The Perils of Explaining Climate Inaction in Terms of Psychological Barriers

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ABSTRACT

As awareness of climate change and its consequences increases, many have asked, “Why aren’t people taking action?” Some psychologists have provided an answer that we describe as a “psychological barriers explanation” (PBE). The PBE suggests that human nature is limited in ways that create psychological barriers to taking action on climate change. Taking a critical social psychology approach (e.g., Adams, 2014), we offer a critique of the PBE, arguing that locating the causes of inaction at the psychological level promotes a misrepresentation of human nature as static and disconnected from context. Barriers to environmental action certainly exist, and most if not all involve psychological processes. However, locating the barrier itself at the psychological level ignores the complex interplay between psychological tendencies, social relations, and social structures. We consider the ways in which psychological responses to climate change are contingent upon social-structural context, with particular attention to the ways unequal distributions of power have allowed elites to block climate action, in part by using their power to influence societal beliefs and norms. In conclusion, we suggest that psychologists interested in climate (in)action expand their scope beyond individual consumer behaviours to include psychological questions that challenge existing power relations and raise the possibility of transformative social change.

Keywords: Climate change; psychological barriers; critical social psychology; pro-environmental behaviour; power
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Rising sea levels, increasingly extreme natural disasters, the loss of biodiversity, food shortages and an ever-growing amount of human displacement are but a few of the reasons that climate change presents the most significant challenge humanity has ever faced (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, 2018). For at least 30 years, scientists have agreed that the global climate is warming as the result of human activity, specifically caused by the drastic rise in greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels (Cook et al., 2016). Public opinion data indicate that a majority of people around the world consider climate change a very serious problem (Stokes, Wilke, & Carle, 2015). Despite this concern and increasingly urgent calls from scientists (IPCC, 2018), human action to mitigate climate change remains woefully inadequate. Indeed, since the scientific consensus on climate change emerged in the late 1980s, humans have only made the problem worse by emitting greenhouse gasses (GHGs) at higher and higher rates (International Energy Agency, 2019).

Why has the human response to climate change been so inadequate? In answer to this question, some psychologists have suggested that climate inaction can be explained largely by the limitations of humans’ psychological nature which make us ill-suited for responding to the threat of climate change (e.g., Gifford, 2011; Marshall, 2015; Ross et al., 2016; Sörqvist, & Langeborg, 2019). We refer to this perspective as the “psychological barriers explanation” (PBE) for climate inaction. The best-known example of the PBE is Gifford’s (2011) “Dragons of Inaction” paper in American Psychologist that lists 29 psychological barriers to climate change action, including cognitive limitations, social norms, and system justification motives. A similar listing of psychological barriers appeared in the 2009 report by the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change.
Psychologists have an important role to play by providing insight into the psychological processes related to climate change inaction. However, we argue that attempts to explain inaction by locating barriers at the psychological level have serious downsides. First and most obviously, the PBE relies on a one-sided picture of human nature, delineating lists of psychological barriers without similar attention to aspects of human psychology that might facilitate action. Human psychology is complex and multifaceted; if there are such things as psychological barriers to climate action, there must be psychological facilitators as well. A similar one-sidedness can be seen in how many processes that have been described as barriers could easily be reframed in more positive terms. For example, lack of place attachment, lack of efficacy, and ignorance have been described as psychological barriers to climate action (Gifford, 2011), when one could just as accurately say that place attachment, efficacy, and knowledge would facilitate action.

Thus, the PBE relies at least partly on a one-sided framing of psychological processes; however, we are not arguing that psychologists must simply balance attention to barriers with more attention to facilitators. Rather, we take a critical social psychology approach (Adams, 2014; Reicher, 1997, 2004) to argue that psychological processes that deter climate action are too frequently abstracted from the larger social context, giving the impression that inaction is due to immutable aspects of human psychology and obscuring the potential for transformative social change. In adopting this perspective, we reject an approach to psychology which “considers reality as no more than the given” and “consecrat[es] the existing order as natural” (Martin-Baró, 1994, p. 21). We attempt to look beyond the ostensibly inherent aspects of human psychology that might deter action on climate change, and instead consider psychological responses to climate change within a broader social-structural context. Of course, no psychologist would
argue that psychological barriers can explain *all* climate inaction. However, even when existing work on psychological barriers acknowledges structure or context, it nonetheless tends to construct a narrative that situates the problem of climate inaction as originating primarily in human psychology.

