

Ecopsychology Roundtable: Identity, Well-Being, and Sustainability

In this Ecopsychology Roundtable, editor Thomas Doherty spoke with Tom Crompton, (far right) Change Strategist for the WWF UK, and psychologist Tim Kasser (right), professor at Knox College, Illinois, and author of books such as *The High Price of Materialism*. Their discussion focused on the intersection of identity, well-being, and sustainability, as explored in Tom and Tim's recent publication *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity* and Tim's research exploring how ecologically sustainable environments and behaviors can satisfy psychological needs crucial for well-being (see this issue). This interview was excerpted from a conference call conducted on January, 20, 2010.



Tom Crompton: By identity campaigning we mean an approach to environmental communications and campaigns which embraces an understanding of aspects of human identity, which, as we see it, will importantly underpin public appetite and indeed active public demand for the types of interventions which will be needed to address the quite profound environmental challenges which we are confronting at the moment.

Ecopsychology (Thomas Joseph Doherty): Tom and Tim, thank you very much for making time to create a roundtable that we can share with the readers of *Ecopsychology*. I am very impressed with the work that you are both doing, and particularly the series of publications that have recently come out of the WWF.¹ I see a great synthesis. The results of the work of many people over many years are coming together—the traditions of ecopsychology and environmental and conservation psychology, as well as knowledge that has been hard won through the environmental movement.

In your recent WWF text, you both write about “identity campaigning.” How would you define this, and how is identity campaigning different from other approaches that encourage sustainability or conservation?

Tim Kasser: I agree with Tom's definition, and I would add a couple of things. What we have argued is that there have been traditionally two primary ways of doing environmental campaigning. One way has been focusing on small behavioral changes, like changing your light bulbs or things like that, and then there have been big policy attempts, like cap and trade.

Our view is that what has been missing thus far and what is important in its own right, but also important as it relates to those other two kinds of campaigning attempts is human identity. That is, environmental campaigning needs to understand how people think of themselves and understanding the dynamics around how people's identities influence their behavior and influence their attitudes towards environmental outcomes. So that is the rationale for identity campaigning; it is a third approach to try to complement and inform the two dominant approaches that have been used thus far.

Ecopsychology: Thank you. It sounds like you are developing a paradigm that could be used across the board, maybe what we could call a postenvironmental paradigm. I think one of the

strong levers that you have to work with here is that, based on my reading of your work, there is a strong, empirical connection between health and well-being, some of these conservation behaviors, and some of these identity processes. Could you speak to the connection as you see it between health and conservation behaviors, health and sustainability?

Tim Kasser: There are two elements of identity that we talk about in *Meeting Environmental Challenges* that I think are particularly relevant to well-being, assuming we are defining well-being in the more limited sense of people's psychological well-being. The first is people's values and goals, and the second has to do with how people cope with the threats and the unpleasant feelings that they have with regard to environmental challenges.

First, with regard to values, one of the things we know from the research is that the same values and goals that tend to promote positive environmental outcomes are the same values and goals that also tend to be associated with personal well-being. On the flip side, the same values and goals which undermine ecological outcomes also tend to be associated with being less happy and having more distress.

To be concrete, what we know is that when people focus on what my colleagues and I have called "materialistic" or "extrinsic" goals for things like money and image and status, they not only engage in worse ecological outcomes, but they report lower levels of happiness, lower levels of personal life satisfaction, lower levels of pleasant affect, more unpleasant affect, more narcissism, more depression, more anxiety, etc.

On the flip side, when people focus on "intrinsic values"—which are goals for things like having a meaningful life or having close relationships or contributing to the community—the research shows that people are happier, that they are more satisfied with their life, that they are less depressed or less anxious, and also that they tend to engage in more positive environmental behaviors. So there is one aspect of identity, people's values and goals, which bears important relationships both to ecological sustainability and to people's well-being.

