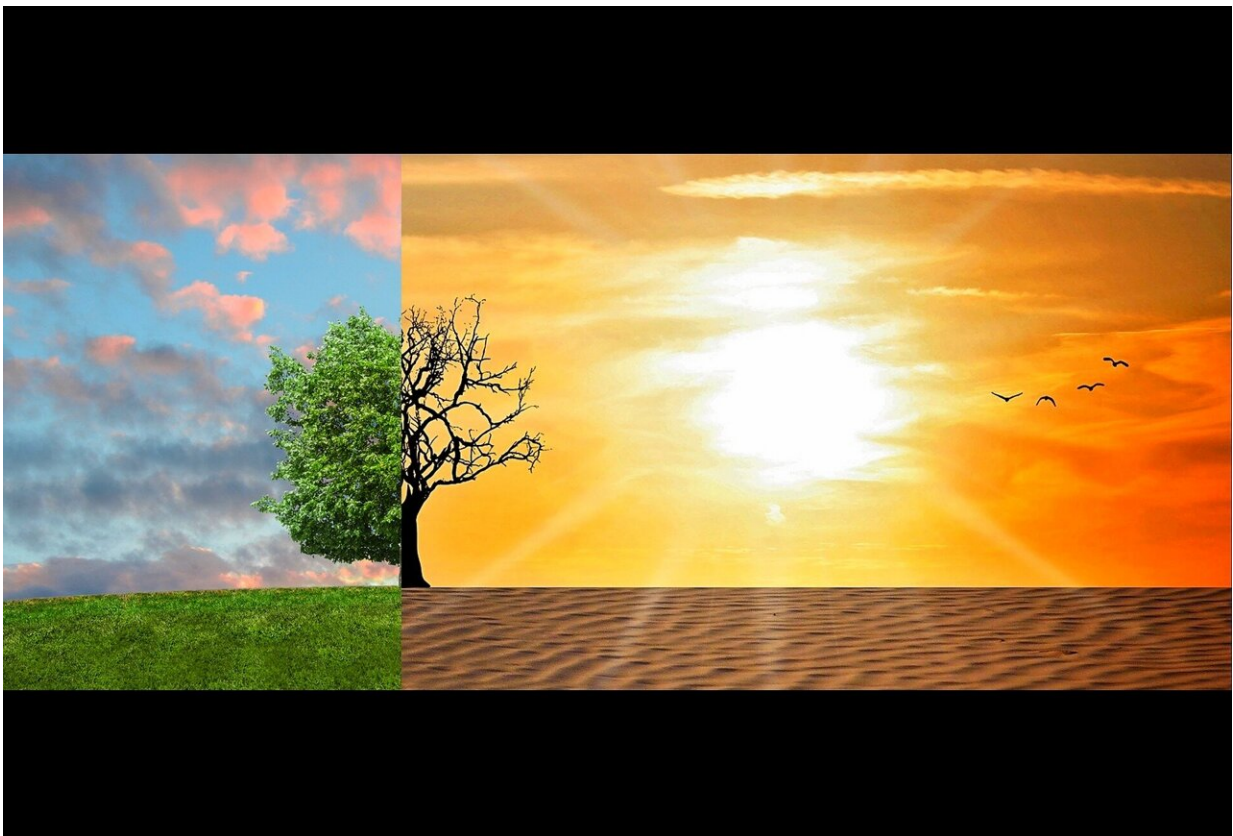


How climate social scientists are finding their way in the era of climate crisis

June 4 2024, by Matthew Hoffmann



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In early May [The Guardian reported on a survey that explored the thoughts and feelings of 380 climate scientists](#). It was not uplifting. The pull quotes tell a story of anguish. "Sometimes it is almost impossible not to feel hopeless and broken...Running away from it is impossible."

[Wrenching articles](#) like these showcase climatologists' anxiety. They are watching their predictions realized with too much fidelity; their warnings going largely unheeded by the humanity that climate scientist [James Hansen called "damned fools."](#) Some climate scientists have even proposed [a moratorium on climate research](#).

Climatologists are not OK.

The [acceleration of the climate crisis has been breathtaking](#) and talking to experts in a time of crisis is a good thing. But these articles are problematic. They seek to [motivate through fear](#) while usually offering only vague notions of absent "political will" to diagnose the problem and little beyond "listen to the scientists" as a solution.

Further, the concerns and practices of climate *social* scientists have not featured prominently in these discussions. This is a significant oversight.

Climate natural scientists are not trained to understand why people aren't listening to their entreaties or the obstacles to and opportunities for action. Climate social scientists, on the other hand, understand the [climate crisis](#) and are [experts in humanity's efforts to address climate change](#).

