ROUTLEDGE

Engaging with Climate Change

Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

EDITED BY

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Published in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

Chapter 3

The difficult problem of anxiety in thinking about climate change

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Many environmentalists and policymakers stress the importance of not making people feel anxious when telling them about climate change. However, anthropogenic global warming is anxiety-provoking. Being able to bear anxiety is a vital part of being able to face reality, as we know that when anxiety becomes too much to bear, our thinking can become irrational and start to lack proportion. This chapter is on anxiety. I first explore the subject of anxiety and then look at what might be our central anxieties about climate change. It is important that we identify these and also that we seek to know as much as we can about the effects of our anxieties about climate change on our capacity to think and act. I conclude by looking at some implications for policy about how to engage people about climate change.

Anxiety

We can feel anxious for many different underlying reasons. Here I concentrate on anxieties about survival, tracing two main forms. I then look at some common defences we use to reduce anxiety. One of these is denial. I go into the subject of denial in some detail.

The psychoanalytic model that underpins my understanding of anxiety is that we are inherently in conflict between different parts of ourselves, that much of the conflict goes on at an unconscious level and that the biggest conflict we face in life is between the concerned part of us that loves reality and the more narcissistic, vain part of us that hates reality when it thwarts our wishes or deflates our view of ourselves.

The narcissistic part that hates reality feels ideal and special and is prone to omnipotent thinking. It uses magical 'quick fixes' to try to restore its sense of being ideal when reality brings disillusionment. It expects admiration – indeed adoration – for its 'quick fixes'.

The part that loves reality recognizes its right size and where it fits within the scheme of things, tolerates limits, tolerates having very ambivalent feelings about reality, tolerates being far from perfect, is motivated by loving concern, finds reality challenging and finds it is struggling with reality that ultimately provides

meaning and self-worth. It aims to try to put right damage caused by the narcissistic part in real ways. It is able to mourn an idealized world.

Melanie Klein (1940), following Freud's (1917) pioneering work on the subject, recognized that anxiety is at the very centre of our work to face reality. She argued that the narcissistic and the reality-based parts of the self both face anxiety. The narcissistic part is anxious it will not survive if reality is accepted. The realistic part is anxious that the narcissistic part has caused damage and may imperil its survival.

Klein saw that the work of gradually accepting reality involves facing both these kinds of anxiety. They both involve anxieties about survival. Her point was that when faced with reality, especially when it can bring most hated and unwanted changes, we inevitably veer back and forth between protecting ourselves from these two very different kinds of anxiety. She also, crucially, pointed out that for the part of the self that loves reality to be more powerful than the part of the self that hates reality, we need emotional support to bear anxiety and also to bear difficult feelings like guilt, shame and loss.

An everyday example of these two different kinds of anxiety at work is a conversation a friend reported to me between herself and Katie, her three-year-old granddaughter. The background was that Katie was facing major changes at home with the arrival of a new baby. 'Grandma', Katie said, 'I've decided to marry Daddy and we are going to have lots and lots of babies.' 'I see', my friend said, 'but what about Mummy and new Baby Gemma?' 'Oh, that's alright. They are only dwarfs.' Part of the touching charm and poignancy of this ordinary story from family life is the unabashed way little Katie states out loud her wishful phantasy solution to current problems. I suggest her omnipotent phantasy – we can almost see her whooshing her magic wand – is a way for her to reduce her anxiety at the shocking new realization that she must share Mummy with New Baby and also with Daddy. Her foremost anxiety here would seem to be survival anxiety. Will the part of herself that has believed up until now that she is the adored and special centre of the family survive? Her magic solution serves to reduce anxiety about the survival of this part of herself. She is a big lady, in charge and having magicked up a powerful creative couple, herself and Daddy. Her feelings of being small, marginalized and not so in control of her fate are projected onto Mummy and New Baby, now morphed into discarded dwarfs. However, this 'quick-fix solution', designed to reduce anxiety, brings other anxieties. Has she damaged her mother's love by allowing her hatred of the new reality at home to triumph in this way? Can a diminished and hated dwarf mother provide her with the love and care she still badly needs? Her anxieties may be that not only is phantasy Mummy now minimized and useless but also that real Mummy might be cross with her.

Paranoid-schizoid anxiety and depressive anxiety

Klein identified characteristic defences used by the narcissistic part of the self to defend itself against anxiety. They include mental splitting, idealization and

projection. In our example, we might say that little Katie splits Mummy into, on the one hand, a powerful idealized figure – the lady partner of Daddy who can make lots of babies with him – and, on the other hand, a depleted, ridiculed dwarf figure. She steps into Mummy's big-lady shoes and identifies with her in her imagination, and she flings little dwarf Mummy away. This omnipotent action protects the part of herself that likes to feel specially adored and powerful from experiencing her own littleness, feared insignificance and lack of power. All these unwanted feelings are projected onto dwarfed Mummy and Baby. Splitting is characterized by idealization and by black-and-white, all-or-nothing kinds of thinking. Katie is unconsciously pushed by anxiety to split in the way she does.

Klein called the anxieties experienced and defences used by the narcissistic part of the self 'paranoid-schizoid'. Calling Katie's frame of mind paranoid recognizes that her anxiety is about the survival of the narcissistic part of her. Will it survive all these changes in the family? Calling it schizoid refers to the way she uses mental splitting to reduce her anxiety about this.

Klein characterized as depressive the anxiety experienced by the part of the self that loves reality. Depressive anxiety is not meant to convey that this part is depressed in a clinical sense but, rather, that it is burdened with sadness, guilt and shame and with anxiety that the narcissistic part has caused damage. Here, there is less idealization and splitting and more love, concern and realism. Katie's depressive anxiety might be whether her loving relationship with her mother will survive the way she is rubbishing her.

Klein's point is that reality can bring most hated, unwanted and anxiety-provoking changes, and when faced with reality, we inevitably veer between protecting ourselves from different kinds of survival anxiety – those felt by the part of the self that hates reality and those felt by the part of the self that loves it. Our love of the other helps us to face depressive anxieties about their state, and our love gives us strength to withstand our more paranoid anxieties. In particular, love gives us the strength to face damage we have caused, to others and to ourselves, and leads to our wish to repair it as best we can.

