Received: 18 May 2021 | Revised: 6 September 2021 | Accepted: 18 September 2021
DOI: 10.1111/1745-5871.12514

FAY GALE MEMORIAL LECTURE 2020

| Geographical Research WILEY

Climate friction: How climate change communication produces resistance to concern

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Funding information
Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship

Abstract

Communication about climate change has never been more urgent. But what if talking about a need for concern about climate change actually contributes to resistance against such concern? I argue that in an effort to stimulate concern and action, climate communicators often fail to listen and give respect to the values and experiences of publics who are unconcerned about climate change. Climate change narratives tend to pathologise unconcern as a negative and uniform attitude, without reflecting critically on the sources of these narratives beyond scientific facts. In shaping normative and unreflexive narratives of concern and failing to address the actual concerns and priorities of diverse publics, communicators can effectively co-produce counter-narratives. In response, in this article I share the stories of people who identify as unconcerned about climate change. Their narratives reveal processes of discursive friction between the concerned and the unconcerned, through which values, priorities, and assumptions are brought into conflict. Recognising and representing the messiness and plurality of attitudes to climate change could generate more useful forms of friction, shifting from antagonistic to agonistic and productive discourse. Avoiding polarised narratives of climate concern and unconcern is vital to enable a broader participation in diverse coalitions for climate action.

KEYWORDS

agonism, climate change communication, climate politics, narrative, polarisation, public attitudes

1 | INTRODUCTION

Climate change may be global, but its experience defies universalisation. It is felt differently in different environments and increases the frequency and intensity of droughts and floods, blizzards, and heatwaves (Ummenhofer & Meehl, 2017). Its effects disproportionately impact the already disadvantaged (Islam & Winkel, 2017). It is an issue that, in many countries, sparks political concern only among certain sections of society (Unsworth & Fielding, 2014). Polls show that climate change concern is growing (Fagan & Huang, 2019)—and people's first-hand experiences of climatic disasters such as bushfires, cyclones, heatwaves, and droughts do contribute to increasing concern (Bergquist et al., 2019). Yet, there is still no clear social mandate for climate action in Australia or the United States. Social polarisation about climate change continues to lead to active opposition to climate policy (Tjernström & Tietenberg, 2008).

Through my research, I have engaged both widely and deeply, quantitatively and qualitatively, with people who do not share my concerns and fears about a climate-changed world (see also Lucas, 2018a, 2018b; Lucas & Davison, 2019; Lucas & Warman, 2018). I will call these

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people "the unconcerned," although this nomenclature does not mean they are unconcerned about issues other than climate change. When I started speaking with the unconcerned in 2015, polarisation was already rife in both the United States and Australia. Since that time, I have watched social and ideological splits in society become destructive forces in the former and, to a lesser extent, in the latter, tearing apart neighbourhoods, communities, and families and shredding norms of respect, listening, empathy, and consideration.

There is no inexorable forward momentum towards climate action. Climate concern is fragile and subject to lapse when other more immediate pressures arise. Elected governments are among the unconcerned, the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, for example, telling us "don't be scared" of coal (Hamilton, 2017) and spruiking a "gas-fired" recovery from Covid recession (Morrison, 2020). In the United States, a climate change denier occupied the White House between 2017 and 2020. Climate change policy was not central to the 2020 election agenda, despite President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. The election campaigns of both Donald Trump and Joe Biden suggest that jobs, economy, and freedom from regulation are of primary importance to most Americans. Under the Biden administration, promises to tackle climate change have returned to the fore, but experience suggests that changing political circumstances (such as the pandemic) could easily derail commitments to action.

In this article, I argue that we need a new politics of climate change. This is not a call for depoliticisation or consensus—these may sound like desirable goals, but they disregard the essential nature of climate change as a social phenomenon, in which diverse, and sometimes incommensurable, values, and interests are inevitably entangled (Lucas & Davison, 2019). Thus, I contend that advocates of climate action should pursue pluralist and agonistic politics of climate change. This pursuit means attending to and embracing multiple different and divergent meanings and stories of climate action. A fundamental benefit of this work would be to begin to repair the cleavages between the concerned and the unconcerned, as well as the left and the right. But most importantly, this shift is needed to break the stalemate in climate politics and to reframe, diversify, and enable policy and action (Video 1).