The second, very different, aspect of identity that Tom and I wrote about in our book has to do with the way that people cope with threats. One of Freud's fundamental insights, I think, is that when people are feeling an unpleasant emotion or feeling some impulse that they do not want to have to deal with, they have to figure out some way to manage. Now, and there are more or less adaptive ways of coping with those unpleasant feelings, whether they are about

death or about some aggressive impulse, or if they are about the feelings that people have about environmental threats.

One of the things that came out of our book is that many of the same kinds of defense mechanisms, if you will, that people engage in that are problematic for the environment—things like denial or things like projection or things like apathy—not only hurt the environment, but they are the ones that most psychotherapists recognize as also damaging to people's well-being.

On the flip side, the kinds of positive coping strategies that we know promote good environmental outcomes—things like problem-solving or emotion-focused coping or mindfulness—are the kinds of coping strategies that psychotherapists know and the research shows are also beneficial for people's well-being on the whole.

So I think there are two good examples where there is this nice, very real convergence in terms of identity where the same things that are good for the environment also are good for people's well-being.

Tom Crompton: I think the second example that Tim gave raises interesting questions for the environmental movement in terms of how we currently construe well-being. We frequently point to the possibilities of this convergence between well-being or, in a shallower sense, happiness, and environmental need. I think that what Tim has just said about needing to incorporate an understanding about some of the psychological management strategies that we may deploy, like denial, and understanding how we respond to loss, serves to underscore the importance, perhaps, of deepening our understanding of well-being and of the environmental movement generally, looking beyond a checklist of lifestyle attributes that you might seek to acquire in pursuit of greater well-being. Working shorter hours or cycling to work rather than sitting in a traffic jam, or buying your food from the farmer you know rather than queuing at the superstore checkout all may be important things, but none of which need necessarily capture this deeper need to engage with our sources of meaning, and perhaps as well begin to embrace an understanding of loss and the contribution that has to our sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Tim Kasser: I just want to broaden out what we mean by well-being here, too. Going back to the values and the defense mechanisms and all of the rest: Everything I laid out before was about, "If I have this value, how do I feel? If I have this defense mechanism, how do I feel?" But, I think in the broad scheme of things we have to recognize that people's values and defense mechanisms and other aspects of their identity do not have impacts only on the person's own well-being, but on other people's well-being, too.

So, for example, we know from the research that when people focus on materialistic values, they treat other people in more manipulative, less empathic ways. That is going to have an impact on another person's well-being. Similarly, if the way that I am coping with my upset feelings is to project them onto you, that is probably not going to be very good for your well-being. So I think it is really important to recognize that the dynamics that Tom and I have identified here are not just relevant to how I feel, but are relevant to the way that a person acts that then influences other people's well-being also.

Ecopsychology: Tim, that was an excellent point. I am glad you brought that out. I want to follow up on something Tom said regarding loss and move into a parallel area within ecopsychology and conservation, the idea of loss and mourning. In a recent article, *Loss and Climate Change*, Rosemary Randall called for a more sophisticated understanding of the process of loss and mourning about issues like climate change, seeking to restore these themes to public narratives—in her language—to help release energy for more realistic programs of change. Is there a role for grief and mourning within the identity campaigning strategy?

Tim Kasser: Can I take that one first, Tom? I think absolutely there is a role, and I think it is really a crucial role, and it gets to a lot of what we wrote about in Chapter 6 of our book. From our perspective, part of what environmental organizations need to start doing is to provide individuals with an opportunity to experience their feelings about environmental challenges and to work through and express those feelings. To be clear, we are not arguing that environmental campaigns should be provoking those feelings. Good psychotherapists know if the feeling is there, it needs to be dealt with by the patient, and sometimes people do not want to deal with those feelings, and not dealing with that feeling ties up energy. I think that is absolutely right, and that is energy that could be used for better purposes.

Sometimes the energy that is tied up leads the person down paths that are maladaptive. Randall's article talks about how people get manic as a way to try to cope, and there goes the energy into more shopping or into something that is not always healthy, either personally or ecologically. So I see her approach as completely congruent with the arguments that we are making.