Klein also pointed out that having these competing anxieties is entirely normal, and that working them through begins in early childhood and is ongoing throughout life. A further crucial point she made is that for the self that loves reality to be more powerful than the self that hates it, we need emotional support. Katie is supported by the adults in her life who love her and gently steer her towards reality by respecting her and empathizing with her and by intuitively understanding what probably lies beneath the surface of her defences.

It might be thought that a small child voicing an irrational phantasy that she is special and has magic powers is far removed from the subject of adult anxiety. However, as adults we think like Katie far more often than we care to realize. Katie essentially deals with her anxieties about impending change not by facing them but by trying to minimize them through 'quick-fix' magical and irrational thinking. There are a myriad ways in which as adults we do the same. Perhaps our

biggest difference from Katie is that we have learned better to conceal our irrationality, most of all from ourselves.

Common defences against anxiety

Anxiety is most often a vital signal that alerts us to real threats and dangers to survival. It is when these anxieties become too much to bear that we can tend to apply irrational 'quick fixes' to try to reduce them. I will now look at three common 'quick fixes' that can also tend to be applied together.

Feeling magically big and powerful

Little Katie felt big and powerful. When we see people behaving in ways we identify as muscle flexing, as feeling a bit god-like and as being out of touch with real worries and real concern, it is important to bear in mind that they may be defending themselves against feeling acutely anxious, a feeling that may be too difficult to bear. This is important when looking at social groups as well as individuals behaving like this. We are familiar with the many analyses of current Western societies as narcissistic (Lasch 1978). We are less familiar with looking at the extent to which feelings of 'I/we are King of the Castle' may be a defence against fearing being in the position of the Dirty Rascal, the dwarfed social outcast.

Projection

Another way to deal with too much anxiety is to project it onto or into another or others. For instance, little Katie projected her anxieties about feeling powerless, side-lined and potentially unloved onto Mummy and Baby. We all use projection of this kind, and it is a prevalent mechanism used by our social groups.

Denial

Denial is a commonly used defence. It tries to get rid of reality altogether by maintaining that it is not there. We only deny things we have already seen, even if only dimly or out of the corner of one eye. The denial is aimed at protecting us from the anxiety and from the pain of impending loss and change that would follow if we did accept reality in a felt and owned way.

When anxiety gets too much to bear, we may resort, broadly speaking, to two different sorts of denial: negation and disavowal. It is crucial to distinguish the two, as negation is more likely to be a stage on the way to mourning illusions and accepting reality. Disavowal can involve the more stuck terrain of delusion. And, with disavowal, unreality and irrationality are not only more likely to prevail but may, indeed, escalate.

Denial as negation

Negation, the assertion that something that is, is not, can be our first response to reality when it faces us with shocking losses and changes. Negation is the first stage of mourning, that process that usually proceeds from negation to anger and only then to grief and acceptance of the loss. Negation helps us process the initial shock of loss when it is too much to bear. 'Too much' is really 'too much all in one go'.

In order to mourn what we have lost, we vitally need to feel the presence of supportive figures who will not judge us too harshly, who are warm in their feelings for us and who can forgive us and accept our human frailty. These figures are not just the actual people in our lives – parents, teachers and leaders – but are also, importantly, figures who are part of the world of relationships that we represent in our internal worlds and carry within us, mostly in unconscious forms. The degree of support from these internalized figures affects how much we are able to mourn and face reality.

So, for example, when we initially deny our loss – say, the death of a loved one – through negation, it helps if we feel the support of people who understand that we cannot bear the whole truth, just for now. Then, when in the grip of the anger phase of mourning, it helps if we feel in the presence of figures who can support and forgive us as well as be reality-oriented. Without an inner climate of forgiveness in which we have real and not ideal expectations of others and ourselves, we may become stuck in a climate of hatred, bitter recrimination and relentlessness, easily feeling harshly judged, being harshly judging and not moving towards accepting the reality of the loss; we may feel caught in the ruinous expectation that our only salvation will be to have our ideal world back again, a world in which no loss has occurred. It also helps to grieve if we feel the support of those who appreciate how painful grief feels.

Loss is far harder to face without support, empathy and forgiveness. But if we are able to work through our grief, with support, to the point of being able to think rationally, we have survived in heart and mind. Thinking is not just having an intellectual and rational understanding of a reality that causes us pain and anxiety: it is that reality felt and owned by the self; not an activity, but a process involving mourning and facing the anxieties that come with inner change.

The prospect of any significant change is itself often shocking. With change comes the unknown and anxiety about the survival of different parts of ourselves. We inevitably face myriad changes and endure myriad losses in life. We lose the past, we lose our idealizations and we lose our self-views. We can also lose our hopes for the future. Many of the different kinds of losses we face in life can feel like deaths and are, indeed, deaths in so far as death is the irrevocable. With death there is no return to how it was before.

Change can also involve accepting back and reintegrating parts of ourselves that we may have split off and disowned. Defences mounted to protect against too much anxiety need to give way if reality is to penetrate, and negation can protect

against a sense of impending disintegration. For instance, feeling big and powerful may give way to feeling helpless and perhaps humiliated, and the anxieties that have been split off and minimized can return to flood and overwhelm.

Negation is hopefully worked through with strengthened inner resolve and outer support, so that reality is eventually faced and loss is mourned. But we can also resort to a different sort of denial, one that can lead us not towards accepting reality but increasingly away from it. This is disavowal.

Denial as disavowal

Disavowal involves radical splitting and a range of strategies that ensure that reality can be seen and not seen *at one and the same time*. Disavowal is often called turning a blind eye, but this description does not go far enough in distinguishing disavowal from negation. There are two key differences. First, with disavowal our more wish-fulfilling narcissistic part may have come under the sway of a more entrenched arrogant attitude that can exert a powerful hold on the psyche. Second, disavowal may be part of a more organized and enduring defensive structure, whereas negation is typically a more transitory defence against anxiety.

