

# The Psychodynamics of Climate Change Denial: The Need for an Ecopsychanalysis

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Climate change denial can be seen in various ways and a psychodynamic view has much to contribute. This paper looks at denial from a descriptive and psychodynamic perspective. Freud's views about denial are summarized. The views of John Steiner are of particular importance as they offer a differentiation between turning a blind eye and omnipotence.

As a defence mechanism, denial protects us from various anxieties. The anxieties aroused by climate change will be discussed from a descriptive and psychodynamic perspective noting in particular the unconscious processes described by the psychoanalyst Harold Searles.

Within psychology and psychoanalysis there has been much denial of the psychological importance of the natural environment. Some psychoanalytic and other relevant views of the psychological significance of the natural environment will be discussed. It will be argued that there is a need for an ecopsychanalysis, made more urgent by climate change.

**Keywords:** Psychodynamics; Denial; Climate Change; Ecopsychanalysis

## Denial- a descriptive and psychodynamic perspective

Freud used three words which relate to denial or negation: Verdrängung, Verleugnung and Verwerfung (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). Verdrängung (repression) was the first term he used in relation to denial. He used it to refer to defence in general but later more specifically as the means whereby mental representations are made unconscious in neurosis. External reality is accepted, but may be repressed from consciousness.

Freud used the term Verleugnung (disavowal) to describe the situation of both knowing and not knowing about external reality. He first used the term when stating: "We know how children react to their first impressions of the absence of a penis. They disavow the fact and believe that they do see a penis all the same" (Freud, 1923, p.143). He goes on to use the term in relation to fetishism and perversion in general.

Verwerfung (foreclosure) was a term used particularly by Lacan to describe the mechanism in psychosis; an ejection from oneself of part of reality. The external reality is never affirmed or admitted.

These different notions of Freud point to the possibility of looking at different forms of climate change denial. While the Freudian view emphasizes the unconscious component of denial, it is clear that much climate change denial, for example by vested interests, is a conscious attempt to deny reality and the truth.

Stanley Cohen (2001) offers us useful ways of looking at denial. He looks at the organization of denial (personal, cultural or official), the type of denial and the agent involved. He describes three types of denial: literal, interpretive and implicative. This typology can be applied to climate change denial. In literal denial climate change per se is denied. In interpretive denial climate change is not denied but is interpreted as non anthropogenic, while in implicative denial anthropogenic climate change is accepted but its 'psychological, political and moral' (Cohen, 2001, p. 8) implications are not. The agent involved may be victim, perpetrator or bystander. Though Cohen's book is largely about atrocities it is relevant to apply the same division to climate change denial, including seeing these agents as different aspects of the self.

Cohen critiques Freud's notions as confused but nevertheless incorporates a psychodynamic approach and in particular shows interest in the ideas of John Steiner.

In more recent years the idea of both knowing and not knowing has become an important way of thinking about perversion. This idea has been elaborated particularly by Steiner (1993).

Steiner refers to the Oedipus story as recounted by Sophocles and follows the interpretation that the main characters, in particular Oedipus and his mother Jocasta, knew or half knew the situation and that there was a collusive cover up. At a point in the drama Oedipus becomes aware of the terrible truth, that he has murdered his father and married his mother, which he is briefly able to bear, though overwhelmed with guilt. However he then discovers that his mother/wife has killed herself. He blinds himself. This initiates a more profound retreat from reality. He can no longer see reality or the truth (Steiner, 1993). Oedipus, in the sequel to Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, no longer respects the truth: he is in an omnipotent state.

In this view, in disavowal there is a respect for the truth though it is evaded, while in omnipotence there is a turning away from and indeed a blindness to truth. Melanie Klein regarded omnipotence as a defence 'against the experiences of separateness, dependence and envy' (Hinshelwood, 1991, p. 375). In this situation the important issue is the relationship to truth. Oedipus at Colonus turns to divine authority which allows him to be contemptuous of the truth:

*Reality is dismissed and the organization on which it is based is peopled with omnipotent figures who claim respect from their divinity and power. The truth does not have to be argued with or justified and shame and guilt are inappropriate (Steiner, p. 129).*

Steiner's differentiation between omnipotence and turning a blind eye allows us to look at different types of climate change denial, for example Cohen refers to omnipotence as 'the preferred mode of perpetrators rather than bystanders' (2001, p. 34).

