An Energy Biographies Think Piece

Psychosocial Research and Breaking the Deadlock in Climate Change Communication (Karen Henwood)

How is it possible to integrate diverse psychological and related research approaches to climate change communication, while bringing to bear the distinctiveness of a psychosocial approach? Can doing this help to avoid sterile debate and break the deadlock in communicating with the public about climate change? These two questions provided the focus of an event organised by the Energy Research Meeting Place (UKERC) and which took place on 12th March, 2014, at Church House, Westminster, London. The event brought together a number of different groupings of people with a shared interest in answering these questions. One grouping was academic researchers working in the field of environmental risk and risk communication together with colleagues working on UK research council (ESRC/EPSRC) projects concerning sustainable community energy and energy demand reduction. Another grouping was psychotherapists interested in issues arising in their own practice, for their clients, and in society at large from climate change. A third was non-governmental organisations engaged in making interventions to promote change in groups, communities and individuals who are faced with living with the growing social consequences of natural resource depletion, environmental harm and climate change. As with the other two, this third grouping recognised that engaging people in responding to climate change is far from being a straightforward matter; indeed how to do this was seen as a key issue for organisations charged with pursuing national policy objectives on behavioural change.

Communicating the psychosocial: Focus on clarity and integration

At the event, there was an emphasis on taking up communication and campaigning perspectives. In particular, it was suggested that acceptance of a psychosocial way of working for policy-makers and practitioners will stand or fall on robust argumentation. From an academic point of view, it is also important not to underestimate the challenges involved in grasping what a psychosocial perspective is all about. Challenges arise from the way the history of psychosocial research has generated a diverse set of theories and practices for current psychosocial research; and the way such research characteristically concerns itself with **epistemic differences** i.e. differences in the assumptions that can be made, at least within the research community, about what is or should be involved in knowledge making, and the need for critical reflection on preferred or habitual knowledge making practices**.** Renee Lertzman's video presentation at the event remarked upon these issues in passing as the "epistemic issues at stake" but, notwithstanding their importance, the main focus of her fluent and engaging 13 minute talk was to respond to important campaigning imperatives. In particular, she stressed how **lived experiences, felt emotions, and affective depths** are mainstays of psychosocial approaches, cutting across the many different theoretical perspectives, and providing a sense of the distinctiveness of psychosocial research. For simplicity's sake, and in shorthand, a focus on *emotions* occupied one of four quadrants in her diagrammatic representation of the relevant academic and practitioner approaches that are in need of integration. The other three quadrants represent *behavioural* interventions (the dominant approach to diagnosing problems with what individuals are currently doing

that is unsustainable and that, according to mainstream thinking and in order to meet public policy goals, needs to be changed); *socio-cultural* concerns (mainly highlighting the importance of values and framings in risk communication and, more generally, in efforts to understand ways of responding to risk) and *systemic* factors (including social practice explanations of the ongoing nature of inconspicuous, energy consuming everyday habits and routines). Similar psychosocial emphases to Lertzman's also come across strongly, along with a shared commitment to psychoanalytic theory and practice, in the work produced by psychosocial researchers and psychotherapists and published in chapters in the *Engaging with Climate Change* book edited by Sally Weintrobe (2013).

Ongoing Challenges

Aside from the obvious importance for the UKERC meeting of carrying forward the communication and campaigning agenda, it is necessary to continue to discuss the kinds of challenges that are likely to accompany efforts to broaden the appeal of psychosocial approaches. Reservations already exist within the academic psychosocial community about creating a highly impression-forming image of research participants or, in this context, recipients of climate change communications, as anxious or defensive subjects. Such an impression is not necessarily created by an engagement with the psychosocial. However, it may well be worth pausing for thought, and taking at least some time to think about this issue, given that a key argument promoted at the meeting was about taking anxiety and other discomforting emotions and affects into account when constructing communication strategies about disturbing realities that can, understandably, be difficult for people to accept. In what follows I draw attention to some further ongoing challenges, as I see them at this point in time, but move away from directly considering issues to do with the defended subject or messaging strategies.

