

Cultural inertia is slowing effective action to address climate-change

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Resistance at individual and societal levels must be recognized and treated before real action can be taken to effectively address threats facing the planet from human-caused contributions to climate change.

That's the message to this week's Planet Under Pressure Conference by a group of speakers led by Kari Marie Norgaard, professor of sociology and environmental studies at the University of Oregon. In a news briefing Monday, Norgaard discussed her paper and issues her group will address in a conference session on Wednesday.

Scientists from multiple disciplines from around the world are at the conference to assess where they stand before the June 4-6 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in [Rio de Janeiro](#) -- also known as "Rio+20" since it is occurring 20 years after 1992's Rio Earth Summit that drew officials from 172 governments.

"We find a profound misfit between dire scientific predictions of ongoing and future climate changes and scientific assessments of needed emissions reductions on the one hand, and weak political, social or [policy response](#) on the other," Norgaard said. Serious discussions about solutions, she added, are mired in cultural inertia "that exists across spheres of the individual, [social interaction](#), culture and institutions."

"[Climate change](#) poses a massive threat to our present social, economic and political order. From a sociological perspective, resistance to change is to be expected," she said. "People are individually and collectively

habituated to the ways we act and think. This habituation must be recognized and simultaneously addressed at the individual, cultural and societal level -- how we think the world works and how we think it should work."

In their paper, Norgaard and co-authors Robert Brulle of Drexel University in Philadelphia and Randolph Haluza-DeLay of The King's University College in Canada draw from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) to describe social mechanisms that maintain social stability or cultural inertia in the face of climate change at the three levels.

At the personal level, climate-change information raises fear about the future, a sense of helplessness and guilt. These emotions clash with individual -- and often national -- identity, sense of self-efficacy and the need for basic security and survival. In small groups, interactions often subvert political conversations and/or submerge the visibility of climate-change issues. At the macro level, or society at large, the co-authors point to an absence of serious discussion of climate change within U.S. Congressional hearings and in media coverage.

In many discussions in the last 30 years, climate change has been seen as either a hoax or fixable with minimal political or economic intervention, said Norgaard, author of the book "Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life" (2011, MIT Press). "This kind of cultural resistance to very significant social threat is something that we would expect in any society facing a massive threat," she said. The discussion, she said, is comparable to what happened with challenges to racism or slavery in the U.S. South.

"Just as we cannot overhaul a car fleet overnight, we cannot change our ideological superstructure overnight," Norgaard said. "We must first be aware that this resistance is happening at all levels of our society," she

said. "If you have to push a heavy weight, it doesn't mean it can't be moved, but in order to push it you had better know that you have something heavy and figure out how to move it -- where to put the lever to shift the weight."

Most discussion on climate change has focused on natural science. It is time, she said, to broaden that approach. "Social scientific responses have been limited in their primary focus on individuals. These explanations are important but partial and thus inadequate as explanations or guides for future action. Our cross-dimensional model links individuals, culture and society. We have to take all dimensions into account simultaneously."

"Confronting climate change is daunting but it is not an insurmountable obstacle if we collectively put our minds together," said Kimberly Andrews Espy, vice president for research and innovation at the University of Oregon. "Interdisciplinary collaboration among social scientists and those involved in technological advances can help to move us forward."

Provided by University of Oregon

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