**The systemic crisis of climate change: clinical and political reflections.**

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**Abstract:**

The ecological threats posed by climate change constitute the outstanding social, political and moral challenge of the 21st century. It is no longer in doubt that we are changing our world in significant ways and the consequences will be far-reaching, calling our very survival as a species into question. What role, if any, has systemic psychotherapy in responding to such a scenario? In an attempt to answer this question this paper gives an overview of the scale of the challenge faced by humanity and drawing on some foundational thinkers in the systemic tradition, argues for those with a systemic perspective to show leadership in formulating a radical response at both clinical and societal levels.

**The crisis**

The evidence of climate science suggests that within a generation the world will have been changed almost beyond recognition. The rapid melting of Arctic ice in recent years is but one very dramatic index of the escalating pace of change that is occurring at a planetary level. This has happened at a much faster rate than predicted by the collective wisdom of the world's climate scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (1). The oceans are absorbing the steadily increasing temperature but they cannot do so indefinitely. The incidence of extreme weather events continues to escalate and the consequences will be increasing social disruption, economic collapse, significant loss of life, species extinction and mass migration.

The ecological crisis we are facing is unprecedented. It is overwhelming and deeply alarming. It is about discontinuous, irreversible, planetary change. The understandable reflex is to ignore, challenge, deny or dismiss it. A recent report of the International Energy Agency says that if we have five more years of escalating carbon emissions we will bypass the possibility of staying within the threshold of a 2OC increase in average global temperature which is regarded as essential to maintain the ecosystems on which we depend (2).

All previous threats – plague, famine, war (including nuclear) - allowed for the possibility of continuity of the species even if there was massive attrition. This threat goes much further. James Lovelock, a British scientist, has predicted a huge reduction of the human population before the end of this century perhaps to one billion from the current seven billion (3). Those surviving will be in a largely ‘unlivable world’ - a phrase I have taken from Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland (and currently UN Special Envoy on Climate). Lovelock is best known for his theory of the earth as a self-regulating, living system. This hypothesis, which he named Gaia after the Greek goddess, has now become one of the foundations of much contemporary climate science.

My intent is not to be alarmist for its own sake or to spread panic. But such is the scale of the potential catastrophe that threatens many of our species and others that there is a moral imperative to declare the truth and not to soften the blow. Panic may be regarded as an appropriate psychological response to the factual situation.

At the same time I have a deep confidence and belief in the creativeness and resilience of humankind. The capacities to respond to the emerging ecological threats are there - both in terms of technology (although that will not be a panacea) but also in terms of learning to live with less and treading more lightly on the planet and its ecosystems. However the scale of the adjustment required in lifestyles and consumption has previously occurred only in wartime or in response to a major calamity. Is this threat equivalent to wartime? Not in the public mind but in other respects, perhaps. The onslaught on our essential ecosystems is just as fierce as if we had deliberately decided on ecocide. The rates of deforestation, soil erosion, resource depletion, water wastage, glacial retreat, fossil fuel extraction and carbon emissions are continuing to escalate in spite of the accumulated scientific knowledge telling us that we are severely compromising the prospects for future generations.

This paper is addressed primarily to my colleague systemic psychotherapists. This modality of therapy is my professional home and I am pleased to have played some part in its development. We share many values with the other psychotherapies and health disciplines - i.e. seeking the reduction of human suffering, physical and mental, the enhancement of human well-being and the maximising of the potential of all, adults and children. Many of us chose to enter our professions precisely because of these principles and aspirations. A commitment to increasing health, happiness and well-being or reducing their opposites motivated us to undertake extensive and demanding training.

How do we now equate those initial impulses with the news that all that we take for granted is under threat, that we are part of an extinction process which is well advanced and the time available to redress the harm is reducing rapidly (4). At what level of risk do we as professionals have to act - collectively or individually? What do our codes of ethics have to say about this? Fundamentally as therapists we are engaged in professions and practices that prioritise and value human well-being and work to restore it where it is in distress or gone awry. Much has now gone awry in the ecosystems that sustain us:

* The oceans are overfished to dangerous levels where mass extinctions are predicted (5);
* The rate of global carbon emissions continues to rise annually;
* There is little prospect of binding international agreement to halt this escalation;
* The world's poor seek the lifestyles and commodities we, the wealthy, take for granted;
* The rate of extreme weather events with devastating impacts has increased dramatically.