The psychosocial is not simply a window on our true feelings

A particular challenge arises for efforts to popularise the psychosocial as an approach to climate change research and communication from the powerful arguments that exist about why psychosocial research cannot provide a transparent window on feelings, emotions or affect, and why no simple assumption can be made about their functioning as repositories of truth. This is one reason why so much attention is paid to issues of meaning, discourse and narrative in psychosocial research. Questions are then asked about when, how and why can we be confident in the claims we make as researchers about the experiential, emotive and affecting data we pay attention to, what is being communicated affectively in social encounters, and what it means to study affect and meaning making in everyday life and wider public discourse. Published research in the psychosocial field that has set out a way of developing a psychoanalytic approach to qualitative psychology highlights the need for critical scrutiny of procedures for enriching research participants' narratives by applying psychoanalytic interpretations (Frosh and Saville-Young, 2008). My own work makes the case for studying energised forms of meaning-making - also known as relational flows, psychosocial temporalities, and intergenerational transmissions (Finn and Henwood, 2009; Henwood and Finn, 2010) – as a way of attending to the dynamic workings of cultural entanglements, moments of consequential relational (dis)connectedness, and lines of flight (Aitken, 2008) in affectively freighted subject positions and transitions (Coltart and Henwood, 2012). These concerns may not be fit for purpose in directing messages about

the need for a psychosocial approach and what can most immediately be taken from this work in the service of climate change communication. Nonetheless, such conceptual developments hold in place relevant ideas that could otherwise remain beyond our immediate powers of recognition, or our capacity to grasp, analyse and encounter such moments of recognition creatively.

The need for conceptual clarity

Lying behind my remarks is an awareness of how, for some, **conducting research and making claims about the psychosocial workings of affect is a contentious issue**. For example, in a special issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (*QRiP*; Taylor, McAvoy and Langridge, forthcoming) on *Researching the Psychosocial* the editors draw on Margie Wetherell's excellent book *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (2012) to argue that

- "the best known psychosocial writing on affect by non-psychologists is a mash up"
- "the kind of psychology (these writers) draw on is not the only available psychological story"
- Work that approaches the psychosocial as purely psychoanalytical serves to “exoticise psychology and promote selective re-claiming or rediscovery of some of its concepts”
- And that "where the standard psychological term 'affect' is co-opted to cover every kind of influence then we are in a definitional morass".

I do not think myself that the reservations expressed in the *QRiP* special issue apply specifically to the psychoanalytic work done by Renee Lertzman or others at the UKERC meeting on climate change communication, and whose work seeks to establish why and how it is important to draw on psychoanalytical forms of theorising about feelings and affect.

In fact, on the point about being in a definitional morass, I would say – to the contrary – that one cannot but be impressed with the explicitness and clarity of the way in which concepts are used. For example, in Renee's case, her chapter in *Engaging with Climate change* shows how it is possible to build an environmental object relations theory by developing Bollas' transformational objects theory in addition to Winnicott's theory of the transitional object. So-doing "allows for a different way of approaching environmental objects" …. as imbued with associations that may involve human others, sensations, memories, or desires", so that it is possible "to try to understand the potential meanings of their losses". This explicitly theorised approach then informs her own research claims about the importance of attending to the way people who might appear on the surface to be unconcerned or apathetic about climate change rather seem to her to be turning away from the pain of caring too much. Commentators on her work have picked up the further claim that she makes about how this insight suggests that climate change communications need to be "reframed to presume a presence of care and creativity rather than its absence" if they are to promote public engagement”.

This praise does not go far enough. One can also be impressed with Renee's work for doing what Ann Laura Stoler in her edited book (*Imperial Debris, On Ruins and Ruination*, 2013) says is lacking in work that seeks to understand the aftermath of forms of destruction – a matter that has already been set in train in a world where we are faced with climate chaos and the psychic discomfort involved when thinking about unpleasant facts about environmental degradation, resource depletion and climate change. A strength of psychosocial research is that it seeks to establish “a vocabulary and analytics that might speak to the stark and occluded durabilities and tangible and intangible effects" (Stoler, op cit) of dominant socio-cultural formations. In Stoler’s case, the reference here is to the durable traces of imperialism; in the context of UK psychosocial research the focus is on neoliberal forms of governance and how they help to shape subjectivity. Paul Hoggett (2013) does something similar when he sets out a framework for studying the complex mind as part of his psychosocial examination of the "perverse mechanisms" and "illusional space riddled with ambiguity" that show “evasion and collusion” at work as part of the advanced socio-political conditions characterising western type democracies "where citizens go about having to do their work in spite of an unhappy consciousness".

Substantiating “scaled up” claims about the ideological workings of affect

According to one of the papers in the forthcoming *QRiP* special issue (mentioned above), it is through recent developments in qualitative (e.g. discursive and narrative) analysis that it is possible to get an up close and in depth understanding of research data in the forms of personal interviews, social interactions and cultural texts so that it is possible to substantiate claims about the relationships between ideology (ideas and practices associated with dominant socio-cultural formations) and their qualitative effects on subjectivity – and so that the effects can be understood as an ideological and affective product.

