

INSPIRING ACTION:

The Role of Psychology In Environmental Campaigning and Activism



Psychologists
for Social Responsibility



Friends of
the Earth

INSPIRING ACTION: **The Role of Psychology In Environmental Campaigning and Activism**

Summary Report of a Workshop
Washington, D.C.

by *Laurie Mazur*



Psychologists
for Social Responsibility

www.psysr.org



**Friends of
the Earth**

www.foe.org

Report of a September, 2010 workshop co-sponsored by Psychologists for Social Responsibility and Friends of the Earth. The project was made possible by generous support from the David and Carol Myers Foundation.

Introduction

While the environmental movement in the United States has enjoyed some important successes over the years, there is still a long way to go in terms of meeting the complex and diverse ecological challenges that confront humanity.

The problems of climate disruption, habitat loss, species extinction, and pollution seem to be growing rather than diminishing. And existing strategies have not yet proven successful in promoting fundamental change towards sustainability. That is, while they have succeeded, for example, in increasing sales of compact fluorescent light-bulbs, existing strategies have yet to lead sufficient numbers of people to retool their lifestyles in order to lower their ecological footprints, organize protests to protect local habitats, or demand that those who represent them in Congress vote in favor of meaningful environmental legislation.

Given how many miles still must be traversed in order to attain a sustainable, healthy world, we feel that it is crucial for the environmental movement to begin looking for new strategies to use in its campaigns and communications. One promising source for these new strategies is recent psychological research on identity. This growing body of work suggests that many features of human identity can interfere with pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. These include:

- The desire for the enticing consumer goods that are nearly constantly and everywhere marketed to everyone, from birth up.
- A lack of empathy (and sometimes an antipathy) toward other species.
- The time pressures of modern society that leave little opportunity to reflect on how well one's everyday choices align with one's fundamental values.
- The tendency to separate oneself from the natural world, strongly promoted by our sedentary, in-doors culture.
- A sense of apathy about environmental problems, stemming in part from the belief that any


one of us is powerless in the face of the massive changes that are necessary.

This scientific literature suggests that so long as these features of identity are ignored by environmental campaigns and communications, the kind of groundswell of activism and personal lifestyle change necessary to reach sustainability is unlikely to occur. Happily, this psychological literature has also begun to investigate a variety of approaches to counter these environmentally-damaging aspects of identity and to support and encourage the healthier identities known to promote sustainable attitudes and behaviors.

Because we have become convinced that a focus on human identity has substantial potential for improving environmental communications and campaigning, Friends of the Earth and Psychologists for Social Responsibility joined forces to organize a two-day workshop. It brought six leading psychologists together with 19 organizers, activists, and campaigners from a diverse array of organizations. We enjoyed stimulating presentations on the relevant psychological research and its implications, followed by wide-ranging discussions about ways of applying this perspective to the environmental movement. And we had even longer, often emotional, and sometimes difficult, conversations about where to go next.

This report provides a flavor of what happened over these two days and a brief summary of some of the relevant psychological literature. The workshop and the report are of course first steps towards rethinking how environmental campaigning and communications are conducted. We hope that you will take the time to peruse the report and consider whether you agree that the aims and strategies of the environmental movement might benefit from incorporation of some of the key findings and suggestions that were discussed at the workshop. Then perhaps we can begin taking the next steps along the path we must quickly traverse.


Erich Pica,
Friends of the Earth


Tim Kasser, Ph.D.
*Psychologists for
Social Responsibility*

INSPIRING ACTION:

The Role of Psychology In Environmental Campaigning and Activism

*Sponsored by Psychologists for Social Responsibility and Friends of the Earth
September 23-24, 2010*

Summary Report of a Workshop

“The difference between a future ranging from outright catastrophe to the evolution of global civilization moving toward justice and sustainability will come down to our capacity to understand ourselves fully at all levels, ranging from individuals to the deeper and wider currents of mass psychology . . . At all levels, leaders must be master psychologists, empowering and inspiring, not simply ruling, followers. They must help foster the traits necessary to a higher order of human behavior, among which I include gratitude, openness, compassion, generosity, good-heartedness, mercy, tolerance, empathy, humor, courage, and attachment to nature.”

- David Orr, *Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse*

On September 23-24, 2010, nearly two-dozen activists and psychologists gathered at the offices of Friends of the Earth in Washington, D.C., to explore how to productively apply research and insights from psychology in environmental and social campaigns and communications. The goal: to inspire and empower real, systemic change at every level.

Friends of the Earth President Erich Pica welcomed participants, who represented the environmental and social-justice communities, with a reminder of the massive challenges we face. Climate change, he observed, “is perhaps the greatest threat to our planet and civilization.” But efforts to communicate the urgency of the threat—and to promote change of the appropriate magnitude—have fallen short.

The environmental movement, Pica said, often appeals to short-term concerns about economics and security, rather than engaging “hearts and minds” in a morals- and values-based discussion of the sweeping, long-term changes we must make. Moreover, activists tend to talk about issues in isolation, when many of those issues—such as climate change and health care reform—are fundamentally about achieving a just allocation of resources, today and into the future.

Pica cited the decade-long effort that culminated in the 2009 failure to pass meaningful climate legislation. In the wake of that defeat, he said, many environmentalists are beginning to recognize the need for new communications frameworks that can more fully engage the public. That is why Friends of the Earth (FoE) partnered with Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) to host this meeting,

which was funded by a generous grant to PsySR from the David and Carol Myers Foundation.

Steven Shapiro, co-coordinator of PsySR's Climate Change, Sustainability, and Psychology Program, expressed his organization's commitment to an ongoing process. "Nothing happens in a two-day meeting," he said. Rather, the meeting will hopefully catalyze thinking and partnerships that will continue into the future.

