

# Is climate change the business of psychoanalysis?

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## **Abstract:**

Facing and accepting reality are very much at the heart of psychoanalysis. In the “Wolf Man”, Freud wrote of the resistance to reality which included the reality of the very findings of psychoanalysis itself. Parallels will be discussed between Freud’s understanding of this process, and the response of the community to news of climate change. As well the international response will be considered as one of perversity as it becomes ‘acceptable’ to tolerate a temperature rise of 2 degrees warming and beyond. What do we need to help us face reality and respond on a scale commensurate with the problem?

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## **Presentation:**

I propose this evening to illustrate that the way we as individuals and as a society have responded to news of climate change is best understood using many of the key elements of psychoanalytic theory. Further, our understanding of human nature from a psychoanalytic perspective can contribute a great deal to the difficulty of engagement with this urgent and critical issue – indeed the most critical of our time! Yes is the answer to the question - climate change is very much the business of psychoanalysis.

Freud in the introduction to *Wolf Man* (Freud, 1918 [1914]) wrote of human resistance to reality, including the reality of the very findings of psychoanalysis itself.

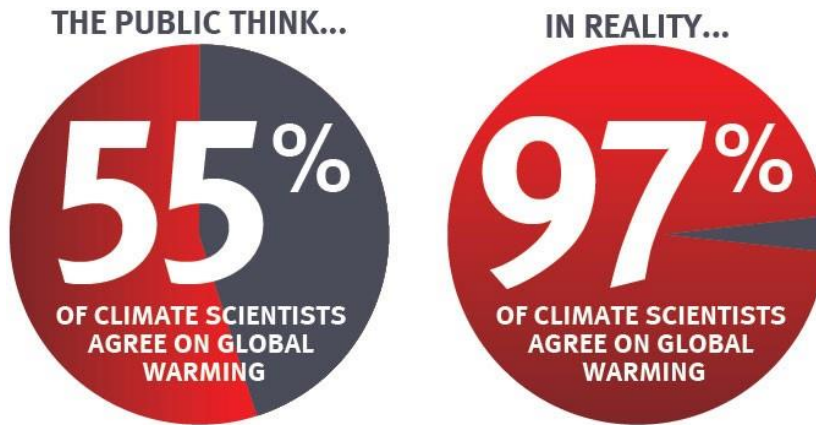
*‘In the present phase of the battle which is raging round psychoanalysis the resistance to its findings has as we know, taken on a new form. People were content formerly to dispute the reality of the facts asserted by psychoanalysis: for this purpose the best technique seemed to be to avoid examining them..... (Freud, 1918 [1914], pp. 235-6).*

His observation of human nature responding to unwanted and disturbing information is pertinent to our society’s current response to climate change.

How many of us are content to allow the fleeting news in our media of climate change waft past us, without wanting to enquire further, and this has been exploited by the climate deniers who are organised, planned, intentional and ideological (Cohen, 2013).



## The “Consensus Gap”



Climate deniers have created the impression in the community that the climate scientists are divided about whether or not climate change is happening and whether human activity is causing it- when in reality there is a huge consensus with 97% of climate scientists in agreement about anthropogenic climate change. This research has just won the Environmental Research Letters prize for their best research paper in 2013. This research highlights that support for climate action is not a matter of belief, but of whether or not we accept the body of science that explains the cause and why we need to act.



Even if we are not supportive of the organised deniers, how many of us have deferred knowing more about climate change till later - when we feel better, when we have more time or

whatever we can come up with consciously and unconsciously. I was certainly in this category for a long time having two key climate books sitting beside my bed to read at a later date – never touched until prompted to do so by a friend who had read Tim Flannery's (2005) *The Weather Makers*. She was so alarmed that she wanted me to join her in thinking about how concerning the issue was and what we could do. I did read *The Weather Makers* – and my life changed because I couldn't not know what I had learnt, but it took a trusted friendship to coax me to face what I was avoiding.

The merchants of doubt have gained a foothold into the psyche, engaging defences that are well established to avoid the anxiety. Climate change arouses anxiety because our security is being threatened, our regenerative capacity is in question, and the great future we trusted would be passed on to our children and grandchildren is being shattered. Our leaders politically are not taking responsibility for the change that is necessary and that is frightening. It is anxiety provoking to lack certainty and to feel out of control, and this is especially so for those who already feel overloaded as so many people do.

Primitive defences are drawn on to protect us from engaging with this awful reality.

**Splitting** is one such defence used to protect us from the more complex and challenging need to bear and integrate what on one hand we want and think we deserve - with a painful reality on the other. When we feel alarmed, frightened, and helpless, splitting renders the climate message bad, misguided, a conspiracy, scaremongering and idealistic. Splitting preserves our self-image, but worse it fosters a narcissistic cocoon of self-focus, self-satisfaction and obliviousness to other.

**By projection** we can denigrate those bearing the news as people unlike ourselves; worriers, pessimists, trouble makers, greenies, environmentalists, and people who are just too passionate. We can even encourage these 'others' to keep doing what they are doing so as to further distance ourselves from being involved, while feeling relieved someone is doing something about the problem. This way our concern and disquiet is carried by others, no matter how burdened they are, and we can continue as before. Then we don't have to bear the troubling dissonance arising from examining and digesting the facts at all.

