

Enabling action for sustainability

— the role of partnerships, stories and psychology

By Dr. JODI-ANNE M. SMITH

Jodi-Anne M. Smith gave a keynote presentation titled 'Enabling action for sustainability — the role of partnerships, stories and psychology' at the September, 2009 VAAE Conference. A summary of the concepts she discussed are included in this article.

There are many different educational approaches that are used by sustainability educators in our attempts to get people, organisations, governments and society to change their behaviour. These include 1) information and awareness raising; 2) market, technology and regulatory; 3) social (green) marketing; 4) critical systems (problem solving) and 5) social learning approaches.

I have been exploring a sixth category, that of psychologically-based approaches for obtaining behaviour change for sustainability (the deep ecology, depth psychology and eco-psychology literature). The Australian Psychological Society (2008)¹ explain the psychological underpinnings of people's reaction to environmental threats:

"It is common for people to experience a range of emotions and psychological symptoms when faced with information about environmental threats and predictions of an uncertain future. People may feel anxious, scared, sad, depressed, numb, helpless and hopeless, frustrated or angry. Sometimes, if the information is too unsettling, and the solutions seem too difficult, people can cope by **minimising** or **denying** that there is a problem, or **avoiding** thinking about the problems. Being sceptical about the problems is another way that people may react. ... Another common reaction is to become

desensitized to information about environmental problems. Stories and images relating to climate change flood our daily news. People can become **desensitized** to the stories, and mentally switch off when the next one comes. The fact that these problems are not easily fixed, and seem to go on and on without resolution, increases the chances that we will tune out, thus minimizing our stress, and continuing with business as usual. Once people believe that they cannot do anything to change a situation, they tend to react in all sorts of unhelpful ways. They may become **dependent on others** (i.e., by believing that the government or corporations will fix things, or that technology has all the answers), **resigned** ('if it happens, it happens'), **cynical** ('there's no way you can stop people from driving their cars everywhere — convenience is more important to most people than looking after the environment'), or **fed up** with the topic 'yeah — whatever'.

This shows the need for sustainability educators to help people overcome a sense of despair and helplessness. The psychology literature also explores the reasons why people behave in unsustainable ways and this suggests additional educational approaches needed to obtain behaviour change for sustainability.

Consumerism and unsustainable lifestyles are seen as largely due to the psychological *woundedness* of individuals, which has resulted from their childhoods and life experiences. This woundedness occurs due to traumatic incidents such as child abuse (physical, mental, emotional or sexual abuse²); parental divorce; alcoholic, drug addicted or

workaholic parents who are unable to meet the physical and emotional needs of their children resulting in the child feeling not loved, not wanted, abandoned, or not good enough.

These experiences result in babies and children developing a low sense of self esteem and self worth — they don't feel good about themselves intrinsically — so they develop defense mechanisms to protect themselves and help them cope. Many individuals try to prove that they're okay — to define their sense of self based on material goods, power, wealth, success — external sources.³ This had led to consumerism, competition and isolation as people focus on achieving and accumulating more. Many are very lonely, unable to connect intimately with others, afraid to show their 'real' self for fear of judgment or rejection. Many people lead superficial lives using addictions (alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, gambling, sex, shopping, etc) or anti-depressants⁴ to numb their pain. Those that don't cope express their anger by lashing out and harming others (graffiti, crime, destruction of nature, maltreatment of animals, repeating the cycle of child abuse with their own children) or commit suicide.⁵

The psychological literature suggests that to achieve large changes to people's lifestyles we need to:

- Help people heal past hurts that lead to defence mechanisms and addictions
- Help people develop healthy self esteem so that they don't define themselves by possessions and status
- Help people express their emotions and remove defence mechanisms that inhibit caring for the environment and others
- Help people develop intrinsic valuing of the environment, self and others
- Help people develop strong connections with nature
- Support and enable people to improve their personal, social and environmental sustainability

- Support improved parenting practices so that children grow up with minimal wounding⁶

The psychological literature highlights that unless we address the above we are unlikely to get significant changes in lifestyles. People may be willing to make small changes to their behaviour, such as the use of energy efficient lightbulbs and whitegoods or the installation of solar panels. They may do this for extrinsic reasons — to save money or for reputation benefits. However, it can lead to a rebound effect. They may spend the money they save on more electronic gadgets or an overseas holiday — more unsustainable practices.⁷ Or they may stop their environmentally supportive behaviours if it is no longer trendy to be doing them.

Larger changes to lifestyle are seen as more likely if people intrinsically care about the environment. Then they change their behaviour because they care about the environment for the environment's sake — respecting the rights of plants, animals and ecosystems to exist as well as acknowledging the many benefits nature provides us in its pristine state. When people intrinsically care about nature they see behaviour change as responsible, moral, not as a sacrifice or punishment. So the psychological literature emphasises the need to help people reconnect with nature and its healing properties.⁸

So what does this suggest that sustainability educators do?⁹ A lot of what we already do — supporting individuals and communities to take action on sustainability. Support is the key word here. Supporting them to form partnerships to discuss what they want to do individually and as a community, helping them find ways to do what they want — removing barriers, building skills, getting resources, etc.