Participants began by sharing frustrations about the state of environmental activism--for example:

- Losing ground with the public on climate change, as measured in opinion polls;
- Losing ground in relationships among environmental groups, whose competing priorities result in a lack of unity, a retreat to lowest-common-denominator positions and diminished effectiveness;
- An inability to communicate effectively with faith communities; for example, over-emphasizing science-based messages and under-emphasizing values-based reasons for change;
- The challenge of reaching and motivating people who are preoccupied by bread-and-butter economic issues;
- "Blank eyes"—apathy and boredom with climate change among students;
- "Doom and gloom"—messages that are "all about what you can't do," rather than about a positive vision for the future;
- The tension between crafting messages for policymakers and for the general public;
- The challenge of remaining focused and constructive in the face of depressing and scary predictions about the future; and
- The perception of a conflict between our individual economic well-being and collective (and environmental) well-being.

Several general themes emerged: the need to articulate a positive vision for the future; the need to engage individuals' hearts as well as minds; and

the need to balance short-term policy objectives with the imperative of significant long-term change.

A focus on human identity

Tim Kasser, Professor of Psychology at Knox College and co-director of this project for PsySR, then shared a PowerPoint presentation that reviewed strategies currently employed by environmental campaigns, and their often unimpressive results. Scientific research, he said, is met by denial and apathy among the general public. Prescriptions for simple behavior changes ("green consumption") fail to spur larger changes. Policy proposals are scuttled by low public demand and resistance from powerful institutions.

A key to this problem, said Kasser, is human identity: the ideas we have about who we are. If people are exposed to information that doesn't fit with their pre-existing identities and beliefs, it typically "bounces right off." Human identity, then, is central to whether messages are heard, to whether people are willing to change behaviors and to whether they will take political action. Environmentalists should consider human identity when designing campaigns, Kasser said. They might even consider campaigns that help the public tap into the most fundamental and expansive sense of human identity – that of being closely related to, and interdependent on, all forms of life on Earth.

Unfortunately, many people have culturally reinforced identities that are in sharp conflict with protection of the environment. Empirical research points to three identity "types" that are associated with attitudes and behaviors that are damaging to the environment:

- Self-enhancing, materialistic values and goals, i.e. the tendency to value money, image, power and status;
- Social identities based on "in" and "out" groups, especially ones that define humans as an "in-group" and non-human nature as an "out group;"

- Strategies for coping with threats that include denial, apathy, projection and hedonism.

These findings have several implications for environmental campaigns. First, campaigns should avoid activating environmentally-damaging identities by, for example, eschewing appeals to opportunities to increase profits or status. Campaigns using messages that are likely to evoke fear should offer constructive coping strategies, so that they do not instead trigger denial, apathy, projection and hedonism. Environmentalists might also develop campaigns to eliminate the legitimizing myths behind environmentally damaging identities—for example, the belief that nature is a commodity. A campaign to limit the reach of advertising, which contributes to self-enhancing, materialistic values, could have substantial benefits for the environment, Kasser emphasized.

Finally, environmentalists could identify environmentally beneficial identities, and actively promote them. For example, efforts to increase the public's contact with nature can cultivate empathy with other species, and defuse the “in-group/out-group” tensions between people and nature.

Kasser summarized the potential benefits of identity-focused environmental campaigning. First, it could help activists communicate more effectively in existing campaigns. Second, it suggests new campaign approaches and, importantly, new coalitions that can be forged. Environmentally beneficial identities, he said, also promote other pro-social behaviors that can enhance human well-being. Fostering those identities could thus appeal to a broad coalition of groups working for social justice.

Lessons from the U.K.

Collaborations between psychologists and environmental activists are already under way in the

U.K., said Tom Crompton, Change Strategist for WWF-UK, who joined the meeting via Skype. As in the U.S., the impetus for collaboration came with mounting frustration over the “glacial pace of change.” Crompton spoke of the frustration he encountered among some in government who

recognize the need for more ambitious change, but who find that “their hands are tied; there is no political space for the scale of change that is needed.”

That experience led Crompton to ask: How is political space created or shut down? What generates political demand for change? That led, in turn, to Crompton's work with Tim Kasser to explore how human identity and cultural concerns shape demand. The approach does encounter areas of skepticism: some campaigners worry that efforts to foster environmentally friendly identities could be too diffuse, and that limited resources are better spent on “upstream” efforts to reach key decisionmakers. These are legitimate concerns, said Crompton. What comes from this effort must be strategic, addressing the aspects of human identity that are most problematic.

The conversation about these issues in the U.K. began with the publication of a report, *Weathercocks and Signposts: the Environmental Movement at a Crossroads*, written by Crompton for WWF-UK in 2008. That report critically reassessed current approaches to motivating environmental behavior change. It also recommended engagement with the values that underlie individual decisionmaking by working to strengthen helpful aspects of identity. Favorable reviews indicated that the report struck a chord with frustrated environmentalists.

The report led to a series of meetings with other U.K. environmental groups, the creation of a working group, and the recent publication of a joint report entitled *Common Cause*, which urges broad coalition building around values and identity. High-level support within the participating NGOs helped advance the agenda, and there has also been government interest in this work. For example, Oxfam secured new funding from the U.K.'s Department for International Development to examine the decline in support for foreign assistance and the role of government in strengthening the pro-social values that underpin such support.

Crompton sees great potential for coalition-building among a wide range of third-sector organizations (including, for example, environmental, human rights and development groups). He observed

that this is not an inherently leftist agenda—conservatives (at least in the UK) share many of those values which we know to be important in underpinning social and environmental concern.