The scale of denial of these facts at all levels is staggering, the official and political inertia frightening. The belief of some who have studied the science and have the training to read it is that collapse of all the principal systems which sustain us – economic, energy, food, transport and IT is an inevitability (6-10). The only uncertainty is when.

Given a potential risk of this scale what does this oblige us to do – either as citizens or as health care professionals? If, in our practice, we encountered an assessment of risk where extensive harm appeared inevitable what would we do? There would be an obligation to report and to act. I am now making such a report. I am obliged to report to you that the threat of massive loss of life and suffering has been identified and action is required. In this scenario we are both perpetrators and victims - to varying degrees.

If not immediately a state of emergency, it is at the threshold of one. Our children and theirs are at profound risk of serious injury and death and their life chances will be hugely circumscribed by the actions we are now taking and perhaps, more significantly, by the ones we fail to take.

**The legacy of Bateson**

The systemic perspective is central to understanding the dynamics of climate and the delicate balances that have been destabilised by human activity - predominantly wealthy Western humans.

Gregory Bateson, ecologist and intellectual guru of systemic therapy, spoke of the circularity in all living systems and the critical balance between variables in an ecosystem (10, 11). He highlighted that there are optimal values of most variables in a given ecosystem. If those values are exceeded the system's survival is in jeopardy. Oxygen is a very good example: if the proportion of oxygen in the air we breathe increases by quite a small amount we are poisoned. CO2 is another. Human population is another. We are disturbing the mix of variables - chemical and biological - that have sustained life on this planet in its present forms for millions of years and have allowed the development of civilisation over the past ten millennia. We are doing this both because there are so many of us but primarily because some of us are consuming resources and generating carbon emissions at levels never before experienced.

The collective and conservative scientific consensus as expressed in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports (1) is that the increase in global temperature is due to human intervention - anthropogenic global warming. Much of this is irreversible and of delayed effect so we and our children will live in an increasingly warmer world whatever we do.

There are now many texts (3, 6-10) detailing the consequences of various possible levels of warming - of increasing levels of disruption to lifestyles, habitats and food production resulting in significant population migration as well an escalating rate of species loss. At the upper levels of 3O-6OC of average warming the scenarios are catastrophic for many parts of the world and call into question the continued functioning of civilised society as we know it. There is widespread agreement that we must keep average warming below a threshold of 2OC to avoid such consequences.

Bateson admonished us forty years ago that ‘the unit of survival is *organism* plus *environment’ . . .* ‘we are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself.' (11, p. 483).He also spoke eloquently and frequently of the ‘pattern which connects’ by which he meant the endless tapestry of interweaving ecosystems from the micro to the macro of the Earth itself that collectively constitute and sustain life. The pattern which connects living systems is currently being torn apart - perhaps irreversibly. We are on the cusp of an environmental catastrophe of huge proportions with major implications for all life forms on the planet.

Bateson described ‘chopping up the ecology’ as the most serious epistemological error. Most of our professional distinctions and political differences are predicated on chopping up the ecology and then shoring up the defences around our piece of territory. The sovereignty of the nation state has precedence over the integrity of the biosphere. Many of Bateson’s ideas are echoed in the work of Lovelock who believes we have passed the point where the positive feedback loops can be prevented. They are underway. We are heading for massive changes in the way that Gaia balances her ecosystems and our species will not be a beneficiary. (3).

**The scale of the threat**

To be more precise we are already well beyond the carrying capacity of the planet. We have been floating on a sea of oil that is essentially concentrated solar energy distilled over millions of years. We are going to consume most of it in two centuries or less. Based on this oil we have had a huge explosion of food production that has enabled a similar population explosion. Oil underpins every aspect of our contemporary technological, industrial and commercial world. Without that lubrication we grind to a halt. It is a species-level dependency with all the worst features of the addictions we observe and treat in our clinical practice.

Because of our knowledge of systems and particularly of feedback processes the systems therapists ought to understand better than most the runaway escalations that are pushing us towards dangerous tipping points. We ought to be well placed to discern, advise, interpret and warn but - like others - we are distracted by the pressing concerns of practice and teaching, academic demands and professional issues as well as significant financial constraints. As individuals or citizens the scale of the challenge may well overwhelm us. Its full import is an emotional and psychological tsunami.

**Our systemic legacy**

It is good to remember that the pioneering phase of our field 50 years ago constituted a revolution in thinking and practice which expanded the prevailing understanding of human interactional behaviour and emotional functioning. It promised new ways of conceptualising multi-person communications and the relational domain. It was a quantum leap.