Psychoanalytic researchers such as Rosenfeld (1971), O'Shaugnessy (1981) and Steiner (1987) have discussed more stuck mental states the aim of which is to create a psychic retreat from reality where both paranoid-schizoid *and* depressive anxieties can be *systematically* avoided. These states, which can be resistant to influence and change, have been called pathological organizations. Here a delusion of being special – indeed, god-like – is clung to and not gradually mourned and given up. Bion in a series of papers (1957, 1958, 1959) linked this god-like attitude with an underlying arrogance that Rosenfeld (1971) later called destructive narcissism, to emphasize its destructive effects and to distinguish it from less pathological and more transitory forms of inflated self-worth. I will use Bion's term 'arrogance' in this context rather than narcissism in order to keep clear the difference from 'normal' narcissism.[1]

Brenman (1985) discussed the way that arrogance is accompanied by single-minded exploitative greed, and I (Weintrobe 2004) have discussed the way it is accompanied by a sense of narcissistic entitlement to exploit the other, with the 'justification' of being ideal, superior and special. With arrogance, a destructively narcissistic part of the psyche has gained the upper hand in a power struggle with the part that feels wedded to reality. A sense of narcissistic entitlement to be immune to emotional difficulties has triumphed over a lively entitlement to a relationship with reality.

Steiner (1993) linked the pathological organization with the experience of being in a psychic retreat from reality, with the aim of being spared anxiety and pain. Rosenfeld (1971) had originally put forward a powerful analysis of the way that pathological organizations are maintained within the psyche by phantasies of powerful internal mafia-like gangs that enforce compliance and treat the reality seeking part of the self with violence if it does not toe the line.

Disavowal is part of a pathological organization. With disavowal, anxiety may be systematically gotten rid of, sometimes in a flash, through a range of 'quick fixes'. A central quick fix is minimizing or obliterating any sense that facing reality entails facing any loss. Reality may be seen to be there, but the loss that it signals has no or little significance in this state. Disavowal aims to block mourning at the stage before sadness, grieving and reconciliation, and in this sense may be seen as a form of arrested, failed mourning, or melancholia, as Freud (1917) described it.

When we think of a hateful destructive attack, we imagine something active and violent. It is more difficult to see that disavowal – which, after all, apparently 'deals with' anxiety and apparently keeps all negative effects to a minimum – can conceal great hidden violence while being quite split off from its effects.

Triumph is an important part of disavowal. The arrogant omnipotent part of the self feels very clever for being able to 'solve' painful problems so instantly. The delusion that nothing is lost because loss itself has no meaning is perhaps the ultimate triumph. Disavowal is also artful. It can cleverly bend, reverse and warp the truth, and fraudulent thinking flourishes in this state of mind.

The kind of disintegration of the sense of self that is experienced when disavowal *is* acknowledged and reality accepted is far more severe than with negation. It may involve struggling to reintegrate back into the self crippling anxieties and burdens of guilt and shame – crippling because they have been allowed to build up through being consistently and systematically split off so as to stay in a psychic retreat.

The problem with disavowal is, not least, that it involves a severe attack on thinking.

While negation denies the truth, it does not distort its shape so much, whereas disavowal can result in confusion and an inability to think with a sense of proportion. The splitting that occurs with disavowal also leads to a breakdown of proportionality in thinking. Anxiety is minimized, guilt and shame – emotions that also cause us great anxiety – are minimized, and all this is achieved through omnipotent thinking. But human nature does not work this way. When a problem is minimized and ridiculed, the sane part of the mind – which is always there, even if eclipsed and made small – becomes increasingly anxious. The arrogant part of the mind also becomes increasingly anxious, but for different reasons. Having psychically damaged – through triumph and contempt – any internal figures who might be containing and might put a stop to the irrationality, it fears possible retaliation. Also, it is increasingly mentally vulnerable, as it has damaged any internal figures who might contain and calm anxiety and help to re-establish a sense of proportion.

Disavowal is a poor means of lowering anxiety in the longer term. Because disavowal does nothing to address the real causes of anxiety, it can lead to an escalation of underlying anxiety that can feel increasingly unmanageable. The more disavowal is allowed to proceed unchecked by reality, the more anxiety it breeds and the greater the danger that the anxiety will be defended against by further defensive arrogance and further disavowal. Disavowal leads to a vicious spiral, and this makes it dangerous.

What might cause disavowal to set in? Clinical experience suggests that the following conditions apply: the reality has become too obvious to be ignored, there is anxiety that damage is too great to be repaired, it is felt that there is not enough help, support and containment to bear the anxiety and suffering that insight brings and there is anxiety that parts of the self will not survive change that now feels catastrophic and too much to face.

Cultures of denial

Individuals use denial, but denial can also become embedded within cultures, and powerful groups and lobbies play an important part in fostering cultures of disavowal. People internalize their social groups and make them part of their inner worlds. What they may internalize is the idea of a powerful, arrogant group that threatens exclusion and punishment if one breaks ranks. It is harder for any individual to fight for sanity and truth when intimidated not only by actual external powerful groups but also when such groups become internalized within the inner world and gain strength and force there. Rosenfeld's (1971) analysis about the way in which phantasies of mafia groups can hold sway within the internal mental organization to support arrogance has profound implications for understanding the way in which powerful external social groups operating in mafia-like ways can be internalized within the psyche and there have major effects on mental functioning, both at an individual and at a group level.

Again, anxiety is a key issue. The sane self suffers survival anxiety if it speaks out, and survival anxiety if it remains silent. But the sane self can also feel puny in the face of a needed social group that threatens it with rejection, social exclusion, or worse.

