

Applying a transactional approach to the threat of climate change

Joseph P Reser

Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, j.reser@griffith.edu.au

The more typical encounters between individuals and 'climate change' are largely indirect, virtual and vicarious, reflecting engagement with and 'exposure' to a complex *information* environment and social representations of the phenomenon, threat and attributed consequences. The phenomenon which is represented is arguably more of a complex risk domain than an attitudinal object, more threat than already discernable and unfolding biophysical environmental impacts, more changing environmental condition and ongoing environmental stressor than specific or acute events or manifestations. Individual responses to and engagement with 'climate change' encompass risk perception and appraisal, sense making, environmental concern, possible psychological distress, and psychological coping and adaptation responses, as well as overt behaviours and adjustments.

Taking a *transactional* approach within the context of environmental psychology allows for a more environmental and ecological framing of those psychological considerations neglected by but crucial to climate change science conceptualisations of climate change *adaptation* and *vulnerability*. Such a transactional approach can also better accommodate the need for integrated 'environmental stress' and 'stress and coping' framings of *psychological adaptation* to the threat of climate change. The poster also questions the adequacy and cross-disciplinary currency of existing environmental, social, and health psychology models and frameworks for addressing the phenomenon and the psychological and social impacts of climate change. In addressing climate change the poster underscores the more general challenge for environmental psychology in addressing contemporary information and communication technologies and

'environments', and how such information environments are transforming individual perceptions of, transactions with, and understandings of 'real' environmental changes, threats, places, and environments. In-depth national survey findings from Australia are presented and examined to empirically ground these questions and transactional considerations, and to suggest a way forward in the documentation and monitoring of arguably critical psychological changes and processes taking place in the human landscape, in response to depicted changes and impacts taking place in virtually represented physical landscapes.

The national survey addressed public risk perceptions, understandings and responses to the threat of climate change and natural disasters in Australia, and involved a sample of 3096 respondents geographically stratified by region, population centres, and climate change and natural disaster exposure. The on-line survey protocol included a number of psychological scales (e.g., objective knowledge, belief, prior experience, self-efficacy, climate change concern, climate change distress, behavioural engagement), and multiple closed and open individual items, including reference to direct versus indirect exposure and experience of extreme weather events and environmental changes. A longitudinal within-subjects design was employed, allowing for documentation of intra-individual, psychological adaptation, and behavioural change over time. Research findings evidenced appreciable psychological impacts and adaptations, reflected in high levels of risk appraisal, concern, and distress, and very substantial incidence of direct exposure to and experience of natural disasters and perceived climate change impacts, reflecting a dramatic decade of extreme weather events in Australia.

References

- Gifford, R., Steg, L. & Reser, J.P. (2011) Environmental psychology. In P. Martin, F. Cheung, M. Kyrios, L. Littlefield, M. Knowles, B. Overmier, & J.M. Prieto (Eds.), *The IAAP handbook of applied psychology* (pp 440-470). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.
- Reser, J.P., Morrissey, S.A. & Ellul, M. (2011) The threat of climate change: Psychological response, adaptation, and impacts. In I. Weissbecker (2011) (Ed) *Climate change and human well being*. International and Cultural Psychology Series. New York: Springer Publications.
- Reser, J.P. & Swim, J. (2011) Adapting to and coping with the threat and impacts of climate change. *American Psychologist*, 66 (4) 277-289.