

Moving Beyond the Couch towards Acceptance and Meaningful action on Climate Change

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Introduction

Discussions about climate science can be fraught. They often become heated and have typically resulted in polarity of opinion and politicisation of the issues. As a result in social settings they have almost become a taboo subject, as they tend to arouse too much anxiety. Those working to advocate action on climate change have previously thought that if only people had access to accurate scientific information the world community including world leaders would want everything possible to be done to avert the dangers. However this has not occurred. Accurate information is obviously an essential element in wise decision making but it seems in the case of climate science it has not been a sufficient one. I have found this baffling and have turned to exploring how psychoanalytic ideas might help in understanding the psychological factors which have prevented adequate global action to date.

I have drawn on two publications in particular in preparing this paper. One is “Engaging with Climate Change” from the “Beyond the Couch” series, published in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London. The other is a recent paper “A New Agenda on Climate Change”, by Jonathan Rowson (Rowson, 2013) a writer and researcher at the Royal Society for Encouragement of the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce in London.

Rowson writes: while climate change does impact the environment, it is not primarily an environmental problem but is driven by the effects of our societies’ reliance on economic activity. It has significant implications not only for the environment but importantly for public health as we experience more extremes in temperatures, for immigration as sea levels rise and food production is effected, for industrial policy, for pensions, for financial stability and for energy security. So we come to the three E’s Carol spoke of, Energy, Economy, and Environment.

My focus in writing is not only directed to the minority who question the scientific consensus. Importantly I have also turned my attention to those, including myself and most of the population who fully accept the moral imperative to act but to varying degrees

continue to live as though it were not the case. To illustrate this, during our recent summer, in the Northern Hemisphere there were record freezing temperatures and snow storms in the US, and severe and record breaking flooding in Southern UK. In Australia, hot weather in Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra already reached levels predicted by climate scientists for 2030 (Climate Commission, 2014). However a recent national survey by the CSIRO in Australia found that while most believe temperatures where they live will rise, on a list of issues ranging from health, cost of living, terrorism and drug problems, climate change came in only fourteenth. Even among environmental issues, the climate only ranked seventh out of eight concerns (CSIRO, 2014). This was despite more than 70% of respondents judging climate change to be somewhat, very, or extremely important.

How can we explain this? Rowson's research throws some light on this phenomenon. He identified that while 80% of those surveyed in the UK accept climate science at an intellectual level, a majority of these people do not engage emotionally with the issues. This lack of emotional engagement means they do not accept the full implications of the scientific evidence in terms of their feelings, sense of agency and complicity (Rowson, p. 7).

So how can we use our psychoanalytic understanding to assist with our emotional responses to the implications of the scientific predictions in order to free us to acknowledge the changes that need to be made and the losses we need to face? Losses such as: the loss of our identity which is bound to the lifestyle we have become accustomed to, the loss of the future we took for granted, the loss of the capacity to pass on a better life than we have had to our children and grandchildren, the loss of generativity, and of our precious natural resources such as the Great Barrier Reef. Perhaps if we can face these potential losses then we can talk openly about our responses and support others to do the same.

Anxiety

I turn now to the problem of anxiety in response to climate science. You will all be very familiar with psychoanalytic ideas regarding our earliest and most primitive and powerful anxieties and the ways in which we need to protect ourselves from them from birth. However I thought it would be useful to revisit them briefly in order to highlight the power of the early anxieties, the intensity of the feelings that accompany them, and the need to employ psychological defences to protect against them such as splitting, projection, denial,

and omnipotence. I will then consider how these defences are frequently employed as a response to the anxieties regarding climate change.

Reality is hated and warded off when it threatens to expose us to too much emotional pain. Accepting the realities of the implications of climate change is of course extremely difficult for us to do. It confronts us with painful feelings of fear, anger, despair, sadness and guilt about the reality of the situation we face. It is very understandable that we would tend to defend ourselves against the anxieties these feelings arouse.

