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Huntley, Rebecca - *How to talk about climate change in a way that makes a difference*, Sydney, Murdoch Books, 2020, (pp. 291) ISBN 978 1 76052 536

Reviewed by Myra Gurney - Western Sydney University

> Getting too bogged down in the science, requiring people to share all of your values or beliefs, is unlikely to get them to act. If you can find something that matters to them and then connect that meaningfully with climate change, that's a critical first step (Huntley, 2020, p. 229).

Writing in late 2020 in the midst of the rolling media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be easy to forget that during the most recent summer of 2019-2020, Australia endured one of its most severe and impactful bushfire seasons in recent memory. Dramatic scenes of major cities shrouded in smoke, of seaside communities rescued off beaches by the Australian Defense Force having been trapped by circling flames and of iconic Australian wildlife incinerated by a seemingly unstoppable inferno, captured the collective attention of world's media. The fires bookended Australia's hottest and driest year on record and a decade-long drought. They also brought into stark relief a long-prophesied relationship between extreme weather events and anthropogenic climate change. This debate has been at the centre of Australia's decade-long partisan and ideological political imbroglio over carbon emissions policy which has been labelled the 'climate wars' (see Butler, 2017). While surveys regularly indicate strong electoral acceptance of the science of climate change and support for effective emissions reductions policy, responses by governments, businesses and individuals remain slow. It is into this arena of motivating more substantive action, that Rebecca Huntley's latest book strides.

Huntley is a prominent Australian social researcher, and a regular contributor to public forums on a range of social and cultural issues. Her foray into the crowded space of environmental communication, she notes, came after an

emotional reaction to scenes of Australian school students participating in the December 2018 climate strike and the realisation that understanding inaction by the powers-that-be and the broader Australian community, required more than further statistics, graphs or dire images of emaciated polar bears on shrinking ice floes: it requires understanding how our psychological and emotional reactions to climate change messages impact our responses and motivations to act. She notes in the book's introduction:

> You might ask, 'Why does it matter what we, as individuals, feel about climate change? … Isn't it more about governments and corporations, those with the most power, acting to do something about it? Aren't our feelings beside the point? (7).

The central tenet of Huntley's thesis is that there are limits to 'the facts and figures approach to climate communication' (16) and that therefore, 'we need multiple fronts of pressure' (7). She notes that despite the overwhelming body of scientific evidence that has been available during the past two decades, '[p]ublic concern has not mirrored the scientific case that the climate is changing' (17). However, as Mike Hulme has argued in his seminal works, *Why we disagree about climate change* (2009) and *Weathered* (2017), climate change is about more than weather or science – it is a social and cultural phenomenon that challenges our worldview, our politics and our cultural and social identity. For these reasons, a more nuanced approach is needed based on an '[u]nderstanding [of] the social and psychological factors that underpin how we respond to climate change [in order to better understand] how we can better persuade people to act' (7). It is around the various aspects of our psychological responses to fear, risk, grief evoked by climate change, that Huntley's narrative revolves.

In well researched, clearly articulated prose made accessible via numerous anecdotes and personal reflections on her own journey, the book explores a range of primary emotions and the manner in which these are both evoked and repelled by the climate change phenomenon and how they can be harnessed more effectively by environmental communicators. The early chapters overview the issue generally and scaffold, in lay terms, some of the psychological perspectives that underpin the later analysis, in particular three forms of psychological bias that shape our worldview and emotional responses: confirmation bias, Dunning-Kruger effect and cognitive dissonance.

Each of the later chapters explores a specific emotional reaction to climate change: guilt, fear, anger, despair and loss, through denial to hope and love. These primary human emotions, Huntley argues, all underpin our psychological responses to dealing with the climate change challenge. Importantly, she notes, emotions are never monolithic, but are experienced on a continuum of intensity and within a social and cultural context, a notion which gives a nod to Silvan Tompkins' (1984) 'affect theory': anger to rage, shame to humiliation, disgust to contempt, fear to terror, to name a few. In the struggle for hearts and minds in the climate change communication battle, recognising the psychological triggers and striking the right balance, is key.

The dual emotional continuum of *guilt* and *shame* are the first to be explored in Chapter 4, subtitled 'Or my plastic coffee cup killed the green sea turtle'. *Guilt* and its more extreme cousin, *shame*, have been standard weapons to date in the rhetorical arsenal of environmentalists, but their effective use is tricky and requires nuanced and subtle messaging:

> [M]aking people feel guilty about climate change could work to get them to change their behaviour. Making them feel shame could easily cause them to back away and become defensive (72).

Acknowledging the roots of global warming – mass industrialisation historically powered by cheap fossil fuels but which also has driven the economic growth upon which our comfortable Western lifestyles rely, can be psychologically difficult. This may create backlash, reinforcing 'perceptions of environmentalists as disapproving life-style fascists' (77) as well as blame shifting, helplessness and inertia. Research indicates that constructive guilt emphasising collective responsibility is more effective than the riskier strategy of shame which evokes personal responsibility, against which people are more likely to revolt.