How a culture of disavowal props up irrationality in our social world

We are profoundly influenced socially as to what is to be deemed rational and irrational. It is truly startling to think about how much in society is flagrantly irrational and how much we avoid really wanting to know this. If those in power tell us irrational things aimed at reducing our anxiety, we may go along with this and find it seductive. However, it only leads to the build-up of underlying depressive anxiety, including that we may have damaged our capacity to think clearly. An extreme example is the way that, at the height of the Cold War in Britain leaders advised people to shut their windows and climb under a table in the event of a nuclear attack. Imagining ourselves under a table may have served to minimize the horror of the threat to survival, but only if people gave up awareness of just how irrational leaders were being in giving this advice and they would be in following it.

In the example above it is easy to see the irrationality. However, Western culture actively seduces and threatens us into using 'quick-fix' irrational ways of

reducing anxiety in many ways that are not so blatant and visible. One example is advertising. A disturbing fact is that in Western societies a significant proportion of women, especially young women, suffer from underlying depression and feelings of worthlessness.[2] They do not feel wanted or desirable. A well-known advert for L'Oréal hair and skin products involves glamorous 'A-list' celebrity women coyly saying that they use L'Oréal '. . . because I'm worth it'. I suggest L'Oréal appeals not just to women's ordinary vanity – their normal narcissism – but to their underlying more arrogant wish to be part of an in-crowd of superior women, valued by society and loveable; it also promotes and sells the phantasy that we can rid ourselves of unpleasant feelings like depression, envy and fear of social exclusion through a very simple act: that of buying a small, inexpensive plastic tub of cosmetic cream. This is magical thinking and irrational, but because it is endemic in our culture, it is not generally fully recognized as such. My point is not about one specific advertisement but advertising in general and also a culture that sanctions and appeals to the part of us that feels especially entitled in an arrogant way to deploy omnipotent fixes to life's painful problems. We are actively encouraged to use disavowal and to live within an organized psychic retreat from the anxieties that reality brings.

But, irrational 'quick fixes' for anxiety only increase underlying anxiety and also lead to loss of underlying genuine self-worth. The part of the self that struggles to face reality, that feels entitled in a lively way to a relationship with reality 'because I *am* worth it', can be dwarfed and denigrated by society and also by the narcissistic part of ourselves that feels entitled to be spared psychic difficulty.

Anxieties about climate change

I now turn, finally, to our anxieties about climate change. What is it specifically about climate change that makes us so anxious? Välimäki and Lehtonen (2009) have suggested that modern man is suffering from what they call an environmental neurosis, rooted in deep-seated annihilation anxiety resulting from our denial of our real dependence on nature and based on the illusion of our own autonomy. They also make the cogent point that much of our illusory sense of autonomy is based on our use of science, but that our use of science (not science itself) has led to imbalance and damage.[3] I think Välimäki and Lehtonen have grasped the nub of the matter. I now explore some specific survival anxieties about climate change, highlighting the radically different sorts of anxieties suffered by the reality-based and the narcissistic parts of the self and focusing on the increasingly prevalent denial of climate change through disavowal.

Starting with our depressive anxieties, they can all cause traumatic levels of 'too much' anxiety. They include first, that we need a healthy biosphere to stay alive, and the biosphere is already showing signs consistent with predictions of effects of climate change. Second, we face the loss of a predictable future and, potentially, the loss of any future. Third, leadership is not acting sufficiently to

protect us; deep down we know this, and it is traumatic to feel so uncared for. Fourth, we are realistically anxious about the destructiveness of the arrogant side of our own nature, which is destructive to ourselves and to the outside world; in particular we rightly fear circumstances when the destructiveness has become split off and disavowed and where its real effects are minimized.

Alongside this, I suggest that the narcissistic part of the self dreads giving up our sense of entitlement to have whatever we want and entitlement to apply our magical 'quick fixes' to the problems of reality.

Survival anxieties

The depressive anxieties of the reality-based part of the self about climate change

1. We face the loss of the Earth as the dependable bedrock that enables and supports our very life, the life of other fellow species and future life for all. Specifically, we face the effects of a climate tipped into instability. The terrible anxieties we face about this are akin to the small child's anxieties of losing the mother he or she utterly depends on. This cogent point is made by several authors in this volume. Margaret Rustin, commenting on the classroom artwork of primary-school children about the effects of climate change, argues that little children may be more in touch with their fears about the state of Mother Earth than are adults because they are more aware of just how dependent they are on their mothers and parents for their very survival. We truly hate fully to register the depth of our dependence on nature and our attachment to nature. We much prefer to see ourselves as the exploiting King of the Castle with the Earth as the exploited and controlled Dirty Rascal. But without a bountiful and flourishing Earth we are lost and deeply anxious. Deep down I suggest most people know this, at least unconsciously. This is the annihilation anxiety that Välimäki and Lehtonen (2009) have suggested we are now having to find ways to live with.

    As psychoanalysts, we know that children's anxieties, conscious and unconscious, about losing the mother are exacerbated by fears that greedy demands on her have damaged her. When we are small, as well as loving the mother, we can tend to see and treat her in a split way as an ideal 'breast-and-toilet' mother, there endlessly to supply our needs and demands and to absorb our waste (Keene, chapter 7, this volume). Climate damage can also revive our earlier childhood fears of damage. This may feel traumatic, and the accompanying anxiety may feel unbearable (Brenman Pick, chapter 6, this volume).

2. When we register that the climate is out of kilter, and are faced with what Friedman (2008, quoted in Morris 2010, p. 600) called 'climate weirding', at stake is not only anxiety about our physical survival, but the survival of our very sense of self. It is deeply anxiety-making to have our belief in a reliable

future and our sense of regularity and continuity as a species threatened at such a basic level. Undermined is our hope that we are generative – that our children will have children who will have children into the future – and rooted within long time.