Persecutory anxiety

Klein described the two main types of anxiety that we are confronted with from infancy: persecutory and depressive anxieties. Persecutory anxieties, the earliest anxieties experienced by the infant are primarily concerned with survival of the self. In Klein's words they are concerned with "...a fear of annihilation (death) and take(s) the form of a fear of persecution...." (Klein, 1946, pp. 4-5). These persecutory anxieties and their associated defences Klein referred to as the paranoid-schizoid position and have also been referred to as the narcissistic state (Weintrobe, 2013). Fundamental to the paranoid –schizoid position are the defensive mechanisms of splitting and projection. Splitting and projection as a response to climate change are evident when we hear comments such as "those sceptics are preventing the world from acting on climate change", or "those greenies are just a bunch of alarmists and pessimists" or even "ratbag troublemakers", or "all the Greens want to do is wreck the economy". These are all examples of projection of negative attributes and destructiveness onto others. What about our own reluctance to face the truth, or alternatively our own alarm and pessimism in response to the science, our own wishes to see unending growth and rampant consumerism curbed? Carol spoke about the projective identification of guilt and sense of being burdened experienced by those activists who feel silenced by these types of projections.

Depressive anxiety

Depressive anxieties begin to become more prominent as the baby's relationship to the mother starts to change around 4 to 6 months of age, and focus on the central importance of concern for the other. The infant fears the loved mother has been harmed or destroyed

by his greed and hatred, and sadness, guilt and remorse become “fatally inevitable” (Hinshelwood, 1991).

Klein referred to this state of mind as the depressive position and compared it to that of mourning in an adult. The pain of depressive anxiety recurs throughout life and is met to varying degrees by defensiveness in most people, most commonly the manic defences of denial, omnipotence, disparagement, and idealisation. The ability to tolerate depressive anxiety and feel concern for the other are the crucial elements in mature relationships and are the source of generous and altruistic feelings. They pave the way for reparation, the hope that love can overcome hate, the taking of responsibility for harm done leading to efforts to put things right. It is these depressive anxieties which need to be tolerated by the community if we are to accept the realities of climate change.

So how are the defences associated with warding off depressive anxieties commonly employed in our struggle to come to terms with the reality of climate change?

Denial

Denial has often been the focus in discussions of climate change. Denial has been described as “the unwillingness to accept the reality of uncomfortable, painful facts (and/or unconsciously) the repression of those facts” (Cohen, 2013, p. 73). I will focus on three types of denial which have been identified in relation to climate change: negation, disavowal, and denialism (Weintrobe, 2013).

Negation

Negation is often our first response to shocking or unwanted news. It can take the form of numbness. Alternatively comments such “oh no, it can’t be true” are not uncommon as a response. Negation can protect us temporarily from being overwhelmed until we have time to absorb the news over time. In that sense it can be seen as a part of the process of mourning. It can lead from initial numbness and disbelief to anger, sadness and grief and ultimately to acceptance. We all witness this occurring over time with our patients in our consulting rooms.

In order to be able to accept painful losses such as the death of a loved one, we need to have supportive understanding figures we can turn to. These figures include both the active people in our lives, our family, friends, work colleagues etc, and also supportive internal figures which we have taken in over our lives from good experiences with significant others. The degree of support and soothing we are able to draw on from both external and internalised figures will affect the degree to which we are able to shift from initial denial to then mourn the loss and move to a position of acceptance (Weintrobe 2013).

When people are faced with the science regarding climate change, the news is indeed shocking. Accepting it is made all the harder when there is not social support and most importantly when there is an absence of leadership in the community.

Disavowal

Sometimes a different type of denial is resorted to - that of disavowal. Disavowal involves more dramatic splitting of the psyche so that reality is both known and not known at the same time. Disavowal involves an attack on thinking. This way of dealing with reality can be seen as a perverse response, as Steiner described it a more wilful or persistent adherence to what is contrary to the truth (Steiner, 1993, pp 99). It can signify a more narcissistic stance to reality where a sense of entitlement prevails and triumphs over the healthy part of the personality and the need to experience emotional pain and to mourn loss. Hoggett (2013) has spoken of a perverse dimension existing in cultures of advanced Western societies which supplies part of the cultural support for denial of climate change.

Disavowal is more likely to be resorted to when there is anxiety there is too much damage to repair, or if there is not enough support to bear the anxiety that facing the reality may bring (Weintrobe 2013).

