

Praxis: Using psychodrama methodology to respond to the existential threat of climate change

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What follows is the backdrop of climate change that affects all life on planet Earth. As a sociodramatist, at times, I work directly with this existential threat. I have found that research is needed to be able to direct a sociodrama on a general topic of 'What matters today?' or more directly on 'Responding to climate change with hope and agency'. The content presented here is correct in 2023. As you'd expect the science refines each year.

We are currently experiencing in 2022 what it means to have an increase in our climate's temperature of 1.1 to 1.5 degrees Centigrade (C). In some quarters the temperature has risen locally by 4 degrees, for instance in the Tundra where Mongolian nomadic life has been massively disrupted and ended for many.¹ For the last four decades there have been calls worldwide to act with urgency. The call now is to double our reduction of emissions pledge by 2030. Again, the urgency.²

These seemingly small numbers require *a climate perspective*. Earth's last ice age was about 200,000 years ago. It took the earth 175,000 years to rise 1°C thus setting the climate for the next 25,000 years till industrial times and our ever-increasing use of fossil fuels.³ Further, when we look at the increase of carbon in our atmosphere the tell-tale isotopes of fossil fuels are present. As you likely know, it is the isotopes of carbon atoms that allow carbon-dating that show when an event took place in the past. It is these fossil fuel

1 There are other social factors, such as the limits on livestock being removed, that have also contributed to the end of nomadic life. This was reported in an Australian Broadcasting Commission documentary.

2 It is worth noting that there are other environmental matters requiring our action; plastics in the ocean, methane from agricultural methods, pesticides all but extinguishing some insects, etc. Also, the social justice issues are exacerbated by climate change.

3 Agriculture with methane farting cows and reducing forests for mono-harvests, etc., have played a lesser part.

isotopes that confirm it is anthropogenic activities that have changed our atmosphere. It is only fossil fuels that are consistent with the isotopic fingerprint of the increased carbon in today's atmosphere. In current circumstances we are anticipating several degrees increase in our temperature in a matter of decades.

The *matter of urgency*. Most of us are familiar with the dynamic of tipping points. Environmentally speaking there are nine critical tipping points, i.e., subsystems of the environment that directly affect the climate. There is evidence all these subsystems are reaching their tipping points. For example, the boreal permafrost and the ice sheets of the two poles. In the case of permafrost, the melting of the frost is resulting in bacteria and bugs eating the plant matter in the newly unfrozen soil. Amazingly, this process is increasing the speed of the unfreezing because of the rise in temperature that the digesting bugs supply. With the ice sheets and the glaciers in Antarctica, the evidence of their melting and decreasing in size is clear. This means that there is less reflection of heat from the reduced white ice. At the same time, the speed of the melting is quicker because the blue sea is absorbing more heat and that warmer sea surrounds the ice including underneath it. Once these tipping points are reached, the defrosting and melting accelerates and there is no possibility of stopping this phenomenon. Urgency is further exacerbated when other environmental systems reach their tipping points: the Amazon system, the monsoon, and massive ocean currents and, in particular, the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation.

It is likely that many of us use *psychodrama methodology* in a variety of ways in response to this existential threat: when working with groups or individuals experiencing their denial or impotence, fears and challenges, when working with climate scientists in the public sector, universities and the community, when working within the climate change movement itself, running future-oriented community groups to facilitate adjustments and collective responsibilities to emergent crises and dilemmas. Some of you also work in the political arena. These are some of the offerings from psychodrama.

The 'climate' context

What follows is based on scientific data and modelling into the future, i.e., the epistemology and modelling is science-based. The source is primarily the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports authored by this panel are peer reviewed by many, many scientists so that what is published is agreed by all but a very few scientists and is expressed in conservative terms. Thus, there is little to no possibility for hyperbole, exaggeration, mistakes, or misspeaking.

Here is a snapshot of the situation we live in written by one of the

climate scientists, Joëlle Gergis (2022), who contributed to the 6th Assessment Report commissioned by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC.

'Right now, current policies in place today (2020) will lead to 1.9°C–3.7°C of warming by the end of the century, with a best estimate of 2.6°C. This represents a catastrophic overshooting of the Paris Agreement targets, which were specifically developed to avoid "dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. ...'

'To have a chance of limiting warming to 1.5°C by 2100, global emissions need to halve by 2030. This means the world needs to more than double its current emissions reduction pledge to restrict warming to 1.5°C.'