There are hundreds of people in Australia promoting climate awareness, opposing coal development and export, opposing coal seam gas fracking in country areas, and promoting renewable energy and other climate solutions. The denigration of those urging action I believe causes these groups to be less outspoken about the scale of change needed to respond to what is a climate emergency. Instead campaigns are watered down to seem more acceptable, and the message they deliver falls short of what is really needed. The real tragedy is that the denigration contributes to time slipping away for real action to create a safe future. And it leaves those who know about the seriousness of the situation burdened and guilty for not advocating the strength of action required. This is such a powerful case of **projective identification**.

Freud (1914 [1918], pp. 235-6) went on to say that in relation to psychoanalysis, once the '*procedure of avoiding the facts appears to be exhausting itself*', people adopt another plan –

*'of recognising the facts, but eliminating, by means of twisted interpretations, the consequences that follow from them, so that the critics can still ward off the objectionable novelties as efficiently as ever.'*

What is meant by twisted interpretations in relation to climate change?

There are two categories for this twisting, (*States of Denial*: Stanley Cohen (2001) or in psychoanalytic terms *disavowal*. With *interpretive denial* – the raw fact of climate change occurring is given a different meaning by minimizations or rationalizations:

*"Climate change is not new – it's been happening for eternity - it's natural."*

*"Some more warmth in winter will be great for our crops."*

*"Climate scientists are not sure of what the changes in climate will be in the future so we can't do anything yet."*

*"Australia's emissions are negligible."*

By this form of twisting we minimize the facts and thereby reduce potential emotional unrest. Here is another example:

*Twisting*

*Disavowal: Interpretive denial*



This interview occurred after the storms in south England in Somerset were so bad they washed the railway line away.

***Victim***

*"It's the worst storm I've ever seen, I've never seen anything like it."*

**Interviewer**

*"So do you make any link between what you saw that night and climate change?"*

**Victim**

*"Oh I don't believe in climate change.", "do you?"*

**Interviewer**

*"I do, very much so."*

**Victim**

*"Well I do believe that since the beginning of the industrial revolution we've poured huge amounts of gases and pollutants into the atmosphere and that that has changed the climate, but I don't believe in climate change."*

By a different twist – called implicatory denial - we can deny the moral, psychological and political implications (Cohen, 2001). Both the fact and the seriousness of the fact are admitted but rationalizations and justifications are used:

*"It's got nothing to do with me."*

*"What can an ordinary person do?"*

*"Why should I have to lose sleep, or take a risk, or change anything."*

*" Technology in the future will find a solution, so we needn't worry."*

*"I deserve my lifestyle because I work so hard."*

One can hear in all these examples of twisting a simultaneous *knowing and not knowing*. This is different from *negation* or literal denial that something did not happen or is not true. Charles will talk about this distinction further.

As psychotherapists we are all aware of personal denial and the power of its deeply unconscious roots. In our work we are familiar with the power of denial of a life threatening medical diagnosis, of a mother in denial of the sexual abuse of a child by her husband, or of a partner having an affair. It is often just unthinkable for it to be true. But in each case there is usually a both knowing and not knowing underlying the denial, however deeply buried.

Freud (1918 [1914], p.236) described the purpose of twisting as a way of avoiding the consequences of objectionable *novelties*, by which he meant the new thing, new experience or new invention. It's about change!

We can avoid the *novelties* of change implicit in the facts of climate change by coming up magical ideas that we believe will solve the problem without requiring any change. These magical ideas appeal to our narcissistic selves, filled with self-importance and grandiosity, determined to assume we are the centre of the universe and that nothing need disturb that

position. Guy Pearse calls it *Green Wash* when products and schemes are devised that support the fantasy that with a small tweak we can still have everything we want and not strain the capacity of the planet to provide. (Pearse, 2012)

Most significantly in our omnipotence we dispense with the need to care for nature by blocking out our dependency on Mother Nature. Charles will discuss this fully later.

Facing the facts without twisting is very difficult.

Denial operates beyond the personal as a public and collective process, and can be officially sanctioned by the modern state. Governments can be highly organized in covering up famines, political massacres and international arms boycotts, writes Cohen (Cohen, 2001). 'We are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading' (Cohen 2001).

In our psychotherapeutic practice we try to get to the bottom of what is presented to us that seems perverse - the contradictory, the unreasonable, and the ideas which are stubbornly held onto, but that defy logic. Yet as a society we tolerate what is evidently a perverse cultural response in relation to climate change. We hear both *knowing and not-knowing* in many of the responses of the government to climate change.

For example, in Australia in 2012-13 the Government claimed that we as a nation need to take the threat of climate change seriously, and as one measure introduce a price on carbon to force a limit to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. At the same time that same Government was also advocating continuing exploitation in our mining industry to develop every conceivable opportunity for new coal mines, for new export facilities for coal, and to explore new gas reserves and markets. This contradiction is very confusing for the public, but also very familiar in our culture.