Tom Crompton: I could just add one practical example of how WWF is trying to do that. We recently ran a process which we called Natural Change, which took some young up-and-coming Scottish leaders—these were not people who were selected because

of any particular environmental concern—and engaged them in a process of inquiry about their relationship with the environment and with one another and what they saw as their role in society in relationship to environmental challenges. That included, in part, an important experiential component, a solo experience in a wilderness area in Scotland.

Each of those people through this process, which was led by qualified psychotherapists, experienced almost unanimously a profound sense of shift in their own perspective, in the importance that they attached to their direct personal relationship with the natural environment, but also the importance that they attached to helping to address environmental challenges. It was tremendously encouraging that these people expressed those concerns.

But what I think is a bigger challenge is how to begin to provide a social context in which those concerns continue to be legitimized, in which those individuals, on going back to their nine-to-five jobs in the city, find that they are able to articulate their insights and find legitimacy in talking about their experiences within their professional and social circles. Those are things which many participants identified difficulty in doing.

Where I think identity campaigning will come in, too, is in asking what is it that currently conspires socially and culturally to help to close down that sort of debate? What is it that serves to, over the course of time, erode some of those insights? And how can we begin to legitimize public debate? How can we begin to create a public space for the further elaboration and deepening of people's understanding of those experiences?

Tim Kasser: If I could just add one thing to that. I was trained as a clinician. My wife is a therapist. I think what Tom has just said is akin to treating the child who has an identified psychological problem and making some progress with that child, but then having to put the child back into a dysfunctional family that is not going to do much in order to support the gains that have been made with the child in therapy. Almost all therapists have encountered that situation. It is not just with children and their families. Sometimes it is with people and their wives or husbands, or people in the broader society. You know, you have an eating disordered client who then has to go out there and look at all of these images of women that just reinforce the body image issues that you have been working on in therapy.

I think that part of what Tom and I are arguing here is that it is very important to look at those emotional dynamics and all of the rest, but we have to keep our eye on the broader social situation

in which we are putting people back in. They are going to have to still try to cope, even though the system is trying to move them in the opposite direction of coping strategies that may benefit them and the environment.

Ecopsychology: In my background doing wilderness therapy work with young people, this is the same dilemma that the wilderness therapists found. These young people would have these incredible experiences in nature—a combination of a therapeutic experience, a nature connection experience and a rite of passage—and then the dilemma was how to foster and generalize those changes back at home.

Tim Kasser: Just one more thing about that. I think that is why it is super-important for us to deal with people's loss and to take this kind of approach to talking about environmental outcomes. That is why we have to be shooting for the big shift here—it is not just about these small behavior changes and it is not just about cap and trade. We need to be talking about a much broader shift in terms of moving most of people's identities and society in different directions so that when people come out of those wilderness experiences, they are not nearly so far away from that experience anymore. Instead, they are in an environment which is supportive of the insights they have gained.

Ecopsychology: Yes, good point. As I alluded to earlier, I see the fruition of a number of trends here. I think what we are talking about is what, say, someone like Theodore Roszak was talking about 30 years ago, this early ecopsychology idea that the personal and the planetary are connected, that individual health and well-being, mental health, and environmental sustainability are intricately connected. Then also, there were calls for a kind of "psychological impact statement" to be filed by the environmental movement to gauge the effectiveness of their methods. I think what can be studied or researched about those intuitions is being found to be true, and I see your work as an example.

To move us forward a little more on the emotional side of things, I have found some of my colleagues in environmental studies to be curious about people's romanticism of nature. Now, Rosemary Randall would talk about idealization of nature or certain historic lifestyles as a way of coping with loss, and even possibly a place where someone could stall on the process of coping with grief and loss. On a more positive side, in what ways do you see that idealism can be harnessed within identity campaigning?

Tim Kasser: Well, the first thing I would say is that idealization of nature is going to be a far better starting point than the denigration of nature. One of the things we write a lot about in our text is how the separation between humans and nonhuman nature is like very familiar in-group/out-group dynamics where we tend to degrade the out-group. Personally, I have come to think that is a big reason why people do so many nasty things to nature and animals.

