

# Climate challenged: Where to focus change efforts?

**Marg O'Brien<sup>1</sup>**

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*It is increasingly clear that understanding human responses to climate change is just as important as – if not more important than – understanding climate change itself. (Weintrobe, 2013b)*

The present situation is clear. Scientists are in consensus with regard to the evidence in support of human induced climate destabilization (Cook et al., 2013, Cook et al., 2016). Fundamental changes in our behaviour, our attitudes and values are required if we are to avoid a catastrophic future. We are already beginning to experience extreme environmental changes so why is responding to this reality being so resisted? The causes and consequences of anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases have been long understood but we are not noticeably changing our actions. Does this mean that we have not understood the significance of what is happening?

We know from substantial national research done a few years ago that over half of those surveyed believe in the reality of climate change and its cause by human activity. A smaller percentage believe in climate change but not its human cause. Under a third of us are undecided while 10% remain sceptics (Milfont et al., 2015). So, a good half of us are aware that we have a problem and that change is needed. Yet even for those with a thorough understanding of the issue, moving to make a change is slow when not given the requisite priority.

Have communications about climate change fallen short of expectations? The science world's ability to convince people to change certainly has been denied or slow to work (Moser, 2010, Moser, 2016, Pearce et al., 2015, Somerville, 2012), although there are examples of effective communication as presented by David Holmes<sup>1</sup> at the NZPsS 2018 Jubilee Conference (Holmes, 2018). There are so many ways to defend ourselves against the reality of what is happening. The reactions you'll hear even now are varied:

- The climate isn't changing. We're just experiencing a natural cycle... we've had them before.
- Nothing we can do in New Zealand will change the situation.
- I'm sure there will be technological breakthroughs to solve the problem... won't there?

- I can't think about it. I just get too depressed.
- I don't think there's much that I can do... the government needs to make the changes.

In attempting to understand this type of response, we find that an overwhelming factor that determines whether or not we reject climate change is linked to our values - our worldview, political orientation or ideology (Lewandowsky et al., 2012, 2015, Lewandowsky and Oberauer, 2016, Whitmarsh and Capstick, 2018, Bliuc et al., 2015). In one of the early reviews of public engagement with climate change, Corner and colleagues (2014) state: "Although people possess a range of different and sometimes conflicting values, those who identify strongly with self-enhancing values (e.g. materialism...) tend not to identify strongly with self-transcending values (e.g. ...respect for the environment), and vice versa." p.412.

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Similar results were established here by Milfont and colleagues, who in analysing data from 36 countries found that national-level pro-environmental scale scores<sup>2</sup> were higher in countries that value harmony, collectivism, and intellectual and affective autonomy and lower in countries that endorse conservative and materialist values (Milfont et al., 2013, Milfont et al., 2008). And more recently, a smaller study expanded on the notion of conservative, and linked right wing authoritarian and social dominance, particularly anti-egalitarian dimensions to climate change denial (Stanley et al., 2017).

The question then to be asked is whether our values relate directly to our engagement with environmental issues? Certainly this is supported by research. Corner et al. (2014) write: "...people who endorse self-transcendent values and who exhibit high levels of altruism are more likely to engage in sustainable behaviour; ...perform specific actions such as recycling; ...engage in indirect and direct political engagement on environmental issues... engage positively with climate change... and [be] prepared to make significant changes to their own lifestyles..." (p.413-4). Working to inform and change the values people hold

<sup>1</sup> Director, Monash University Climate Change Communication Research Hub, Caulfield, Melbourne

<sup>2</sup> As measured on the well-known New Environmental Paradigm Scale

would benefit pro-environmental engagement. But how is this developed?

Reflecting on this type of research, Clayton et al. (2015) write, "... evidence indicates a need to further examine relevant social identities, to better understand how beliefs about climate change have become ideologically polarized in certain populations, and to develop educational interventions and communications tailored to values and possible misperceptions of specific audiences." (p.641)<sup>3</sup>. The rationale for this work is to enable communicators of climate science to craft communications to effectively target each distinct cultural worldview. The implication is that there will be some 'expert' out there who will know how to strike at the heart of those holding contrary views – a method that unfortunately risks being construed as control or manipulation.

Another unintended impact of this work into worldviews and its application to campaigns is that it can give prominence to ways of construing the world that add to conflict and resist change. As Corner and colleagues have further discussed, framing the issue in this way where one worldview is denigrated just contributes to polarization. Conventional climate change communications have distanced people from one another. So, if we are to avoid framing the views on climate change in ways that contribute to prolonged or intractable conflicts should we move past 'diagnostic type framings' to achieve a more constructive debate (Whitmarsh and Capstick, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See also the work of BOSTROM, A., BÖHM, G. & O'CONNOR, R. E. 2013. Targeting and tailoring climate change communications. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 4, 447-455.

It is clear that we need to work in ways that reach the 'disengaged', counter polarization and overcome the denial and disbelief in climate change, as other psychologists have begun to do (Whitmarsh and Corner, 2017, Swim et al., 2018, Kasser, 2017). But will an awareness and acceptance of the climate crisis really necessitate the behavioural changes we seek? Will individuals feel free to talk to friends and colleagues about climate change? Will they reduce, reuse, recycle; use public transport; buy an e-bike or engage politically on carbon neutrality? Or will we just be adding to the majority who are aware but making slow progress on the 'action' front? Or, even worse, be adding to those who are now depressed and grieving at the state we are in?

While there has been a profound concern for those still 'in denial' and our need to urgently bring these people 'on board', my concern is that, deep down, this applies to most of us. Are not most of us still in denial?