3. We depend on our leaders in the current situation, and this introduces further anxiety. We know that currently in the United Kingdom, for instance, while they are setting very ambitious targets, they are not pushing through measures to reduce carbon emissions within a viable timescale. Because of this, we know that our leaders are not looking after us. We see them, too, pulled in by and in the power of commercial lobbyists and pressure groups with interests destructive to the Earth and all its human and non-human inhabitants. The message – and I suggest we do hear it – is that we are not cared for at the level of our very survival. To feel this uncared for is deeply traumatic and can also lead to unbearable anxiety, born of a feeling of helplessness and aloneness in the face of survival threats. This, I suggest, was the fundamental legacy of the 'Hopenhagen' summit in 2009. At Copenhagen, for the first time, world leadership came together and publicly accepted that climate change is real and man-made. This provided an iconic image of truth backed by power. But the abiding iconic image of Copenhagen is a later one – that of truth bending the knee to greater, more hidden sources of power in the wings.[4]

The anxieties of the narcissistic part of the self about climate change

If we do contemplate making changes to reduce CO_2e emissions, we, leaders and followers, can start to experience survival anxieties of a more paranoid-schizoid kind. Our identities and status are intimately bound up with our lifestyles. In current consumerist societies we are actively encouraged to express our sense of identity through our material possessions, and losing these can therefore mean losing our sense of identity. We know we need a radical shift in our expectations of what we can take from nature, a shift towards a type of thinking that is based on real observation, on real arithmetic, and not on our idealized expectations. I think in these circumstances what we dread giving up is not so much particular material possessions or particular ways of life, but our way of seeing ourselves as special, and as entitled, not only to our possessions but to our 'quick fixes' to the problems of reality. This underlying attitude, just one side of human nature, is strongly ingrained in current Western societies. As I suggested via the L'Oréal advert, advertisers play to this attitude and foster it to sell us things, and society rewards those who embody it. We know that in giving up an unsustainable consumer lifestyle, we are threatening the identity of this part of ourselves, one we are mostly not aware of but will fight tooth and nail to protect.

A culture of disavowal of climate change

Currently there are signs that we are in the grip of disavowal when it comes to climate change, with all its effects of distortion of the truth. This was argued in a paper of mine (Weintrobe 2010) and is the subject of the next chapter in this book. Chapter 4, by Paul Hoggett, is in my view a major contribution to the subject. In it Hoggett links a detailed psychoanalytic account of perversion with a thorough-going analysis of what makes for a perverse culture. He discusses perverse modes of thinking about climate change – specifically, the lies and distortions involved for society collectively to turn a blind eye to global warming.

   In this paper I have focused specifically on anxiety. Within a perverse culture we find 'quick-fix' ways to reconcile irreconcilable sets of anxieties about the implications of climate change. We are so bemired by this culture – one that breeds confusion and a lack of proportionality in thinking – that it can become very difficult to discuss with any objectivity not only issues of global warming but also economic issues, such as the necessity or not for growth in the economy. In a climate of disavowal, there is the greatest possible need for support and containment of anxieties so they can, albeit with difficulty, be jointly faced. There is also the least real support available because so much reliance is placed on the 'quick fixes' of evasion, fraud and splitting by leadership.

   If we look at predisposing factors to disavowal, we see that they fit current realities about climate change very well. I will repeat them:

- The reality has become too obvious to be simply denied with negation.
- There is anxiety that the damage is already too great to repair.
- There is felt to be not enough support and help to bear the anxiety and suffering that knowledge of reality brings.

As climate change progresses and its effects become ever more visible, unless greater support for facing reality is given and unless group identification with a stance of arrogant entitlement is challenged to a greater extent, we can expect disavowal to be the prevalent defence against the 'too-much-ness' of the reality. Inaction on climate change does not only lead to soaring levels of CO_2e emissions. It may lead to spiralling disavowal.

Some implications for policy

What are the implications for how policymakers engage people about climate change?

1. Feeling big and powerful

When we look at economic models that insist on growth, regardless of whether or not it is environmentally sustainable, it is important to distinguish between purely

economic factors and underlying unconscious emotional factors, such as the need to feel big and powerful, which can then also become a spiraling defence against anxiety. For instance, the state of mind of traders – some of them feeling like self-confessed 'sexy masters of the universe' – has been analysed in terms of underlying emotions and not just economics (see Tuckett 2011). And, history shows that expansionist utopian narcissistic states of mind that buck reality always lead to ruin in the end.

Also, when we advocate policies about climate change measures aimed at minimizing emotional difficulties for people, we should beware lest our unrecognized agenda is to put ourselves forward as ideal leaders magically able to spare people pain. In this case, our anxiety might be about our own survival as ordinary un-ideal but real leaders. Actually, people need ordinary real un-idealized leaders to help them to face and engage with very difficult realities about climate change. When we pretend we have idealized solutions that enable people apparently not to have to face any difficulties at all, we support disavowal and can unwittingly cause people's anxieties to rise, not diminish.

2. Projection

It is vital to come to understand our own anxieties about climate change as best we can before seeking to engage with others about it. If we do not, we are in danger of projecting our anxieties onto the people we want to engage, 'passing them on', as it were. This makes it more difficult for people to think in a rational way. Unwitting projection of this kind may have been a part of some of the early, 'catastrophizing', stridently doom-laden communications about climate change.

3. Disavowal

It is very important that we understand as much as possible about how disavowal works in our culture in order to work collectively to resist it.

Concluding comments

Lertzman (2008; see also chapter 6, this volume) has argued that what can appear as public apathy about environmental issues is the result of people caring too much, not too little. I agree, and in this chapter I have focused on defences against anxiety as contributing to what can appear as public apathy.

We are poorly equipped because of our very nature as human beings to bear the truth that global warming is mostly caused by human activity. This is because the truth makes us so anxious. The truth about damage to climate stability also makes us feel guilty and ashamed, and whether or not it is rational to have these feelings, having them is also part of human nature.

One main reason we find guilt and shame such difficult emotions to bear is that they cause us considerable anxiety. If we defend ourselves with disavowal, this

can lead us rapidly to lose a sense of proportion. Indeed, proportional thinking is the first casualty of the environmental crisis we are in. We are trying, unsuccessfully, to manage contrary internal positions within our psyches where we are both overwhelmed by anxiety and not anxious at all; where we simultaneously feel no guilt and it is the other person/nation/corporation who is to blame and, on the other hand, where we feel monstrously guilty and to be blamed; and where we are shameless and easily flooded with shame at one and the same time.

