

# Responses to the Threat of Climate Change: A Sociodramatic Exploration

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## ABSTRACT

Katerina Seligman describes a sociodrama undertaken during a residential psychodrama workshop, whereby sociodramatic questions regarding the global threat of climate change were posed, and a range of subgroup responses were explored. She begins with her personal story of exploration regarding climate change to warm the reader up to the sociodramatic enactment that follows. The author describes the way in which the enactment facilitated role reversal and a deepening of the understanding of conflicting values in relation to climate change.

## KEY WORDS

climate change, environment, global warming, Moreno, psychodrama, role reversal, sociodrama, subgroups

*I have a multitude of friends. Most of them aren't born yet.*

Joanna Macy

*No problem can be solved with the same consciousness that created it.*

Albert Einstein

## Climate Change: The Personal Story

During 2009 I devoted almost all my waking moments to studying climate change. It was both an exhilarating and a depressing journey — exhilarating because it brought me in touch with highly educated and environmentally conscious people, depressing because I had to face the real possibility that the natural world that I love so dearly is under even more serious threat than I had previously imagined. As a nature lover I am deeply saddened that we stand to

lose a great number of living species as a direct result of climate change. Many of the world's populations, among them the poorest and least responsible for global warming, stand to lose their water supplies. Some of the world's largest cities are threatened by sea level rise. The number of climate refugees could be in the millions or even billions. These are just some of the very disturbing predictions currently being made by climate scientists.

As a response to this disturbing information I became involved in political actions to encourage our government to take the matter seriously and to raise public awareness about the urgency of the issue. Drawing on my science background, I joined with a colleague to conduct a number of local seminars entitled *The Basics of Climate Science*, in the hope that participants would understand the science better and therefore be more likely to take actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. I also made efforts to reduce my own personal carbon foot print. Rather idealistically, I decided to stop flying since air travel produces vast quantities of harmful emissions. Then I received news that my mother was dying and I felt I had no choice but to fly to Melbourne to be with her in her final hours. I decided to travel to our psychodrama trainer development workshop by land-based public transport. This took two days of travel by bus, boat and train, and cost more than twice as much as a budget airfare. It was an enjoyable experience but I nevertheless decided to fly home. I went to my local supermarket to buy a bottle of wine. Faced with the choice of buying local wine or purchasing wine from the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, I chose to buy the latter knowing full well that it had travelled hundreds of kilometres to reach the supermarket shelf. I annually consume many times my body weight in food which has travelled environmentally damaging distances to reach me. With this awareness, I entered the Eat Local Foods Challenge sponsored by our district council, and for 5 weeks I tried to eat only foods grown and produced within a 200 kilometre radius. This meant giving up coffee, chocolate, most grains and many other food items. I failed to eat 100% local, but nevertheless won the competition! Since then I have definitely incorporated some new buying and eating habits into my daily life. However I have also reverted to eating some foods which have travelled many kilometres to my table. This is one of the conundrums that I face on a daily basis. My somewhat inadequate attempts to change my own behaviours have clarified for me the huge challenges that we, the global community, face in making adequate responses to the unprecedented crisis of climate change<sup>1</sup>.

## **A Group Focus on the Environment**

With these issues and questions in mind, I decided to address the environment and climate change during a four day residential psychodrama workshop in October 2010. The group was open to psychodrama trainees as well as others wanting to experience the psychodrama method. As climate change is a social

issue I knew that I would be working sociodramatically to explore our collective as well as our individual responses to this situation.

Sociodrama is an application of the methods created by Dr J.L. Moreno. Moreno viewed sociodrama as a way in which to engage people in specific dramatic activities in order to evoke discussions, explorations and enactments of solutions to issues of conflict (Kellerman, 1998). Sociodrama is a “group approach . . . of analysing and treating social problems” (Moreno, 1977). “The sociodrama . . . starts from within the audience present and is calculated to be educational, clarifying and energising to all members. It serves as a stimulus to spontaneity, creativity . . . and empathy, and as a check and balance to cultural tensions . . . arising from local or world-wide events. It is a means for social catharsis and integration” (Moreno, 1993:88).

In the workshop’s promotion I included an emphasis on opening to, and being nourished by the natural world. Potential participants knew there would be specific time for meditation in a natural environment during the workshop. The group members thus arrived warmed up to some degree to an environmental focus. I chose to focus on climate change itself on the third day of the workshop because this coincided with a global day of climate action on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month 2010, coordinated by the organisation 350.org.nz.