Over the last two years, I have interviewed more than 20 colleagues across the climate social sciences about how they are navigating the climate crisis in their research, teaching and personal lives. These

interviews were undertaken as part of an ongoing project exploring the perspectives and roles of climate social scientists in a time of climate crisis. They may offer a useful and motivating perspective that the world could certainly use.

Mixed feelings

It's not that climate social scientists are doing great either. They know too much about the climate crisis to be cheery—fear, guilt, gloom, anger and frustration were all prevalent. [Cristina Yuma Aoki Inoue](#) from Radboud University articulated a common lament: "If I think too much about the future, I get desperate."

Yet, none of those interviewed showed signs of throwing in the towel or leaving the climate crisis for amorphous others to solve. Instead, there's a conscious commitment to positivity in the face of disheartening climate news.

University of British Columbia (UBC) scholar [Peter Dauvergne](#) noted that he is "intentionally optimistic." And while some—like British political scientist [Matthew Paterson](#)—feel "guilt that our community was not louder earlier," there is consensus around the "sense of possibility" that Oxford University's [Thomas Hale](#) sees.

"Hope is a practice," remarked [Harriet Bulkeley](#) from the University of Durham, and this community actively cultivates that practice.

In fact, none of the scholars I spoke with consider doing the work of understanding and conceiving a just, effective response to the climate crisis to be a choice. Climate [despair is a luxury](#) for those not living through climate disasters or who have the means to survive them.

As such there is a collective feeling of responsibility on the part of

climate social scientists to work to advance long-term transformations towards sustainability and justice. This struggle is "all we are promised," [Kemi Fuentes-George](#) from Middlebury College clarified. And the work is valuable apart from the achievement of the solution to climate change.

As [Peter Newell from the University of Sussex](#) reminds us: "There's empowerment in the process of working on this regardless of the outcome. We don't know if our efforts are enough, but we know that if we don't try at all, nothing will change."

Promoting alternatives

The climate social science community starts their teaching and research where the bulk of the ["climate scientists are despairing" type articles](#) end their discussions. By making concrete the vague notion of political will, and striving to specify necessary action in the face of climate crisis, social scientists help to provide key nuance.

No one thinks this will be easy. Indeed, as climate governance scholar [Aarti Gupta](#) expressed: "I'm worried about what the climate crisis will do to already contested politics in a world with so much injustice and inequality. There is opportunity [if] we are actually all in this together, but the status quo will fight back tooth and nail."

Those I spoke with are unanimously committed to articulating the possibilities for change in their research and classrooms. Rather than trudging through endless analyses of the failure to act, scholars like [Kathryn Harrison](#) at UBC are "teaching the reality of obstacles while teasing out what might be different."

Everyone I spoke with is committed to what [Chukwumerije Okereke](#) from Bristol University described as reflecting "both hope and anxiety" in their work. But the key, as Dauvergne suggests, is focusing on "many

future possibilities that could be better."

Climate social scientists are explaining the crisis, but also showcasing where there is momentum for an equitable response to climate change and where more effort is needed to, in Indian climate policy expert [Navroz Dubash's](#) words, "build the society we want to see."

Day to day

Climate social scientists are people too, living in world dominated by fossil energy. We research ways that might change, but often feel conflicted about personal choices.

The experts I interviewed think deeply about their personal actions. Importantly, they do so in light of commitments to understand and contribute to structural change, upending the dependence on fossil energy that pervades our societies.

Personal action and structural change are linked in their minds. [Laura Tozer](#) from the University of Toronto mentioned how important it was for her to "focus on choices I can make that others can as well. Trying to cut fossil fuels out of one's life gives great insight into the structural changes that are necessary."

Further, this group reminds us that individual actions are [enmeshed in webs of larger networks and forces](#). In this vein, Brazilian scholar [Veronica Goncalves](#) remarked on a frequent refrain—the importance of collective experience and organizing; empowering communities and people in response to [climate change](#).

Such connections need more than [fear or despair](#) to thrive.

As the University of Toronto's [Kate Neville](#) emphasized: "Seeking joy,

connection and community is a crucial part of collective action—the climate-stable, ecologically-vibrant future needs to have space to be imagined as a joyful one, not an apocalyptic one, even though we know there is strife and grief and loss and upheaval."

What now?

While the "[climate-scientists-are-despairing](#)" genre of articles is problematic, it captures an important aspect of the reality of the climate crisis. Humanity is moving too slowly.

Navigating this crisis, however, means not only generating urgency, but also finding [outlets for that urgency](#). It entails understanding and pursuing an equitable low-carbon future. Here is where climate social scientists can help.

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