Our critique concerns what we see as a growing trend in the psychological study of climate change, and, where noted, is also relevant to limitations that exist more broadly in psychology. Nonetheless, we illustrate our general critique through a specific focus on Gifford (2011). We focus on this work because of its reputation and influence. Gifford (2011) has arguably done more than any other academic work to promote the PBE in both academia and in popular discourse. Gifford’s (2011) article has been cited more than 1000 times (Google Scholar, October 29, 2019), and been a subject of popular media, with headlines like “Global warming a tough sell for the human psyche” (Ritter, 2009), “How your brain stops you from taking climate change seriously” (Akpan, 2019), and “We are all climate change idiots” (Gardiner, 2012). Such headlines illustrate how the PBE can take on more simplified and problematic forms when it becomes part of popular discourse. However, our concern is with the origins of such discourses in the writings of academic psychologists, which, while more nuanced, nonetheless construct a narrative that human psychology is to blame for climate inaction.

**The Social Context of Climate Change (In)Action**

Critical social psychology rejects individualized, atomized conceptions of psychology and human behavior, emphasizing instead the fundamentally contextual and social nature of psychological processes (Adams, 2014; Reicher, 1997, 2004). A critical approach assumes that social reality is the product of the narratives which pattern human interactions in specific historical, structural and social contexts; thus, no psychological processes exist exclusively “in
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the mind” (Adams, 2014; Reicher, 1997). Approaches to psychological barriers do not deny the existence of contextual effects, and sometimes even refer to them (Gifford, 2011); however, the tendency in such work is to treat barriers as “normal” aspects of human psychology, rather than as emerging within a social context. Thus, while barriers to climate action do exist, we argue that it is problematic to locate those barriers narrowly at the level of psychology, and we suggest that calling them “psychological barriers” is misleading if not inaccurate.

Some psychological processes described as barriers are obviously dependent on context as to whether they deter or promote action. For example, anti-environmental social norms can act as barriers to action and thus social norms have been listed as a psychological barrier to action (Gifford, 2011). However, norms can facilitate action when they are pro-environmental (Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Thus, to the extent that norms do act as barriers, this does not result from something inherent to human psychology, but rather a complex social process that led to the development of anti-environmental norms associated with a particular identity in a particular context (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Gifford (2011) acknowledges that norms can promote climate action. However, given that norms are not in themselves a barrier to action, we question the choice to include norms in a list of barriers when they could just as easily fit on a list of facilitators, as well as the choice to locate this “barrier” at the psychological level rather than the social-contextual level. Describing norms as a barrier to climate action appears reasonable in the contemporary context in which norms are not very pro-environmental. However, such an approach runs the risk of what liberation psychologist Ignacio Martin-Baró referred to as the “ideologization of reality” (1994, p.21), using psychological explanations to describe only what is, deflecting attention away from what could be (see also, Haslam & Reicher, 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).
The most compelling candidates for psychological barriers to climate action are those that would appear to be fixed into human psychology as part of our evolutionary endowment (e.g., Sörqvist, & Langeborg, 2019). This emphasis can be seen in the title of Marshall’s (2015) book, *Don’t even think about it: Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change*. One such proposed barrier is the “ancient brain”, the idea that the human brain, which has not evolved much in thousands of years, is concerned with protecting one’s immediate relations from immediate dangers—but not threats that are global, affect distant others, and unfold over long periods of time (Gifford, 2011). To be clear, psychologists who promote the idea that the ancient brain acts as a barrier do not claim that such tendencies cannot be overcome (e.g., Gifford, 2011), but such explanations tend to ignore how this might happen. Humans are certainly capable of concerning themselves with threats that are distant in time and space, including those that affect other people. Simple reminders to think of one’s legacy lead people to be more concerned about climate change and willing to act (Zaval, Markowitz, & Weber, 2015). Responding quickly and adequately to threats that are not immediate nor local is difficult, but humans’ ability to rise to this challenge depends not on some inherent inability to think and act long-term, but on whether humans can successfully create contexts that enable people to think carefully about the future, and to care about others who are distant in time or space. We (humans) therefore might fruitfully conceptualize this as a social barrier, not a psychological one, and ask how and why we have created contexts that encourage us to effectively ignore the future. Whatever evolved human tendencies people have, the degree to which they manifest and their implications for climate action are dependent on social context (see Norgaard, 2011 on how perceptions of time and space are influenced by social processes).
Power, Inequality, and the Social-structural Context of (In)Action

