

# Editorial

## Psychology and the Environmental Crisis

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This special issue was planned in what seems like a different world. There was ongoing global action on the climate and environmental emergency and in November 2019 the community of psychology joined together at the “International Summit on Psychology and Global Health: A leader in climate action” to issue the Lisbon Declaration which stated (<https://www.psychologyandglobalhealth.org>):

“We, representatives of national and international psychological organizations in attendance at the Lisbon Inaugural International Summit on Psychology’s Contributions to Global Health, are committed to ongoing collaboration in the application of psychological science to jointly advance progress on critical global issues, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>).

Our commitment of professional, scientific, educational, cultural, and applied resources will be directed to advancing those issues and Goals for which psychology offers the greatest contribution.

Our initial efforts will be focused on Sustainable Development Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.”

Since then, the Global Psychology Alliance has been set up that has the Climate and Environmental crisis as one of its key policy objectives (<https://www.apa.org/international/networks/global-psychology-alliance#>).

Many other statements have echoed this concern and calls to action. For example, the medical journal *The Lancet*’s position is that climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century (Watts et al., 2021; <https://www.lancetcountdown.org>). UNICEF says much the same: “climate change is the most significant intergenerational challenge facing the world today” (<https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/children-and-climate-change/>).

Failure to take substantive action would be an act of injustice to all children according to the American Academy

of Pediatrics (<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/136/5/992>).

The Paris Agreement also is clear “Climate change represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet” (<https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>) and there are many others too numerous to mention.

Climate change will impact all of us, but children and young people are more vulnerable due to their immaturity, dependency, and exposure to interacting risk factors resulting in possible impacts on multiple aspects of psychosocial development (Evans, 2019; Sanson et al., 2019).

The idea of a special issue caught the mood of the times among psychologists who were increasingly engaged with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) process (<https://ukcop26.org>). The publication of the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C (<https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>), that included psychologists and social science experts among its lead authors, outlined the need for a far-reaching transformation of how we live so that we have a global pathway to limit warming to levels not considered dangerous. This report, considered cautious by some, was rejected by some major oil-producing nations and showed how far we have to go to reach a global consensus on necessary action.

And then the Pandemic arrived and quite reasonably everyone’s attention became focussed on how to prevent the spread of the virus and how to mitigate the consequences. There are many lessons to be learned here. One striking one concerns the relationship between technical preparedness and effectiveness. The Global Health Security Index 2019 (<https://www.ghsindex.org>) ranked the USA (1st) and the UK (2nd) out of 195 countries. However, neither country has done well, and both experienced high levels of fatalities associated with COVID-19. Why have they done less well than expected? Many commentators attribute it to politics and the psychology of how the population relates to the state. In a very powerful lecture about

our experience of the Pandemic to the British Psychological Society Annual Conference 2020, social psychologist Stephen Reicher said (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCAvIv2x7Ys>):

“What is happening leads us to reconceptualise one of the basic questions in psychology: the relationship between the collective and the individual and between the individual and the State.”

This is at the heart of how we need to think about the future in our relationship with the natural world as there is no getting away from the fact that we are all in this together. Unless we come together and foster global collaboration and tackle the public health and ecosystem challenges there is no doubt about the consequences: they will be very severe indeed. It is in this light that we have organized the nine papers of this special issue on the climate and environmental crisis around three themes:

- Leadership and social change.
- Health impacts destabilizing our climate and ecosystems.
- Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Leadership and Social Change

Three papers focus on leadership and social change, building on group-based processes grounded in the dynamics of social identity theories.

The first paper by Jolanda and colleagues (2021), “Responding to Climate Change Disaster: The case of the 2019/2020 bushfires in Australia” sets the scene for the whole special issue by developing this theme, as Australia witnessed record-breaking wildfires that had major impacts on people and ecosystems. They examine how psychological ideas can help us better understand the leadership we need as we will increasingly face global public health challenges. Their conclusions firmly locate an understanding of social identity and leadership as key ingredients in building trust between the authorities and the population which is necessary for effectively addressing the climate and environmental crisis.

This is followed by two papers from Germany. Maxie Schulte’s contribution (2021) entitled “We, the change: Outlining research lines of how psychology can contribute to the understanding of societal transition processes” where she makes the case that we need to focus on the psychology of social change and that the social identity model of collective action is a helpful framework.

Hannah Wallis and co-authors (2021) follow this up with their paper “Empowering people to act for a better life of

all: Psychology’s contributions to a social science for sustainability” giving a broad account of how social science needs to bring its evidence and research effort to the task of helping people realize how they need to act, and how, as noted above, we either all float together or we all sink together. They suggest the concept “solidarity-based quality of life” as an appropriate umbrella term for the positive implications of acting towards transformation to sustainable development. The paper demonstrates that psychological research can contribute to the mitigation of the socio-ecological crisis and give insights into how this can be fruitful for further developing psychology as a society-relevant discipline.