## Warming Up the Group

Introducing the group warm up, I spoke about my own journey of discovery about climate change and invited responses from the group. One participant likened society’s ‘head in the sand’ response to global warming to an active addict’s denial of their addiction, but on a much larger scale. She referred to the work of Anne Wilson Schaef (1987,1988) and expressed the view that society is in a state of collective denial regarding the destruction of the planet’s natural systems. As with an addicted person, this denial and other unconscious defence mechanisms are allowing our destructive behaviours to continue. In response, other participants reflected on the parallels between the more commonly recognised drug and process addictions, for example alcoholism and workaholism, and the ‘cultural addiction’ we have to the excessive use of fossil fuels and other environmentally harmful behaviours.

Building on this theme, we set out on the sociodramatic stage the five stages of addiction recovery, pre-contemplation, contemplation, planning, action and maintenance (Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992). Participants reflected on their experiences of effective and ineffective interventions with addicted people in relation to the five stages. One participant highlighted the need to make interventions which are appropriate to a person’s consciousness when facilitating the movement from one stage of recovery to the next. For example, if a person is at the pre-contemplative stage, only interventions that will assist them to begin to contemplate the existence of their addiction are appropriate.

## Distress and Empowerment

After these somewhat theoretical considerations, the focus became more personal. I asked participants to share with one another, in pairs and then in the whole group, their own personal experiences and responses to environmental degradation. In the group sharing participants spoke deeply about:

- Frustration with flat mates who wantonly waste electricity.
- Memories of deep grief experienced during childhood after watching the movie *Watership Down*.
- Grief in response to special natural places that have been seriously degraded or are threatened with degradation.
- Distress at the continued loss of endangered wild life.
- Anguish when viewing scenes of mudslides obliterating whole villages.

One group member wept and expressed feelings of grief, fear and helplessness in the face of the environmental threats the world is currently facing. Some group members responded with similar distressing emotions, while others became guarded and self-protective, expressing resignation. I found this an appropriate time to bring in the work of Joanna Macy (1991). Macy maintains that distressing feelings, experienced in response to major global threats, demonstrate the capacity to have compassion for all living things and the planet itself. The distress, she claims, is a normal and necessary aspect of the move towards empowerment, rather than a sign of personal weakness or neurosis. This positive mirroring validated the experiences of some group participants and enabled them to become more thoughtful, while still valuing their emotional responses.

Macy's work has been enormously validating and empowering in my personal climate change journey. Allow me for a moment to interrupt my description of this group session to elaborate on some of her thinking. Macy notes that people who question the sanity of what we are doing may be viewed as negative, neurotic, morbid, boring or crazy. In her view, the acknowledgment of grief, despair and fear for the future is a kind of social taboo which means such feelings are rarely expressed directly. The dread remains on the fringes of awareness, too deep to name, too fearsome to face. As a result there is an impoverishment of emotional and sensory life, and a block to our capacity to process and respond to information. Our imaginations, which are needed for fresh visions and strategies, are impeded. She suggests that rather than grabbing for sedatives, ideologies or simplistic solutions, we learn to look at things as they are, painful and overwhelming as that may be. She postulates that no healing can begin until we become fully present to our world, until we learn to sustain the gaze. Many of us fear that confrontation with despair will bring loneliness and isolation. To the contrary, Macy notes that in the letting go of old defences truer community emerges. We are empowered to move towards effective action.

Anyone who has experienced psychodrama to any depth will be aware of the parallels between Macy's ideas and those of J.L. Moreno. Moreno encouraged

people to move away from robotic, conserved ways of doing things. His methods stimulate the imagination and encourage in depth feeling and truthful expression. Psychodrama has the effect of unifying our beings. We come out of isolation, healing and strengthening our relationships past and present, and as in Macy's work, developing a true sense of community.

## A Sociodrama Focused on Climate Change

The in depth sharing described above warmed the group members up to the sociodrama which followed. I asked participants to reflect on emerging questions and after some sharing and discussion the group identified two sociodramatic questions, which were written up on a whiteboard.

- How can we live effectively and vibrantly in an insecure and uncertain world?
- How can I use my abilities effectively to influence cultural change towards creating a sustainable world?

I invited participants to step onto the sociodramatic stage and express their values in response to the issue of climate change. As the first participant took up this invitation, the others joined her in entering the world of the particular subgroup that she was representing. They took up the roles inherent in its culture, exchanging thoughts and feelings and becoming conscious of the values of that subgroup. After a short while, a participant moved to separate herself and represent a different subgroup and once again was joined by the others to explore the thoughts, feelings and world view of that new group. Other subgroups emerged in a similar way, in an atmosphere of high spontaneity and involvement. Each subgroup was named as it emerged. In identifying a new subgroup, participants did not always express their own values but attempted to represent other groups that they had observed in society. As the director of the sociodrama, I took care that participants avoided stereotyping. I coached the participants to leave their usual world view aside and to enter the world of each subgroup as genuinely and deeply as possible, to gain a real sense of the experiences, motivations and value systems that are alive there and thus begin the process of role reversal.

