

Denial, Stories and Visions

As the evidence for climate change mounts, public scepticism about it increases.

Sandra White explains the psychology of denial

After Copenhagen, the need for wholehearted engagement on the part of our political and business leaders with a sustainable future becomes ever clearer. Even as the demands of the modern world compete for their attention, we need them to prioritise climate change. We also know there is an intimate relationship between the expressed needs and desires of the general public and how far politicians and CEOs will go in implementing change. Last year, opinion polls showed that the number of people who believe that climate change is real, let alone human-induced, is decreasing, despite more convincing scientific evidence. This is known as 'climate change denial'.

Why is it happening? One conclusion we can draw is that presenting factual information about threats to the Earth's systems is failing to galvanise the required action; there is so much to being human, this is not enough. Today, there is increasing focus on developing an understanding of what people want, what motivates them and what might attract them towards change. For the past five decades, psychologists have been integral to the marketing industry in shaping consumer society and its cultural narratives; as psychology has led us further in, perhaps it can now help lead us out.

What people are saying

A recent crop of in-depth studies into human attitudes to the environment help to flesh out the picture.

Significantly, the World Bank recently published a study entitled *Cognitive and Behavioural Challenges in Responding to Climate Change* by Kari Marie Norgaard. She focuses on the 'failure of information to move through the public awareness and into policy outcomes' and goes on to identify a high level of confusion about the science and name some of its causes: distortion of climate science and poor quality information in the media; and the behaviour of fossil fuel interest groups in influencing government policy and funding sceptics' campaigns. She also finds that understanding information is not a pre-requisite for concern and, worryingly, informed concern does not in any case necessarily lead to action, particularly in industrialised societies.

Norgaard's observations about some of the conflicting feelings generated by climate change help explain this lack of action. She found widespread helplessness at the enormity of the problem; guilt that the privileged lifestyles we enjoy contribute to it; and not wanting to feel like a 'bad' person or member of a 'bad' nation. She considers that these are more influential in preventing engagement than apathy. Given our culture of not talking socially about things which provoke uncertainty or guilt, she proposes that if climate change is not discussed at a community level, 'we don't know how to know about it.'

The report's recommendations include developing strategies to reduce isolation, build community and create positive frames of reference; countering the influence of the oil industry on public debate; and developing ways of appealing to national identity and pride through emissions reductions. The common thread is the importance of engaging peoples' emotions and loyalties, rather than simply their intellect or sense of duty.

Aspects of identity

This thread is taken up by another new study, *Meeting Environmental Challenges: the role of human identity* by Tom Crompton and Tim Kasser for WWF. Crompton & Kasser point out that, in our culture, people gain their sense of value from 'wealth, reward, achievement and status', and highlight studies which show that these values correlate strongly with high CO₂ emissions and destructive treatment of non-human life. Such treatment can also be extended to other humans who are perceived as belonging to 'out-groups'; people with whom we cannot identify and in whose presence we behave so as to enhance the standing of our own group. This behaviour is applied to the rest of life on Earth when rooted in 'anthropocentrism', a kind of human chauvinism in which the perceived needs and desires of humanity as the superior species are privileged over all other considerations.

Crompton & Kasser's work is aimed at activists but their recommendations have profound implications for the political and business leaders who shape our society's expectations and desires. They suggest greater emphasis on values of self-acceptance, affiliation and community feeling; communicating empathically about the difficulty of facing the enormity of climate change; and stressing the relationship between people and non-human nature and promoting more contact between them.

These studies reveal important aspects of the disabling impacts of climate change denial and it is well worth understanding more about it.

Explaining denial

'Denial' is psychological jargon for the way the mind's defence mechanisms protect us from what we cannot cope with knowing. Climate change is exactly the kind of phenomenon which elicits denial. Most people consider that the word applies only to those who deny that climate change exists or is human induced, but this is not so. Denial operates in complex ways while we begin to take steps towards change, and shapes those steps.

Ministers and CEOs are especially exposed to the dynamics of denial. At the helm of the economic and production models by which our society currently realises its needs and desires, their investment in those models is naturally substantial. They have to deal with the double dose of denial within themselves as well as within their electorates and customers.

One of the most powerful triggers of denial is fear of loss. The pursuit of an ecologically sustainable world heralds for Western civilisation the prospect of fundamentally changing everything it has believed in and achieved over centuries, implying a change in the very foundation of our collective identity. For most of the public, the images put in front of them relating to sustainability threaten the loss of what is precious to them. For political and business leaders, this loss extends to the levers of the systems in their hands.