Key insights
To counter polarising forces in climate discourse, the political legitimacy of a broad range of perspectives about climate change must be respected. Democratising climate discourse involves openness to negotiation with people from diverse social groups. There is an opportunity for climate change communicators, rather than seeing themselves as educators or activists with concrete positions, to engage with diverse publics by positioning themselves as listeners and learners involved in a dialogue with fellow citizens. Dialogues across difference can help to develop a wider range of narratives about the nature and benefits of climate response and generate stronger political coalitions for action.

VIDEO 1 Climate Friction: Fay Gale Lecture Video by Dr Chloe Lucas, University of Tasmania.
Video content can be viewed at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1745-5871.12514

2 | CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Life as we know it in modern societies exists thanks to sources of energy created 300 million years ago, in the carboniferous period. All the experiential goods that we value (such as education, healthcare, employment, and mobility) and the material goods that make our everyday lives in modern societies possible (such as medicines, cars, refrigerators, clothing, machinery, and computers) have been built, and continue to be powered, in large part, thanks to fossil fuels (Malm, 2016). These dead masses have shaped our existing cultural, political, and economic systems and possibilities. Social responses to climate change are informed by, and entangled in, widespread implicit trust in the systems and practices that make up everyday life (Lucas et al., 2015).

To address climate change is, therefore, to address modernity itself. This task cannot be reduced to the

measurement of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere or to cost–benefit analyses of renewable energy. The stories we are telling about climate change remain too narrow. Climate change is not only a tale of the environmental impacts of greenhouse gases. It is also a story of how societies can come to terms with the powerful and uneven political, technological, and ecological legacies of modernity. It is a story that we all have a part in, but in which we may play many different roles.

Dominant narratives of climate change activism and concern (such as those in the text box below) define the problem, and its solutions, in ways that do not make sense to all publics. These narratives construct climate change as primarily understood through scientific means. They suggest that it is a product of the failings of human nature and should be addressed through global political consensus. In drawing attention to such narratives, I do not seek to dispute their truth, or to suggest that they are hegemonic. Although these narratives dominate discourses of climate concern, they are themselves marginalised by dominant capitalist narratives in many policy contexts. This friction between the long-accepted narratives of modern capitalism and the dominant narratives of climate concern is challenging for many people and has contributed to polarising the debate.

Dominant narratives of climate activism and concern

Human-induced climate change is a scientific, indisputable fact.

Climate change is being imposed upon us by morally corrupt fossil fuel corporations, super-rich elites and short-termist neoliberal governments.

Climate change is perpetuated by misinformation, ignorance, and apathy.

Climate change represents the selfishness of humans putting themselves above nature.

The way to deal with climate change is to educate the public about climate science as the basis for international political consensus on climate policy and global action to eliminate fossil fuels and transition to renewable energy.

How we tell our stories—what we emphasise, what we leave out, whether we portray ourselves as protagonists or victims, the language and metaphors we use—not only constitutes our personal identities but enables culture to "speak itself" and be constituted through our stories (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Within each person's story, personal values and cultural norms interact. This process is co-constructive—the stories we tell about ourselves are often limited by cultural norms. One example is the number of women and girls who describe themselves as "no good at science," which reflects a cultural norm that science is a male discipline. But sharing personal stories can also shape cultural norms—we are seeing this in society's developing intolerance to sexual harassment, following the catalyst of personal stories shared through the #MeToo movement. Through the stories people tell about their lives, perceptions of the past, present, and future are fashioned and refashioned; interpretations of events are moulded and applied to other events (Fivush, 2010). The stories of individuals are connected with broader cultural narratives through which the moral positions of social groups are fostered and shared.