UsingBatesonian theory many family therapists such as the Milan Associates subsequently broke the mould of the focus on the single patient and opened up the window to a greater sense of the web of interconnections within which symptoms and problems arise and are sustained (13).

However there was limited follow through on the (eco)logical implications to expand this frame to include the wider social and political context in which the families were embedded. Milan took the Batesonian message but restricted its application to micro human systems only - as if they could be addressed apart from their contexts. Bateson would not have approved.

The systemic therapy revolution of the 60s, 70s and 80s can be seen as the psychological sciences’ attempt to understand the wider human systems of which we are a part and to devise means of working therapeutically with those relationship networks. Our pioneers realised that we are born of relationship into networks and contexts of meaning which sustain or harm us and we them. However, unlike Bateson, they did not include the larger ecological context that is the cradle, the source of nutrients and energy and completes the systemic whole.

The effort to widen the lens continued in various forms but has largely succumbed to the constraints of the established order. We have not followed through with the logic of an ecosystemic epistemology. This would require us to widen our lens to include the other living systems with which we share the planet and that of the planet itself. That would have the consequence of us having to question our interaction with and impact on those ecosystems. Second-order change or collusive blindness would then be the critical options. Thus far we have opted for the latter.

By revisiting our systemic origins we can be pathfinders for our professional peers and students and perhaps for others. We can reclaim the innovatory, paradigm-shifting inspiration of the early founders of our field. However to do this we must go beyond psychology, politics, and economics as presently construed. They are each dedicated to fragmentary territorial views, invested in individualism, polarisation, and worship of the market respectively.

The situation is dire – perhaps not as dire as Lovelock proclaimed - but certainly urgent. To repeat, it is an emergency. We are in a state of collective denial about the scale of the challenges that confront us which are either a) to turn things around or b) to face the consequences if we can’t or won’t.

**Nagy and relational ethics**

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy - my former professor in Philadelphia - was a major influence in my formation as a family therapist**.** He was the founder of contextual therapy and he, more than any of the pioneers in the field, sought to incorporate an ethical dimension into his model of practice. He spoke of relational ethics and of balances of entitlement and indebtedness between the generations. He saw the lack of reciprocity and trustworthiness in primary relationships as a principal source of pathology (14). Nagy’s call for reciprocal fairness and accountability between and across the generations as foundational for healthy human functioning seems incontestable. He gave those intergenerational dynamics a greater ethical dimension and emphasis than any of the other leading figures in our field.

His model has not had widespread popularity but perhaps it deserves closer attention now as we consider the world we are bequeathing to our children. We persist with consumption predicated on an infinite supply of raw materials while knowing that we live on a finite planet where the upper limits of many essentials - water, soil and clean air - are being reached. The myth that each succeeding generation can do better than the last no longer applies. What will be the consequences for intergenerational trust and justice when our children discover that we have depleted these critical resources and compromised their futures? Should we withhold this information from them or try to share it? What will they believe and think of us when they realise they are growing into an unlivable world? Ban Ki-moon, UN General Secretary, has recently declared:

*‘We are the first Generation that can end poverty, the last that can end climate change’* (15)

Nagy’s wife, Catherine DuCommun-Nagy, has continued to develop contextual therapy and says *“posterity is the main ‘client’ of the contextual therapist, the vulnerable ‘other’ towards which each of us is accountable’’* and she quotes her husband *‘The very ethical priority of fair availability is the foundation of transgenerational solidarity, the fiber of all higher animals’ species survival’*. (16) That is a provocative clinical challenge. What if we conducted our therapy with posterity in the room as part of the system? This is a form of child protection upon which we could usefully reflect. What if our practice attempted to include the entitlement of the next and future generations - what then, clinically, ethically, politically?

**Conclusions**

The formulation I am proposing is to add the relational ethics of Nagy to the systemic rigour of Bateson at all levels of our practice and positioning as clinicians and as citizens. Nagy's perspective would require us always to take the emerging generations into account. This is a key principle of sustainable development as defined in the report of the Brundtland Commission in 1987:

*"Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".* (17)

Such an awareness of the claims of posterity would go some way to counter the delusion that we can carry on as we are and the denial of what we are facing.

How would our practice and our politics change if we took Bateson seriously and saw the organism plus environment as the indivisible unit of evolution, of life and of survival? Then we would not draw a boundary around the individual, the couple or the family in our clinical enquiries. We would not permit our politics to chop up the ecology. Such an expansion of our consciousness of the network of relationships in which we reside and on which we depend may be crucial not just to the future of our discipline but to the destiny of our species.

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