Social and Psychological Issues that Hinder Us from Combating Climate Change

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The ecological and the climate crisis stem from broader systemic crisis.

The climate crisis as an existential threat.

... and what kind of things hinder us from combatting it.

Mitigating climate change requires (and builds) hope and emotional work.

Goal: Social and cultural change to a post fossil fuels world.
Background
The ecological and climate crises stem from a broader systemic crisis

Manifests as ecological, economic, social and political crises

Problems are complex and interconnected, and thus difficult to manage

Main engine of the crisis: capitalism (Harvey)

- has until now relied on ‘cheap natures’: cheap labour, food, energy, raw materials
- devalues/ underpays much human & non-human work
- commodification all ‘land’ and life
- logic of endless acceleration & economic growth
Struggle over land and resources

- "Humans are earthbound" (Latour 2017) – thus crucial what takes place during the kilometres from the bedrock to the atmosphere
- How to share & cohabit the Earth?
- What about those who have been/ fear being marginalized?
Awareness has not transformed into radical enough action
Fear of backlash hinders needed reforms in liberal democracies
In politics: attempt to keep the world as it is; radical changes
(Hollow) sustainability talk, yet unsustainability deeply embedded in cultural practices
Ecological consumer choices often elitist & beyond the reach of the poor
Economic growth and competitiveness remain high priorities, providing, e.g., the financial base for social professions + legitimating overconsuming ways of life
The climate crisis is an existential threat to humanity (e.g. Pihlström 2020)

- The climate crisis is an "epochal threat multiplier" already (+1.1°C) increasing vulnerability and inequality
- The fact that the balance of the biosphere is severely threatened because of human activities challenges the value, meaningfulness and ethical justification of human existence also in the present → anxiety, sense of despair and insignificance
- While also other living organisms suffer/die, the climate crisis is essentially a human existential problem due to the human quest for meaning and normative differentiation between good/bad, right/wrong
What hinders us from combatting climate change?

- Climate change is largely a by-product of daily (fossil fuel dependent) human life
- Climate change remains abstract & difficult to conceive, whereas we like to work on specific, local, concrete issues & what is close to us (e.g. Pihkala 2017)
- Environmental risks & natural scientific facts resonate poorly with human psychological operations:
  - Confronting uncertainty with emotion & being often optimistic even without grounds
  - ‘Limited pool of worries’ (Skirmishire 2010)
  - Difficulty to give up privilege
  - Biased understanding of root causes of problems
  - Limited capacity to act even when motivated to do so
  - Climate friendly/ ecological choices & practices may be inconvenient & costly
  - We are notably silent on issues that really matter (might hurt, silencing power structures, group pressure...)
  - Instead of tackling risks, we get used to them: if nothing can be done, why to bother?
Part of our identity, how we build up self image, get accepted and respected

If not maintained, fear of losing the appreciation of others

Focus easily on what we lack

While we are not for forced labour or environmental damage – we may end up causing them, for

- Market prices do not fully convey the ecological and social costs involved
- It is rational to choose the more reasonably priced item
- Ecological/low carbon solutions may be more troublesome or costly and/or elitist

Fossil-time economic and political interests shape our behaviour (society, culture, working life, pleasures)
Reducing carbon emissions is difficult (Pelttari 2021)

- Humanity is globally immensely dependent on fossil fuels, the super power of humanity
- The financial value of the unutilized fossil fuel reserves is enormous & tied to powerful political and economic interests
- Force of inertia in currently existing infrastructures and modes of operation and action
- Getting rid of fossil fuels requires reconstructing EVERY sector of societies: economy, industries, consumer behaviour, + beliefs and values typical to modernity

- Global warming does not stop without stopping/ radical reduction in the use of fossil fuels and catching and storing greenhouse gases
Politics as solution?

- Global change requires local action → need of locally & globally just and sustainable solutions →
- Reviving democracy through localization of politics and re-politicising the everyday

- However, re-politicising things does not guarantee change for the better
- Post-politics: fragmented identities – politics is just one (not highly ranked) form of self-realization

- Politics is not dead, but needs to be re-thought and invigorated?
The current ecological crisis is also a crisis of hope (Amsler 2010)

To be able to act, we need to be able to believe that change is possible

At worst, hopelessness may lead not only into inability but also unwillingness to imagine a better world

Inaction is (a passive) choice

Most important is to maintain one’s function-ability

What can we do to maintain hope as (members of) organised professional and other communities?
What keeps/ could keep you hopeful?
How do you maintain your hopefulness, and that of others?
The change requires emotional work

- Dealing with the environment related worriedness, sorrow, guilt and anxiety (e.g. Pihkala 2017)
- Learning away from destructive modes and beliefs
- ➔ Need to change *expectations* concerning good life (Pelttari 2021)
- Generating and sharing more hopeful stories about being human
- Ability be present and connect with the Earth (vs. escapism etc.)
How to deal with environmental/ eco anxiety?

The eco anxiety does not disappear by being silent about it → need to find non-paralysing ways to deal with it

Emotions that eco anxiety evokes
- guilt, shame, sorrow, helplessness, fear

Ways to react
- Apathy, denial, techno-optimism, narcissistic consumerism

From despair to hope
- Acknowledging the facts, ‘seasons of mind’, emotion work

From anxiety to action
- Learning, justice, respect, participation, care
Mitigating and adapting to the change is an enormous social and cultural challenge (Hulme 2017)

- Our response to these crises matters for who **we** are, and not only for the future generations and the rest of the planet
- Need to develop systemic alternatives
- Developing alternatives is active also outside academy/established professions
- e.g. discourses of transition: Vivier Bien (good life), Degrowth, Commons, Ecofeminism, Rights of Mother Earth, Deglobulisation, Post-Extractivism....

[www.systemicalternatives.org](http://www.systemicalternatives.org)
• ’The revolution’ takes place every day, everywhere
• Anyone can be an activist, but together and as members of different communities we are stronger – and most influential

THANK YOU!
(some of the) Literature


- Pelttari

- Pihkala

- Salonen