To reproduce a cultural narrative is therefore to participate in a powerful social process in which the stories we tell about the world shape its realities and are shaped by them in turn. Rehearsing a cultural narrative often leads one to take a moral position and to situate oneself within a framework that tells others about one's moral and social identity. Once internalised in ways of thinking and acting, a cultural narrative becomes a frame or lens through which one sees other narratives, making particular metaphors, images, arguments, and concepts appear more relevant and truer. Culturally dominant narratives gain currency either through the breadth of their spread or their promotion by powerful agents in society. These narratives can have the effect of silencing marginalised groups in society (Harding, 1993). Within such groups, alternative cultural narratives gain purchase by providing a means to resist the evaluations and moral implications of a dominant narrative (Lucas & Warman, 2018). Cultural narratives reflect individual experience, but are collective, and work to make some realities more likely than others (Hajer & Laws, 2009). They define issues in particular ways and, in doing so, make certain pathways smoother and others more jarring and uncomfortable.

I argue that we slip too easily into narrowly defined cultural narratives of climate change concern, based on scientific risk assessments that present climate change first and foremost as a scientific fact. Those narratives foreground threatened nature and focus on environmental impacts. And they advocate a limited range of responses through intergovernmental agreements and energy transitions. Repeated by prominent messengers from certain social groups, such narratives become associated with the identity of those groups—to belong, one buys in, investing one's sense of self in the group narrative. It is all too simple to repeat something you have heard a few times from people you trust, without giving it too much thought. And before long these narratives

become attached to one's identity as a member of a social group. They become something that it hurts to reconsider. But for those who do not identify with a social group that has signed up to these same narratives—particularly those who see people who belong to such groups as "other," this is an invitation to espouse oppositional narratives. In this way, by uncritically perpetuating a narrow set of climate narratives as true, advocates of climate change action can contribute to the formation of resistance and oppositional discourse coalitions and slip into the parallel ruts of polarised narratives created in previous cultural and environmental conflicts (Lucas & Warman, 2018).

There are three dangers inherent in this situation. The first is that climate advocates limit their own options for action by adhering too closely to accepted narratives. The second is that they pathologise unconcern, and in doing so fail to heed real and important intersectional concerns experienced by people outside of their own discourse coalition (Lucas & Davison, 2019). The third is that they limit coalitions for action by othering people who do not conform to dominant narratives.

3 | COMMUNICATION AS FRICTION

Communication is an act we tend to take for granted. We do so much of it all the time, mostly without thinking too hard about it. We get up in the morning, check the news, send work emails, agree over the fence to put out our neighbour's bins, tweet about our pets, chat with the barista at the coffee shop, send more work emails, write to-do lists, go to Zoom meetings, commiserate online about the state of the world, share stories of our day with our partners, call our parents to check they are OK, tell our kids we love them but would they please go to bed, and maybe send a couple of last work emails before falling exhausted into our beds—well that is my day, anyway. In all our interactions, we rarely have time to consider the underlying meanings of our communication.

But what we are doing is connecting with others—networks of others who are busy also communicating between themselves. And these myriad interactions produce and reproduce the cultural narratives and power relations that make up our collective worlds. In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2011, p. 4) has described this network of communicative connections as "friction," through which the "awkward, uneven, unstable, and creative qualities of interaction across difference" continually co-produce culture.

Friction is a helpful metaphor for the ways in which communication can shape culture. "Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light: one stick alone is just a stick" (Tsing, 2011, p. 5). In the friction of interaction, both sticks are materially transformed. Tsing (2011, p. 5) has told us that as "a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power." Friction is necessary for movement—but can also slow progress. Using our energy efficiently often means we take the path of least resistance—that we take things on trust and we avoid thinking too hard about things that are not central to our immediate purpose. But the pursuit of smoother passage can lead us to slip into ruts in our collective thinking, which curb our creativity, reproduce conflict, and limit the paths open to us. Tsing's metaphor of friction can help understand how people adopt and perpetuate cultural narratives about climate change and how these narratives interact with one another. Friction between opposing narratives can produce resistance, but as Tsing has reminded us, in friction is the potential for transformation.

