant other' might be represented within the psyche.

Randall in her essay (chapter 5) discusses the way we turn a blind eye to where our consumer products come from and the environmental and human costs they entail. She also makes links with issues of social justice, adding that most of us prefer to keep obscure our relationships of exploitation with those who work to provide our consumer goods. We may like to think that we are ignorant of where our food, clothes and machines come from – 'gosh, I just never thought about it' – and it is true that the media makes it difficult to get information, but in a general culture of disavowal we also unconsciously choose to remain blind. If knowledge of the damage we cause were felt and owned, it would trigger guilt and shame.

In Brenman Pick's (chapter 6) evocative use of the title of Pinter's play *Not I*, it is NOT I who shoulders any of the blame for wanting to 'have it all and be it all'. Hamilton notes that it is responsibility for both the problem and the solution that is disavowed. Randall's chapter is a detailed exploration of some of the difficulties in confronting the shock of realizing that it 'IS I' who shoulders some of the blame.

One of the consequences of disavowal is an increasing difficulty in thinking with any sense of proportion about issues of guilt and responsibility for our share of the damage. With disavowal we can simultaneously feel it is not my fault while unconsciously increasingly feeling it is all my fault, thereby losing an ordinary sense of *mea culpa* – that it is some of my fault.

Disavowal of our destructiveness is discussed in several chapters as a failure to work through ambivalence in our conflicting self-representations. In the West we feel narcissistically entitled to consume what we want from wherever we want when we want, and we also simultaneously want to protect the environment. Facing this conflict and working it through would involve facing our destructiveness towards the environment and towards our own minds.

## **Anxiety**

The ways in which we resort to irrationality as a means to try to cope with too much unacknowledged anxiety is one of the most important obstacles to our effective engagement with climate change. In my essay on anxiety I go into two main and conflicting sets of anxieties about the meaning of climate change for us. I look at disavowal as an organized means of trying to minimize both sets of anxieties. I also argue that we need support to bear the anxieties that come with facing climate change.

## **Apathy**

Apathy is the subject of Lertzman's essay (chapter 6), and the topic is also raised from different perspectives in several other chapters. Lertzman argues that rather than feel too little about environmental degradation – the common explanation for apathy – we feel too much. Being unable adequately to mourn natural landscapes we have loved and lost to pollution and environmental degradation, we remain trapped in what she calls an environmental melancholia. Here she uses Freud's ideas on melancholia, taken particularly from his paper 'On Transience' (Freud 1916). She highlights Freud's idea that we lose our pride when we allow our world to be robbed of its beauties. Freud was describing the general devastation brought about by the Great War, which had robbed the world of its beauties. "It destroyed

not only the beauty of the landscapes through which it passed, and the artworks that it encountered on its way, it also shattered our pride at the accomplishments of our civilization, our respect for so many thinkers and artists, our hopes of finally overcoming the differences among peoples and races. . . . In this way it robbed us of so much that we had loved, and showed us the fragility of much that we had considered stable". (Freud 1916: 307).

Here war is evoked by Freud as a destructive force trashing all that has meaning in its wake and being, in Hanna Segal's phrase, 'anti-mind'. Several chapters support Lertzman's analysis that melancholia is a good diagnostic description of our difficulties in mourning our lost trashed environments and a stable climate. Mauss-Hanke discusses apathy as a position of claustrophobia between a fear of change and the scorching pain of getting in touch with our difficult feelings of guilt and loss, feelings that involve us in revisiting earlier painful childhood situations of trauma and loss. Keene writes: 'I believe it is the problem of how to influence policy, more than apathy or individual greed, that makes individual impulses to care for the planet seem hopeless or futile.' Keene situates as apathy our feelings of hopelessness and futility about influencing current destructive policies. This is a somewhat different view to Lertzman, who seems to see the lack of a political response as part of the apathy. For Keene, the apathy refers more to an experience of feeling a lack of political power and voice to make a difference, whereas for Lertzman the issue is of apathy experienced more as depression. Both perspectives are important. When we feel a lack of strength and a lack of pride due to underlying depression, we are also not so able to mount political resistance. The psychoanalyst Eric Brenman (1985) noted that it takes inner strength to stand up to omnipotent ways of thinking when they are powerfully in charge.