Critical social psychology acknowledges the existence of systemic injustice and inequality and recognizes that elite individuals, groups and institutions have the power to create structures, practices, laws and discourses that serve their interests (Adams, 2014). The ways in which elites shape social systems to work in their favour are often difficult for people (including psychologists) to see because the system shapes so much of human life that it appears normal (see Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). Thus, critical social psychology aims to deconstruct and denaturalize the taken-for-granted aspects of human life and psychology that make up the unequal status quo, what Martin-Baró (1994) called the “collective lies” told about people and politics.

In contrast, the PBE, like much of mainstream psychology, tends to obfuscate issues of power, inequality, and social structure. Proponents of the PBE do acknowledge “structural barriers”, but they tend to be treated as something separate from the psychological processes, with little consideration for how social-structural realities might inform the psychological analysis (Gifford, 2011, p. 290). Understandably, psychologists might be tempted to leave such issues for sociologists and economists. However, treating those issues as separate from psychology denies the reality that psychological processes exist within these larger structures and intergroup relationships, and both shape and are shaped by them (see also Bloodhart & Swim, in press). We argue that decoupling psychological barriers to climate action from the larger systems in which these psychological processes take place constitutes a form of psychological reductionism in which explanations for human behaviour primarily consider individual mental states (Martin-Baró, 1994).
By explaining inaction in terms of “normal” psychological processes, the PBE implies that the lack of human action on climate change is the result of our species’ psychological characteristics. Such a characterization obscures the group-based nature of responses to climate change and suggests that responsibility for inaction rests with humans in general, with little regard for their position or power in society. The species as a whole is clearly not doing enough, but many people and groups are working extremely hard to mitigate climate change. However, these people, including environmental organizations, Indigenous communities, and youth climate activists, tend to not be afforded much power in our societies and institutions. Others, particularly those in positions of power, such as fossil fuel industry barons (Leonard, 2019), are taking action on climate in an opposing way by actively trying to maintain the status quo that profits them, despite environmental and human costs. Obviously, there are many people in between, but to describe the contemporary context as one of inadequate human action is an oversimplification. Relatedly, the PBE ignores the fact that in most places around the globe, institutions with the power to mitigate climate change on a large scale have failed to act, even when the masses might be supportive of climate change mitigation policies and social changes (Stokes et al., 2015). Thus, the PBE neglects to raise questions about the failure of democratic institutions, how power is distributed, and why people in positions of power choose to use that power in particular ways (Fuchs et al., 2016).

As an example of how power can be obscured by too narrow a focus on individual psychological processes, consider how Gifford (2011) describes neoliberal ideology as a psychological barrier. Neoliberalism as an ideology values individual freedom and individual responsibility over equality and collective responsibility, and as an economic agenda advocates for free, competitive markets with minimal government interference (Bettache & Chiu, 2019).
We agree that endorsing neoliberalism deters action on climate change (Heath & Gifford, 2006). However, neoliberal ideology is not merely a product of psychological processes that arise spontaneously among individual humans. Neoliberalism has been constructed and promoted by elites to justify the creation of laws, policies and structures that serve their economic interests (Klein, 2007). More problematic than the psychological effects of neoliberal ideology are the effects of neoliberal policy, which has gutted environmental regulation and contributed to dramatic increases in economic inequality around the globe (World Inequality Lab, 2018). Neoliberal capitalism assumes that continuous economic growth is both possible and necessary; indeed, capitalism as currently structured does require economic growth to function. Such an assumption runs counter to the reality of a finite planet and contributes in a significant way to rising levels of GHGs (Klein, 2014; Magdoff & Foster, 2011). Nonetheless, the “winners” in this economic system have an interest in keeping the system as it is (Boyce, 2008; Klein, 2014; Magdoff & Foster, 2011).