'We have a hell of a job ahead of us.' (Ibid pp. 13-14)

Many of you will recall the exceptional fire season we had in Australia in the summer of 2019/2020 that followed an exceptional drought in 60% of Queensland and 95% of New South Wales. And the drought had been ongoing for 11 years in the Gondwana rain forest near where I live. For me the fires hit at the visceral levels of despair, impotence and gnawing fear for future generations, including my six great grandchildren. The world heritage listed Lamington National Park, here in Queensland, just two hours from me, and the Nightcap National Park, on the northern coast of New South Wales, are both part of the Gondwana Rainforest of Australia. This area contains the largest remaining stands of sub-tropical rainforest in the world, as well as the most significant areas of warm temperate rainforest in Australia (Ibid p. 7). The smoke from this and other fires up and down the east coast of Australia reached Aotearoa and around the world. Who can forget the black daytime sky at Malacoota while fire raged at such high temperatures that micro-climates formed and flames were impossible to extinguish? As well as the scorching of the earth, an estimate of 3 million native animals lost their lives and many more were injured and then unable to feed in the burnt-out landscape. We had many species of birds normally in the rain forests coming to the coast where I live including majestic black cockatoos. And, unimaginably, koalas are now an endangered species. 'We lost 53% of the last of these Gondwana rainforests.' (Ibid p. 8). Some of the trees reaching ages of more than 2000 years (Ibid p. 103).

I imagine I would have a similar experience if the Kauri forests I visited in Aotearoa were affected by drought and then ferocious fires with accompanying irreplaceable loss of flora and fauna. Indeed, on further reading I find that the Wollemi pines in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, that survive deep in an isolated canyon, its location a heavily guarded secret, are the biological cousin of the Kauri in Aotearoa. One Kauri, Tāne Mahuta,

Lord of the Forest, is estimated to be 2500 years old and another massive Kauri, Te Matua Ngahere, Father of the Forest, is estimated to be over 2000 years old. For me, and many others, this evisceration of more than half of the Gondwana forests in Australia is a primal loss. Not even the unique protection offered in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2014 that granted legal personhood to the protected area of Te Urewera, the largest expanse of native forest left on the North Island, can protect it from the wildfires affecting forests throughout the world.

In Aotearoa in early 2023 the deluge of rain and the floods began in the North island. This is the kind of exceptional climate event that we don't want to become the norm. We have had similar unprecedented flooding for a couple of years on the East coast of Australia and uniquely fierce fires on the West coast of Australia in 2022, including near Perth. These events are mirrored around the world. Many in the poorest countries. This year, 2023, eviscerating fires in the Northern Hemisphere have dominated the news; Greece, Italy, United States of America and in particular Maui, and many more.

You will be aware that I have only touched on the more obvious climate biosphere.⁴ The oceans, ice masses, etc have climate systems that are all effected. We know that receding ice masses will result in increased ocean mass and the rise of sea levels world-wide. Oceanic changes resulting from climate change are not so well known. Changes in ocean currents are predicted to massively change climates throughout the world. A tipping point that we don't want to experience.

The impacts on social systems from climate events

The single most imminent threat to our *human existence*, and the *exacerbation of inequities in our society*, is climate change (Harari, 2014). (Yuval Noah Harari signals three threats; climate change, artificial intelligence and the nuclear threat). The United Nations recognised *displacement because of climate change* as an issue in 2020. As Pacific Islands disappear into the ocean with sea level rise, relocating displaced people will increase. We can be sure that it will affect us all. For instance, I have been working with scientists who have known about this impending disaster throughout their forty years as a climate scientist or environmental scientist. Their place in their families and their communities has been affected and for

4 The five elements in the planet's climate systems are the:

- atmosphere, or air, i.e., the gaseous fluid surrounding the earth,
- lithosphere, or land that is the brittle part of the upper mantle or crust or solid part of the earth such as the continental and oceanic crusts,
- hydrosphere or water, i.e., the water on the surface of the planet,
- cryosphere, ice, i.e., the portions of the earth where the water is in a solid form and
- biosphere or life, i.e., the part of the earth where living organisms are to be found.

many has become another friction at gatherings they attend. One scientist came to a community group to work out whether she is responsible to speak up each time this issue comes up. And the grief and impotence and rage and despair are commonplace. Oftentimes, I have a subgroup of these folks in a community group.

A range of group's responses to 'what is'

Movements, protests and revolution. I have one trainee who has joined the 'Climate Emergency' protest group. I have been to several groups who are part of the larger movement to get action urgently happening to stop fossil fuel mining and export. Revolutions are studied and the small group's cohesion begins to form. As this movement spreads, the State governments in Australia have begun responding with legislation to inhibit protest that 'disturb' other citizens as they go to work, etc. At the time of writing this article in mid 2023, the South Australian and New South Wales governments are enacting legislation that will fine a protester up to \$50,000 or 6-months in jail.

Conservative groups: One such group, represented by John Anderson, a former conservative politician in Australia, does not reject the facts of climate change, rather they dispute how to respond to such changes. One commentator said, 'I do not want to plunge my children into poverty.' by immediately stopping the fossil fuel industry. The message is to oppose any moves by the political arm of society to act with any haste and to focus on adjusting as climate change impacts. As a farmer, John Anderson is changing the crops he farms.