The following 10 subgroups emerged during the sociodrama and were recorded on the whiteboard:

- *Environmentally Aware, Limit-Setting Comfort Preservers*: I'm doing my bit. I already recycle, use energy efficient light bulbs, cycle when I can, and I'm not willing to inconvenience myself or my family any further.
- *Believers in Human Superiority and Progress*: Human intelligence puts us above other living things. Human technology, progress and growth are invaluable and are to be pursued and applauded.
- *Philosophical Fatalists*: The planet and life on it will go on in some form or

- other and it doesn't matter if humans and other life forms don't survive.
- *Survival Oriented Pragmatists*: We need to learn to grow our own food, and develop small self-sufficient resilient communities within towns and cities so that we have the best chance of survival when the climate crisis and peak oil really hit home.
  - *Carefree Hedonists*: There's no point worrying. Might as well just have a good time. The powers that be/governments/scientists will sort it out.
  - *Scientific Realists*: Unless we all take drastic action immediately, life as we know it will come to an end. But there is no point in frightening people.
  - *Spiritualists*: Surviving humans will transcend this existence and move to a higher state of consciousness.
  - *Environmental Activists*: Humans are a part of an interconnected ecosystem and the world needs each person to take responsibility for their own environmental footprint and to act politically to raise awareness in other individuals, organisations and in policymakers.
  - *Day to Day Survivors*: Surviving day to day reality is challenging and all-consuming enough. I have no time or energy to even think about anything else.
  - *Naïve Nature-Loving Enthusiasts*: This group comprises children and adults who are excited about the natural world and care for it.

During the setting out of subgroups, participants were highly animated and thoroughly involved. With the high level of warm up, we could have continued bringing out more subgroups. We could also have enacted role reversals between subgroups. However I decided to bring the enactment phase of the sociodrama to a close, as I wanted to avoid too much complexity and the potential for chaos on the sociodramatic stage. I reflected that we had achieved the sociodrama's purpose, which was to engage in an in depth exploration of the different world views that exist regarding climate change.

## Waking Up to Personal Values and Role Reversing with Others

The group then embarked on the sharing phase of the sociodrama. Some participants shared that experiencing and naming the subgroups resulted in them waking up more fully to their own values regarding this challenging issue. Some participants shared that they had a deeper understanding and acceptance of others, whose values they had previously rejected. Some expressed surprise at the degree of animation and involvement they had experienced.

It was clear that the process of taking up the roles of other subgroups required participants to reverse roles very fully with people who hold different world views. Although they did not come to final answers to the sociodramatic questions that had been posed, the participants had made beginning steps

towards appreciating, in a real and lively way, the complexity of the cultural responses to climate change. Group members had begun to engage with the sociodramatic questions posed during the warm up. How can we live effectively and vibrantly in an insecure world? How can I use my abilities effectively to influence cultural change towards creating a sustainable world?

Several weeks after the workshop one participant reported that she felt much less reserved about discussing climate change with friends and family. "I've been holding on to expressing how concerned I feel so it has had definite effects on my awareness and expression." Another participant commented on the "total" way in which she was involved and enlivened during the enactment. She reported that she is now much readier to take action in her own life. Others reported an increased awareness in their daily activities such as conserving fuel and recycling. I was heartened by these small shifts as a result of the sociodrama, whilst also remaining aware that much larger scale solutions are also needed.

## Fostering Sustainable Behaviour

Since the workshop, I have become enthused by the idea that behavioural change happens when people make a small commitment, because this 'changes the way they view themselves' (McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). Person to person contact and zero pressure or coercion are essential ingredients in the process of creating new societal norms. Moreno's work clearly has a part to play in this regard. Psychodramatic and sociodramatic enactments enable people to sustain their gaze on uncomfortable cognitions and emotions, to examine the roles they themselves play, and to role reverse with negatively valued roles. They assist people to develop progressive roles and identities, and thus contribute towards new values and progressive societal norms. As psychodramatists and sociodramatists, we are in a powerful position to facilitate movement towards a more sustainable society.

## Conclusion

The responses to the global threat of climate change are varied. There is a need to enter into the world of those who hold views and values that are different from our own, and to stay in emotional contact with them. It is through having the courage to experience our responses to uncomfortable realities and to role reverse with others who have different responses, that we are able to influence societal norms towards a paradigm shift which would offer hope for our endangered planet and the future generations who will inherit it.

## ENDNOTES

I. This article originally included a two page literature survey on the psychological responses to

climate change and a one page appendix that briefly and simply summarised the generally poorly understood basics of climate science. If you would like copies, please contact the author (see below).

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