Neoliberal capitalism allows and encourages the accumulation of wealth in the hands of relatively few individuals and corporations. Within this system, fossil fuel companies in particular have accumulated great economic and political power, and have persistently used that power to undermine attempts to limit GHG emissions (Hoggan & Littlemore, 2009; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). For example, Exxon’s own research provided evidence of human-caused climate change 40 years ago. Rather than sharing this critical knowledge with the world, Exxon executives deliberately misinformed the public and policy makers on the existence and causes of climate change (Supran & Oreskes, 2017). Thus, while neoliberalism is a barrier that has psychological dimensions, it seems erroneous to locate the barrier at the psychological level but not equally at the social, political or economic level.
Examining psychological processes without some reference to how they might be influenced by discourses, structures, and practices created by elites presents an account of psychological processes that is oversimplified and convenient for elites (Maniates, 2001; Shove, 2010). As another example, a popular narrative in the psychology of climate change is that the existential, ideological, or system threats posed by climate change lead people toward skepticism and denial (e.g., Feinberg & Willer, 2011; Gifford, 2011; Ross et al., 2016; Stoknes, 2015). However, such perspectives are misleading if they ignore the money and effort that fossil fuel companies have expended on seeding doubt about climate change (Hoggan & Littlemore, 2009; Klein, 2014; Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Supran & Oreskes, 2017). Proponents of the PBE are not unaware of the link between capitalism and the natural environment. Indeed, Gifford (2011) does something important and unusual in psychology by acknowledging capitalism, stating that “some aspects of [capitalism] …have led to the devastation of fisheries, forests, and landscapes around the world” (p. 293). However, we would argue that Gifford (2011) and other examples of the PBE have not fully reconciled the implications of capitalism with their psychological analysis (but see Ross et al., 2016, for a barriers approach that makes an excellent attempt).

**The PBE Ignores the Possibility of Social Change**

As a critical perspective tends to focus attention on the ways in which elites have blocked action on climate change, it also suggests that addressing climate change requires political action of the sort that will alter power relations. It is difficult to imagine successful climate mitigation without some meaningful and widespread social change (Webb, 2012). In contrast, the PBE, like most work on the psychology of climate change, is mostly confined to considering the actions of individual consumers, echoing the neoliberal idea that humans participate in shaping society mostly through their consumer choices (Maniates, 2010). Of course, individual consumer
behaviours do matter, and will need to change if we are to mitigate climate change. However, the ability of individual consumption choices to shape production is extremely limited (Uzzell & Räthzel, 2009), and we are highly skeptical that such consumer choices can generate the large-scale social transformations needed to mitigate climate change. People can and do attempt to influence policy-makers and governments through petitions, letters, voting, protests and demonstrations (Gunster, 2017). Citizens and communities also engage in resistance to environmentally-destructive projects and unethical practices through courts, civil disobedience, and direct action (Grant & Vasi, 2016).

By focussing heavily on individual consumption, and neglecting political and collective behaviour, much of the psychology of sustainability implicitly seeks to answer the question, “How do we motivate individual people to consume more sustainably within the existing social structure?” This focus reflects a larger shift toward what Maniates (2001) calls the “individualization of responsibility” for environmental problems. He writes, “When responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society” (p. 33). In part, this focus on individual responsibility reflects the influence of neoliberalism, which included “the rhetoric of returning power and responsibility to the individual, while simultaneously curtailing the role of government in an economy that was increasingly characterized as innately self-regulating and efficient. Within this context, responsibility for creating and fixing environmental problems was radically reassigned, from government, corporations… to individual consumers and their decisions in the marketplace” (Maniates, 2001, p. 39; see also Becker & Sparks, 2018).

Psychologists have opportunities to challenge the individualization of responsibility by studying
predictors of engagement in social protest and other forms of activism (e.g., Bell & Braun, 2010; Farrell, 2013; McFarlane & Hunt, 2006; Schmitt, Mackay, Droogendyk & Payne, 2019), and by doing so, remind people that such actions are possible and important avenues of climate change mitigation. Of course, individual consumption remains an important site for research and intervention, but we argue it is best understood within a context of unequal power relations (see Bloodhart & Swim, in press, for an analysis of gender, power, and sustainable consumption).

**Accountability**

Critical social psychology assumes that we, as psychologists, must recognize that our science and the narratives we generate are part of the co-construction of reality. As stated by Reicher (2004), “psychological theory is not only a commentary on the world and how we behave within it; it is also part of our world and serves to shape our own self-understandings” (p. 942). When psychological theory constructs human nature as laden with deficits that limit our ability to take action on climate change, and likewise fails to consider the social and structural context in which human psychology operates, we run the risk of eliminating the possibility of social change by pushing it beyond the human imagination (Reicher, 2004). Indeed, people are more likely to engage in collective action the more they believe that the status quo is changeable and illegitimate, and when they can imagine how the world could be different (Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The PBE, on the other hand, risks undermining environmental collective action by making the environmental status quo seem like a natural consequence of human psychology. Alternative worlds seem less possible if the current reality is the result of deficits in human nature.

