

John Thorne: Using the Psycho-Social Approach to Engage with Climate Change

We live in a time of great anxiety due to Climate Change, but our response is muted. Only a psycho-social approach can help us accept our possible futures and to take action.

A few years ago an eminent group of psychoanalysts and psychologists realised that many more people were presenting to them with clear signs of Climate Change related anxiety. The group formed the Climate Psychology Alliance¹ to highlight the psychological issues being faced by individuals within society, and sought to involve other professional disciplines to mitigate climate change.

Climate Change causes psychological effects on individuals within society, a “psycho-social” effect. How we react to climate change relies heavily on our instinctive brain, built on 200,000 years of cave-person development, and which doesn’t deal well with distant threats. We are programmed to notice and run away quickly from charging elephants, but are ill-equipped to react to a herd of milling elephants many miles away. Or to put it into a modern context, we react fast to issues around family, work and hobbies, or a flood on our doorstep, a burglar in our house, a punch to the nose, but slowly if at all to a creeping, existential threat to the climate.

The threat to humanity *is* existential. We face a societal collapse through changes to our climate. Our reaction to this psychological threat is a psychological process where we disbelieve, hide, transfer that feeling of threat, grab at possible tech fixes, are angry and confused, blame others, avoid responsibility, and respond by losing ourselves in the easy hedonism and busyness of our modern capitalist society.

If we allow ourselves to feel at all, we feel guilty; for every thing we buy, for every action we make. We know it has an environmental cost, but in a complex society there is no escape: the most organic carrot is wrapped in unseen fossil fuel plastic for delivery, delivered on a diesel truck, seeded and harvested by a diesel tractor whose tyres are made of fossil fuel plastic, the farmer wearing harmful polyester, which all directly links to this existential threat...the links go on and on and it is overwhelming, which causes us to deny that it is happening now, happening to us.

The types of denial² range from negation that it is happening at all, to disavowal, the dangerous state in which we know but deny at the same time, sometimes defined as “turning a blind eye”.

Denial is powerful. We can ignore 1,138 deaths in one clothing factory³ and still shop where the cheap clothes are sold; we buy DVD players whose makers have gone blind making them, wear gold and silver mined in slave-conditions, and use mobile

¹ <http://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/>

² <https://vimeo.com/78805269>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/18/rana-plaza-collapse-murder-charges-garment-factory>

phones containing minerals from conflict ridden areas whose miners don't get paid a fraction of their real value to us.⁴ We are all guilty just by being, breathing, taking the car to the supermarket, eating, travelling, taking a holiday or heating our homes.

This isn't just present guilt, but it is the sins of our fathers. We live in a society that has developed as a patriarchy, aided and abetted by a male-led series of religions that puts our soul and distinct categories of humans above everything and everyone else. This is useful. Once we devalue something or someone we can subjugate them to our use, and use and dispose of them at will. There is a reason we have words such as "savage" in our lexicon, why animals have no rights, and why we feel entitled to take what we need, including the contents of the sea, and fossil fuels that should remain locked forever in the Earth.

In the past 20 years we've lost 75% of all insects.⁵ In 40 years we have lost 40% of all global wildlife.⁶ In 50 years I have been alive our proliferation has added 4.1 billion extra people.⁷ We lose 13% of arctic ice a decade,⁸ and parts of the arctic are over 20°C warmer this year than usual.⁹ We are already psychologically in mourning for our future loss.

The planet is dying, and fast. Current projections by the IPCC do not include feedback loops which will accelerate change.¹⁰ We know Climate Change is happening, but are underestimating both the catastrophic extremes that are imminent, and the speed at which permanent damage will be done.¹¹

Feeling anxious? Feeling helplessly guilty yet? We're stuck in a capitalist system from which there is seemingly no escape, our leaders seem clueless – which adds another layer of anxiety – and personal actions feel meaningless.

We're told to "save the planet" to minimise our impact, a term that generalises the threat when the real losers here are humanity. We talk of save the rhino, save the whale, but the psychological elephant in the room is the loss of us, ourselves.

If we are to face up to our existential threat we have to realise that we are all guilty. You are guilty. I am guilty. Not just the ruling elite presently grabbing all the money they can, but the consuming middle classes protecting what they can hold on to. All of us live in a modern society that is developed, funded, shaped and supported by exploitative, constructed, systemised consumerism. We all live on the backs of

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQhLUbW0tE>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/18/warning-of-ecological-armed-don-after-dramatic-plunge-in-insect-numbers>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf>

⁷ <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Lesson-Plans/HumanPopulation/PopulationGrowth.aspx>

⁸ <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/arctic-sea-ice/>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/feb/27/arctic-warming-scientists-alarmed-by-crazy-temperature-rises>

¹⁰ <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/grantham-institute/public/publications/briefing-papers/Biosphere-feedbacks-and-climate-change-Briefing-Paper-No-12v2.pdf>

¹¹

others, unseen, un-thought and unreported.¹² We know this and we react with disavowal.

The Psycho-Social Response

If we're all guilty, then how to change the system? The fact that we are in a system is one hope, for systems can be changed. We must focus not on consumer-led demand but on systematic change to supply. We know that the ideas put forward so far are sticking plasters on a gaping wound, and knowing it makes our situation feel even more desperate. "Plastic free supermarket aisles", extolling us to recycle and changing light bulbs are psychologically damaging, we know it won't save us.

We need to undertake a fundamental re-examination of how we got here, our historical debt, our current impacts and we need to paint a positive, possible future. The hypocrisy of modern society is damaging our psychological ability to adapt and survive.

This psychological response can be proportional: we are each one in 7.6 billionth of the problem, but those who can do more should do more. Take action where you are, or where you can position yourself to be to have maximum impact.

We should examine our feelings: Climate Change is not an environmental issue; it is an emotional, social and cultural one and overwhelmingly a psychological one. What we don't connect with we don't value: consider refugee deaths in the Med, or drying-up lakes in Africa, we have never met or seen such people or things, so have no connection and no value to their loss. The greater the numbers of people killed, or the amount of water lost, the number of trees cut down, the less we can allow ourselves to care or we risk psychological damage.

Vital, is the correct use of language. We should talk about the existential threat to things we love and connect to – which aren't polar bears and white tigers, or arctic ice flows, or Lake Chad, but ourselves and our children. Only a psychological approach can quickly connect us emotionally to issues and provide possibilities to change the system. Knowing we are in a designed system can lower levels of anxiety to useful levels, that the system can be changed for the better.

We might be the first society on Earth to successfully transit from one harmful system to another more caring one. History tells us that such transformations are rare if they have ever truly happened before. But does the complexity and knowledge of our society make us able to buck the trend and change before we collapse?

Much as our modern society has manufactured consent to our consumption-rich society,¹³ so too can we use creative psychological approaches to re-establish connections within ourselves, to each other and to nature. There is a positive story to

¹² <http://slaveryfootprint.org/>

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnrBQEAM3rE>

be told of a new society. This society will have to be innovative and disruptive in its system design, allowing people, jobs, production, even corporations, to transit to new ways of thinking.

Whatever your profession or practice you can further explore these themes with the Climate Psychology Alliance. The CPA aims to use psychology to help people understand their emotions regarding climate change, how to respond to them better, and to form a basis for action to mitigate Climate Change.

We're exploring these themes at the inaugural Climate Psychology Alliance Scotland conference in Glasgow on Saturday 21 April at the Glasgow School of Art, all welcome. www.facebook.com/events/2497910280348003/

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