## Why does climate change need to be denied?

A way of looking at this is to describe what emotional states, induced by climate change, need to be defended against. This is well outlined by Norgaard (2011), based on her interviews in a rural community in Norway. She argues that failure to respond to global warming is not due to lack of information or lack of concern for the world but rather, as one of her interviewees describes it, 'people want to protect themselves a bit'. She mentions a number of threats: fear of loss of ontological security, helplessness, guilt and the threat to individual and collective sense of identity.

Ontological security, (the sense of continuity of self identity and the environment) is deeply threatened by climate change. Helplessness can arise from the sense that the problem is so large and can lead to feelings of despair. Guilt can occur from feeling that one's actions are causing the problem. Identity is also threatened: 'The Norwegian public self image has included a strong self identification of being environmentally aware' (Norgaard, 2001, p. 87).

## Unconscious processes in relation to climate change

A psychodynamic approach goes beyond the descriptive approach to look at the underlying psychodynamics. A paper by Harold Searles from 1972, *Unconscious processes in relation to the environmental crisis*, is prescient in this regard. Searles had a reputation for being able to work analytically with very difficult borderline and psychotic patients and wrote a number of influential analytic papers.

He first states: 'Even beyond the threat of nuclear warfare, I think the ecological crisis is the greatest threat that mankind collectively has ever faced' (p. 361). His hypothesis is that: 'Man is hampered in his meeting of the environmental crisis by a severe and pervasive apathy which is based largely upon feelings and attitudes of which he is unconscious' (p. 361) and that 'the world's current state of ecological deterioration is such as to evoke in us largely unconscious anxieties' (p. 363) which he relates to different Freudian and Kleinian developmental positions.

He discusses the Freudian phallic and oedipal stages. Our genital primacy, he suggests, symbolized by our cars, is threatened. He mentions, for example, that our envy and hatred of Oedipal rivals, in particular succeeding generations, makes us happy for them to be polluted into extinction. These factors can contribute to Oedipal guilt. He also speaks of the moralizing tone used by writers on the subject, who imply 'that we have raped Mother Earth and now we are being duly strangled or poisoned.'(p. 364) projecting, he suggests, their Oedipal guilt.

In Melanie Klein's thinking there are two developmental positions: the paranoid schizoid and depressive positions. The paranoid schizoid position is more primitive with more fragmented experiences and anxiety is managed by splitting the world into good and bad objects. The depressive position is more integrated allowing whole objects and feelings of loss, sadness and guilt and desires to repair.

Climate change can evoke depressive position feelings of loss, sadness and guilt. This emotional depression connects with the despair that Joanna Macy discusses: 'Confronted with widespread suffering and threats of global disaster, responses of anguish-of fear, anger, grief and even guilt are normal' (Macy, 1995). Such painful states of mind connect to the guilt and helplessness that Norgaard mentions and may be denied. As Searles says: "Environmental pollution shields one from the full depth of emotional depression within oneself –instead of feeling isolated within emotional depression, one feels at one with everyone else in a realistically doomed world" (Searles, 1972, p. 366). He also discusses the difficulty accepting losses in our current society:

*An ecologically healthy relatedness to our nonhuman environment is essential to the development and maintenance of our sense of being human and that such a relatedness has become so undermined, disrupted and distorted, concomitant with the ecological deterioration, that it is inordinately difficult for us to integrate the feeling experiences, including the losses, inescapable to any full-fledged human living (p. 368).*

He suggests that by moving away from nature to technology,

*we have come from being subjectively differentiated from, and in meaningful kinship with the outer world, to finding this technology-dominated world so alien, so complex, so awesome and so overwhelming that we have been able to cope with it only by regressing in our unconscious experience of it, largely to a degraded state of non differentiation from it (p. 368).*

