CONFLICTED ABOUT EMOTIONS: ECOLOGICAL GRIEF, LOVE AND TRUTH

A Green House Gas by Nadine Andrews
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Where are the emotions?

The keynote speaker representing the IPCC had just finished his presentation at the World Symposium on Climate Change Adaptation at Manchester Metropolitan University. It was September 2015. The questions from the conference delegates were sparse and bland. Feeling a bit bored and dissatisfied I decided to liven things up by asking a question that had been on my mind for a while. "*There is a view that the IPCC and climate science generally would be more effective if there was more expression of emotion,"* I ventured, "*what do you think about this?*" I made reference to two articles in the media that reported a panel member crying and how this was received (see here and here). "*What you have just presented is terrifying, what do you do with these emotions yourself?*" Professor Hans-Otto Pörtner paused ever so slightly. Then with a smile he replied, *"Are you asking me why I'm not crying right now?"* This got a huge roar of laughter from the audience. But he went on to address the question more seriously. In the break he came to find me. "*I really liked your question, can we talk?*" Fourteen months later I started working in his science team in the Technical Support Unit of Working Group II with the question still on my mind.

The word 'emotion' in English has the same semantic root as 'motivation'. Emotions are cues, directing attention and guiding behaviour. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio discovered that people with brain injuries who are unable to feel emotions find it extremely difficult to make decisions.

The emotion paradox: both recognition and rejection

The IPCC Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) acknowledges the important role of emotion in risk perception, decision-making and in communication (IPCC 2014). Yet the report itself is unemotional. Scientists are not generally encouraged to bring emotions into their research reports. To do so threatens one's status as a credible and objective scholar. This denigration of emotion has a long history: moral philosopher Mary Midgley reminds us that in the 17th century when Descartes disembodied the mind in the in a "violent separation" of mind from body (2003 p39), emotion came to be seen as soft and "beneath the dignity of scientists" (p18). The Scientific Revolution gave reason primacy and diminished emotion, creating a dualism that has persisted over the centuries. In the past couple years there has been more written about emotions and climate science including by climate scientists (e.g. see here and here, and the website Is This How Your Feel?) but these are mainly in non-academic outlets.

I find it quite remarkable that I was appointed to bring a psychosocial perspective to the IPCC. A sign of desperation perhaps, an acknowledgement that despite all the facts and figures, societal inertia is still a huge problem, and one that can't be addressed with the physical and natural sciences. In 2009 the American Psychological Association published a report on the interface between psychology and climate change, arguing that psychology has an important contribution to make in developing understanding of the human dimensions of climate change. Two years later, this argument was made again this time with the added complaint that the "value of psychological contributions is not yet widely accepted, nor are psychological insights and findings widely applied" (Swim et al 2011 p246). Seemingly not much changed as the argument was repeated a few years later, this time in a mainstream scientific publication: Nature Climate Change (Clayton et al 2015). Enough with making the case, the time surely had come to actually make the contribution. My first act in post was to write an article for the Climate Psychology Alliance website, calling for psychologists to engage with the Sixth Assessment (AR6) cycle. Some disciplines have a long track record of involvement and are

familiar with the processes of engagement, but not psychology. So there was some explanation and demystifying required. But IPCC decision-making processes work against having adequate representation of the social sciences. Dominated by physical and natural sciences, the diversity of the social sciences gets reduced to just a few disciplines. The case for wider representation across the fields and for greater coverage in the reports has been made (Egner 2016; Leyshon 2014), but it was a constant fight to keep even a few experts on the list as the selection processes unfolded. With each round of decisions, there is risk of elimination due to the need to achieve a degree of balance in experts across gender, citizenship, developed/developing countries etc. But there were some successes: a few world leading psychologists (Janet Swim, Linda Steg and Susan Clayton) are now part of the IPCC family and involved as experts with AR6, and the American Psychological Association has become an official IPCC observer organisation.

Mental health

But there were also some failures. Despite my best efforts I was unable to influence the content of the impacts chapter in the Special Report on 1.5° degrees warming. The internal draft mentioned only impacts on physical health i.e. mortality and morbidity, and nothing at all on the mental health impacts of climate change even though these are already being experienced: anxiety, depression and PTSD and psychosocial impacts of increased rates of violence, suicide, substance abuse and crime (Doherty & Clayton 2011; Clayton et al 2017). This was unchanged in the subsequent drafts and remains an omission in the final published report. Mental health was also largely overlooked at COP23, even though there was a Health and Climate Summit, a Health Action Day, and a side event on Health and Climate Change in the UK Pavilion. The side event, that I attended, featured talks from WHO, Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change, and Global Climate and Health Alliance. When I commented at the end that mental health had not been discussed, I was told that the Lancet Countdown had focussed on what was easy to measure. The drunkards search principle in action?

On the plus side, there have been some developments this year. Perhaps most significantly, Nature Climate Change published a special issue on mental health in April 2018, which included a paper by Susan Clayton (Clayton 2018). More empirical research is also being published (e.g. Obradovich et al 2018). And in the USA especially there is growing recognition of the trauma that is experienced with extreme weather events and loss of homes, lands, communities and cultures, and the need for policy to address the increasing demands on frontline health services. Contributing to this consciousness-raising is the International Transformational Resilience Coalition, which works to build the capacity of communities to deal with traumatic experiences in a way that *increases* wellbeing above previous levels. In this approach, adversity is a catalyst for finding new meaning and direction in life (Doppelt 2016).

Ecological grief and mourning

Literature on the mental health impacts of climate change tends to focus on extreme weather events. But there are other ecological processes occurring, no less extreme or devastating, that impact on our sense of wellbeing: loss of nature. Another paper in the Nature Climate Change special issue addresses this phenomenon, naming the emotional response 'ecological grief': the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018). Climate psychologist Renee Lertzman calls it 'environmental melancholia' (Lertzman 2015).