Our behaviour does not always align with our attitudes. While research indicates that the public's belief in climate change and its human cause are increasing over time (Milfont et al., 2017), for many of us the issue is still very distant (Stanley et al., 2018). We go about our everyday lives, "... driving the kids to school, heating our homes, putting food on the table", oblivious to the impact of our everyday behaviour (Marshall, 2014)<sup>4</sup>. Behaviour change leads to attitude change but not necessarily the other way around.

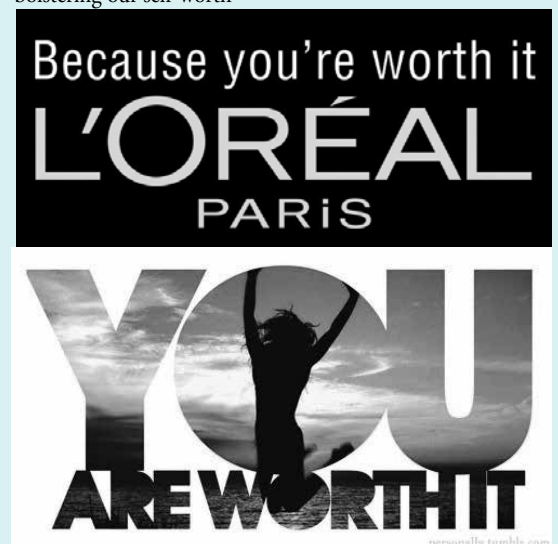
Rather than changing our behaviour

<sup>4</sup> See also Marshall, G (2014) in <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/23/why-our-brains-wired-ignore-climate-change-united-nations>

we can modify our thinking to match what we do.

The problem is that we live in a culture that encourages our self-interest: our narcissism and our life as consumers (Weintrobe, 2013b). Narcissism normally involves our inability to tune into others but in this instance we are failing to tune into the very environment that supports us (MacDonald, 2014). As Randall (2013) has commented, as a culture we have become narcissistically entitled to consume, our liberalized markets "...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." (p. 98). Supported by advertising (see Box 1) we give 'things' in our lives social and psychological meaning. We focus on buying so that we may be more attractive and our magical thinking deploys omnipotent fixes because we are 'worth it' (Weintrobe 2013a).

Box 1: Adverts for cosmetics and travel (absolute necessities!) bolstering our self-worth



So, are we too constrained by the well-worn pathways of our everyday lives? Or is there something deeper that we still have to come to terms with? Some, alarmed at the lack of

response to climate change issues discuss the need to draw a distinction between denial and what they call *disavowal* - where we are unconsciously accepting that something is true while simultaneously finding ways to deny it, behaving in ways that suggest that the opposite is true (Weintrobe, 2013a)<sup>5</sup>. We are in conflict with ourselves and yet we fail to work through the dissonance. Any anxiety that surfaces is easy to deflect as we get on with our busy lives. Business as usual: Disavowing responsibility for both the problem and the solution (Hamilton, 2013).

So where and how should we psychologists focus our change efforts? We have for decades focused on the dysfunctional behaviour of individuals but is this still wise when evidence of greater systemic dysfunction becomes apparent? Will we be guilty of dealing with the symptoms rather than the ‘disease’?

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There is no doubt that while much of our focus will remain with the individual it has been seen as problematic. Over many years, government agencies have been keen to learn about individual behavioural change techniques and processes that engage people in pro-environmental behaviour. The focus of these campaigns has been an individualized climate change risk and responsibility. And while recent work by people like Wolske and Stern (2018) looks to encourage greater impact from this focus on individual and household behaviours, we are becoming increasingly aware that environmental deterioration is not just the result of poor individual choices.

What has occurred has been a powerful framing of the problem that shifts the locus of control from the political to the personal, from system and structural constraints to us as individuals. As Leonard (2013) writes though, this emphasis can distract “...us from identifying and demanding change from the real drivers of environmental decline. It also removes these issues from the political realm to the personal, implying that the solution is in our personal choices rather than in better policies, business practices, and structural context.” (loc 5421).

It is clear that our absorption with the impact of worldviews reinforces this framing focus. Sociologist Brulle (2010)

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<sup>5</sup> See also <http://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/explorations/blogs/290-bbc-coverage-of-global-climate-emergency-we-have-become-increasingly-troubled-by-how-the-bbc-covers-and-does-not-cover-climate-change-in-its-news-broadcasts>

has gone further arguing that expert communications developed to change the behaviour of individuals undermines collective change efforts and “...[weakens] the mobilization capacity over this issue of global warming.” (p.1). A concern that would be shared by Bamberg and colleagues in their work of developing a psychology of collective climate action (Bamberg et al., 2015, 2018). It would seem in fact, that we are faced with systemic change requirements of a far greater magnitude than yet fully understood.

The reality is that we already know a lot about what is needed from a psychological perspective. Indeed, many of us are already working on the need to tackle psychological problems of a systemic nature, whether this be, for instance, in relation to cultural, income or gender inequality. The need posited here would indicate that we may also have a role not only in developing awareness of the environmental crisis that we face but also in dismantling the culture of consumerism, of building social capital... overcoming community fragmentation... and building connection... steps in a wider social transformation that has us flourishing in more aware and less materialistic ways (Jackson, 2009, Jackson, 2016). In these challenging times for humanity, psychologists have an ethical responsibility to support and encourage individuals, communities and our society to ensure the wellbeing of people and the sustainability of all life on Earth (Abraham et al., 2016).

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