Searles implies that the ecologically deteriorated, technological world lends itself to a more paranoid schizoid perspective. 'The proliferation of technology, with its marvelously complex integration and its seemingly omnipotent dominion over nature, provides us with an increasingly alluring object upon which to project our non human strivings for omnipotence' (p. 368) while at the same time the 'animal-nature based components of our selves become impoverished' (p. 368). This conflict between animal and technological selves, seen as either good or bad in this paranoid schizoid thinking, can then get projected onto external reality: 'the war in external reality between the beleaguered remnants of ecologically balanced nature and man's technology'(p. 368). There can thus be an omnipotent defence against the vulnerability of nature, both inner and outer:

*At an unconscious level we powerfully identify with what we perceive as omnipotent and immortal technology, as a defence against intolerable feelings of insignificance, of deprivation, of guilt, of fear of death and so on (p. 370).*

At the same time the natural environment is seen as very threatening, with risk everywhere. It is not surprising that climate change creates ontological insecurity, a term first used by R.D. Laing (1960) to describe deep fears of annihilation.

Individual helplessness can lead to an omnipotent response:

*It has been said realistically, 'When it comes to salvaging the environment, the individual is almost powerless'. Since the constructive idea of saving the world can be achieved only by one's working as but one largely anonymous individual among uncounted millions, in adult concert with other citizens, it is more alluring to give oneself over to secret fantasies of omnipotent destructiveness, in identification with the forces that threaten to destroy the world (Searles, 1972, p. 370).*

In many ways climate change denial may thus be seen as a defence against feelings of vulnerability and dependence. Accepting the reality of climate change means accepting dependence on the natural environment. This is a difficult thing to accept when we have had so much experience of power over nature and may not feel a close relationship with it. Clive Hamilton discusses the link between a sense of connectedness to nature and acceptance of climate change (2010).

## The psychological importance of the natural environment: the psychoanalytic perspective

Psychoanalytic thinking has tended to minimize, if not turn a blind eye to, the significance of the natural environment in our mental functioning. Within psychoanalysis, Freud personally had a close connection to nature. The natural environment was important to Freud as a child (Burke, 2006) and in later life and he had a very close relationship with his dogs.

It would appear that Freud never wrote systematically about the psychological significance of the natural environment. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud states however that 'the ego is originally all-inclusive, but later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present sense of self is thus only a shrunken residue of a far more comprehensive indeed all-embracing feeling, which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it'(Freud, 2002, p. 6). This perhaps alludes to what has subsequently been called the ecological self.

Freud was well aware of Man's position in the animal world.

*Man acquired a dominating position over his fellow creatures in the animal kingdom. Not content with this supremacy, however, he began to place a gulf between his nature and theirs.... and made claims to a divine descent which permitted him to annihilate the bond of community between him and the animal kingdom. It is noteworthy that this piece of arrogance is still as foreign to the child as it is to the savage or primitive man (Freud, 1917, quoted in Searles, 1960, p. 4).*

Freud's way of thinking however reflected the anthropocentric thinking of the time and tended to privilege the human world.

The natural environment has been little discussed from a psychoanalytic viewpoint with the notable exception of Harold Searles' book, *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal*

*Development and Schizophrenia* (1960). In this book he discusses man's kinship with and the infant's subjective oneness with the nonhuman environment, the nonhuman environment in subsequent personality development, the mature person's attitude to his nonhuman environment and the psychological benefits that derive from mature relatedness to the nonhuman environment.

He believed that relatedness to the nonhuman environment is 'one of the transcendently important facts of human living' (p. 6) and that while for 'hundreds of thousands of years men felt themselves in mutually interchangeable kinship with the rest of their environment' (p. 7) the pendulum had swung.

In terms of development, he writes of the struggle to be separate not just from the mother but also the nonhuman environment. He quotes Winnicott, who was writing about transitional objects and the importance of the environment at the same time, though it would appear that Winnicott does not refer to the natural environment other than animal pets. Searles writes that 'this nonhuman environment apparently provides, in the life of the normal infant and child, a significant contribution to his emotional security, his sense of stability and continuity of experience, and his developing sense of personal identity' (p. 78). 'The child can use his nonhuman environment through finding it to be relatively simple and relatively stable, rather than overwhelmingly complex and ever shifting' (p. 82) as the human environment may be.

