

Cassandra's Message! A Psychoanalytical Perspective on Climate Change

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I recently attended a paper presentation and panel discussion hosted by the Institute of Psychoanalysis which was looking at how a psychoanalytical approach can inform and explain different responses to the climate emergency.

The keynote speaker was Charles Strozier from New York City University who began by outlining the importance of the foreknowledge of death in highlighting the importance of creating a meaningful life. Having awareness of the finite nature of life helps us to focus on the importance of creating a meaningful life. Throughout many cultures the stories we tell help us give meaning to life, whilst many religions have a focus on new and re-deemed life.

Climate change and subsequent environmental devastation threatens our ability to create a meaningful life. If the meaning we find in life comes from having confidence we continue symbolically after death through our communities and our children, this meaning is shattered by an apocalyptic event. Death through climate change would be apocalyptic in that there would be no chance of salvation or redemption and potentially an inability for life to continue through our communities: the earth may survive but not mankind. The paper finished on a note of hope: we can still choose to change our course as a species.

Strozier discussed work from the 1960's which showed that there was opposition to government programmes which encouraged people to prepare to survive a nuclear attack. He talked about psychological numbing and mind-blindness: that people would rather not make any changes and face death rather than take steps to survive. Instead, it was more helpful to encourage people into activism through avoiding focusing on the impending apocalypse.

We walk a fine line when discussing the climate emergency between hysteria and psychological numbing and entropy. If we want people to act to face the challenge of climate catastrophe it is important not to make things worse by terrifying people, leading to people choosing psychological numbing and lack of action.

Philip Stokoe from the Tavistock clinic suggested that from a Kleinian perspective psychological numbing can be seen not as a primary destructive drive, but a drive which is a response to an intense emotional response (fear). Therefore, one way to encourage engagement with the climate emergency is to reduce the intensity of feelings around the debate to avoid psychological numbing. The need to retreat from these painful feelings can lead to a psychological retreat either towards a parent figure (God will save you), or a disavowal of the evidence: the unconscious beliefs which protects people from engaging with the evidence. One way to combat this would be to describe the unconscious belief, then re-activate curiosity and discuss what is real.

Another concept that is helpful is to consider awareness and formed awareness in relation to climate emergency. You might be aware of climate change, but formed awareness is when you realise we are implicated in climate change: that all of our behaviours are implicated in the current trashing of the planet, leaving no home for our children. This then becomes a

moral issue: once one has formed awareness of the impending climate catastrophe, to choose not to act could be considered morally wrong.

In the face of this, how can we build a life affirming culture and act in a way that uses our power to promote wellbeing for ourselves, the planet and our children?

1. Using personal conversations to bring people to confront their own mind-blindness. Using climate cafes models can help with this or using props such as beer coasters to discuss drivers to open discussions on how society operates. This requires us to become leaders in our own right in having these conversations and developing tools to support other people to become leaders in this.
2. We can draw on social identity research by being aware of the importance of challenging norms of social behaviour and using the power of the group to create new environmentally active and aware social norms. Once behaviours which promote the wellbeing of ourselves and the planet become the norm they will become easier for people to adopt.
3. Draw on place-based knowledge and traditional cultures, including Gaelic culture, which are imbued with place based knowing. There is work ongoing in this area, and it ties into research showing that having a connection to the natural world and to place supports people in being open to discuss climate action.
4. Consider what actions you can take to make a difference to climate change and consider how you can support change in others. For myself, this means exploring how psychology can help us engage more people in necessary climate actions. I am developing research looking at how connection to people and place can support us in taking actions to address climate change across our communities.
5. Personal changes include using non plastic waste domestic products, shopping second hand (thank you Highland Hospice shops), using local repair cafes, composting and growing vegetables locally, and walking/cycling for short journeys and reducing carbon footprint in the amount and type of longer journeys.

I hope to run some climate café sessions soon: look out for them coming through in your emails if you wish to take part. For more information on psychology and climate try these resources:

[Home \(climatepsychologyalliance.org\)](http://climatepsychologyalliance.org)

[IAPS Association | International Association People-Environment Studies \(iaps-association.org\)](http://iaps-association.org)

[IAAP: Division 4: Environmental Psychology \(iaapsy.org\)](http://iaapsy.org)

[Home | British Environmental Psychology Society \(breps.co.uk\)](http://breps.co.uk)

Repair Cafes: Try Transition Black Isle, Clachworks Inverness if you are Inverness based, or search for a local project using: [Map - Circular Communities Scotland](#)