That said, I work at a small liberal arts college, Knox College, so I am working with 18- to 21-year-olds who have an awful lot of idealism about various things, some of them about environmentalism. One of the things my colleagues and I frequently ask each other is, "Okay, how can we harness that idealism? What can we do with it?"

I think it is a crucial issue facing us, and the place I would want to direct ecopsychologists to be looking is at youth. I say that for two reasons: The first is that they do have that idealism and they do have that energy and they do still have that sense that, "Okay, I can go out there and do something." I think that is a really important place to start.

The second reason I think it is important to focus on youth is that youth are going to age, and they are going to age into an environment which is going to become increasingly degraded, and ultimately they are the ones who are going to have to really change their lifestyles, and they are the ones who are going to take on the positions of power to make the big decisions.

One thing youth will need is help after they realize idealization does not work anymore. You can give up. You move to apathy, or you say, "They are horrible people." When you give up on your idealization—and this is what splitting is about—you move to the negative.

I think today's youth are going to encounter an awful lot of struggles as they try to work with nature in a positive way. I think one of the things ecopsychologists have to watch out for is, how are we going to prevent that sort of move—just giving up on nature as young people begin to encounter the struggles that they are no doubt going to encounter?

Ecopsychology: Great. Thank you both. Coming back to our discussion of well-being, Tim, I was curious about your work on the concepts of "time affluence" and "time poverty." Can you give some concrete examples?

Tim Kasser: One of the things that I have been interested in for some years now is the fact that our culture defines affluence and defines being rich and defines wealth in terms of money and material possessions, when we know from the research that more wealth has not

brought more happiness in economically developed nations [like the United States], that materialism actually is associated with lower well-being, and that both high levels of wealth and materialism are associated with ecological degradation.

Some years ago, I met John de Graaf, who did the *Affluenza* movies. He got me thinking a lot about the idea of using time as something to be affluent with or in. Right now, I find that when I ask people how they are, the modal response is “Busy.” You know? It is not “good” or “fine.” They say, “Well, I am busy.” One of the things we know from the research—I have done some of this research, as have others—is that when people are really busy they tend to be less happy, and they also tend to engage in behaviors that are environmentally degrading, because they do not have time to do the good environmental behaviors.

So I have started to do some research on this issue of how it is that we can shift people’s minds toward thinking about a good life not as being a materially affluent one but as being a time-affluent one, one where I have enough time to be with my family; I have enough time to pursue my hobbies; I have enough time to volunteer and to vote and to cook my food from scratch and walk instead of having to drive five blocks since I am in a hurry.

So I really think that time is a important for us to be talking about because it has both those well being and ecological outcomes, and I think that it is something that for me gets at both a personal level of change and a broader societal level of change. So when practitioners are working with their clients, I am sure we will find that many of their clients are time poverty-stricken. They are feeling way too busy. So one of the things that psychologists and therapists can do is to enter into conversations with their clients about, “Well, why are you so busy? What is your busyness about? Is your busyness bringing you happiness? Is it standing in the way of the kind of sustainable behaviors you might like to do, etc.?” and help people start to shift their models and their lives.

At the same time, I think time is the sort of thing that we can begin to develop bigger policies around in order to help people live in a more time-affluent way. The United States is miserable with regard to its time policies, its maternal leave policies, its overtime policies, its nonexistent vacation policy, etc. These are all, again—and this gets at, to me, the very heart of identity campaigning—these are all about both personal change—helping this individual to change—but it is also about a societal change that will help people be able to maintain the changes that they have made and will help new generations of people take on different identities that are more sustainable.

Ecopsychology: Following up on much of what we talked about, maybe summing it up a bit—in my work with people, I have found that linking the concept of sustainability with their identity and their sense of self can be helpful. We may ask about ways that people can meet their personality or esteem needs in an environmentally sustainable way. At times, people will begin to approach their life in this more broadly sustainable manner, approaching their job choices, even their relationship choices in this manner—sustainability taking on the connotation of being something that is enduring or long-lasting.

