Dominant Species Syndrome: A New Concept to Understand & Manage Unsustainable Human Behaviour

New Zealand Psychological Society Annual Conference
30 August 2014

Dr Amanda Shea Hart
Private Practice Adelaide

Dr Jacqueline Feather
Auckland University of Technology
Rationale for Dominant Species Syndrome (DSS)

Name the problem to enable:
- Recognition
- Investigation
- Amelioration

_Naming a problem accurately assists in its resolution_ (Graycar & Morgan 2002)
Why Us?

- Experience working with child abuse, neglect, trauma
- Applying this to human abuse and neglect of other species and nature
- Committed to protection and wellbeing
Aim of DSS

Kaitiakitanga
Why Now?

Destructive human behaviour

Need for sustainability
The Power of Discourse

- Each society has a regime of truth (Foucault 1980)
- *Identifies whose interests are served* (Weedon 1987)
- *Construction of a problem influences how it will be managed* (Ptacek 1999)
Social Norms

Social norms (understandings, beliefs, values) are defined by the dominant discourse

Western communities – individualistic - competition and ownership – this is spreading

Traditional Indigenous communities - collectivist – live more in harmony with nature
“To you, time is money, to us, time is life”
           Nu-a, Samoa

Shea Hart & Feather Dominant Species Syndrome NZ Psychological Society Conference Nelson 2014
Psychology of DSS

DSS - a primitive survival mechanism
Need to further evolve human compassion, connection and collaboration

Three simple yet profound steps to healing:
(1) take responsibility
(2) understand the root cause
(3) heal the cause
Understanding a Problem

“Child abuse is a problem – but not a hopeless one"

Henry and Ruth Kempe, 1978

Similarly, DSS is a problem, but not a hopeless one

Shea Hart & Feather Dominant Species Syndrome NZ Psychological Society Conference Nelson 2014
DSS – working definition

Dominant Species Syndrome means the harming (whether individually or collectively), ill-treatment, abuse, neglect or disregard for the care and protection of any creature or the natural environment.
Science for a Better World

World Science Week
- Sir Peter Gluckman – NZ ‘a canary in the mine of international science’
- Dr Harry Clark - NZs initiative to reduce the world’s greenhouse gases

Social scientists
- Partnering ‘hard science’
- Niki Harré (2011) Psychology for a Better World
Why is Social Science Important?

By addressing human behavior (DSS) we can contribute to a healthy future.

Healing ourselves is the ultimate environmental activism (Ben Ralston, 2011)

Shea Hart & Feather Dominant Species Syndrome NZ Psychological Society Conference Nelson 2014
DSS - A Psychosocial Construct

Theoretical bases include:

- Behavioural
- Cognitive
- Neurobiological
- Social
DSS Criteria – Initial Ideas

- Criterion A: Harmful Behaviour
- Criterion B: Human Hierarchical Thinking
- Criterion C: Individualistic Survival Reactions
DSS Criterion A: Harmful Behaviour

Harm, ill-treatment, abuse, neglect or disregard for the care and protection of any creature or the natural environment

- Direct involvement
- Direct or indirect gain
- Lack of responsibility taking
- Minimisation or denial of evidence
DSS Criterion A: Harmful Behaviour

1. Dominant Behaviour

Achieving status, power and control, preferential access to resources, disregard for consequences e.g.

- exploitation – animal cruelty, deforestation
- overproduction – pollution of waterways
- many more examples...

Shea Hart & Feather Dominant Species Syndrome NZ Psychological Society Conference Nelson 2014
DSS Criterion A: Harmful Behaviour cont.

2. Avoidant Behaviour

- Distraction, disconnection e.g.
  - absorbed in technology-disconnected from nature
  - buying products involving unsustainable practices - over-fishing, exotic species, rainforest destruction

2. Compulsive Behaviour

- Repetitive, habitual patterns e.g.
  - compulsive consumerism, reckless discarding
  - hoarding of resources/money/possessions
DSS Criterion B: Human Hierarchical Thinking

1. **Primacy** - we are the most important species on the planet
   - Human-centric, individualistic
   - Competitive, achievement and ownership-focused

Shea Hart & Feather Dominant Species Syndrome NZ Psychological Society Conference Nelson 2014
2. **Cognitive Avoidance**
   - denial, minimisation, lack of awareness
   - fusion with social-acceptance and status

3. **Cognitive Overwhelm**
   - Too much, too hard
   - I can’t do anything to make a difference
DSS Criterion C: Individualistic Survival Reactions

1. **Survival based fear** arising from individualism
   - fearful, anxious, stressed

2. **Ego-centric desire** – more will make me happy
   - envy, greed, gratification, entitlement

3. **Disconnected/numb**
   - disconnection between needs and desires

4. **Overwhelmed**
   - exhausted mentally and physically
   - trapped in the demands of the modern world
## Framework for Psychosocial Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTCOMES</th>
<th>PRINCIPLES (Treaty of Waitangi)</th>
<th>PROCESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guardianship of the planet</td>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>Address dynamics of DSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindful Experience</td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Embrace and integrate all perspectives*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion and Harmony</td>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>Promote sustainability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Social, environmental, economic, technological, scientific, spiritual, cultural
Goal of DSS Interventions

To provide opportunities for people to become Guardians of planet Earth and live sustainably in harmony with nature.
Me to We

The brain is hardwired to take in signals from the social environment.....self and community are fundamentally inter-related, since every brain is continually constructed by its interactions with others.....the me discovers meaning by joining and belonging to we....

(Siegel 2012)
DSS Interventions Include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DSS Criteria</th>
<th>Psychological Interventions</th>
<th>Social/Community interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harmful Behaviour</td>
<td>CBT, ACT, Mindful practice, psycho-education</td>
<td>Cross sector collaboration, partnership with indigenous cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Hierarchical Thinking</td>
<td>CBT, ACT, Mindful practice, Attachment therapy – applied to humanity, other species, nature</td>
<td>Connection and engagement, supporting community projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic Survival Reactions</td>
<td>CBT, ACT, Mindful practice, Compassion-focused therapy, Sensorimotor psychotherapy</td>
<td>Social inclusion, community capacity building</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mindful Practice: Mindful Practice alters brain function, mental activity and interpersonal relationships toward wellbeing (Siegel 2009).

Mindful Practice enables brain re-programming and better functioning, including the ‘circuitry of compassion’ (Siegel 2014) in regard to other people and nature.
Cross Sector Collaboration

Levels of Collaboration

Integration

Co-ordination

Networks

Increasing complexity of collaboration

Increasing cost of collaboration but better outcomes

Private Practice services

Non Government organisations

Business organisations

Government provided services
Connection with nature enhances flourishing and wellbeing