Such partnerships are being formed in many communities with the proliferation of Local Climate Action Groups.¹⁰ Recent research

conducted for the Vic Department of Planning and Community Development recommended that these groups be supported through grants, climate change community engagement officers in local government and community organisations, as well as provided with practical and ongoing support for accommodation, IT and administration.¹¹

I am involved in two projects at RMIT University that focus on the support of community partnerships for sustainability. The first is research investigating examples of schools and their communities working together in learning partnerships for sustainability. The second is investigating the use of scenario thinking workshops with communities to assist the community members who participate to develop scenario stories of what their region may look like in the future. The scenarios are analysed to identify the implications and develop strategies to 1) mini-

mise undesirable outcomes, 2) maximise opportunities and 3) prepare for those aspects that will occur regardless of what actions the community takes. The stories and their analysis provide a mechanism by which the community can come together and decide what they want to do. This can give people a sense of empowerment and hope, rather than feeling overwhelmed and in despair about climate change and the future.¹² Scenario workshops have been held in the Hamilton Region and the Otway Ranges Region of Victoria.

Partnerships strengthen the sense of community and can also help individuals to heal some of their wounds. They can feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, feel that they are doing something worthwhile and that they are okay — building their self confidence and self esteem. Further support is needed to assist with deeper healing. This can be done individually with a counsellor/psychotherapist and in groups with workshops focussed on healing from the impacts of abuse; building self esteem; increasing awareness of and ability to dissolve defense mechanisms; building social skills, emotional literacy, and conscious parenting.

Ideally educators should be role models of healthy personal and environmental sustain-

ability functioning, supporting individuals to achieve personal healing (embrace emotions, reduce addictions and support healthy functioning) as well as sustainability goals.

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community, as well as leadership development workshops with business personnel. Her research at RMIT University focuses on school-community learning partnerships for sustainability and the use of scenario thinking to assist communities to adapt to climate change. She can be contacted by email at jodi-anne.smith@rmit.edu.au or phone 03 9925 9891.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Australian Psychological Society. (2008). Climate change - what you can do. Retrieved 09 May, 2008, from www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/climate/.
- 2 Child sexual abuse is extremely common in Australia. 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before the age of 18yrs. (http://www.darkness2light.org/KnowAbout/statistics_2.asp last accessed 18/11/09)
- 3 Those of us who derive our sense of self as environmental activists may still be wounded. For instance one of my defense mechanisms was to care about the environment and defend it from all the nasty people who abuse it. This was a projection from my own childhood pain and experience which led me to be a crusader spending most of my time trying to save the environment. The payoff being I could feel righteous, I could ignore the fact that I was lonely and hurting and unable to let people close or enjoy my life. Clearly unhealthy. Thankfully I woke up and took action to heal myself enabling me to now live a more peaceful, balanced and happier life.
- 4 Since 1990, the number of prescriptions for anti-depressants has risen from five million a year to 12 million in a population of just 20 million, and many of these drugs, which are meant to be used only for major depression, are being handed out for less severe cases and are also being prescribed to children. (<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1401280.htm> 27 June 2005)
- 5 Every 4 days a farmer is committing suicide in Australia. It is expected this may worsen with climate change (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200610/s1771783.htm> Oct 24 2006)
- 6 See Robin Grille's books for a description of this process and recommended parenting practices that minimise woundedness and enhance children's emotional intelligence. Grille R, 2005, Parenting for a peaceful world, Longueville Media, Australia. Grille R, 2008, Heart to heart parenting, ABC Books, Australia
- 7 Psychological aspects of behaviour change including the rebound effect are discussed in WWF (2008). Weathercocks and signposts: the environment movement at a crossroads, WWF-UK.
- 8 A range of group activities to help people reconnect with nature and heal are provided in Macy JR & Brown MY, 1998, Coming back to life: practices to reconnect our lives, our world, New Society Publishers, Canada
- 9 An in depth exploration of environmental education approaches from a psychological perspective occur in Sattmann-Frese, Werner J & Hill, Stuart B: Psychology of Ecological Crises and Eco-Self Transformation: A Guide to the Psychology of Sustainable Living, Morrisville: Lulu.com, 2007
- 10 Local Climate Action Groups are developing across Australia and starting to work together advocating for changes to government and societal practices. (See <http://www.foe.org.au/climate-justice/media/news-items/2009/australias-climate-action-summit/> last accessed 11/11/09)
- 11 Fritze J, Williamson L and Wiseman J (2008). Draft Report — Community engagement and climate change: benefits, challenges and strategies. Melbourne, Department of Planning and Community Development, Victorian Government.
- 12 The Hamilton scenarios can be downloaded at: <http://prodmams.rmit.edu.au/cyb31c4gyjn2.pdf>. Last accessed 18/11/09