In the discussion that followed, one participant noted that critiques of the “commodification of life” – a core problem with capitalism—resonate with communities of faith. Yet some environmental campaigns—for example, to create carbon markets or place monetary value on biodiversity—appear to further the process of commodification. Crompton responded by emphasizing the importance of appealing to intrinsic values: compassion, community, connection to nature.

Materialistic values and environmental challenges

Tim Kasser then drilled down further into the values that shape environmental behavior. He offered examples of materialistic/extrinsic values: a belief that “happiness is for sale,” an emphasis on work oriented to increased consumption, pursuit of profit and growth, measuring one’s self-worth in financial terms. Those stand in contrast to intrinsic values of personal growth, affiliation and community. Most people hold a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic values. But an emphasis on extrinsic values tends to suppress intrinsic ones. And for those in whom materialistic/extrinsic values predominate, research by Kasser and others has found less pro-environmental attitudes and behavior.

Higher levels of materialism were associated with lower “biophilia” (love and appreciation for nature); less value placed on environmental protection; and less concern about the impact of environmental damage on nature and human beings, including future generations. Not surprisingly, these attitudes correlate with fewer pro-environment behaviors (including political behavior) and a bigger environmental footprint. At a national level, countries with higher prevalence of materialistic values had higher CO₂ emissions. In short, said Kasser, “materialistic values are bad for the environment.”

This research has two central implications for environmental campaigns. First, campaigns should take care with mentions of power, status and financial benefits, because even passing references that seem to endorse those goals can activate materialistic “frames” and discourage pro-environmental behavior. Second, campaigns should seek to eliminate root causes of environmentally-damaging values. Social modeling plays a key role in values formation: people are more likely to have materialistic values if their family and friends have those values; if they watch a lot of television; and if they live in a neoliberal, capitalist society. Restrictions on advertising could significantly diminish the power of materialistic social modeling, Kasser said. Environmental and social justice groups could, for example, work to remove ads from public spaces such as schools and parks, or to remove tax subsidies for advertising.

More proactively, campaigns can use social modeling to promote intrinsic values, which are associated with more pro-environmental behavior as well as higher levels of personal well-being and greater altruism. For example, an effort to promote alternatives to the GNP, such as the “Gross National Happiness” index, would encourage society to measure and appreciate intrinsic values.

In the discussion that followed, several participants questioned whether Kasser’s approach would work in a range of settings. One participant, who works in a predominantly low-income community, said he found campaigns that encourage people to save money through weatherization and energy efficiency to be effective. Another doubted that the members of Congress he lobbies would be receptive; the identities of many Republican lawmakers have been shaped by conservative theorists such as Ayn Rand—who elevated self-interest to a social good. A third participant questioned whether there is a “one size fits all” message—perhaps some audiences will resonate to extrinsic values, others will not.

Kasser responded that both extrinsic and intrinsic values are present in everyone: rich and poor, conservative and liberal. And while appeals to extrinsic values may be effective in the short term, the data

suggest that they are likely to undermine efforts to build support for substantive change in the long run.

The participants then split into three smaller groups to discuss how these findings might shape their current and future work. Participants noted the need to:

- Balance recognition of real economic needs and higher aspirations—can we appeal to self interest *and* altruism?
- Balance the tension between short-term goals and long-term movement building;
- Counter advertising’s cultivation of insecurity with messages that encourage self-acceptance and satisfaction; and
- Radically rethink how the young are nurtured, to cultivate courage to live in a world with countervailing values.

Interpersonal channels to sustainability

In her presentation, Janet Swim, Professor of Psychology at Pennsylvania State University, shifted the focus to interpersonal factors that influence behavior—including environmental behavior. For example, she said, people are more likely to conserve water if their neighbors are doing so. How can social norms be harnessed to promote pro-environment behavior?

Swim reviewed “Global Warming’s Six Americas,” a recent study conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.¹ Its results indicate that 70% of Americans are “alarmed,” concerned” or “cautious” about climate change. The other 30% are “disengaged,” “doubtful,” or dismissive.” Yet despite the fact that a healthy majority perceives that climate change is a threat, most do not take appropriate action. This is evidence of what Swim calls a “belief-behavior discrepancy.” Swim used the analogy of “the rider, the elephant

and the path” to illustrate the challenge.² The rider represents forethought; the elephant the emotions. The task is for the rider to clear a path that the elephant will follow.

Swim explored behavior-change models that show how innovations are diffused in society. The “Knowledge, Attitude, Practice (KAP)” model traces acceptance of new innovations.³ Other research, including work cited by Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point*, shows how opinion leaders can spur the diffusion of new ideas.

While most innovation-diffusion research looks retroactively at past trends, Swim’s recent work with students at Penn State sought to actively foster the diffusion of pro-environment behaviors by creating opinion leaders and utilizing networks. First, she used the KAP model to promote knowledge—about the problem of climate change and about the specific behaviors needed to avert it—among student leaders, so that knowledge could then be diffused to other residents. For example, because Penn State’s electricity is supplied by coal-fired power plants, heating water is a major source of carbon dioxide emissions. Therefore, Swim worked to educate students about the importance of taking shorter showers.

Second, Swim addressed attitude and motivation. Other research Swim has conducted with students supports findings that self-transcendent, altruistic motives were more likely to spur action than was narrow self-interest. Moreover, concern for the biosphere is a more consistent predictor of willingness to engage in pro-environmental behaviors than is concern about the impact of environmental degradation on human beings. Accordingly, altruism and concern for the biosphere were emphasized among the student leaders.