I cannot at this point demonstrate the study of "the feeling of ideology" other than to say that it involves studying language as an activity, “ discourse large and small”, and involves “a new way of doing things” (McAvoy, forthcoming). In epistemological terms, it explicitly overturns representational notions of language, and the idea that the researcher can, by deploying theory, simply tell the truth about what is really going on (for parallel ideas well established in qualitative social science see e.g. Denzin, 1997).

A question arising for me prior to the meeting, and that has continued to occupy an important place in my own mind afterwards, therefore, is **how is it possible for psychosocial researchers to establish and legitimise their claims about emotions and affect** in ways that address the "scaled up" ideological effects of situations involving unpalatable truths; occluded durabilities of ruination; relations of care, dependency and loss: mechanisms of collusion and evasion etc?

Identifying possible analytic and interpretive strategies from extant social science and in the field of risk studies

I do not think that the question I have just introduced is easy to answer, or that we already have the answer. However, I should at least flag up some analytical and interpretive

practices deployed by myself working with colleagues from Cardiff University's Understanding Risk Group when conducting research into the acceptability of nuclear power stations to local communities (Parkhill et al, 2010; 2011). In order to consider issues of "risk, affect and subjectivity" (Henwood et al, 2011) we firstly focussed our data analysis efforts on a set of smaller sub-claims that we thought we could substantiate about humour being a means of "expressing the unsayable", "attenuating anxieties", "deriding and discrediting negative affect", "vindicating the absence of anxiety", and "empowering moral talk". We then went on to further interrogate the instances and claims presented within our data analysis as holding wider substantive and theoretical implications, in particular, allowing us glimpses into the dynamics of risk subjectivity which were illuminated as part of people's risk biographies and their ways of living with risk. By explicitly linking our analysis to Masco's (2006) psychosocial work on *The Nuclear Borderlands*, we were able to provide an account of the significance of the ebb and flow in and out of awareness of affective responses to the nuclear power station: for interrupting it's taken for granted familiarity and normality, and for opening up "spaces of perception" where the uncanniness (threatening, if typically invisible meaning) of this part of our existing energy infrastructure was brought into view. An argument we were able to direct to the policy making community, and that further suggested the worth of the reported findings from our data analysis, was that it supported previous research pointing to fragility in public acceptance of risk within local communities living adjacent to nuclear power stations. Our qualitative analysis suggested that this would be especially so in the event of further risk events happening - whether or not these were associated with the nuclear facilities themselves.

Asking searching questions about our own/institutionalised practices

It would be useful at some point to reflect at more length upon the range of analytical and interpretive strategies that are available for use within the broad community of psychosocial researchers who are committed to advancing knowledge of environmental risk issues and communicating with publics, non-governmental organisations, and policy makers about climate change. Qualitative researchers within this community, and especially those whose work is influenced by ideas about the crisis of representation and legitimation associated with the discursive and narrative turns, are likely to be interested in asking searching questions about psychoanalytic reading practices (see e.g. Frosh and Emerson, 1995). How can they deal with struggles that habitually take place about what it means to render participants' accounts meaningful? How can experiences be appropriately represented, and by whom? How will quandaries over interpretive authority be understood if they relate to struggles that take place over the meanings of experiences of anxiety and why they happen? Who is to say whether unpalatable truths are being negated or disavowed and what their consequences are? On what basis are these judgements being made and why? What importance should be attached to different modalities of sensing and forms of sense-making, and to the traditions of work that have been developed for understanding their contribution to developing interpretive and analytic practice – often in quite different substantive research areas? These kinds of questions open up the terrain of psychosocial research as practiced in the social sciences and following them up may lead us to possible ways of scaling up research into the ideological workings of lived experiences, feelings, and affect in times of ecological, psychical and social trouble.

Moreover, questions can be raised about the representation of knowledge of interpreted experiences and affective tellings more widely as they do not relate only to psychoanalytic readings. In the case of studies of environmental risk and climate change communication**,** there are important associated issues: identity conflicts, contestation over values, and the coexistence of contradictory meanings, values and identities (see e.g. Lovell, Bulkeley and Owens, 2009; Torsello, 2012; Henwood and Pidgeon, 2013). These are not just the staple of environmental politics and a phenomenon of study in society at large, they are issues that must be engaged with, and negotiated, by programmes of research. A methodological literature is available on how these can sometimes be approached as questions about risk framing (Henwood et al, 2008). But there are also searching questions to be asked about the different kinds of data produced in psychosocial research (Henwood, 2008; Hollway, 2007; Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine, 2003; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2002). Within the fields of psychological and social sciences more broadly, researchers are seeking to critique assumptions about what counts as researchable data deriving, to name but two examples, from work on communicating risk in relation to innovative technologies and climate change (Lee and Motzkau, 2012) and networked environmental sensing (Gabrys, 2012 who draws on the theoretical work of Stengers, 2009). Efforts to connect the academic social sciences and the arts and humanities are also at the forefront of attempts to broaden questions and data, method and science-public communication, with some projects looking explicitly at questions about how to research issues of environmental risk and uncertain futures, sustainable transitions, and transformative change (see e.g. http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/environmentalfuturesdialogue).

