

Climate Change and Counseling Psychology

By Philip Schulte

Climate change (i.e., “global warming”) is here, likely to stay, and will most likely get significantly worse within the next 30 years, according to a leading report released by a panel of United Nations (UN) experts (Allen et al., 2018). This report’s essential take away is this: As the Earth warms, climate systems become unstable and ultimately cause adverse impacts to human health through a variety of natural and human mediated systems. Unfortunately, reports conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA; Clayton, Manning, Krygsman, & Speiser, 2017), United States Global Change Research Program (USGCRP; Dodgen et al., 2016) and the UN (Allen et al., 2018) indicate that these adverse health outcomes are more likely to occur within marginalized communities. Although counseling psychology’s commitment to social justice has often led the field to address other issues facing marginalized communities, counseling psychology’s capacity to contribute to the conversation on climate change as a social justice is ripe for development. While public concern and awareness toward climate change has been substantially increasing over time (Jones & Saad, 2017), climate change has yet to be explicitly discussed in the counseling psychology literature. This begs the question: what does climate change have to do with counseling psychology?

The turn of the decade (2009-2011) was a busy time for the APA in regard to understanding and addressing climate change. In 2008, an APA task force on and global climate change released a report entitled, *Psychology & global climate change: Addressing a multifaceted phenomenon and set of challenges* (Swim, et al, 2009). The *American Psychologist* ran a special issue in 2011 on psychologist’s contributions to global climate change efforts, which provided a strong foundation for better understanding the psychological principles present in climate change. In tandem with the special issue, the APA released a *Resolution on Affirming Psychologists Role in Addressing Global Climate Change* that (re)affirmed psychology’s role in addressing behavioral contributions to climate change and recognized that global climate change affects those who are underprivileged and disenfranchised (American Psychological Association, 2011). These publications, followed by the release of the updated UN climate change reports in 2018, provide a strong foundation for the importance of climate change within psychology and the relationship between health, climate change, and marginalized communities.

So, it turns out that climate change actually has a lot to do with counseling psychology, despite it being an issue that lives in the periphery of our awareness. The reports named above (Allen et al., 2018; Clayton et al., 2017; Dodgen et al, 2016) provide strong support for the contention that marginalized communities experience negative outcomes in physical and mental health. Specifically, they find that the impacts to physical health occur along three pathways: extreme weather (e.g., natural disaster, heatwaves, floods, droughts, and fires), natural systems (e.g., vector-born disease, food and water infections, nutrition and demised air quality), and anthropogenic systems (e.g., occupational hazard, and violence and conflict). Adverse mental

health outcomes can be direct such as trauma, shock, loss, and grief or indirect such as increases in aggression, violence, and mental health emergencies; solostalgia (i.e., loss of place attachment); loss of autonomy and control; helplessness; depression; fear; resignation; and eco-anxiety. Although these physical and mental health impacts occur within non-marginalized communities, research suggests that they are more likely to have greater impact to marginalized communities.

Indeed, although climate change impacts everyone, an insidious characteristic is that the negative outcomes are more likely to be distributed among many different communities (Allen et al., 2018). For example, longitudinal survey data following Hurricane Katrina found that adverse health outcomes were significantly greater among African Americans, older adults, women, single adults, those with fewer years of education, and with fewer social supports when compared to the general population (Adeolo & Picou, 2014; Picou & Hudson, 2010). However, when considering the broad-spectrum of climate change, the list of marginalized communities commonly discussed in the literature grows significantly and often includes: children and older adults; women; African Americans; individuals in a lower socioeconomic group; those with developmental or acquired disability; individuals with pre-existing mental and physical health conditions; indigenous communities; immigrant communities; those with limited language proficiency for their current location; and communities in geographic regions prone to specific weather changes. Clearly, climate change is an issue that places a greater burden among a large portion of (if not all) marginalized populations.

Fortunately, counseling psychology has worked to balance the injustices found in many complex dilemmas facing marginalized communities. One must simply recall our intro to counseling psychology course, peruse *The Handbook of Social Justice in Counseling Psychology* (Toperek, Gerstein, Fouad, & Roysicar, 2006), or grab coffee with a member of the field to learn about a plethora of examples, a discussion beyond the limit and scope of this article. Despite counseling psychology's historical commitment to addressing injustice within marginalized communities, we do not know how, or if, counseling psychology will work to address those issues posed by climate change. Further research is needed to better understand what counseling psychologist's think about climate change and if they believe it should be addressed within the field.

Currently, we are conducting a qualitative study to better understand the topic discussed in this article. If you would like to lend your voice to this conversation, have any questions, or would like additional information, please feel free to email at Phil Schulte at pschulte@radford.edu.

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