## **Cultural influences**

Several chapters make the point that in the West we live in cultures that encourage narcissism and encourage us as consumers; they draw attention to ways a culture may be internalized within the psyche. Randall (chapter 5) suggests that 'the needs of late capitalism are well served by personalities who are alienated from the rest of the natural world and who are dependent on material satisfactions to sustain their sense of self-worth and identity'. In my chapter on nature (chapter 9) I look at some ways that advertising and current TV programmes can promote this sense of alienation. Hinshelwood (chapter 7) argues that 'cultural icons grab us deep in our souls, at the place where we were once children', and Keene (chapter 7) points out that 'the cultural expectations that surround us are the medium in which our individual superegos swim and develop'.

### **Doing the work of engaging with our feelings**

With all these difficulties, how do we come to face reality and engage with climate change? This question is addressed from different perspectives in the book. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, facing any painful reality is always hard emotional work that needs to be ongoing. The work involves facing our self-idealizations, mourning our illusions and bearing difficult feelings. It involves knowing as much as possible about the facts of human nature and mourning our illusions about human nature too.

The work also includes understanding the sorts of defences we use to deny reality. Examples of the defences we use are discussed in some detail in the chapters. They include splitting, projection and the way we may identify defensively with idealized figures to 'big ourselves up' when we feel small, dependent and anxious. Keene, Hinshelwood, Randall and I all look at different aspects of idealization and its effects. Another kind of idealization is thinking we will be saved by idealized leaders (Steiner makes this point in his discussion in chapter 4).



An important part of the impetus for engaging with a painful reality is the wish to repair damage. This is what is meant by the psychoanalytic concept of reparation, where reparation is the emotional work required to enable necessary change.

Randall in her essay (chapter 5) looks at situations where people start to do the emotional work necessary for making life-style 'carbon repair' changes. It is noticeable that in all cases the problem is personally owned in a feeling way.

Repairing involves facing destructiveness but also involves seeing the self in an entirely new and shockingly different light. Randall uses Dickens' story *Great Expectations* to illustrate the shock and pain of recognizing true environmental dependence and indebtedness. She charts how Pip was shocked to realize that whereas he thought he was dependent on Miss Havisham, it was actually to Madgwick that he owed his good fortune. Randall, in describing her work with people seeking to reduce their carbon emissions, tells of people undergoing a moment of shock, where, as she puts it, the truth 'would not go back in the box'.

Probably many small moments of shock go into producing a moment of shock that breaks through defensive processes of negation and disavowal.

Several essays highlight that change can be fearsome and potentially destabilizing. This is particularly the case when reality has been disavowed and 'good' authority figures – on the side of facing the truth – are held in contempt. With no good authority recognized, there is no containing support for change.

Reparation is ongoing and involves the work of managing emotions, a view Randall puts forward in her essay (chapter 5) and I argue in my anxiety essay (chapter 3). Randall and I both underline the importance of developing a sense of proportion

about personal guilt for climate change as central to reparation. Randall writes:

'Those who managed best were those who had developed a clear sense of proportionality and placed some boundaries round their responsibility. For one person this meant protecting herself from the amount of news she read. For another it was creating a plan for the personal changes she would make. For several, it helped to see the political dimension and the power relationships clearly. It helped to understand neo-colonialism and globalization, to contribute to a political programme, or simply to point the finger at BP or bankers and say, 'It's not all my fault.'

Once some responsibility has been admitted, the eternal manic-depressive swing of 'pass the parcel of blame' ends (it's all your fault; no it's all my fault) and awareness of one's own part in a perverse collusion can begin.

### **Our dependency on the Earth**

Many chapters go into our dependency on the Earth for our survival and the ways we deny this dependency. In my chapter on anxiety (chapter 3) I suggest that this dependency is the source of our deepest underlying anxieties about climate change. Lehtonen and Välimäki, in their discussion, argue that denial of our dependency on the Earth has come to constitute a modern neurosis. Anxieties about climate change are seen to revive feelings of dependency we had on our parents as small children and can revive traumatic experiences of being abandoned in states of utter need (see, in particular, Margaret Rustin's discussion). Mauss-Hanke argues that when we think of 'saving the planet', we may be projecting our dependency on the Earth onto the Earth, which is then seen as needing us. Keene describes us as treating the Earth as a 'breast-and-toilet mother', there solely to provide for our needs

and to absorb our waste. Brenman Pick talks of how environmental damage revives our earliest anxieties of having damaged the mother with our greed.