When denial is triggered by this scale of perceived loss, instantly a shutter slams down. In front of the shutter, huge emotional, cognitive and motivational energy is applied to holding on to and increasing what is precious and negating what threatens it. Behind the shutter an equal amount of energy is needed to ward off unbearable and conflicting feelings which may include guilt and shame alongside fear and anguish.

In the case of climate change, these feelings may be simultaneously about both the anticipated loss and the destruction we are causing. Not enough attention is paid, in my view, to the importance of shame, which is deep-seated and inseparable from core, often unconscious, desires to be intrinsically good and valuable to society. While most organisations

are still hardly engaged with reducing their carbon footprints, working people are placed in a double-bind where, as they identify with, take pride in or simply need their work, they subliminally know or fear that their activities contribute to climate change. This triggers the safeguard of denial, in a vicious spiral.

Consequently, at all levels of our society, little psychological energy remains accessible for the kind of open and creative thinking needed to enable a meaningful and radical review of the situation. The vital, creative engine room that becomes available when deepest feelings are attended to is cut off. What results are attempts at less bad business-as-usual, which essentially maintains the vicious spiral. Little else will be available unless and until the mechanisms of denial can be helped to relax.

Three characteristics of denial

To this end, we need to understand three key characteristics of denial, which make it such a powerful obstacle to change.

- The onset of denial is not a matter of choice. This is the crux of the matter. This innate level of psychological defence is equivalent to bodily systems and safety reflexes which activate when needed without our knowledge or consent.
- As the shutter slams down, a new story is created. This story may be irrational or rational; it does not matter. Its sole purpose is to uphold the person's core sense of validity when confronted with a major threat to their identity. Such stories include 'climate change is due to sun-spot activity' and 'we can only act when we are certain of all the facts and sure of the outcomes.' The latter sounds rational, but it contrasts starkly with how political and economic decisions are really made. This quality of 'upholding' fuels a genuine belief in the story and in its superiority over opposing stories; presenting a different case is near futile.
- The protection afforded by the shutter, the new story and the accompanying feeling of superiority will be unconsciously held in place until the danger has passed or a new desire emerges which allows the old one to be relinquished. If a new threat supersedes the earlier danger, the protection may tighten and a new upholding story may emerge. This is another way to understand the increase in climate change denial; the UK's weather patterns are becoming less stable in line with predictions and more people are suffering from floods and mini-tornados, but more people do not believe in climate change. This is the new story, now that the need to change our whole way of life presses closer.

A clash of needs

The importance of all this is that the psychological protection of denial is essential – and here lies the heart of our difficulty. Right now, we are in a clash of two opposing but equally valid and vitally compelling needs: the physical need to protect the Earth's systems from further deterioration, and the psychological need for people to protect their sense of legitimacy. Although it is clear that there is no ultimate conflict between looking after the Earth and looking after ourselves, a substantial threat to a person's identity blocks out that perception.

An exhortation to 'downsize' is not simple. Underlying people's identity is also the psychological dynamic of 'identification' which takes place at both conscious and unconscious levels. This means that we experience the valued thing that we identify with

– our well heated home or our foreign holiday for which we have worked hard – as an aspect of our selves, not merely an accessory. Hence, the primacy that our culture places on material success, rather than on the intrinsic value of who we are, has resulted in most of our sense of self worth being defined by those things. If we imagine that building a sustainable world only means losing them, it feels like amputation and of course we resist it.

This brings me to why the subject of stories is so important, beyond the mechanisms of denial. As marketing specialists know, every personal, political and corporate action takes place within a story, whether conscious or subliminal. In a parody of Descartes, our society's guiding story seems to be, 'I have, therefore I am'. We even call ourselves 'consumers' rather than 'people'. Why would we think more deeply or act more wisely when, if the label is to be believed, we are already fulfilling our purpose and potential? Surely, this is too narrow a vision of what it means to be a great human being.

Visions of ecological sustainability

Perhaps now is the moment for a new strategy, one that addresses our larger cultural narratives. What if those of us who have them start to share our visions of sustainability that excite and inspire us? Here is mine: We are the privileged generations who have the opportunity to take part in an extraordinary endeavour to restore the Earth's systems. It does not get greater than this. Far from being a project of impoverishment, developing sustainability gives each and every one of us a chance to use our talents, large and small, to the full. If we all come together, we can collectively contribute everything that is distinctive about humanity, to halt the trail of destruction we are leaving behind us. We can afford to give life the time and space it needs to repair and rebalance itself and, while we do, who knows what other riches we will discover?

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Short talks and a workshop exploring how these ideas can be put into practice, aimed at those working to promote greater engagement with sustainability, will soon be available.