Chapter 5 explores the impact of *fear*. Evolutionary psychologists, Huntley argues, provide important perspectives on 'why it's hard to generate necessary levels of fear about climate change to get people to respond rationally to the threat' (96). This is an important argument, and one that goes furthest in explaining the reason that mounting scientific evidence has so far failed to generate the levels of outrage and definitive action that many have been anticipated. The concept of 'risk vividness' creates a tendency to minimise and distance us from a longer term, more generalised risk. Even the advent of extreme weather events, such the bushfires experienced during the 2020 Australian summer, can work both ways. Huntley cites research which notes that while fear can initially 'get people off the couch', fearful appeals 'are ineffective in motivating personal engagement: they left people feeling powerless, overwhelmed and fatalistic' (103). In the case of the 2020 bushfires:

> All the fires seemed to do was make the concerned more concerned, the disengaged more helpless, and the dismissive and the cautious more reluctant to see the links (112).

Fear is also difficult to sustain for an extended period and like guilt and shame, extreme emotions can evoke psychological defense mechanisms which may result 'in apathy, resistance and doubt about the nature of the threat' (104), a phenomenon familiar to health communicators trying to convince smokers to quit, teenagers to say no to drugs, and young people to practice safe sex.

Chapter 6 examines *anger*, a powerful political motivator that can be harnessed initially to get activists involved: the example of Greta Thunberg and the student climate strikers is a case in point. It is, however, a highly negative emotion and one that may divide and create blame, rather than inspire collective action, creating an 'us' and 'them' of 'enemies and aliens' who we seek to punish and

condemn while ‘diminish[ing] our own sense of responsibility’ (124). The impact can be to damage ‘the cohesion and cooperation necessary to tackle the problems we face’ (126). Huntley concludes that like *guilt* and *shame*, *anger* is not all bad, and in moderation can be employed as a catalyst to action.

One of the greatest impediments to effective political action in particular in the past decade has been outright *denial* of the existence of climate change, especially by many of those most empowered to affect substantive action. Chapter 7 overviews this important response, significantly noting that ‘denial has many faces. And not all kinds of denial are equal’ (132). It can be active or passive and should not be understood as simply a rejection of the science. Debates, so often couched as scepticism or a rejection of the scientific evidence, are most often a reaction to ‘a message that threatens their worldview, their values and even their sense of self’ (136):

> You think you’re arguing about the laws of physics and weather patterns, whereas you’re really debating competing visions of the past, present and future, and of the nature of authority and power in our society (137).

Ultimately, because combatting climate change means that humans will have to radically change their behaviour, denialism is a comfortable, if ultimately unsustainable position. Fighting powerfully economically embedded and politically sophisticated vested interests who use the many tools of media and influence to push back against change, is extremely difficult. These are tried and true tactics which were famously explored in the case of big tobacco in Oreskes and Conway’s (2010) seminal study, *Merchants of Doubt*.

A significant and relatively unacknowledged impact of our lack of progress in dealing with the threats posed by climate change, is *despair* which has the ‘potential to erode relationships and social cohesion’ (154) not to mention create and exacerbate mental health problems. As with the other emotions explored, Huntley argues that *despair* arises from a profound sense of lack of control or erosion of agency. The flow-on effects include people turning away from collective action, losing faith in our social and cultural institutions and in our fellow humans which in turn ‘narrows the range of possible futures we can hope to create’ (173).

The antidote to these psychological responses, the book argues, is to both recognise the limitations of negative rhetorical devices and to harness more positive strategies that engage individuals and bolster feelings of community: an approach well known to health and risk communication experts more generally. What Huntley has done is to position these within the context of the current ecological and health crisis and to frame them in simple terms and using relatable examples. In two of the final chapters titled *hope* and *love*, she argues for the need to construct climate change messages using connections to what researchers have labelled ‘objects of care’:

> Getting too bogged down in the science, requiring people to share all of your values or beliefs, is unlikely to get them to act. If you can find something that matters to them and then connect that meaningfully with climate change, that's a critical first step (229).

Equally important is a list of simple and doable strategies centred around a principle that underpins much of the undergraduate communications program into which I teach: the need to understand the *audience* of a message. Huntley cites George Marshall (2015) who advises '[n]ever assume that what works for you will work for others' (236). Connecting to multiple audiences via storytelling and evoking personal experiences rather than by lecturing, scolding and drowning ordinary people in statistics and predictions of doom would seem a sensible way forward. In the current extraordinary period where all the norms of society and politics seem to have been upturned, the simple messages of this book are extremely prescient.

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About the reviewer

Dr Myra Gurney is a Lecturer in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University and teaches into the key program of the Bachelor of Communication. She has been a member of the editorial committee of *Global Media Journal/Australian Edition* since 2007 and has edited several past editions of the journal. She has written a range of journal articles and book reviews, is co-author of *Communicating as Professionals (3e)* (Archee, Gurney & Mohan, 2012) including a soon-to-be-published chapter (with GMJ-Au editorial colleagues Professor Hart Cohen and Dr Antonio Castillo) in *Global Media Perceptions of the United States: The Trump Effect* (Kamilipour, 2020) which explores Australian media coverage of Donald Trump. Her research interests relate to politics broadly, in particular the manner in which language and discourse work to shape political and media narratives. Her PhD examined the language and politics of climate change policy in Australia since 2007.

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