In truth, in current Western cultures we all bear some small individual responsibility for climate change and environmental degradation, and we are also, realistically, largely not individually responsible. While we can be incapacitated by anxiety when thinking about climate change, we are, in a realistic sense, not nearly anxious enough, given the current news that warming is proceeding faster than had been estimated.

Anxiety is, I suggest, the biggest psychic barrier to facing the reality of anthropogenic global warming. In this chapter I have looked at some of the main ways we defend against our different sorts of anxieties about climate change. My main conclusions are threefold. Avoiding the subject of anxiety does not make people's anxieties about climate change go away. The defences used to minimize anxieties drive them underground, where they are not worked through and can escalate. People need genuine emotional support to bear their anxieties, and this is particularly the case when the defences used to minimize them involve disavowal. It is important for people to bear their anxieties, because when they do not, their thinking deteriorates, and irrationality, lack of proportionality, hatred and narcissism are more likely to prevail.

Notes

1 This is Kohut's (1966) distinction. He differentiated between normal and pathological narcissism.

2 Amelia Hill, 'Mental health of women in crisis', *Guardian Newspaper*, 11 Jan. 2011. See also World Health Organization (WHO 2011) report on depression: 'Depression is the 4th leading contributor to the global burden of disease (DALYs) in 2000. By the year 2020, depression is projected to reach 2nd place of the ranking of DALYs calculated for all ages, both sexes. Today, depression is already the 2nd cause of DALYs in the age category 15–44 years for both sexes combined.'

3 Hamilton (2011) has cogently argued that the narrative of the enlightenment backs up our illusion that we are in charge of Nature and control the future, with the help of what he calls 'technological–production science'. This is an important point. In Western societies we swim in the medium of enlightenment philosophy like fishes oblivious to being in water.

4 Lest anyone think I am simply accusing governments, the relation between leaders and led is a complex collusive dance. I do, however, think that this is a dance heavily led by one side.

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Discussion

The difficult problem of anxiety in thinking about climate change

Johannes Lehtonen and Jukka Välimäki

The environmental neurosis of modern man: the illusion of autonomy and the real dependence denied

The human mind is often regarded as man's evolutionary crown, and the mind of modern man as competent and powerful, whereas because of its elusive and affect-laden character it represents man's 'weak point'. This is both remarkable and poorly recognized. It is particularly clear in relation to climate change, where the mind inhibits recognition of the warning signals, as Sally Weintrobe aptly describes in this chapter. Here, the mind specifically is the anxious mind, and its functions are maladaptive.

Decisions we take or withhold are made on the stage of the mind. The topical question of how to cope with the Gordian-knot-like complex of the interdependence of multiple climate-related factors is also dealt with, solved or left unsolved, on the stage of the mind. In the simple, but poignant words of an experienced Finnish industrial leader Tauno Matomäki several years ago, the problem of controlling climate change depends on what resides between our ears.

The psychological factors involved in our adaptation to the consequences of climate change are numerous. Together they form a complex that has many different roots in the sphere of our minds, such as our affects, basic sense of security of life, social orientation, economic adaptation, individual wishes and fears and, last but not least, our psychological make-up – the structure of the mind that has developed from infancy and adolescence to its adult forms. In addition, our social ideals and the capacity to feel shame and guilt about the exploitation and destruction of nature are also involved in our responses to signs of climate change.

Together, these factors have created a psychological condition that merits being called an environmental neurosis of modern man. We badly need the resources of nature that we cannot live without, and simultaneously we do not want to acknowledge these needs since their recognition ensures that we can no longer expect our lives to be safe or our self-centred demands guaranteed to be fulfilled in the future.

In this discussion, we consider two points to be of particular importance in the complex psychology of facing climate change.

The first is the tacit assumption of the autonomy of man in relation to the physical, chemical and biological conditions of life on our planet. We like to forget that the dominant position of mankind in nature is, in reality, based on the availability of living and inorganic natural resources. The real condition of man with respect to nature is not autonomous. On the contrary, our welfare is based on an uncompromised dependence on food, water, energy and a biologically feasible atmosphere, all of which make the idea of man's independence an illusion.

Because of our profound dependence on nature, climate change shakes the security of the human sense of being at a very basic level. This is already true at the present uncertain stage of knowledge of its consequences. The current effects of climate change and its imminent future effects pose and evoke a threat to the continuity of our present way of life, one in which we in Western societies are accustomed to technological efficiency, affluence and comfort. It is thus perhaps understandable that attempts to prevent the experience of deep anxieties about the future development of living conditions on our planet will inevitably be mobilized by any information that tells us of the dangers of the increase of carbon dioxide and the other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Trust in the ultimate independence of human intelligence over nature is nurtured by scientific discoveries and technological inventions that are expected to continue endlessly. We believe that we are able to solve all the riddles posed by nature for the benefit of our well-being and prosperity. The fact that environmental problems are largely caused by the application of these very discoveries has been a severe blow to the illusion of the sovereignty of technology. Science has guaranteed us development and prosperity. Now, it has revealed its hidden face: the dangers of its uncontrolled use and our inclination to exploit nature beyond its tolerance. In the same vein, the unwelcome reality of the dependence of man on nature instead of the illusion of full autonomy in relation to nature is becoming more conscious, and this awareness is followed by increasing anxiety and a sense of helplessness.

Our second point is the unfathomable quality of the anxiety that tends to be mobilized when basic conditions of life are threatened. The human personality with its conscious and unconscious functions is a result of long development, with major roots in infancy and adolescence. The sense of human security is embedded in deep psychological layers that stem from vital, absolute dependence of the infant on her or his caretaker and from the basic trust that has developed when care has been adequate (Winnicott 1965). Using the basic Kleinian concepts of paranoid-schizoid and depressive anxiety (Klein 1975), Weintrobe's discussion of these deep issues is truly illuminating. Emphasizing the psychological survival aspects inherent in both concepts, she demonstrates how in the midst of anxieties about climate change these two positions are activated and aim for psychological survival by using different strategies, the former in a maladaptive and the latter in an adaptive way. Also, her thorough analysis of the concept of disavowal deserves special mention.