With the mature person's attitude he speaks of a basic emotional orientation of connectedness while retaining a sense of separateness. In discussing the psychological benefits of mature relatedness to the natural environment he mentions the assuagement of various painful and anxiety laden states of feeling, the fostering of self realization, the deepening of one's feeling of reality and the fostering of one's appreciation, and acceptance of one's fellow men.

## Other perspectives on the psychological importance of the natural environment

A number of other ways of thinking about the natural environment-mind connection may be helpful in developing an ecopsychanalysis (a psychoanalysis that incorporates the psychological significance of the natural environment).

Gregory Bateson, anthropologist and originator of the double bind theory of schizophrenia, was interested in complex systems. Writing shortly after Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which exposed the problem of pesticides, he argued that the environmental crisis was primarily a philosophical one. He believed that we suffered from an epistemological fallacy; that mind and nature operated independently of each other.

*When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise 'what interests me is me or my organization or my species', you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the byproducts of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the ecomental system called Lake Erie is a part of your wider ecomental system - and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience (Bateson, 1973, p. 460).*

Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, was the first to expound the ideas of deep ecology, which has a number of tenets including the inherent worth of non human life independent of its utility to man. Deep ecology is not just concerned with dealing with particular ecological crises but looks at the fundamental values underlying issues. The philosophy emphasizes the interdependent nature of human and non-human life. In deep ecology there is an emphasis on self realization where the self is very all encompassing and can include the natural environment (Naess and Rothenberg, 1989).

Ecopsychology was a term coined by Theodor Roszak (Roszak, 1992). The basic idea of ecopsychology is that the human mind is shaped by not only the social world but also by the natural environment and that this environment can also help to maintain mental health and help mental distress. It is backed up by considerable research, for example that a view of nature from a hospital window led to a quicker recovery post surgery (Ulrich, 1984). There is the idea of the ecological unconscious: that there is an intrinsic mental connection with the natural environment. This relates to biophilia, an idea of Erich Fromm, developed by the evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson (Wilson, 1984), that refers to the connections that human beings subconsciously and instinctively seek with the rest of life.

## **A more connected view of the self and the natural environment.**

Psychoanalytic theories, particularly those of Harold Searles, can be integrated with the ideas of ecopsychology and deep ecology. This can provide a view of the self which is more connected to nature. In such a view it then becomes a healthy and ethical response to protect nature. Not surprisingly there is evidence that our concerns about the natural

environment are influenced by our feeling of connection with the natural environment (Schultz, Shriver et al, 2004).

Such an ecological self is in contrast to the consumer self which is so vital for the growth economy as discussed by Clive Hamilton (2010). In Ian McEwan's novel *Solar* (2010) the protagonist consumerist antihero hunts for technological fixes for climate change. As stated above, in a deep ecology and Batesonian view, technological fixes alone will not be the answer, but rather a shift in thinking.

## Conclusion

There needs to be an underlying change of consciousness in relation to the natural environment in general and climate change in particular. Within psychoanalysis there needs to be a shift to an ecopsychanalysis, made more urgent by climate change.

It is crucial that politically, culturally and individually, we are able to understand and contain the anxieties that are evoked by climate change; trying to minimize the potential for denial of reality and to maximize the chances of a realistic response.

It seems appropriate to end this article by again quoting Harold Searles:

*The environmental crisis embraces, and with rapidly increasing intensity, threatens our whole planet. If so staggering a problem is to be met, the efforts of scientists of all clearly relevant disciplines will surely be required. It seems to me that we psychoanalysts, with our interest in the unconscious processes which so powerfully influence man's behaviour, should provide our fellow men with some enlightenment in this common struggle (1972, p. 361).*

## Endnotes

- i. This paper is based on two papers; 'Altering the Fate of the Planet. Can Psychoanalysis make a Difference?' given at the Section of Psychotherapy, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, Conference, Sydney, 2010 and 'From turning a blind eye to omnipotence- the psychology of denial and the denial of psychology' given at a workshop 'Turning a Blind Eye to Climate Change: Integrating Psychological, Sociological and Cultural Perspectives' organized by Psychology for a Safe Climate, Melbourne, 2012.
- ii. Thanks to the Psychology for a Safe Climate writing group for facilitating my thinking about climate change denial.

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