HOW CULTURE SHAPES THE CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE

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A helpful primer for those interested in what research has to say about why climate change remains so socially contentious

Andrew Hoffman’s new book How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate skillfully weaves together research from numerous social sciences – ranging from psychology to sociology – to show that public confusion about and lack of action on climate change is not the result of a knowledge deficit or a misunderstanding of the relevant science. Instead, Hoffman shows the startling disconnect between the high level of scientific consensus on one hand and the lack of social consensus on the other is the result of people’s intentional and unintentional avoidance of information.

Research suggests that avoidance of information is the result of a variety of cultural and cognitive dynamics. Hoffman effectively summarizes four such forces: (1) humans use cognitive filters, such as motivated reasoning; (2) our cognitive filters reflect our cultural identity; (3) cultural identity can overpower scientific reasoning; and (4) our political economy creates inertia for change. He concludes “The debate over climate change in the United States (and elsewhere) is not about carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas models; it is about opposing cultural values and worldviews through which that science is seen.” Building on what research has to say about these forces, he suggests that no amount of
science, in and of itself, can reconcile conflicting cultures and values. Instead, he advises that worldviews will have to be altered. This, in turn will necessitates careful public education and engagement campaigns that take account of the strong cultural and cognitive forces causing the current cultural schism.

Hoffman’s conclusions are by no means new – indeed, similar points have been made, albeit in bits and pieces, by the many scholars he cites. He does add great value, however, and advances our understanding by summarizing and insightfully stitching together existing scholarship. His goal in writing this book was to “build an edifice from the large and growing body of research in sociology, psychology, and other social sciences about why people accept or reject the science of climate change.”

In successfully doing this, Hoffman’s small book – with its less than 100 pages of text – packs a big punch. It is a helpful primer for those interested in what research has to say about why climate change remains so socially contentious despite the considerable scientific consensus that exists. Written in readily accessible language, How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate will be user-friendly for anyone trying to grasp what social science research has to say about the lack of action on climate change.

Hoffman’s book provides an excellent example of the kind of writing — succinct, clear, interesting, that we need.