It follows from the structure of the mind that the developmentally early and functionally most primitive mental manoeuvres are mobilized when a massive

anxiety, covered or open, is actualized. Due to its non-verbal and all-encompassing nature, the dependence of man on nature as a supplier of vital means for life is very difficult to acknowledge consciously. From this point of view, man's relationship to nature and its resources bears an important analogy to the original absolute dependence of a baby in her/his union with the caretaker in the beginning of the life-cycle (Lehtonen 1994; Lehtonen et al. 2006). We suggest our inability to recognize the influence of the limitations in the man–environment relationship and the tendency to succumb to denial and disavowal of the real threats may derive from these primitive psychological sources. *Modern man is like a baby-adult in her or his relationship to the basic survival issues that arise from the present conflict between natural resources, their usage and the modern vision of successful life.*

Nonetheless, anxiety that hardly has words for its expression needs to be recognized, shared and to become accepted as a valid aspect of the problem and to be taken into account in questions of how to deal with climate change. Otherwise, the weak part of our mind cannot be changed, nor can its implicit tendency to denial when problems without a clear shape arise. The effects of denial and disavowal as depicted by Weintrobe are seen all over in the debate on the nature and dangerousness of climate change. Arguments that it is not yet actual but will only happen sometime in the future and that the evidence is not fully confirmed, or that the United States and China first have to decide on action, or a little warming is not bad, and so on, are all responses revealing partial acknowledgement and simultaneous denial that only end in non-commitment and non-verification of the global signs of the changes. At bottom, the problem continues to be by-passed.

The point is not in looking to cure our psychological make-up when problems exceeding our coping capacity are encountered. The anxieties mobilized by climate change cannot be blown away or rendered neutral by any psychological measures. The real climate problems that are part of the present environmental neurosis cannot be resolved or removed by any means. On the contrary, they have become a part of our living conditions. Climate change and its consequences constitute limiting factors in our physical and biological as well psychological existence. The imbalance in the ratio between population growth and available safe energy, as well as the imbalance between energy demands and oil resources, are facts that together will make a critical oil-price factor around the year 2015, according to recent forecasts (Sackinger 2011).

Under these unwelcome conditions, it is important to pay attention to the effects of primitive psychological measures, denial as negation and disavowal first and foremost, that are activated by the threats, and to show ways to cope with the threats without seeking security from reality-distorting denial. Understanding the deep, anxiety-evoking psychological impact of the threats activated by climate change can provide an opportunity to find alternative, better adaptive modes of coping with the psychological malaise that is increasingly being felt. As long as the primitive psychological mechanisms continue their blurring effects on our relationship with the environment, we will be invalidated and incapable of

thinking in a mature and productive way about the challenges imposed upon us by man-made climate change, and of seeking constructive means to handle them, whatever that may imply.

The point made by Weintrobe, that primitive anxiety leads to loss of proportionate, sensible thinking and may lead to an attack on further development of the human capacity to think, is, in our opinion, extremely important. Thus, the question is not to diminish the anxiety, but to make it tolerable so that constructive thinking can proceed.

We would like to end with a reminder that what has been analysed and suggested above as pertaining to our psychological maladaptation to climate change creates a mental scene that exceeds the adaptive powers of any individual. Coping with issues of the magnitude of climate change is not possible at an individual level. Facing the uncertainties posed by current threats is only possible by joint effort in a social community, and for that purpose real, not idealized, leadership is required, as Weintrobe points out (see also Välimäki and Lehtonen 2009 on the role of leadership). As quoted by Harold Bloom (1997: xxxvi), this principle had already been elegantly expressed by Francis Bacon: 'Certain it is, though a great secret in nature, that the minds of men in company are more open to affections and impressions than when alone.'

Highlighting the psychological, largely unconscious, aspects of human responses to coping with climate change can be of aid in this effort and can increase social trust in the human community, enabling it to face and respond creatively to the unwelcome signs of the changes that are already visible.

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Discussion

The difficult problem of anxiety in thinking about climate change

Angela Mauss-Hanke

In her excellent chapter Sally Weintrobe describes one of the basic conflicts of human beings in our attitudes to climate change: that between our realistic part, concerned not only about ourselves but also about those we feel related to, and our narcissistic part, concerned about nothing but ourselves and the fulfilment of our egocentric wishes. In the example of little Katie, Weintrobe shows us vividly the basic anxieties that can arise within us when we have to face unwanted, frightening changes in our lives: the fear of the narcissistic part that it will not survive if it accepts the reality of those changes and adapts itself towards them in a reasonable way, and the anxiety of the realistic part that what and whom we depend upon in life might have been damaged by our narcissistic rage and will therefore cut benevolent connection with us.

We are familiar with the idea that there is no other time in life in which we are more dependent on these benevolent relationships than during early childhood. Babies who have nobody to feed and caress them die. But when we empathize with a baby, we assume that in the earliest stages of life there is no conscious conception of what relationships are, what is 'me' and 'you'; the other is perhaps felt as an extension of the self. A newborn baby sees its surroundings and other people as a part of itself. In a way it expects the other to have just one assignment: to serve the baby's needs and to comfort it. Little children do not yet have any consideration about the needs of others. Mummy is being woken up and her breast has to be full of milk whenever I am hungry and regardless of whether Mummy is totally worn out. In early childhood hunger is felt like an existential threat. In order for me to survive, Mummy cannot have needs herself – she must be there to serve my needs. And whenever those needs are not fulfilled sufficiently, little children can become immensely angry and terribly frightened at the same time: angry because Mummy does not function the way I expect, and frightened because Mummy might turn away or becomes angry herself because she has been hurt by the attacks of the angry child.