Friction is an inevitable outcome of competing interests rubbing up close, as people share the common realities of a changing climate. Donna Haraway (1988) has argued that the multiple perspectives of partial and embodied accounts of the world are more rational and more constitutive of reality that the disembodied "view from above" of an empiricist model of science that claims access to universality. In my study of climate change unconcern, I had conducted a large public survey, the Hobart Values Survey, that looked at how unconcern could be predicted by prioritising certain values (Lucas, 2018a). I wanted to see how this played out in the context of people's lives. And, as Tsing (2011) has written in this regard, "as soon as we let go of the universal as a self-fulfilling abstract truth, we must become embroiled in specific situations" (pp. 1–2).

4 | PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH METHODS

In my research into unconcern about climate change I stepped, tentatively, into the lives of nine people, each of whom I interviewed every few weeks for about six months. I knew that none of my nine participants was concerned about climate change, because each had revealed this in the Hobart Values Survey (Lucas, 2018a). The nine participants agreed to allow me to interview them up to eight times each, over the period, meeting where it suited them, which was variously at their home, in their car, at work, or at a cafe. I met seven participants eight times each, and the two remaining participants six and seven times, respectively. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes. Overall, I conducted 62

dialogical, semi-structured interviews between September 2015 and March 2016.

My main aim in undertaking a series of repeat, short, dialogical interviews instead of one or two long, in-depth interviews was to develop trusting and reflexive relationships with participants. Trust was important, both so they were open to a deep engagement and might provide rich and reflective responses and so I might develop an empathetic connection with participants who were "other" to me insofar as they did not share my concerns about climate change. I hoped that by making our conversations part of a regular routine, we would become familiar with each other and that this approach would enable greater openness, trust, and empathy, as well as several opportunities to address issues of interest. The series also enabled an innovative process involving delayed disclosure of the specific aims of the study to participants. I was able to explore the context and reasoning underlying their beliefs about climate change by moving over time from personal to local to global concerns and from personally held values and commitments to reactions to publicly controversial issues.

To avoid generating avoidable bias in participants' responses, I did not specifically address climate change in the first four interviews, unless it was introduced into conversation by the participant. I described my research in its most general sense as an exploration of how participants thought about controversial issues in the public sphere in the context of their own lives. My aim was to use those interviews to find out what participants were actively concerned about so that I could place their attitudes to climate change in the context of their values, life experiences, social identities, and core concerns. Climate change was introduced as a topic of discussion in the fifth interview. In the sixth interview, I explained to participants that although interviews have covered wide-ranging issues, climate change was the central focus in the study. Given that participants might reasonably feel misled about the aims of the study, at that point, I reiterated participants' right to withdraw from the study entirely or withdraw any or all of their interview responses. I asked participants to explicitly re-consent to taking part in the study at this point, as specified in my ethics approval for the study (Human Research Ethics Committee [Tasmania] Network, H0014743). None of the participants wished to withdraw, and all provided written re-consent. Their continued involvement attests to the trusting relationships engendered through the process of multiple interviews before that point. In all my interactions with participants I aimed to be reflexive about my own positionality, empathetic in my engagement and non-judgemental about their opinions and life choices. Let me introduce them to you, using their pseudonyms.

Doug is an ex-taxi driver and a veteran of the Navy. He spends lunchtimes at the Returned and Services League (RSL) club and likes to take a punt on the horses.

Gerald has dived Tasmania's coasts since he was young and has witnessed the loss of the kelp forests. He would like a bigger house, and a better car.

Hannah is a retired librarian whose travels in India led her to pursue eastern philosophy.

Henry is a Christian minister who runs a youth hostel and has a growing family, all home-schooled.

Lana works for the government and loves her veggie patch. She likes to get out to the coast with her family in their four-wheel-drive.

Oliver used to be a government adviser. Now retired, he lives close to the bush and reads about Tasmania's indigenous history.

Rachel has lived in the same suburb her whole life and sees herself as the family peacekeeper.

