

Harré, N. (2011). *Psychology for a better world: Strategies to inspire sustainability*. Auckland: University of Auckland, 192 pages. ISBN 978-0-473-19304-1 (paperback) and available as a free download from [www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/psychologyforabetterworld](http://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/psychologyforabetterworld)

Susie Burke  
Australian Psychological Society  
[s.burke@psychology.org.au](mailto:s.burke@psychology.org.au)

Niki Harré's book *Psychology for a Better World* is a book about climate change and other big environmental problems, but with a focus on how we can change our own behaviour and influence the behaviour of others, to make sustainable behaviours normal and enduring. Then, we and other species can all flourish.

Harré, Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at Auckland University, teaches applied social and community psychology and has strong research interests in sustainability, citizenship, and political activism. She uses concepts from all these areas of psychology to show the reader how people can better address complex environmental threats, not just as professionals, but as citizens, moral leaders, and community members. And an overarching theme throughout the book, from the field of positive psychology, is the importance of positive emotion and flow in getting and keeping people engaged in sustainability. Positive emotions, argues Harré, encourage creativity, invite people to participate, and make it easier for people to consider change. She quotes Beavan, "If we aren't going to joke around, is the planet even worth saving?" (<http://noimpactman.typepad.com>) and Mitchell, "In the long run a boring system cannot last" (Mitchell, 1988).

Harré dedicates a section of her book to discussing identity and the importance of encouraging 'sustainability identities' in

order to enhance and maintain pro-environmental behaviours. Whilst Harré only skims the surface of the large social science literature on worldviews, ideologies, and the power they have to influence environmental beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (see for example Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Smith, & Hmielowski, 2012; Lewandowsky, Gignac, & Oberauer, 2013), she makes a few very important points about the value of identity, concluding that identity matters, and that identity is a virtuous circle: "Identity is created by action. The more we act for sustainability, the stronger our identities as advocates and the more we feel compelled to act for sustainability."

The best parts of the book, I think, are the sections on modelling, copying, and the enormous power of social norms to change people's behaviour. How we think and behave around climate change is very much influenced by our peer group, by what the people around us think and do. "People are social animals, and what we see people doing matters," argues Harré. Most importantly, implying that pro-environmental behaviour is normal has been shown to be a more powerful way to encourage that behaviour than direct pleas to protect the planet. She writes, "Unsustainable behaviours are relentlessly modelled around us. However, the capacity to copy that keeps us doing what we do now can be utilised for the opposite purpose" – for pro-environmental purposes. Being visibly sustainable yourself, and leaving behind as many behavioural traces as you can, is very important. Harré encourages people to make efforts to show their sustainable behaviours – for cyclists to carry their helmets with them into their offices, for workplaces to locate bike racks prominently on the pavement, for each of us to carry around visible signs of our sustainable behaviours. "Modelling is the x-factor that makes one behaviour option rise to the surface; pick me, pick me!"

In addition to leaving traces, Harré also

argues that you strengthen your power as a model if you are able to not only demonstrate the behaviour itself, but also transmit its meaning. This might involve providing explanations for why you do what you do (she does acknowledge that this can be easier to do for your children than for adults, and that finding a way to not sound preachy is one of the challenges!). If you can provide a compelling reason for an action, then it is more likely to catch on.

Harré further argues that demonstrating your sustainable behaviours also shows that there is no gap between what you do as a sustainability advocate and what you do in the rest of your life. And this leads to the final section of the book on morality. Harré bravely leaps in at the deep end, with a daring statement, “Once we know an action is damaging or unjust, we are morally culpable when we undertake that action.” Burning fossil fuels as we feel the temperature rising will be something we will look back on in a few decades and see clearly as a moral wrong.

Moral leadership, explains Harré, is when people openly live their values: When people take the bus or train to an interstate conference rather than fly; when people don't outsource the catering, but commit to sourcing local, sustainably produced food for conferences. She brings in the concept of costly signalling as a way of demonstrating why moral leadership showing a personal commitment to the cause is so powerful. In animals, costly signalling might be a feature that seems counterproductive to their survival – for example, a peacock's highly visible and cumbersome but glorious tail. The very cost of the tail signals something important. Likewise, when an organisation can be seen to make a big effort, one that might cost them something of relative value, to demonstrate their sustainability, this is costly signalling. It encourages us to pay attention to the principles that are being discussed. Harré concludes that we need a lot more moral

leadership – “Imagine how seriously the world would take climate change if the leading climate scientists pledged to give up their cars.” Even better, imagine how seriously the world would take it if politicians or corporations did this!