## Health Impacts and Interventions

Four papers then focus on the health impacts and possible interventions in the context of climate change.

Harriet Thompson from the UK (2021) takes on the important issue of assessing the health impacts, both physical and psychological, of climate and ecological disruption in her paper “Climate ‘psychopathology’: The intersection of mental and physical health in the climate emergency.” From the literature, we know some things already about the impact so far. These include a relationship between increasing temperatures, and the suicide rate. People who have existing mental health problems are particularly vulnerable when hit by extreme weather events, and the provision of care generally can be profoundly affected as we have seen from the COVID-19 Pandemic. Finally, we are seeing some evidence of increasing levels of distress among young people, associated with concerns about their future when seeing media reports of the impending climate and environmental changes.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the direct, indirect, and psychosocial impacts that are outlined above. The conclusions from the research literature, are that these impacts are very substantial, particularly in those areas directly affected by climate change-related extreme weather events, and show every indication of becoming worse.

It is in this context that Niels Peter Rygaard from Denmark writes about the inspiring work he and his colleagues have been undertaking to help children who live with caregivers who are not their parents. In his paper (2021), “Climate Change, Migration, Urbanization, and the Mental Health of Children at Risk in the European Union – A Discussion of the Need for Large Scale Interventions” he shows the links between the environmental changes we have been witnessing, the number of families on the move because of conflicts, often about resources, and the needs of children and young people.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-responds-new-report-climate-crisis-and-impact-mental-health>

The next two papers develop a conceptual model of how such interventions as described in Niels Peter Rygaard's paper, can fit with a global perspective and how the various domains of practice in psychology can benefit from interdisciplinary practice when tackling global health challenges.

In Osvaldo Santos and colleagues (2021; including one of the co-editors) paper from Portugal "Health behaviors and planetary health: a multi-level environmental health approach," they show how among the various domains of psychology practice, there are two, in particular, Environmental Psychology and Health Psychology that have been on convergent tracks and should now work much more closely together to tackle the systemic, global health effects.

Jennifer Inauen from Switzerland and her colleagues (2021) continue "Environmental issues are health issues: Making a case and setting agenda for environmental health psychology" close this section with a paper complementary to Osvaldo Santos' taking the perspective of Public Health and Environmental Health. They review the literature on how psychology more broadly than Health Psychology can contribute to the development of a new domain of practice they call "Environmental Health Psychology."

These climate and health papers, lead us to the last topic, addressing what we can learn from the Pandemic.

## Learning From the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thalia Maglioglou and Sharon Coen from the UK (2021) take us on an intellectually challenging journey about how we make sense of our world. In "The construction of a hegemonic social representation: Climate crisis and the role of COVID-19 In defining survival," they propose that social representation theory be revisited, with insights from political philosophy and social theory that can provide a heuristically helpful framework to understand the tensions arising from the global threats of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is difficult to summarise this complex area, essentially the framework explores how meaning is constructed – what is true and what is false, what unquestioned assumptions underly policy decisions, and how these frames of meaning can be changed during times of extreme social upheaval – as we are living through with COVID-19. In their paper they discuss in particular how people view the meaning of survival during the Pandemic – is it about them and us, or is it about everyone in this together and the implications of such widely held views.

Finally, Stuart Whomsley (2021), also from the UK, discusses five areas where psychologists have roles in addressing climate change and its effects on the planet and the lives of people. His title, "Five roles for psychologists in addressing climate change, and how they are informed by responses to the COVID-19 outbreak" provides a guide to

some of the key parallels from which we can build in planning future engagement with public health challenges that we are inevitably going to face. The COVID-19 outbreak gave a stark warning of how ecosystems connect, and that we humans can no longer pretend that we are somehow separate.

The five roles are:

(1) Changing human behaviors that are causing climate change (2) Increasing human connection with nature in positive ways to heal both the planet and humans (3) Advising and assisting on what leadership and good governance to protect the planet. (4) Providing support and psychological interventions for those affected by climate change. (5) Preparing for bad outcomes and helping adaptation and survival if this occurs.

## Conclusion

As mentioned above, this special issue is published shortly before COP26, the major United Nations conference which is being held in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021, that agrees on the undertakings that governments agree for the coming years to address climate change. The aim is to limit the heating effect of human activity to 1.5 °C or less below pre-industrial levels. Psychologists played an important role in setting out the roadmap that is needed to achieve this, which will involve major social change. The papers in this special issue we hope will be a contribution to developing this work and in a small way support the global effort to mitigate and adapt to the climate and environmental crisis.

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