At the *Breaking the Deadlock in Climate Change* event, the argument was put forward for not focusing on climate science in climate risk communication. The arts-social science initiatives just mentioned have demonstrated some possible ways of doing this. Further analysis and reflection is needed on how such initiatives work, and to trace through what a better understanding of their workings can tell us about environmental subjectivity (feelings, affect, object relations/attachments, self-other identifications, energised forms of meaning making etc).

And, finally, a reflection on how to keep issues of risk in mind

Finally, I want to refer back briefly to my talk at the first meeting of the UKERC network that was held in Oxford, 2013, and recapitulate how, as well as having a background myself in psychosocial research, I am committed to working within the field of risk research. This is because it already puts us in a strong position to engage with questions about perceived risk and uncertainty, risk knowledge, and emotions (especially threat, anxiety, and fear of harm; for an already influential psychosocial study see Hollway and Jefferson, 2005). The risk field particularly recognises that researchers and society at large can be faced with intractable problems not easily dealt with given the current capacities of science, people, and governance. Risk researchers, commissioned to help fulfil a policy brief of thinking ahead to identify important questions about future identities (Henwood and Pidgeon, 2013), have been able to do so by drawing on approaches within risk research and cognate fields that are capable of focusing attention on temporally extended ways of acting that take different possible futures, and the future's inherent uncertainties, into account (see Adam and Groves, 2007; see also Henwood, Shirani and Colthart, 2010, for relevant empirical work).

Some risk researchers may have unhelpfully characterised risk problems as "unfathomably complex" for policy makers so that they revert in a rather defeatist way to managerial strategies geared at predicting and controlling risk – rather than understanding it, but this is not an all pervasive view. As I said at our previous meeting, I prefer to think about problems of risk in terms of opening Pandora's Box. By this I mean recognising that a risk orientation necessarily centres on questions of possible human misfortune (as well as possible benefit), some of which results from the public being presented with unpalatable scientific facts together with their limits for developing societal responses to environmental and social problems. Yet, from a risk orientation, one remains committed – even optimistic (although this may not be the right word[1]) - about meeting the challenges posed to scientists, governance change and people at large by the current global, national and local environmental threat, climate change and decarbonisation agendas.

In reading through the *Engaging with Climate Change* (Weintrobe, 2013) book, I have been struck by how often a similar approach seems to be manifest, for example, when Clive Hamilton (2013) speaks of his concern with the problematics of forecasting distressing facts, rather than entertaining speculation, and how this complicates the appetite that can be shown in some areas of life for wanting to know what the future holds in order to be able to prepare for it. My own hope then, in thinking ahead from this meeting, is to get more of hold on what can be gained by bringing psychosocial scholarship and interpretive risk research into a closer dialogue. The topic of climate change communication is a timely and important catalyst for doing this.

Biographical information: Karen Henwood is a social scientist and psychologist whose research concerns how people understand and respond to environmental risk, along with broader questions about the way risk awareness and subjectivity feature within the processes and practices of everyday life. She is also interested in the implications of living with the dynamics of socio-cultural change and transformation under the conditions of late modernity. Her published work addresses the role of qualitative and psychosocial research in making these issues researchable. By asking questions about the nature of risk knowledge, and the part it plays in socio-cultural processes and transformation, she seeks to advance research and elucidate intractable local problems and ambiguous global risk issues, where both are high in policy relevance to science, policy, society and individuals. She is currently leading the research of the energy biographies team which is developing innovative research approaches to understanding everyday energy practices and low carbon transitions across a range of UK niche and mainstream communities in the UK.

Footnote: In thinking about the problems raised by making the case for optimism as a strategy for responding to global environmental risk, a report by the AHRC network Homing In/Making Sense of Sustainability network suggests that an orientation involving openness to whatever the future might bring might be less troubled by problems such as false hope and bad faith (Dunkley, Henwood, Groves and Lavery, 2014; http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/environmentalfuturesdialogue).

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