In a context of an increasingly dire need for climate change action on multiple levels, it is worth interrogating psychology’s explanations for inaction, particularly those that appear to
“catch on” in public discourse. When we, as psychologists, make theoretical or empirical arguments for why people do or do not take action to mitigate climate change, we are acting as agents in the co-construction of the human response to climate change. Thus, as psychologists we need to hold ourselves accountable for the narratives we generate and their broader implications for social justice, social change, and sustainability. By delineating numerous barriers to action, and describing them as psychological, the PBE might cause people to believe that taking adequate action on climate change is beyond the realm of human capability. Such a pessimistic outlook might deter people from acting by reducing feelings of efficacy (Hamann & Reese, in press), or by allowing them to rationalize their own inaction (Ginn & Lickel, in press). If people accept the PBE and its narrow view of human nature, they may paradoxically become less likely to take action on climate change.

This is not to say that psychological limitations do not exist, but to use them to explain inaction fails to point the finger at powerful groups who need to be held accountable (see also Kent, 2009). In the words of 16-year old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, as she spoke to the global elite at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland,

Some people say that the climate crisis is something that we all have created. But that is just another convenient lie, because if everyone is guilty, then no one is to blame. And someone is to blame. Some people—some companies and some decision-makers in particular—have known exactly what priceless values they are sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money (Kottasova & Mackintosh, 2019).

By ignoring the ways in which many barriers to action are cultivated by powerful groups and individuals, the PBE fails to raise the possibility that in order to respond adequately to climate change, humans have to change how political and economic power is distributed.
Lowering our expectations at the psychological level and not raising possibilities for change at the social level leaves people with little reason to feel hopeful. To be clear, we are not suggesting that people are mere pawns of the powerful; in contrast, we hope to illuminate issues of power and inequality so that people might effectively resist being such pawns.

**Implications for Psychological Research and Theorizing on Climate Change (In)Action**

Certainly, there are many deterrents to humans taking appropriate action to mitigate climate change, and those deterrents all intersect with psychological processes in ways that deserve attention from psychologists. Thus, we summarize our arguments as recommendations for how future work on the psychological dimensions of climate change (in)action might advance most fruitfully. First and foremost, researchers should avoid implying that humans have failed to respond adequately to climate change because of something fundamental and inherent in our psychology. Instead we recommend that the psychological dimensions of “barriers” be viewed in a larger context. We suggest researchers use caution when labeling barriers to action as “psychological” in nature, as doing so is an oversimplification (we would make a similar argument for “psychological” facilitators; see Shove, 2010). Researchers should not let psychological processes related to climate (in)action overshadow social and political factors, and particularly the efforts of elites to block meaningful climate change mitigation. Psychologists who care about promoting sustainability should pay theoretical and empirical attention to the ways in which elites use their power to deter action on climate change, and the ways in which those power structures can be changed through collective action. To that end, we suggest psychologists move beyond the current focus on individual consumption and add to a growing body of research on environmental social movements, political participation, and social change (e.g., Bell & Braun, 2010; Farrell, 2013; Kurz & Prosser, in press; McFarlane & Hunt, 2006;
Schmitt et al., 2019). Psychologists could further contribute by examining processes of leadership and social influence that can change environmental norms (e.g., Reicher & Haslam, 2012), the ways in which elites are able to mobilize action or inaction, as well as how others may resist the influence of elites.

We will not avoid climate disaster by limiting ourselves to individualized actions that work within the political and economic systems that made catastrophic climate change possible in the first place. We need to consider alternative systems that address the problems with the system that is currently failing us (Klein, 2014; Haslam & Reicher, 2012). In the words of environmental philosopher Susan Griffin (1996) “. . . every important social movement reconfigures the world in the imagination. What was obscure comes forward, lies are revealed, memory shaken, new delineations drawn over the old maps: it is from this new way of seeing the present that hope emerges for the future . . . Let us begin to imagine the worlds we would like to inhabit, the long lives we will share, and the many futures in our hands” (p. 67).
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