While this state of mind is tolerated, a pervasive cynicism about political solutions is aroused, which feeds into individuals being disconnected and apathetic. A psychic numbing develops as we live a double life.

As the climate science becomes more urgent and alarming the greatest perversity of all is the agreed international position with regard to setting a guardrail or limit on warming. One of the main outcomes of the UN climate meeting in December 2010 was that global warming should be limited to below 2°C above pre-industrial average global temperatures. The two degrees 'guardrail' was intended to protect us from tipping points leading to runaway climate change. However, with less than one degree of warming, extreme weather events provide evidence that climate change is already impacting severely. The Climate Commission (Steffen et al., 2013) 'Angry Summer' reports the breaking of 156 records in Australia this past summer. And 2013 was the hottest year on record for Australia.

## Records tumble in 2013...



The world is already too hot, so why was 2 degrees set as the guardrail? It gives the impression the problem of reducing emissions can be tackled in the future and meanwhile we can continue with new methods such as fracking as well as all that has been done before – an approach that, if continued, ‘guarantees we will leave an unsolvable problem for young people’, says outspoken climate scientist James Hansen (formerly from NASA).



James Hansen: “we will leave an unsolvable problem for young people’

Kevin Anderson from the UK Tyndall Centre for Climate Research says we no longer have a non-radical option.



Prof. Kevin Anderson: “No longer is there a non-radical option”

We are currently on track for a global average temperature rise of 4°C from pre-industrial levels (Carbon Tracker, 2013) or beyond, and this is well outside the relatively stable temperatures of the past 10,000 years in which human civilization developed (Climate Change Authority, Issues Paper, 2013).

How is it that we as a society accept this? Why don't we protest and say this is too risky for ourselves, let alone future generations. I suggest that because we can't bear to fully know the climate change facts, that we therefore disown our responsibility and project it on to our political leaders whom most of us charge with keeping us ignorant, and with doing just enough behind the scenes to help us believe something is being done, but with not doing too much to make any big changes or make it look too serious. Our political system of short termism and not rocking the boat from business as usual colludes with this perfectly.

The recent IPCC report last month has reported that even under the most ambitious goals of its assessment, the estimated reduction in economic growth would basically amount to a rounding error, around 0.06 percent per year, according to Noble prize-winning economist<sup>1</sup> Paul Krugman.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Krugman, Salvation Gets Cheap, New York Times, April 17, 2014



A ten year transition in Australia is possible, but only if large changes begin immediately and emergency action is taken that is outside business as usual, and politics as usual. For example, researchers at the University of NSW (April 2013) have demonstrated that the additional cost of a 100% renewable energy network in Australia could be paid for by increasing the carbon tax (in place at the time) to between \$50 and \$100.

**University of NSW:  
Cost of 100% renewable energy network  
by increasing the carbon tax to \$50 - \$100.**



Why wouldn't we pull out all stops to solve the problem? Again we need to return to acknowledging community anxiety. It is too difficult to face doubt and uncertainty. As Keene a UK psychoanalyst describes, in our society with minimal tolerance for anxiety it is 'managed by taking a position of moral superiority in place of knowledge and is followed by the search for who is to be blamed and punished'. 'Witch-hunting and conflict are more exciting and satisfying than painstaking evaluation of evidence' As well, he continues, 'societies are particularly vulnerable to the acts of immature narcissistic leaders who promise to relieve all anxiety but, being out of touch with elements of their internal world, only attempt to satisfy [the community's]\* 'I want' wishes and desires' (Keene, 2013, p.148).

Does this mean that all is lost – that there is nothing we can do because of human nature?

We need to bear to experience feelings associated with depressive anxieties of sadness, shame, guilt, and of the anxieties associated with responsibility and reparation as we allow ourselves to feel loss and grief.

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\* My insert

Initially grieving climate change loss (Randall, 2009) is an intellectual process, as we learn about the subject and challenge our prejudices and resistances. Then it becomes an emotional task to realize we have strong feelings that we may not have recognized: despair, guilt, fear, anger, shame, sadness, longing for things not to be so, and perhaps a bewildering state of not quite knowing ourselves. Grieving is a slow and difficult process, but often results in new energy being found for hitherto unexpected directions, maybe with a desire to learn new skills and make new connections.

As therapists we know people need support and containment for the demands of the emotional work required to reach a place of acceptance of change, followed by recovery and a capacity to focus on the future (Randall, 2009). To date grief about environmental loss is largely a solitary activity, but people need each other to hold the grief safely and honorably (Moser, 2012). This is something our profession could contribute. – once the therapists themselves have done the emotional work.

What else do we need? We need more community leaders who can bear reality and not ones who propose idealistic solutions. Leaders who can carry responsibility, provide support and direction, but who do not need to have all the answers. Knowing there are leaders who understand the reality provides courage and support for others to follow (Moser, 2012).

‘The bravest thing is to take this first step: getting real. Facing the truth, and letting it sink in’. (Moser, 2013, p.6).

To conclude: Martin Luther King’s view that ‘Our lives begin to end the day we begin to be silent about things that matter.’



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