Science and technology will save us: Another response that was articulated by the former conservative Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, was public policy based on a belief that currently known and newly developed science and technology means we can continue living as we do with minor adjustment to our lifestyles. Transitioning to the new means of energy from the fossil fuel to solar, wind and suchlike, has begun. We have the ironies that come from a wired network that was not built to be able to absorb the heat generated in the wires from solar power on a hot day, and so the contribution from households is stopped when it is most available. I have a Tesla battery to store solar power but cannot share it with anyone other than on the same land title as me. Much of the technology is known, yet the complexity of dated infrastructure and laws restricts their use while political leadership seems unacceptable to the voting populace. Also, the use of electric cars and the like require the mining of rare earths. The opening of new mines, for instance in Indonesia, is done quickly with little or no regulation and with devastating local ecological and social impacts.

Coordinated action across the globe: Multi-national agreements under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, (UNFCCC) has an annual Conference of Parties, COP. Annual COPs are the supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC. The Paris Agreement at COP 21 in Paris in 2015 is a legally binding international treaty on climate change for 196 nations to act in concert to reduce the rate of warming. This agreement builds on the earlier Kyoto Protocol of 1997. However, even where agreements are reached, each sovereign nation has to adopt such agreements at the national sovereign level for implementation to happen.

Opting out altogether as a minor player compared to China, USA, India, etc. 'There is nothing significant we can do. We are in their hands.'

QAnon and other conspiratorial movements assert that the scientific consensus on global warming is based on manipulated data or suppressed dissent, often NASA is quoted as leading the disinformation. Political and public controversy can result by disputing the consensus. They see that the science behind global warming and climate change has been invented or distorted for ideological or financial reasons. (QAnon, n.d.)

Focus on adjusting to climate change; better firefighting techniques to match the ferocity of temperatures reached unknown before, moves to higher ground as the sea level rises and flooding increases inland from unknown deluges and a river system that floods its banks.

Focus on individual's responsibilities that is spoken of as 'individual virtue'. This has led to the purchase of Electric Vehicles, residential solar panels, reduced or no flying, etc. Some commentators regard this as a clever diversion away from the responsibilities of the fossil fuel industry itself.

Teaching our children to be adaptive; to anticipate seasonal or climatic events that require adjusting to where they live. To teach our children to enjoy camping and being peripatetic.

Being frogs that boil because they do not experience the shift in temperature. This group rely on their own observations and ignore or deride scientific measurements.

And many more ...

What is gained from sociodramatic enactments, role training in deeply conversing with one another, strengthening sociometry, and tending to troubled psyches using psychodrama?

As you would anticipate, new perspectives are gained through role reversal. Sometimes there is role refinement or expansion between various subgroups. Righteous knowing, passionate hyperbole, incredulous disparaging can be enacted between subgroups. When these are enacted as symmetrical roles in response to one another, hope diminishes and strengthening resolve to 'conquer' or dismiss others out-of-hand can dominate.

Enacting being climate refugees within our own countries is sobering for many, and having to go to another country is most often fearfully anticipated. A chilling karmic experience given Australia's response to refugees over the past few decades.

The understanding of a 'scientific' truth vis a vis a 'political' truth litters this landscape as does the slippage between opinion and knowing. In some quarters there is little or no appreciation of the scientific method. Those who do subscribe to scientific evidence, in my experience, have a deep emotional journey to live through, that most often includes impotence, rage, guilt, sadness and periods of despair. For some it is a cry to action and joining with others to shift the political landscape of decisions that will keep the temperature at something liveable.

Hope: 'How bad we let things get is still up to us — the apocalypse is not a done deal.' (Gergis, 2022, p. 7)

We can continue to relate psychodrama to climate change at the level of the individual's psyche, in groups, as members of our societies and we can further expand and refine our professional offerings. Becoming knowledgeable enough to direct sociodramas on this and related topics, offering role training in bold conversations and expanding roles to include agitation in political and the climate movement can further our professional contributions. Of recent time, I have been alerted to a hope-reviving framework of Three Horizons by Bill Sharpe (2013). I will attend a workshop where we use this model and I'm hopeful that I will be able to use this in groups as appropriate. As well, I will further study David Snowden's Cynefin (Cynefin, n.d.) framework and its application to complicated and complex systems and systems in chaos.

Moreno's dynamics of spontaneity-creativity-cultural conserve are potent; managing human creativity to enhance our living rather than contributing to our collective demise. There is an insight that Moreno expressed into the nature of humankind which had at its centre our inherent creativity. He commented on how humankind have moved against this core nature towards a will-to-power and have deified this. My own observations are that this is still dominant in our society. Will we take

timely action based on scientific facts? Will we do too little too late? Will we shift from a will-to-power to a will-to create? *Who shall survive?*

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Elizabeth lives on the Redcliffe Peninsula just north of Brisbane. Each month she meets with a 'climate' group called, What's on your mind? Over the group's two-year life it has become a place of sharing our current experience, thoughts, research, reading and our emotional journey. The group is open and meets in a community hall in Paddington, Brisbane. Elizabeth is the group leader.