I was recently looking at Al Gore’s new book, *Our Choice*, and he addresses the contention that humans are very short-term-focused in our thinking, and he uses the counterexample of the great gothic cathedrals, and how these were projects that were carried on over many generations, and he gives a number of examples where humans have actually done larger, longer, more transcendent projects. I thought that was very inspiring. Based on your work, in a global sense, do you think someone can develop a sustainable sense of self, a sustainable self?

Tim Kasser: I would use the term self-concept rather than self, but definitely think that people can develop a sustainable identity, and I think that they can develop a sustainable way of life. The way that I look at people and their interaction with society is: People come into the world. They have certain psychological needs that they have to try to meet, and they have to live in the world with other people. All the time, depending on the culture that they live in, they are told, “This is the way to do it. This is the way to meet your needs. This is the way to have a meaningful life. This is the way to have a good relationship.” That is where they get their self-concept from. That is where they get their sense of identity from in large part.

Right now, we raise people in a culture which tells people the way to have a meaningful life, the way to have esteem met, is through consumption, is through the acquisition of more and more money, etc., and people take that message on. The research shows that people have taken that message on very strongly.

If we can make a shift, if we can start to develop a society and start to develop people’s identities in ways that help them to see that, “Okay, well, materialism and consumerism and hyper-capitalism is one strategy, but it is a strategy that does not really seem to meet my needs very well and hurts the environment and seems to hurt other people,” we can start to ask, “Well, what is a different kind of identity that will help us feel meaningful and have relationships and be sustainable?” I do think that ultimately the research suggests hav-

ing a sustainable self-concept and having this sort of identity will meet people's needs better and will help them live together better and will create a more environmentally sustainable outcome.

Certainly, people have tried this before. There are voluntary simplifiers have taken on this kind of identity and lifestyle. The problem is they are so much in the minority they are looked at as oddballs, and I do not think they have had an impact in terms of making a broad shift in the culture. So certainly I hold out great hope that it is possible, but it is only going to be really possible at a massive level to the extent that we begin to fundamentally shift the culture, also.

Tom Crompton: As far as unpacking what you might mean by a sustainable self, there is perhaps an element which relates to social norms, the greener ways of living, and an element of that which refers to the integration into a person's identity of some of those values or life goals which the work of Tim and other social psychologists suggest underpin a concern and a motivation to work for both the environmental good and the wider public good. Obviously, both play a role, and social norms are crucially important.

But I think in answering that question, we need to be thinking about it in that deeper sense of the values or life goals which come to dominate, with an expectation that the social norms will follow. Too often, I think the environmental movement at the moment, in trying to work toward what it may construe as a sustainable self, tends to focus on shifting the social norms without sufficient attendance to the values and life goals which will come to energize the changes in priorities that have to precede the shift in social norms. Does that make sense?

Ecopsychology: Yes. Yes, it does. Thank you. This has been very enlightening. I am curious a bit about where you are going to be moving on for the rest of your day. What is an example of something you are going to do today that is in line with the values we

have been talking about and ways that you tap into this material in a personal manner?

Tom Crompton: That is interesting. Well, as soon as I put the phone down, I am going to go and play with my two kids.

Tim Kasser: Well, I would say that an hour and a half from now, I am meeting with a student for whom I am sponsoring an independent study designed to get a community garden on Knox College campus so that students can start to grow some of their own food that would be served in the dining services and, I think, more importantly, so that students can have the opportunity to learn to garden. I think a lot of people have lost that skill, and a lot of students do not really know how to do it. So that is later in my day.

Ecopsychology: Thank you very much for your time, and those are great notes to end on. This was really an exciting opportunity. I want to be thankful for the technology and the resources and the people that have allowed this transcontinental and transatlantic phone call to occur.

Note

1. WWF's Strategies for Change project: http://www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/campaigning/strategies_for_change

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