I will transpose this situation between baby and mother into the situation between us and 'Mother Earth'. Weintrobe describes three ways to defend ourselves against such existential anxieties in combination with ongoing climate change. The first is feeling 'magically big and powerful' – that is, going on to

insist on economic growth and the needlessness of changing (i.e. adapting) our thinking and behaviour to real circumstances. The second is projecting our anxieties into others, and I wonder whether the most powerful and at the same time most destructive way of doing this might be to project our anxieties onto our environment by insisting on economic growth and the needlessness of changing anything. Because, by doing this, we would seem to turn the situation upside down by forcing this very environment on which we existentially depend into the role of the one (the baby) who is desperately dependent on us in order to survive.

The third way of defending ourselves is denying the damage being done to the climate. Denial takes centre stage in Weintrobe's examination of possible ways that we have to cope with our anxieties. She distinguishes two main forms of denial: denial as negation – that is, a sort of denial that can be 'worked through' with good enough 'outer support' and growing inner strength – and denial as disavowal. In disavowal Weintrobe sees a 'more organized and enduring defensive structure' based on 'radical splitting': reality is noticed, and at the same time it is ignored. When this defensive structure is dominated by the side of the ego that denies reality, the arrogant tendency that Weintrobe describes is at work and a feeling of triumph spreads out because narcissistic greedy wishes have won over the cognition of reality. But it is, paradoxically, this very triumph that may cause even deeper anxieties as the healthy realistic part, though being ignored, still silently knows that something is rotten in the inner state. When we look around at the political and economic decisions being made worldwide with respect to ongoing anthropogenic climate change, we can observe this domination of disavowal on many occasions and many levels.

Climate change is something that splits our inner and outer world into normal and at the same time deeply threatening circumstances. It is a change that does not necessarily affect all our daily lives, and at the same time it threatens mankind at the most basic level. 'We need a healthy Earth and biosphere to stay alive', Weintrobe says. But we know we have already damaged 'Mother Earth' in a way that is irreversible by having used up within a century or so most treasures of the soil – treasures that were formed over millions of years. Nevertheless we still fly from A to B, though we could easily take the train – and when we read the newspaper while sitting in the plane and see pictures of arid landscapes and starving children, we are shocked.

Weintrobe describes several 'realistic survival anxieties' about climate change: the anxiety about loss of the Earth, the anxiety about loss of the future and generativity, the anxiety about not being protected by our political leaders and anxiety about our destructiveness. But she also points out that 'climate change can revive our early childhood fears of damage'. I think it is worth while to take a closer look at the threatening circulus vitiosus she describes here about our early childhood fears – namely, that the revival of frightening feelings can cause emotional apathy, and growing emotional apathy can cause an intensification of early childhood anxieties. This apathy as a mental state marks a cul-de-sac that, on a psychic level, resides in an abysmal inner no-man's-land, as it were, in which the split between

the illusionary feeling of living in a healthy and 'good-enough' environment on the one hand and the knowledge that this environment is being threatened even more if we go on to pretend that we are able to stick to this illusion is to the fore. In this apathetic state neither emotional cognition nor development seems possible because any progression is anticipated as realization of climate change that must and can be avoided, whereas in reality it is already a matter of fact. It is a claustrophobic position, with little room for backward or forward movement.

I suggest that we need to distinguish between two forms of anxiety at play in this psychodynamic state. First, the anxiety of entering a terra incognita – that is, the fear of the unknown which requires letting go of the familiar without knowing the new; and, second, a *terra cremata* that involves the fear of re-entering psychic territories that had once been experienced as something most threatening and were therefore 'burned down' (from the Latin *cremare* – to burn) – that is, they were psychically destroyed.

What does this mean with respect to climate change? I suggest that terra incognita is being faced with our task to develop totally new approaches concerning the use of natural resources. The *terra cremata* is the inner 'land' of an existential vulnerability and dependence – a terribly frightening and traumatic experience we all went through as babies (though, of course, at very different levels, frequencies and intensities) and which we overcame by developing our autonomy in order never ever again to be so vulnerable and dependent!

In this way of conceptualizing the situation we face, the encapsulating of trauma, involving splitting, creates a psychic 'void' that is strenuously defended and in which the delusion is maintained that there is no damage, At the same time, the emotions and thought processes that were involved in the traumatic event as well as the psychic surroundings undergo an active, albeit unconscious, change *themselves*.

Weintrobe speaks about 'attacks on thinking' – that is, in order to hold on to an illusionary standpoint, we can not only think something untrue though we know better, but we might furthermore attack and therefore damage our thinking capability itself. Any development that is anticipated and at the same time vehemently resisted, like ongoing climate change, involves a psychic movement in which an inner *terra cremata* must be reinvigorated in order to reach a *terra incognita*. It involves a retreat to a primitive developmental state in order to work through a situation in which the new and the damaged are intertwined. In this primitive state, mature (realistic) means of communication and functions may be destroyed and replaced by immature (illusionary, narcissistic) ones. When the immature gains the upper hand in a mature stage, it loses its meaningful place in the structure of the whole and thus puts that very psychic structure at risk. The paradoxical result is the outbreak of dreaded and unbearable catastrophic anxiety.

I think it is this anxiety that Weintrobe describes when she speaks about 'unbearable anxiety' as 'the biggest psychic barrier to facing the reality of anthropogenic global warming', and I totally agree with her conclusion: 'Perhaps one step towards engagement is to recognize the difficulty.' As psychoanalysts, we

should engage ourselves first of all by providing our knowledge about psycho-dynamic processes, as Weintrobe does, by showing some of the main obstacles that hinder us from engaging more intensely in activities against climate change. Let us as a last step in this discussion of Weintrobe's very helpful and clarifying thoughts remind ourselves of what we have learned about childhood development: namely, that when facing any existential threats like that of climate change, we regress to early childhood states. But, as no regression is endless and absolute, we can at the same time remind ourselves how we learned to let go of the illusion that our mother is nothing but a wish-fulfiller. We can remind ourselves how we even learned to understand that our mother has her own needs and must be treated with respect, especially after we have treated her badly, and even more so when she becomes seriously weak. And we can become aware of Mother Earth being so many generations older than all of us without being replaceable in the way we can be.