Neil is a student and a young member of the right-wing Liberal party. He worries about the welfare of immigrants in detention centres.

Margaret is very shy and works as a nanny. She is eagerly awaiting the birth of her first grandchild.

In this article, I draw specifically from transcripts of interviews with Margaret and Neil as examples of two distinct types of climate change unconcern. I have chosen to represent only two narratives in detail (and two in passing) so that the reader may experience something of the connection and empathy I came to have with participants through hearing their rich and contextualised stories. I have described narratives shared by Rachel, Gerald, and Doug in detail in Lucas and Davison (2019). Extended vignettes of each participant can be read in Lucas (2018b).

As the descriptions above suggest, the participants are nine very different people with rich histories and diverse politics. In my judgement, they all aim to live decent lives. None of them was wilfully ignorant, selfish, or immoral. Each had diverse views on climate change, from denial to resignation, and each resisted some or all aspects of the dominant narratives of climate concern.

I have already written about the ways in which participants' unconcern about climate change challenges existing explanations of a "concern deficit" in the literature (Lucas & Davison, 2019). In this article, I focus on the ways that socially constructed narratives are reflected in individual attitudes to climate change and how they are implicated in resistance to concern. Because I was able to interview participants multiple times and gain a multifaceted and fine-grained understanding of their views and attitudes, I had a wealth of contextual information in which to situate their unconcern about climate change. Rather than generalising about reasons for unconcern across the group, I have wanted to examine how their

individual views made sense to each participant, in the context of their own lives. The analytic method of narrative inquiry has enabled me both to explore both individual and structural reasons for unconcern and to retain the lived context of personal stories.

5 | ALL CLIMATE NARRATIVES HAVE A SOCIAL CONTEXT

Margaret is in her late forties and works as an in-home nanny for several families. The characteristics of her job mean that she often works long shifts and odd hours. She cares for children from very young babies to primary-school children. Some of her weeks are extremely busy, whereas others turn out to be unexpectedly quiet. We met fortnightly, when her schedule allowed, for a cup of tea and a chat at the tables outside a suburban café. Margaret has always been shy—a trait she thinks she may have inherited from her mother. Her upbringing was secluded because her parents did not socialise.

> They just never had friends. Like, they just weren't that sort of people. So, I had no experience of what it's like to have people come over, or to go to people's houses or anything like that.

In our second interview, I began to realise that her shyness is pronounced, in that she finds it hard to have conversation with adults who are not part of her family. As I got to know her better, I started to understand that the decision to take part in my research may have been a step on a long road of self-development.

> I was pretty anxious … because I don't like meeting people at all. I'm really an introvert. I do not like meeting people. I don't like talking to people. I like working with children. I like children. I don't like people. And I was like, "oh no, I don't want to do it" and then I was thinking, no, I'm going to push myself. It's about time that I started pushing myself.

Margaret described every day as a battle—as if she is fighting a constant internal war. It is only in the last few years that she has found her vocation working with children. It has been part of a long journey.

> Here I am at 47, and it's only been probably in my 40s that I've started to have a life outside of my own four walls really.

It is perhaps noteworthy that, as a teenager, in an attempt to escape her controlling parents, she agreed to marry a man several years older than she was. Even before the wedding, she felt trapped into it.

> I was 19 when we got married. Within three months of our marriage, he was hitting me. Yet we still had three children, and I truly thought I loved him. (Margaret)

I will not share all of Margaret's story here—it is harrowing—but suffice to say that she escaped a long-term domestic violence situation through the help of her church.

> My church life definitely made a difference because everybody believed in me over the years and saw my potential.

However, Margaret began to feel that the control exerted on her by the church clergy was also preventing her from living according to her own values and beliefs.

> Bringing your children up in an environment like that, you're going against the grain to take your children to the doctor, to give them antibiotics, to send them to school and not home school, to receive a welfare payment. And it's very hard, it's very hard to just try to do the thing that you feel is best for your child. With all that pressure around you, that you're strange or over-reacting or you're completely doing the wrong thing.

