Book Review

Book Review: *Climate, Psychology, and Change: Reimagining Psychotherapy in an Era of Global Disruption and Climate Anxiety*; Bednarek, S., Ed.; North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, CA, USA, 2024; ISBN: 979-8889840817

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Abstract: "*Climate, Psychology and Change*" offers a profound exploration of the psychological ramifications of the climate and ecological emergency (CEE), proposing a paradigm shift in psychotherapy to better support individuals and communities grappling with environmental distress. The book critiques the prevailing hyper-individualized and neoliberal societal framework, advocating for a decolonized, systemic psychotherapeutic approach that emphasizes interconnectedness across species and that challenges human exceptionalism. It outlines four psychological phases that individuals may experience in their environmental consciousness journey, epiphany, immersion, crisis, and resolution, highlighting their non-linear and systemic nature. This work underscores the importance of understanding distress within its broader social and ecological contexts and addresses the profound inequalities and injustices exacerbated by the CEE. With contributions from diverse psychological and non-traditional backgrounds, it introduces concepts like 'ubuntu', advocating for community-focused resilience practices. The book calls for a re-evaluation of psychotherapeutic practices to include communal and nature-connected approaches, offering innovative solutions like climate cafes and social dreaming. It presents a critical yet hopeful vision for the role of psychotherapy in navigating the challenges of the CEE, urging a rethinking of our relationship with the planet and each other, making it an essential read for those seeking to align psychotherapeutic practice with the realities of our changing world.

Keywords: human exceptionalism; psychotherapy; climate breakdown; systemic thinking; social and environmental justice; ubuntu

The book "*Climate, Psychology and Change*" [1] delves into the pressing issue of the climate and ecological emergency (CEE) and reflects on how psychotherapy must change in order to be able to support individuals and communities to manage distress arising from climate breakdown. As a member of the Climate Psychology Alliance (https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/, accessed on 20 April 2024) and a Professor of Psychology who has shifted the focus of his research to climate breakdown [2], I was especially interested in reviewing this book to learn of the latest thinking about how psychotherapists are grappling with these issues and to better understand how 'individual wellbeing' might be supported in such a way that avoids the collapse of 'planetary wellbeing'. The overarching aim of the book is to explore and evaluate how therapists might effectively address the devastating psychological impacts of the CEE, which is described as a "wicked problem", a "hyperobject" and an issue so vast in scope, across time and space, that it can be challenging to comprehend. One chapter (pp. 65–76) describes four distinct psychological phases that are part of the 'climate journey' of increasing environmental consciousness, drawing on insights from earlier work [3]. The first phase refers to 'the epiphany', a sudden awakening to the realities of a warming world, followed by the

'immersion phase', a period of talking, thinking and acting on climate change, followed by the 'crisis' period, which is associated with a range of destabilising feelings and emotions including sleeplessness, disillusionment, anger and fear. The fourth phase of climate awareness is called 'the resolution', which is associated with a greater sense of agency, less negative preoccupation and post-traumatic growth leading to new and stronger capacities. These phases need not arise in a linear way and may cycle back and forth; they have a systemic nature and are not merely a checklist to complete one after another.

The book places 'distress' within a broader context of its social and natural ecologies, consistent with other developments in the field (e.g., the 'Power Threat Meaning Framework', [4,5]). It is especially critical of what could be described as 'a cult of modernity', characterised by a hyper-individualized outlook and a neoliberal mindset that prioritizes competition, consumption, and materialism and is dependent on an unequal distribution of resources, driving societal inequalities. The CEE triggers "trauma within trauma" (p. 66), such that those most impacted by climate breakdown are also those that have contributed the least to the problem, highlighting the relationship between environmental impact and environmental injustice. The CEE is explicitly linked to related topics of systematic colonisation and cultural oppression. Nontokozo Sabic and Malika Virah-Sawmy point out, for example, that while "eco-anxiety has become a mental-health crisis in the Western world… [it] comes with the fear of losing the privileges of Western civilization, while other peoples or civilisations have already experienced some form of collapse because of the history of coloniality" (p. 87).

The book challenges the very foundations on which psychotherapy has been built, focusing on the need to decolonize practice and the need for more systemic therapies that emphasize interconnectedness and interdependencies with multiple species. Rhys Price-Robertson, Mark Skelding, and Keith Tudor write that "psychotherapy generally fails to escape the trap of human exceptionalism that places human subjectivity at the centre of all theorizing" (p. 124). In this vein, the book seeks to explore the limitations of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, aiming to encourage a shift toward a more holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things.

The reflections from those with non-traditional psychological backgrounds bring important insights to this issue. For instance, Shelot Masithi, a 23-year-old psychologist and climate activist from South Africa, described the concept of 'ubuntu' (pp. 79–82), an integrated approach that recognizes the individual, the collective, and the planet. It is a South African concept with origins in the Zulu and Xhosa languages that can be translated to "humanity towards others" or "I am because we are". The concept of 'ubuntu' is rooted in the recognition of the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and the planet, highlighting the importance of community-based models that promote resilience and interconnectedness, consistent with the need for psychotherapy to adopt a more systemic approach to managing distress.

The four distinct phases of the climate journey help to contextualise the various emotional states individuals may go through when coming to terms with the CEE. A clinician describes her experience working with Mr R, a client who was struggling with climate distress and grief, and her striving as a therapist to maintain a 'window of tolerance' that was open to Mr R's difficult feelings while avoiding hyperarousal or defensive shutting down. She describes the need for a 'traumatised sensibility' (p. 75) that involves seeking opportunities for meaning, connection, and resilience through community-focused practice such as 'Climate Cafes' (pp. 211–216). A variety of other communal psychotherapeutic practices are also explored, including social dreaming (pp. 217–222), warm data labs (pp. 223–228), and radical joy for hard times (pp. 229–234), all of which provide a space for group working and the processing of difficult emotions related to the CEE. This work aligns with that of Joanna Macy's *The Work That Reconnects*, which aims to help individuals and communities develop a deeper sense of connection with themselves, each other, and the natural world, and to cultivate a sense of agency and empowerment in the face of environmental and social challenges [6].

Overall, the book presents a compelling reflective account of how psychotherapy is adapting to address the psychological consequences of the CEE. It emphasizes the need for a more systems-focused approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and the planet. While the book offers a promising vision for psychotherapy and its role in addressing the challenges of the CEE, there are clear tensions that will need to be explored in further reflection, such as the challenge of promoting human wellbeing while also maintaining planetary wellbeing. The book also takes a critical approach to Western scientific traditions, which is especially challenging for those of us educated in such traditions. That said, the book provides an essential starting point for rethinking fundamental assumptions about the world and our place in it. Interested readers are referred to the book's website for free discussions, talks on the topics, as well as workshops and training: www.climatepsychologyandchange.com (accessed on 20 April 2024). In conclusion, I whole-heartedly recommend this forward-thinking book and available resources to academics, clinicians, and students committed to exploring and addressing the challenges of the CEE "*in a time when the familiar is dying*". It will surely lead you to question many assumptions that you have long held dear.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. A.H.K. confirms that he has no personal connection with Dr. Bednarek and was approached as a colleague of the Climate Psychology Alliance.

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