Cultural identity and climate change

June 9, 2015

Uncategorized
dcraig
I just started and finished reading a brief (90 pages) and quite excellent book by Andrew Hoffman, How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate.

Hoffman explains what many of us have long known. Our collective inability to cope with the climate crisis has very little to do with science and is instead caught up in the dense weeds of culture, cognition, psychology and unconscious bias.

Each of us creates our own reality through the cognitive filters we use to interpret and understand our experience. We think we know what is true and real, but each of us has a different idea of what that means exactly. Our filters are biased because they arise from our emotionally-based cultural identity, which is ultimately much stronger than the cold, emotionless process we use to think about climate science.

“Through what is called motivated reasoning, we relate to climate change through our prior ideological preferences, personal experiences and knowledge.”

A review of Hoffman’s extended essay suggests our climate conflict “no longer concerns carbon dioxide, greenhouse gases, or climate modeling; rather, it is the product of contrasting, deeply entrenched worldviews. This brief examines what causes people to reject or accept the scientific consensus on climate change. Synthesizing evidence from sociology, psychology, and political science, Andrew J. Hoffman lays bare the opposing cultural lenses through which science is interpreted. He then extracts lessons from major cultural shifts in the past to engender a better understanding of the problem and motivate the public to take action. How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate makes a powerful case for a more scientifically literate public, a more socially engaged scientific community, and a more thoughtful mode of public discourse.”

Hoffman quotes Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University’s Stern School of Business and the author of The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion. Haidt states, “We may think we are acting as scientists when analyzing data and models, but very often we are acting more as lawyers, using our reasoning to a predetermined end, one that was emotionally biased by our ideological positions and cultural views.”

Most of us believe we have arrived at our view of the world on our own. We believe we are independent, autonomous thinkers who rely on logic and rationality to determine our truth. However, scientific research suggests we develop our opinions and convictions in a much more complicated manner that has more to do with our membership in a tribe of like-minded comrades.

Hoffman tells us that we embrace the values of our group and that “we will generally endorse the position that most directly reinforces our connection with others in our referent group and at the same time strengthens our definition of self.”

Our need to be loyal to our group exerts tremendous influence over what we come to believe is true. For most of us, our psychological stability requires that we maintain beliefs that are consistent with others who we respect, value and trust. We unconsciously select information that confirms our bias and intentionally look for and find data that disproves information that is not consistent with our views.

“In this process, facts become less important than the political and ideological affiliation of the source of the
facts and ‘partisanship and group affiliation replaces the greater good as motivators for political action.’”

We can all be described as “cognitive misers” as we carefully restrict our time, attention and resources reinforcing our pre-determined view of the world. We turn to our favorite media outlets that we view as pure, uncontaminated and trustworthy sources and derive conclusions about important issues like global warming in a process known as “bounded rationality.”

Bounded rationality refers to the idea that our decision-process is limited by the information we access as well as “the cognitive limitations of their minds, and the time available to make the decision.”

In Why We Disagree about Climate Change, Mike Hulme suggests this issue has become a “cultural and political phenomenon which is re-shaping the way we think about ourselves, our societies and our place on Earth.”

Hoffman suggests we can locate “the sources of disagreement in four discrete elements of distrust.” These include distrust of: 1) the messengers of climate science; 2) the process that created the message; 3) the message itself and 4) the proposed solutions that arise from the message.

In order to get past our current stalemate, Hoffman offers “a series of tactics for presenting and framing climate change in a way that recognizes its social and psychological underpinnings.”

First, he suggests, we need “to move beyond language that is polarizing, judgmental, and condescending.” When we focus on blame in our relationships with others we often fail to understand them. When we understand them, we are less likely to blame. If we respectfully appreciate that for some, the reality of climate change is extremely threatening, we can approach them in a manner that is more effective.

Engagement must be done with a recognition that the issue represents a deep cultural shift, one that threatens people’s belief systems.