Next, Swim’s students’ leaders focused on overcoming personal barriers and putting beneficial behaviors into practice. Finally, these student

1 Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., & Roser-Renouf, C. & Smith, N. (2010). Global Warming’s Six Americas, June 2010. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Project on Climate Change. <http://environment.yale.edu/climate/files/Six-AmericasJune2010.pdf>

2 Heath & Heath, 2010 [Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard](#); Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Putting Ancient Wisdom to the Test of Modern Science*, Random House, London, 2006, 297 pp. ISBN 9780434013364

3 Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Network analysis and the diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). New York: Free Press.

leaders activated their networks and worked to encourage their peers to choose less energy-intensive behaviors. The effort was successful: Student leaders met five behavioral change goals during their training and six months later 83% were still maintaining three or more goals, 87% were maintaining two or more goals, and 96% were maintaining at least one behavioral change goal. Additionally, student leaders were able to decrease the energy used in campus dormitories by about 4% during an energy competition relative to other campus dormitories.

Swim offered some lessons learned. For example: meet people where they are and build from there. Don't suggest that negative behaviors are normative by saying, for example, "no one is recycling." Nurture empathy, not just objective understanding. Don't provoke fear and guilt without offering solutions. Build community.

This research has implications for broader environmental campaigns, said Swim. It underscores, for example, the need to:

- Address individuals *and* their larger social/organizational context;
- Pick effective behavioral targets, and overcome barriers to change;
- Maintain behavior change with feedback and accountability mechanisms;
- Expand the scope of justice to include the biosphere and future generations; and
- Influence behavior through interpersonal social networks.

In the discussion of Swim's presentation, participants debated whether a focus on the non-human biosphere is really the best way to motivate pro-environment behavior. Does self-transcendence mean leaving behind an anthropocentric worldview? The environmental justice (EJ) movement, one participant noted, clearly prioritizes human beings, but emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with Mother Earth. Another veteran of the EJ movement called for "erasing the line between social justice and biophilia." We need to cultivate

empathy "not just for animals," suggested another, "but for the non-self."

In small-group discussions, participants raised several points:

- The need to emphasize that humans are an integral part of the biosphere and that the health of the biosphere is essential to human welfare;
- Blame vs. responsibility: campaigns that demonize bad actors, such as corporations, may prevent others from taking responsibility for their own contributions to environmental destruction;
- Knowledge-Attitude-Practice is not a one-way street: sometimes behavior change spurs changes in attitude and knowledge;
- The challenges of "compassion fatigue," as when photographs of animals killed in the Gulf oil spill lose their impact;
- The usefulness of the "Watch One, Do One, Teach One" strategy for promoting behavior change.

The importance of being mindful

Kirk Warren Brown, Assistant Professor of Social Psychology and Health Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, then presented evidence that mindfulness can help support sustainable consumption. Brown defined mindfulness as sustained, receptive attention to our thoughts, emotions and behavior—which enables us to perceive what is in the present moment. The opposite of mindfulness is akin to being on "autopilot," where behavior is driven by unconscious or semi-conscious desires and goals. Mindfulness can enable us to act more consciously and reflectively, rather than habitually. As such, it may help spur positive changes in environmental behavior.

The benefits of mindfulness are manifold: research shows that it is associated with better mental and physical health and improved relationships with others. It also has benefits for the larger community, Brown added.

First, mindfulness can promote a sense of sufficiency, a perception that we have "enough." In a

culture that fosters unquenchable desires for wealth and material possessions, there are often wide “aspiration gaps” between what people have and what they want. But research shows that individuals who score higher on measures of mindfulness have smaller aspiration gaps. They also tend to be less materialistic, less driven by consumer-culture pressures, more self-accepting and more attuned to deeper needs and values. Importantly, these associations hold regardless of the individuals’ financial situation.

Second, mindfulness is associated with a smaller ecological “footprint.” Brown described a national study that compared a group of self-described “voluntary simplifiers” with matched controls. Both groups were assessed for mindfulness, values orientation and environmental behavior. The survey found that greater mindfulness was linked to more intrinsic aspirations and lower environmental impact as measured by choices in transportation, diet and energy use. Moreover, more mindful individuals were happier than those less mindful.

Mindfulness can be learned: One study trained subjects in techniques to improve mindfulness. As their mindfulness increased, the subjects reported smaller financial aspiration gaps and improved well-being. This research suggests two possible interventions, said Brown:

- Mindfulness training for activists, which could improve clarity and creativity and decrease stress;
- Consciousness-raising efforts aimed at the general public, which could promote more mindful consumption.

In the ensuing discussion, participants again wrestled with the challenges of incorporating these ideas in a diverse and inequitable society. One participant said it was hard to imagine promoting this idea in marginalized, disenfranchised communities. “Are we saying to the poor, ‘we’re going to stay rich, but you stay poor and have little impact on the environment?’” Brown responded that mindfulness is not about directing people to a particular end, such as reduced consumption. Instead, “It’s about consciousness-raising. It’s about asking ‘Who are you, what are you about, what are the pressures that

bear on you, how do you want to live?’” Clarifying the answers to those questions can be very empowering, Brown said. He acknowledged that the participants in his samples were “on average, middle class,” but emphasized that mindfulness is about helping people see clearly, not about helping them acquiesce to intolerable conditions. Indeed, becoming more mindful can inspire and energize individuals to pursue more effective personal and community action to improve their situations by, for example, deciding to prioritize spending time and money on education, or becoming more socially and politically active on behalf of others in their communities who are also marginalized. Tim Kasser added that insecurity is linked to materialism, and that mindfulness can help people feel more personally secure, which may help them focus on intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, values.

