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Week 2

What do people think about climate change?

Psychological Distance

Climate change is a difficult problem for people to deal with and is one that many fail to understand. Despite the fact that climate change is a human induced problem that has the capacity to impact millions of lives, many people either deny climate change or prioritise it as an issue less important than war, terrorism and the economy. In this lesson, we will learn about why this is the case and the factors that make climate change such a difficult problem for people to engage with.

One way we can understand people's lack of concern over climate change is to use the concept of psychological distance. At its core, Psychological distance is a way of distancing oneself from a problem by refuting its hypothetical, temporal, spatial or social components.

Let's break the model down into its components so we gain a better understanding of how psychological distance can impact engagement with climate change:

- **Hypothetical distance**: Refers to the *hypothetical* element of a problem. For example, a person may ask themselves if climate change is an issue that's actually happening.
- **Temporal**: Refers to *when* a problem will occur. The person may ask themselves when the impacts of climate change will be felt.
- **Spatial**: Refers to *where* a problem will occur. The person may ask themselves where the impacts of climate change will be felt.
- **Social**: Refers to whether the problem will have a *personal* impact. The person may ask themselves whether climate change will personally affect them or those in their social group.

Putting these components together we can begin to understand the impact of psychological distance on climate change engagement. For example, even if an individual accepts that climate change is happening, they may still believe that its impacts will occur much later in the future, in a far-off place with limited impact on them personally. This example is precisely one of the main reasons that climate change is such a difficult problem to deal with. Climate change is often talked about in uncertain terms (e.g., is climate change happening?) and as something that will happen in the future (e.g., climate change will affect our future generations) with impacts far away (e.g., warming temperatures in Europe) that won't personally affect us (e.g., climate change impacts on sea levels will mostly impact small islands). As a result, people often underweight the importance of climate change and their personal contributions to the problem.

Risk Perception and Climate Change

Aside from Psychological Distance, there are a number of other processes that influence whether people engage with the problem of climate change. One significant contributor is the concept of risk perception. That is, how much of a risk people perceive climate change to be. Risk perception is important because people tend to be less willing to act when they don't perceive a problem to be a significant risk.

There are a number of components that influence people's perception of climate change as a risk. One model we can look at is the risk perception of climate change model (RPCC) by Sander van der Linden (2015). Within this model, there are a number of major components that contribute to risk

perception such as cognitive factors, socio-cultural influences, experiential processing and socio-demographics. Breaking this down further:

- **Cognitive factors**: Our knowledge about the causes of climate change
- **Experiential processing**: Our personal experiences of climate change and our emotions towards the phenomenon
- **Socio-cultural influences**: What we are told to think or believe about climate change and how much we identify as an environmentally minded person

In a questionnaire based study, van der Linden (2015) surveyed 800 UK residents and asked them a number of questions about climate change. The data from the study suggested that experiential processing played the largest role in influencing people's risk perception of climate change. In fact, people's emotional responses towards climate change was the greatest predictor of whether people would perceive climate change as a risk. That is, our personal views of climate change as a good or bad phenomenon is what influences our perception of climate change risk the most.

Risk perception can be a complicated concept to deal with and we're not expecting you to memorise this figure. Instead, the main point that you should be getting from this section is that the way people perceive climate change risk is complicated and that people rely predominantly on experiential processing when they evaluate whether climate change is a risk/problem.

The problem with experiential processing

There is a large problem with using our personal experiences to evaluate the risk of climate change and that is that *we don't experience climate*. We experience much shorter term events - weather (we'll talk more about this distinction later). The fact that we don't experience climate can provide huge barriers for our ability to correctly understand climate change as a risk. As pointed out by climate scientist James Hansen "*The greatest barrier to public recognition of human-made climate change is the natural variability of climate. How can a person discern long-term climate change, given the notorious variability of local weather and climate from day to day and year to year?*".

There are numerous ways of how relying too much on experience can lead to confusion or doubt about climate change. We can see an example of this in 80 year old regular beach-goer Kevin Court's statement about climate change and rising sea levels as quoted in The Australian newspaper:

> "I have swum at this beach every day for the past 50 years, and nothing much changes here," Mr Court said yesterday as he emerged from the surf at Wollongong's North Beach, just a short paddle from the Port Kembla gauging station.
>
> "All this talk about rising sea levels - most of us old-timers haven't seen any change and we've been coming down here for decades."

From Kevin's perspective, the sea level hasn't appeared to have risen in the last few decades that he has been going to the beach. Naturally, he is unconcerned about the effect of climate change on