The UK is experiencing drastic reductions in numbers of insects, birds and animals, with ever-increasing development of natural and semi-natural land. We don't have any social norms for expressing how we feel about this, but I find it doesn't take much to bring feelings up to the surface. I discovered this at the Nature Connections conference earlier this year. I was presenting an analysis of Michael Gove's 'Green Brexit' speech, highlighting its reason-emotion dualism. Gove professes to love nature, and indeed if membership levels of nature conservation charities is anything to go by, Britain is a nation of nature-lovers (Cocker 2018). But, I argued, as can be discerned in Gove's speech

there is an embarrassment about expressing this love. I ended my talk with a minute silence "*for the Swifts, and the seabirds of Shetland, and the insects and all the other species whose numbers are in such massive and catastrophic decline*". This was a powerful moment for many in the room. As some later tweeted:

A couple months later I was interviewed by one of the people who had attended the talk. A short film of the interview was shown to CEOs of nature conservation charities who meet together as the Rethink Nature group. What I said about my own experience of loss of wildlife and the need for organisations to host a national conversation about our feelings about this was apparently very well received by this group, and was a turning point in their conversation. Watching the film myself what strikes me most are my own expressions of emotion. It's the micro-expressions that are most telling: split-second expressions of fear, unease, sadness and grief. It would appear that these emotions are not far from the surface for me too.

Emotional avoidance is avoidance of reality

Avoidance and suppression of difficult emotions are well-understood defences against psychological threat. In a study I conducted with sustainability managers working to influence and improve pro-environmental practices in their organisations, felt emotion about ecological crisis was suppressed out of fear that engaging with negative emotions would lead to dysfunction (Andrews 2017). The environmental activist and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy states, "we are afraid that we might break apart or get stuck in despair if we open our eyes to the dangers" (1993 p31).

Suppression of strong emotion takes mental and physical effort, diverting cognitive resources away from other tasks. In the short term emotional avoidance can be appropriate, reducing distress, but over the longer term suppression is associated with poorer health (Brown & Cordon, 2009; Weinstein & Ryan 2011). It is also ecologically maladaptive because as ecopsychologist Mary-Jane Rust (2008 p160) explains, "when we block out our feelings we lose touch with the urgency of the crisis". This blocking is a form of disembodiment. In cognitive science and phenomenology, the physical body is regarded as integral to perception and understanding experience: it is not just as a biological object but a lived experiential structure (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991). Embodiment involves the experience of emotion. David W. Kidner explains that disembodiment "sidesteps the underlying ecological problem by effectively switching off those faculties that might alert us, in effect restricting us to an exclusively cognitive awareness. A focus on thinking that excludes feeling, therefore, amounts to a bracketing off of reality" (2007 p138).

Sustaining the gaze

Macy advises that it is "essential that we develop our inner resources. We have to learn to look at things as they are, painful and overwhelming as that may be, for no healing can begin until we are fully present to our world, until we learn to sustain the gaze" (1993 p4).

The newly published IPCC Special Report on 1.5°C global warming presents a grim picture of a possible future. But if we don't allow ourselves to truly *feel* the horror and be motivated by it to respond with appropriate and proportional action then the inertia that has plagued global responses thus far will not be overcome.

To see clearly we need supportive contexts. When asked how he felt about ecological crisis, one of my research participants replied:

> Ash: (silence) *how do I feel about it (in quiet voice) as local government officers it's all bashed out of us in our day job because what we feel about things is completely irrelevant it's about what the business case is, and you know pragmatic*

This intertwining of the psychological and the social, of our inner and outer worlds, is fundamental to a psychosocial understanding of human experience (Woodward, 2015). Here, the social context is perceived as violently hostile to emotions (*bashed out of us)*. A reason-emotion dualism is also evident: rationality (*business case, pragmatic*) is privileged and feelings are deemed irrelevant. Lertzman (2015 p33) writes, "The capacity to be disturbed is linked with the capacity to be curious, and both require certain levels of containment and safety to help tolerate such experiences". For Ash, his organisation is an unsafe container for expressing his feelings of sadness, melancholy and pessimism, making containment of these emotions within himself the safer option:

> Me: *So what do you do with those emotions?*
> Ash: *Um (pause) I tend not to explore them or I think I've got them in a box in my head*

The difficult emotions are compartmentalised in a 'box' in his mind, where they can be avoided.

Creating new social norms

I have come to the view that one of the most important projects of this moment is to work on creating new social norms for expressing our feelings about climate and ecological crisis – about the harm and suffering we are causing, the catastrophic impacts that will increase in terribleness if we fail to sufficiently alter our trajectory. At the centre of this is public and collective mourning of loss in all its various dimensions: loss of wild life, loss of sense of safety and security, of comfortable consumer lifestyles and our internalised expectations of the future. With mourning we can let go of what is lost and what no longer serves us and our fellow beings. With letting go we create space for the new, for better ways of living - with each other and the Earth. The new political movement Extinction Rebellion has the potential to contribute to creating these new norms, with its value of regenerative culture, and statement that it is fuelled by love and that 'grieving is part of our work' – but it is vital that this is enacted and not just espoused.

One of the demands of Extinction Rebellion is that 'the Government must tell the truth about how deadly our situation is'. This applies to all of us, not just governments. The Climate Psychology Alliance has a strapline *facing difficult truths*. Facing the facts of climate change and ecological crisis involves encountering powerful feelings that can be difficult to bear. How we deal with these feelings shapes how we respond to the crisis, and will be critical in determining whether our responses are ultimately adaptive or maladaptive (Andrews & Hoggett, in press).

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