In the small-group discussions that followed, participants made several observations:

- Religious groups are well positioned to promote mindfulness, which can be seen as a way of connecting with the sacred. The goal of mindfulness is central to several religious traditions, notably Buddhism. Prayer can also be a means of promoting mindfulness.
- Americans face many barriers to mindfulness, including long work hours and the proliferation of electronic media. “Screen time” has replaced real life with virtual life, especially for children and young adults.
- Mindfulness can be very helpful for activists; for example, lobbying requires a clarity of mind and purpose that mindfulness can help instill. To that end, the Center for Community Change is conducting leadership trainings for staff that broadly deal with personal development, cultivating deep listening skills, greater intentionality, and self-reflection.

Personal sustainability

While acknowledging the diversity and complexity of individuals’ world views, psychologist Thomas Joseph Doherty, Editor of the journal *Ecopsychology*,

asserted that “Everyone has an environmental identity.” In his presentation, Doherty observed that those identities are shaped by many things, including our experiences of natural settings and of environmental degradation. Doherty revisited the “Global Warming’s Six Americas” study, saying that the challenge is to reach people in each of those groups.

Environmental problems like climate change provoke complex emotional responses, said Doherty. Such problems can trigger psychological defense mechanisms that are mature and adaptive—such as altruism and affiliation—or less so—such as rationalization, apathetic withdrawal or emotional acting out. Suppression, or the conscious setting aside of distress, can be adaptive if it enables an individual to do productive work, such as intervening in a disaster situation. Polarized, partisan thinking can be a maladaptive response to stress, and it can also prove addictive.

In seeking to change environmental behaviors, said Doherty, it is important to understand the stages of behavior change. Those stages range from disinterest, to thinking, planning and ultimately making the change. We need to “meet people where they’re at,” and find points of leverage to overcome barriers to change.

Doherty observed that, in the modern world, people have many responsibilities: career, self-improvement, parenting, relationships. Green living can seem like yet another responsibility for those who already feel overburdened. “Personal sustainability,” in contrast, is a way of cultivating sustainability in all of the roles in one’s life. Activists, for example, may ask themselves whether they are living and working in a way that can be maintained for the long haul—or if they are headed for burnout.

There are many steps to personal sustainability, said Doherty. The first is to recognize and validate one’s emotions. Then, in the spirit of mindfulness, one moves to centering and acceptance. A much-neglected step of the process is nurturing and celebration: it is important to cultivate positive emotions, which widen our focus and fuel creativity, while negative emotions narrow our sense of what’s

possible. The ultimate goal is “grounded action”—what Doherty calls “self-transcendent acceptance and engagement.”

Finally, Doherty turned his attention to the particular needs of change agents, the heroic folks who are working to protect the environment. As Doherty noted, the final stage of the archetypal hero’s journey is to be a “master of two worlds.” In the case of those of us aspiring to be change agents, this entails balancing the idealized “ecotopia” we hope to construct, and the real world in which we live. Too much focus on either world can distort an activist’s vision and diminish his/her effectiveness. Being a master of two worlds requires:

- *Pluralism*: an ability to work across visions;
- *Insight*: awareness of how personal and cultural psychology informs your vision;
- *Resilience*: maintaining personal and organizational health; and
- *(Re)Visioning*: Cultivating a developmentally appropriate and life-transcendent vision.

After a self-reflection exercise in which participants considered their progress on each of those fronts, the group broke into small-group discussions. Issues raised in those discussions included:

- The pervasive problem of burnout, and the related issue of rapid turnover in environmental organizations. Several causes were identified: despair; intergenerational power struggles within organizations; extrinsic values; and the loss of restorative rituals. Some remedies were also considered, including reclaiming rituals and incorporating personal sustainability into individual workplans.
- Frustration with the environmental movement’s failure to connect with the broader public—as one participant said, “We don’t have relationships with the people we’re talking at.”

Reflections on day one

Participants began the second day of the convening with reflections on how to bring psychological insights into their work. Some offered

positive examples of current efforts: One talked about his work with the Transition Towns movement, which organizes “heart and soul” groups to support activists and prevent burnout. Participants also discussed the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, the renowned peace activist who founded an environmentally focused Buddhist retreat center seeking to cultivate mindfulness of the web of life and of human beings’ place in it.

Many participants described the pressures they face as activists: time pressures; pressure from funders to “run our organization like a business”—to focus on short-term deliverables rather than long-term goals. Another spoke of a “deep, fundamental brokenness” in the environmental movement, which “represents more foundation dollars than people.” Environmental groups are funder-driven because “members don’t pay the bills,” said another: “We’ve moved away from the idea that we represent constituencies of real people, and instead we’re doing the work based on foundation grants, so we’re tied to deliverables.”

Members of environmental groups also constrain the agenda. One participant, who works in the environmental justice movement, lamented the fact that people concerned about the environment will donate money for polar bears, but not for environmental justice, because “human beings are not charismatic megafauna.” Another participant suggested a possible remedy: campaigns that depict children amid the beauty of the natural world. Children may be perceived as more sympathetic than adults, and could also appeal to altruistic concern for future generations.

Earth Circles

Sarah Conn, an ecopsychologist and co-coordinator of PsySR’s Climate Change, Sustainability, and Psychology Program, then shared her experiences with Earth Circles, a process designed to help people move from denial and despair to positive action on climate change and other environmental issues. Earth Circles utilize the energy and power gained from connecting to nature, sharing concerns, learning together and acting in community. Drawing

from Buddhism, systems theory and the work of Joanna Macy, the Earth Circles are “ecopsychology in action,” said Conn.

At the beginning of her talk, Conn asked participants to pause and visualize a part of the Earth that is special to them – a natural place or a particular natural being whose presence nourishes them. A guiding principle of the Earth Circles process is perhaps best expressed by the Alice Walker quote, “Anything you love can be saved.”