Denialism

One type of organised denial is denialism. Denialism has been described as “willed and knowing refusal to see the logic and implications of an obvious conclusion” (Cohen, 2013, pp. 72-73). It can also be seen as an ideological screen which prevents people seeing things any differently than the way they always have done. The denialist movement historically involved active campaigns in several health and environmental movements in the US in the

1970's and 1980's. These included the negative health effects of tobacco and concerns about acid rain and thinning of the ozone layer associated with the use of chlorofluorocarbons in products (Manne, 2012). The aim of the denialist movement at that time was to inhibit government regulation of these two politically powerful industries.

Then in the 1980's as scientists became more concerned about the potential devastating consequences of human-induced climate change, the denialists' focus shifted to discrediting climate science and to undermining the environmental movement in its attempts to bring about change. In this case the aim of the denialists was to repeat the strategy which had been successful in the past – to create doubt and uncertainty in the minds of the public and so take pressure off the industries concerned, in this case the fossil fuels industries, to prove the safety of their products. Doubt and confusion amongst the community also takes pressure off governments to make decisions about regulating these powerful polluting industries.

Omnipotence

The last defence against depressive anxiety I will speak about is omnipotence with its accompanying denigration and idealisation. Omnipotence is based on denial of reality and is a powerful defence often used to ward off depressive anxiety. As has been mentioned those speaking out urging action on climate change are often denigrated. For example when the head of the UN Convention on Climate Change, Christiana Figueres issued warnings about the connections between recent extreme global weather events and climate change she was said to be to be “talking out of her hat” by our very own Prime Minister on Sydney radio (Sydney Morning Herald, 2014). Alternatively “there's nothing I can do, the next generation will have to fix it” is perhaps an example of idealisation of the future and the projection of responsibility and our own power and potential to make a difference onto the next generation.

Omnipotence is rooted in our utter dependence on our mothers in infancy for our survival. Our planet has been a very dependable Mother Earth who has provided us, previous generations and other species with their way of life. When we are faced with a climate threatened with instability and the losses this entails, the anxieties we face are akin to the small child's anxieties of losing the mother he depends on for survival, and his fears that he

has damaged her by his greed and hatred. We truly hate to recognise our utter dependence on, attachment to and destruction of nature. It may be preferable to “feel like the King of the Castle who can be the exploitative one, with the earth as the Dirty Rascal or the exploited one” (Weintrobe, 2013, p. 42). So the world continues to behave as though the planets’ resources are infinite, and continues the greedy exploitation of her provisions.

Alternatively we seem to see Mother Earth as “an unlimited toilet –mother capable of absorbing our toxic wastes to infinity” (Keene, 2013 p 146). We do not need to rely on nature to provide, we can conquer nature, and continue to have everything we want. We wish to be able to solve the problems of our overconsumption by a bit of tweaking here and there, and by quick fixes such as relying on the use of technology alone. We fail to protest or insist upon more meaningful and urgent action being taken by our leaders. There has even been the mention of humans finding another planet to inhabit if life becomes too difficult here on our own. Sounds as fanciful as children dreaming of finding new ideal parents!

Conclusion

Reality is often hard to bear. The more painful the truths the more difficult they are to hear. The greater the anxiety aroused, and the less support there is available, the more we are likely to resort to unhelpful psychological defences.

How might we use our knowledge of psychoanalytic ideas to help us do our part in promoting a shift in our community from the paranoid position to a depressive position where painful realities can be faced, losses and guilt can be tolerated, and reparation in the form of meaningful action can be taken by us all and insisted upon from our leaders. As climate change progresses and the effects become more obvious, if there is not more support from communities and leaders to face the realities and to challenge more the sense of entitlement existing in our culture, there may be a spiralling of the world community even more into disavowal (Weintrobe, 2013).

As Tim Flannery has suggested we can all be leaders: in our families, our workplaces and in our communities (Flannery, 2014). We can work towards this is by making ourselves as informed as possible about the science and what it is we need to prepare for: to face our

own fears and sense of loss. Then we are in a better position to support others to do the same. We can facilitate and encourage the opening up of conversations about the issues so that it becomes less of a taboo subject. We can do what we are all doing right now.

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