### **The issue of hope**

Part of working through our feelings involves allowing ourselves to feel depressed. Steiner outlines Klein's description of our experience of depression when we face our destructiveness: 'It arises because . . . attempts to protect (the good things we value) have been weak in comparison with the power of destructive forces mounted against them.'

Steiner observes that when he read Hoggett's essay, he felt depressed – a reaction that he regards as appropriate when faced with the reality that we are living in a perverse culture of denialism and disavowal of climate change. He argues for knowing as much as possible about perverse mechanisms and the perverse culture. He writes, 'The best we can do is to be alert to the likelihood that we are under the sway of a perverse argument and to be aware of our own propensity to join in the collusions.'

Facing reality involves finding the strength to face one's and others' destructiveness so as to be able to make what repairs we can. This is a situation of sadness and depression that, if worked through, can lead to greater hopefulness and renewed energy to work for change.

### **Some policy implications**

Questions researchers ask are profoundly influenced by their underlying ways of seeing, by their theoretical models and by what counts for them as legitimate data. Much current writing on our engagement with climate change reveals a lack of interest in formulating underlying theories of any sophistication about how

the mind actually works, how experience is represented within the mind and about the deeper structures that organize our experience, both at an individual and at a group level. Underlying models in much current research on our engagement with climate change typically cast humankind as rational and see people's conscious attitudes as an accurate reflection of what they think (for instance, in opinion polls). The models tend to assume a unitary non-divided self. Nearly all research confines itself to looking only at behaviour that can be measured. The zeitgeist is currently that if it cannot be directly seen and measured, it is not legitimate, and we do not want to know about it.

But, measurement is far from all. Within this framework, issues of subjectivity and meaning – not measurable or losing meaning when measured – can be 'safely' ignored. Deeper structures are also not measurable.

All this has profound implications for policy about how to engage people in thinking about climate change. Engaging people means finding ways to relate to them about what climate change and degradation of the natural world actually means to them in a way that supports their anxieties and feared losses. It also means taking serious account of the organized ways we defend against reality when it feels too much to bear. All the psychoanalytic essays in this book make this point.

Currently popular are 'nudge-and-incentivize' policies to encourage us towards more pro-environmental behaviour. Based on Thaler's theory of behavioural economics and cognitive theory (see Thaler and Sunstein 2009), these policies, while recognizing us as conflicted and often irrational, are designed to spare us any difficulty in engaging emotionally with climate change. Elsewhere (Weintrobe 2011) I suggested that what they actually promote is the idea that we should rely on (and presumably vote for) ideal leaders who are magically able to

bring about changes in our behaviour in ways that will spare us any difficulties. Policies such as 'nudge and incentivize' do not help us to begin to face our anxieties and our depressing realities, both necessary for engagement. Indeed, there are no 'quick fixes' for engagement that can lead to a radical, felt and lived reorientation in our relationships to ourselves, to others and to nature.

Genuine support and leadership that is mindful can make the ongoing difficult work of engagement easier. Real un-idealized leadership supports people in facing their feelings to make necessary difficult changes. It can do this by relating to their anxieties and their need to mourn what they have lost and by providing leadership and public space for facing our conflicts and working through our private feelings. Real leadership bases policy on a deeper understanding that while people are conflicted and do want to avoid difficulty, they do need to face reality and experience their feelings of anger and grief at what they have lost before they are able to move on.

NGOs involved in the project Common Cause 3 use an approach that is based on a conflict model of people – that of 'frames and values' – which supports people in making environmentally friendly changes in real and more lasting ways. The approach recognizes that 'transcendent values' inevitably vie with 'instrumental values'. It identifies underlying deeper frames that leads 'Common Cause' NGOs, for instance, to argue that banning advertising to children can be a climate change engagement measure; it also leads to their arguing that giving people financial inducements to save energy might in some circumstances actually be counterproductive to effective engagement with climate change, because it promotes instrumental values in an underlying way. Crompton outlines this position in his discussion of my chapter on nature (chapter 9).

This book, based on psychoanalytic and interdisciplinary

exchange, breaks new ground, providing new and much needed perspectives on our engagement with climate change. The chapters that follow are a feast.