Earth Circles initially began with a group of psychologists and activists gathered around Conn’s dining room table. It later evolved into a seven-session program, guided by a free online workbook, which provides an opportunity for small groups to get together and acknowledge their concerns and fears about the environmental, social, economic and psychological destruction that may lie ahead. In that way, Earth Circles enables participants to access energy that is repressed when feelings are not honored. The goal is to move from despair to action by transforming pain into energy and by building community. Participants start by expressing gratitude and honoring their pain, then “shift toward seeing with new eyes what is sustainable,” said Conn. Next, they focus on community building—learning about what is happening, and what needs to happen, in the communities where they live. Participants then develop action campaigns and explore effective ways to sustain themselves in order to continue as activists.

Conn then invited the group to experience the Earth Circles process by taking part in another exercise. Arranged in pairs, each person had time to share their response to the following open sentence: “To be alive in this time of global crisis, the feelings/emotions that are hard for me are” The room was very alive during this process, and participants reported afterwards that it was both difficult and moving.

In the discussion that followed, participants asked questions about the mechanics of launching an Earth Circles group. Conn explained that members of the group volunteer to be facilitators and the online curriculum provides instructions

for how to run a “self-facilitated” group. Small groups of 6-8 work best, and members are typically recruited through flyers, email and personal contacts. Questions may be sent to the Earth Circles email on the website (<http://www.earth-circles.org/content/>). Participants considered the possibility of organizing Earth Circles among the staff at environmental organizations, or encouraging physicians and psychologists to volunteer their time by facilitating groups. Conn emphasized the importance of activists taking regular time to tune into and share their experiences in this way in order to energize their work.

In small group discussions, several other thoughts were raised:

- The possibility of organizing Earth Circles in communities where people are facing severe environmental challenges (toxic waste sites, Gulf communities impacted by the oil spill);
- The challenge of recruiting busy activists—much less the general public—to participate in self-reflection;
- The need to offer volunteers and activists meaningful work and opportunities to come together as a community to celebrate and commiserate, as many are frustrated with activism that begins and ends with letter writing; and
- The need for an integrated theory of social change.

Psychology and activism: a case study

Steven Shapiro, a counseling psychologist, began his presentation with a story about the intersection of psychology and environmental activism. He told the group about Eddie, a troubled 12-year old from a blighted section of East Baltimore. Born to a drug-addicted mother, Eddie lived in a vermin-infested house devoid of furniture or central heat, on a mostly abandoned block littered with used syringes and condoms. After Eddie witnessed the grisly murder of his uncle, he went on a destructive rampage and Shapiro was called in to help.

Shapiro began to spend time with Eddie, taking him canoeing and hiking—new experiences for a

child who had never been out of the inner city. A breakthrough came during a canoe trip on a beautiful spring day. For the first time since the murder, Eddie was calm and mindful—“he was a different kid,” said Shapiro. Realizing that Eddie—and others like him—needed a connection to the natural world, Shapiro began looking for organizations in East Baltimore that could help make that happen.

Shapiro and his wife, Cindy Parker, had recently formed the Baltimore chapter of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network (BCCAN). BCCAN members sought out helpful citizens in East Baltimore, which led them to Lucille Gorham, a leading member of the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition (HEBCAC). The resulting partnership between BCCAN and HEBCAC spurred people to mentor Eddie and involve children in efforts to improve the inner-city environment; urban gardening and street-cleaning projects; and successful advocacy for tough climate legislation at the city and state levels. At least in part due to that advocacy, said Shapiro, Maryland has one of the strongest climate bills in the country. “And that’s all because of Eddie connecting us with HEBCAC.”

Eddie’s behavior improved, but there is a sad epilogue to Shapiro’s story: the East Baltimore neighborhood where this activism took place has since been cleared of its homes to build a biotechnology park.

Nonetheless, the story offers an example of applied psychology in environmental activism. The model Shapiro used—connecting with people; building relationships between individuals and organizations; and engaging community members in altruistic service to people, nature, and the political process—could easily be replicated elsewhere.

In the small-group discussions that followed, participants raised several ideas:

- The need to focus on opportunities, rather than barriers. “When you’re skiing, if you think about the trees, you’ll hit them. You need to think about the space between the trees.”

- The need for smaller, more achievable goals that can help activists feel a sense of efficacy and success.
- The need to connect with people in a meaningful way. “The environmental movement keeps asking people to do things; we’re not building relationships and helping people.”
- The challenges faced by national organizations seeking to foster engaged local activism.
- The need to connect young people—both urban and rural—with nature.
- The need to cultivate emotionally intelligent activists—“reflectivists.”

Bringing it home

In the next session, participants brainstormed ideas for bringing insights from the meeting back to their organizations and applying them in their work. Participants were encouraged to give their imagination free rein, and to resist thinking of practical barriers. Their ideas included:

- Organizing panels for the annual meetings of the Council on Foundations and/or the Environmental Grantmakers Association. The panels could highlight psychology’s contributions to environmental activism. They should include research updates and concrete examples of fundable existing or potential projects to apply these findings in actual campaigns.
- Organizing a national convocation and coalition-building effort on psychology and environmental activism. The convocation would focus on implementing identity-based campaigns and also “heal the healers,” by promoting personal sustainability among activists within environmental organizations.
- Creating a “think tank” of psychologists to work with activists on problem solving in day-to-day work.
- Building a broad coalition to address advertising as a root cause of materialism—perhaps by working to repeal the tax deduction for advertising. The campaign could depict ads as a form of toxic pollution, and show how marketing undercuts free speech by manipulating our thinking and behavior.
- Encouraging more outreach to and involvement of faith communities—perhaps by organizing Earth Circles in churches/synagogues/mosques/temples.
- Organizing a meeting “like this one in reverse”—in which environmental activists present their campaign strategies and psychologists provide feedback.
- Organizing meetings similar to this one in other parts of the country.
- Embracing the “take back your time” movement as a way of reframing environmentalism, promoting simpler living, and lowering unemployment.
- Re-conceptualizing Earth Day as a ritual that could strengthen environmental identities, and perhaps form a bridge between secular and religious communities.
- Retrofitting existing campaigns against coal plants by focusing on individual plants, and building contextual pressure through local and national media, as well as legislative and regulatory activities.
- Promoting a “Robin Hood tax” that could raise \$50 billion per year from the affluent to support climate change adaptation efforts.
- Developing a campaign centered on gratitude or hope, borrowing from “The weekend: brought to you by the labor movement” For example, a slogan might read: “Hope: brought to you by the environmental/social justice movements.”
- Promoting sharing, rather than growth, as a vision for the future.
- Launching a coordinated attack on the GDP as a measure of success: When GDP figures are announced, work with media to propose alternative measures of human well-being.
- Giving out annual/monthly “materialism awards,”—either positive or negative—modeled on the League of Conservation Voters’ Dirty Dozen, or the Golden Fleece awards of Taxpayers for Common Sense.

- Initiating non-adversarial conversations with major advertisers about accountability and responsibility. Soliciting advertisers' and ad buyers' support to end the tax deduction for ads.
- Working with small local businesses to help them reinvent themselves in sustainable ways.
- Bringing mindfulness to the broader community.
- Incorporating relationship-building and mindfulness into patients' clinical visits with physicians.
- Encouraging pediatricians to talk with parents about following the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendations for limiting screen time.

Setting priorities

Participants then reviewed the list of brainstormed ideas and identified three central themes that tied those ideas together:

- *Community building*: Engaging constituents in meaningful, mindful action on behalf of the environment—moving beyond asking volunteers to “just send an email.”
- *Creating alternatives to materialism*: Tackling social institutions—such as advertising—that cultivate materialism, and nurturing intrinsic values.
- *Building relationships with the “other”*: Moving beyond the “converted” to create effective partnerships with groups currently outside of the environmental fold.

Next, participants focused on each of these three themes, discussing concrete ways to translate them into effective campaigns.

In the discussion of *community building*, participants noted the importance of “taking the pulse” of a community—finding local partners, learning about local needs and concerns. With that understanding, organizations can invest in a community, empower its residents, and represent them in a larger sphere. To underscore the importance of this work, one participant told the story of how his organization's campaign against a coal-fired power

plant was outflanked by the power company, which “went in and built bridges to the black community, promising jobs.”

Many participants noted the difficulty of building such relationships from a Washington base, especially for single-issue groups that don't have the resources to take on all the issues identified at the community level. One observed that this model is effective for making political changes—such as shutting down nuclear power plants—but less so for long-term behavioral changes that would make those plants unnecessary. It is important to empower grassroots activists to develop a shared vision of an alternative future, said another.

The discussion of *creating alternatives to materialism* again focused on counteracting the pervasive messages of advertising. How can we help people reflect more about what they need, as opposed to the larger universe of what they want or are told by advertisers that they need? How can we build demand for environmentally-beneficial goods, such as organic food and public transportation?

Research shows that money and material goods do not bring happiness past a certain point, and that most people say they are opposed to materialism. The challenge is to provide alternatives in a culture that is predicated on “getting and spending.” Several strategies were offered: reframing less materialistic choices, such as “vintage” thrift-store clothing; mindfulness as a ‘power tool’ that cuts across conditioned responses and behaviors; a green reality TV show; promoting gratitude as an antidote to materialism. Participants also discussed taking on the “purveyors of materialism”—advertisers—by opposing ads to children and the tax subsidy for marketing.

The discussion of *building relationships with the “other”* generated strong emotions. Several participants expressed cynicism about the possibility of constructive collaboration with what they see as their opposition—for example, certain Tea Party activists who dismiss climate science or the coal and nuclear industries.

One participant stressed the need to define the

purpose of collaboration. For example, Friends of the Earth has been able to make common cause with conservative and libertarian groups to oppose subsidies to extractive industries. “It’s okay as long as we’re focused” on common goals, said the FoE staffer. It’s possible to build relationships with individuals within institutions, even if those institutions are implacably opposed to our agenda, said another. Industries are made up of people, and often there is some opportunity for dialogue—especially with workers, as opposed to owners and managers. Psychological research affirms the value of bringing together opponents to collaborate on tasks and activities related to a shared goal.

Next steps

In the last session, participants talked about how they will bring insights from the meeting into their work. Specific ideas included:

- Reporting back to colleagues in staff meetings and retreats;
- Establishing a two-way dialogue between psychologists and activists: environmental activists could visit campuses and communicate about the real-world challenges and power struggles they face; psychologists could review activists’ campaign proposals, offering insights from research and theory;
- Arranging meetings with psychologists and environmental activists as part of the next American Psychological Association meeting;
- Creating internships for college students interested in the psychology/environment intersection;
- Sharing research data on factors that influence consumer and voter behavior;
- Conducting new collaborative research that would, for example, test activists’ responses to various email appeals, in order to gain more insight about how to move volunteers toward meaningful action;
- Incorporating identity approaches into training for Transition Town volunteers;

- Developing messages on climate change that activate intrinsic values frames;
- Arranging panels on the psychology/environment interaction at annual meetings of the Council on Foundations and/or Environmental Grantmakers Association.

The meeting ended—appropriately enough—with expressions of gratitude: to FoE and PsySR for hosting the meeting; to Colleen Cordes and Ben Schreiber for organizing it; to Tim Kasser for facilitating; to the David and Carol Myers Foundation for financial support; and to all the participants for engaging in open dialogue.