Throughout *Psychology for a Better World*, Harré illustrates her points with many personal examples from her own years of advocacy, campaigning, and sustainability practices, as well as her work as a psychologist and even her role as a parent. She relates the personal struggles that she, as a long-time sustainability advocate, still goes through in striving to be morally staunch and enact her environmental values, often in the face of considerable inconvenience, risking other people's negative perceptions, and struggling against the status quo. Her person-centred writing style not only makes the book very accessible and easy to read, but gives readers the sense that the author is ally, confidante, mentor and coach on their own sustainability journeys. The book works very well as an engaging, up-beat, how-to, and can-do guide to getting on with the job of changing our own and other's behaviour.

Of course, psychology has much more to contribute to the sustainability debate than what is captured and highlighted in Harré's book. Psychologists have been working on these issues for over 50 years, and have important contributions to make not just in terms of promoting changes in behaviour but in understanding the human causes of environmental problems, the enormous impact that climate threats have on our wellbeing, and the many complex reasons why we are not doing enough, fast enough, to address these massive problems.

And therein lies one criticism of the book. The environmental challenges that we face are far greater and more devastating than portrayed in this book. Whilst there's no doubt that Harré herself fully understands the scale of the problem and the enormous threats that climate change poses to our entire

planetary system, she chooses not to address this head on, focusing instead on the positive. The tension between frightening people with the full truth, so much so that they risk becoming overwhelmed, or tuning out, and wanting to engage and motivate people with positive messages, arises over and over in the social science and environmental and advocacy field.

David Spratt, activist and co-author of *Climate Code Red*, argues this point in a series of recent articles (<http://precariousclimate.com/2012/06/10/stop-saying-yes-bright-siding/>). According to Spratt, if you avoid including an honest assessment of climate science and impacts in your narrative, it is pretty difficult to give people a grasp about where the climate system is heading, what needs to be done to create the conditions for climate safety, and how to avoid increasing catastrophic harm. Harré's book skirts close to 'bright-siding' with its focus on positive solutions to a problem without getting people to examine it fully. According to Spratt, the risk of bright-siding is catastrophe.

*Psychology for a Safe Climate* (<http://psychologyforasafeclimate.org/>), also takes a different approach to Harré. They tackle the difficult questions about why society is failing to respond effectively to the threat of climate change by looking at the impact of conflicted feelings, the temptation to avoid what is appalling to contemplate, and the importance of first coming to terms with deep and complex feelings about the planet, like grief, fear, shame, anger and longing, before being able to take effective action. Unlike Harré's book, they underline the importance of exploring the issues of denial, minimisation, and avoidance. They argue that this is a critical step in understanding the climate problem along with the scale of the human problem, and then being motivated to take sufficient action. In Harré's defence, however, it could be argued that the contrasting approaches of 'positive

psychology' versus 'reality testing' could be applicable at different stages of awareness/motivation. For example, someone who is 'pre-contemplation' might need to be confronted with the harsh facts, whereas someone who is contemplating change might need the positive approach illustrated in Harré's book. And someone who is actively working to change but often despairing might need support in dealing with the grief and loss of the world as we know it.

Despite these limitations, Harré's book remains an excellent resource for activists, psychologists, sustainability advocates, and indeed anyone who cares about sustainability and understands the urgent need for action and change. It's "our turn to inhabit the earth" and we need to do it in a way that enables our species, and the ecological systems we are part of, to flourish.

### References

- Mitchell, R. G. (1988). Sociological implications of the flow experience. In M. Csikszentmihalyi & I. S. Csikszentmihalyi (Eds.), *Optimal experience: Psychological studies of flow in consciousness* (pp. 36-59). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Roser-Renouf, C., Smith, N., & Hmielowski, J. D. (2012). Extreme weather, climate and preparedness in the American mind. New Haven, CT: Yale Project on Climate Change Communication/Yale University and George Mason University. Retrieved from <http://environment.yale.edu/climate/publications/extreme-weather-climate-preparedness/>
- Lewandowsky, S., Gignac, G. E., Oberauer, K. (2013). *The role of conspiracist ideation and worldviews in predicting rejection of science*. PLoS ONE, 8(10). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0075637.