RESOURCES:

From Steven Shapiro—

Psychologists for Social Responsibility's climate change toolkit and related information:

<http://www.psysr.org/about/programs/climate/> and <http://www.psysr-climatetoolkit.org/>

From Kirk Warren Brown—

Duane Elgin (1981/1993). *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (Revised edition).

<http://www.amazon.com/Voluntary-Simplicity-Outwardly-Inwardly-Revised/dp/0688121195>

Jon Kabat Zinn (2005). *Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World*.

<http://www.amazon.com/Coming-Our-Senses-Ourselves-Mindfulness/dp/0786867566>

From Sarah Conn—

Earth Circles: <http://www.earth-circles.org/content/>

Macy, Joanna; Brown, Molly Young (1998). *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*. Stony Creek, CT: New Society Publishers. Current work: <http://www.joannamacy.net/>

Peavey, Fran. *Strategic Questioning: An Experiment in Communication of the Second Kind*. Online at <http://www.jobletter.org.nz/vivian/strata97.htm>

Conn, L. K., Conn, S. A. (2008). "As inside, so outside: Restoration of inner and outer landscapes," with L. K. Conn, in *Healing Natures, Repairing Relationships: New Voices on Restoring Ecological Spaces and Consciousness*. Ed. by R. L. France. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

From Thomas Joseph Doherty—

Koger, S. & Winter, D. D. (2009). *The psychology of environmental problems* (3rd. ed.). Taylor & Francis

American Psychological Association (2009). Report of the Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change. <http://www.apa.org/science/about/publications/climate-change.aspx>

Hulme, M. (2009). *Why we disagree about climate change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (2009). *Global Warming's Six Americas 2009: An Audience Segmentation Analysis*. <http://environment.yale.edu/climate/publications/global-warmings-six-americas-2009/>

Center for Research on Environmental Decisions. (2009). *The Psychology of Climate Change Communication*. New York. <http://www.cred.columbia.edu/guide/>

Norgaard, K. M. (2009). Cognitive and behavioral challenges in responding to climate change. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4940. <http://ideas.repec.org/p/>

<wbk/wbrwps/4940.html>

Agyeman, J., Bullard, R. & Evans, (2003). *Just Sustainabilities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Nicholsen, S. W. (2002). *The love of nature and the end of the world*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

From Tim Kasser—

Brown, K. W., & Kasser, T. (2005). "Are psychological and ecological well-being compatible? The role of values, mindfulness, and lifestyle." *Social Indicators Research*, 74, 349-368.

Crompton, T., & Kasser, T. (2010). "Human Identity: A Missing Link in Environmental Campaigning." *Environment Magazine*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 23-33. Available online at: <http://www.environmentmagazine.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/July-August%202010/human-identity-full.html>

Crompton, T., & Kasser, T. (2009). *Meeting environmental challenges: The role of human identity*. Godalming, UK: WWF-UK/Green Books. The book can be downloaded for free at <http://www.wwf.org.uk/change>. Both authors also contribute to a discussion forum at <http://www.identitycampaigning.org>, where interested readers can join debate on these issues.

Schultz, P. W., Gouveia, V. V., Cameron, L. D., Tankha, G., Schmuck, P., & Franek, M.

(2005). Values and their relationship to environmental concern and conservation behavior. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, 36, 457-475.

From Janet Swim—

For more information on attitude-behavior relations and behavioral change models: <http://www.apa.org/science/about/publications/climate-change.aspx>

http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/Assets/Behaviour_change_reference_report_tcm6-9697.pdf

Or, a shorter version:

http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/Assets/Behaviour%20change_practical_guide_tcm6-9696.pdf

Other resources:

Youth Mentoring—

Wilderness Awareness School

http://www.wildernessawareness.org/adult/workshops_coyote_mentoring.html

Books:

Jon Young, et. al., *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*

http://store.wildernessawareness.org/merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=WAS&Product_Code=P1550&Category_Code=3



WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Kyle Ash, Greenpeace

Erik Assadourian, The Worldwatch Institute

Nick Berning, Erich Pica, and Ben Schreiber: Friends of the Earth

Michele Boyd and Kristen Welker-Hood: Physicians for Social Responsibility

Kirk Brown, Virginia Commonwealth University

Larry Chang, Ecolocity DC – Transition Towns Movement

Sarah Conn, Earth Circles and PsySR

Colleen Cordes and Franziska Suhartono, PsySR Staff

Tom Crompton (remotely), World Wildlife Fund-UK

Thomas Joseph Doherty, Ecopsychology journal and Sustainable Self

Jim Floyd, The Community College of Baltimore County and Friends of the Earth

Kari Fulton, Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative

Lilian Molina, Energy Action Coalition

Tim Kasser, Knox College and PsySR

Laurie Mazur, Rapporteur

Wendy Philleo, Center for a New American Dream

Steve Shapiro, Johns Hopkins Medical Institute and PsySR

Irv Sheffey, Sierra Club's Environmental Justice & Community Partnerships

Pamela Sparr, Church World Service and United Methodist Women

Janet Swim, Pennsylvania State University

Sara Valenzuela, Earth Day Network



Inspiring Action:

The Role of Psychology In Environmental Campaigning and Activism

Summary Report of a Workshop
Washington, D.C.



*Psychologists
for Social Responsibility*

258 Harvard Street, PMB 282
Brookline, MA 02446
Phone: 202-543-5347
Fax: 617-274-8048
info@psysr.org
www.psysr.org



1100 15th St NW, 11th Floor
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: 202-783-7400
Fax: 202-783-0444
foe@foe.org
www.foe.org