A lot of the time, the friction of thinking differently to the group was impossible, and Margaret learned to go along with the group narrative. The strongly conservative church leadership in this former forestry area defined itself as opposed to environmentalism.

> I learned long ago what things you just don't talk about … Like, the Greens are just absolutely, no way. You would not vote, back then you would not have voted Green, and if you did, you wouldn't have told anybody. And if you did tell somebody then you probably would have ended up leaving … And yes, it's, and it's obviously the same with same-sex marriage and homosexuality … Like whether there is climate change or not or—I don't even know why they are worrying about that, it has nothing to do with being a

> Christian and following the Bible ... I have just completely ignored the whole climate change issue because it's so controversial that I have just buried my head in the sand, basically.

Eventually, after 17 years within this close-knit community, and with her children grown, Margaret decided to leave both the church and the area and move closer to Hobart. The move was transformative for Margaret—largely because she has finally discovered her vocation in childcare.

> It has taken me all my life to find this job that I love. So, it is very special.

Working with young children has given Margaret a social status that she has never had in her interactions with adults.

> There is one little girl in particular, she is three and she cracks me up ... She just becomes a mirror of me or a mirror of her mother and it's when you see that then you realize what an important part you play. Because if they are going to mirror you then you have to make sure they mirror something good.

The values that Margaret hopes to instil in the children she cares for are empathy and kindness:

> That is really important to me, to teach empathy. And I like to teach them to, I don't know, just be respectful and you know, have good manners and be thoughtful and ... think about how they use their time and not to be wasteful of food and water.

Margaret's story illustrates that just as climate change cannot be seen as independent from the other crises that face our societies neither can it be understood as separate from the crises and challenges we face in our own lives. Margaret's unconcern about climate change was shaped by a controlling, patriarchal church that also saved her and her young children from a life of physical and emotional violence and abuse.

Although this example of deferring to the group narrative may seem extreme, it has echoes in the stories of every one of my "unconcerned" participants; this is true of both those who were politically right-leaning, and those who were more left-wing, or apolitical. Although polarisation about climate change is generally thought to conform to a Left/Right binary, I found that some attitudes to climate change are poorly explained by this dualism. Seeing unconcern as a right-wing attribute fails to account for the diverse political beliefs of people who feel in friction with existing narratives of climate change concern.

Advocates of climate change action have often described their work as a fight against powerful vested interests that profit from maintaining the status quo (for example, Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Publics unconcerned about climate change have been portrayed as victims of misinformation by powerful conservative interest groups—the "merchants of doubt" or as the perpetrators of such misinformation. Although these organised interest groups undoubtedly exist and do indeed spread misinformation, it is an oversimplification to suggest that the unconcerned are passive or unwitting victims of the narratives pushed by interest groups. If we cast the unconcerned as victims, we undermine their agency, their resistance and their right to democratic participation in the debate.

6 | DIFFERING NARRATIVES OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE

Examples of participants' shared narratives of unconcern resistant to dominant climate narratives were often focused on understandings of nature. Western environmentalist narratives describe nature as fragile and damaged, its "wild" places under threat and in need of protection from humans (Hulme, 2009). In contrast, my unconcerned participants felt that nature was vast and capable of containing and absorbing human impacts without being materially damaged. They described it as finding ways to heal and care for itself. Climate change appeared as natural to several of them, part of a predictable pattern of cycles. Some were also optimistic about aspects of it. For instance, Oliver pointed out that carbon dioxide is good for plants, suggesting that concerns of impending famine are misplaced.

Several participants saw humans as having an important role to play in nature, as custodians, gardeners, and farmers—and they did not see "wilderness" as having greater value than farms, gardens, or other more obviously managed landscapes. This is not to say that these people had no feeling for nature—on the contrary, for several of them immersing themselves in natural landscapes was important to their well-being. But in general, they saw nature not as something external to society that required their care and protection, but as a gift from God that humans have a right and a responsibility to use judiciously. Nature was for the unconcerned participants in

my study primarily a source of energy and materials for the benefit of human life. The Hobart Values Survey has also shown that people who are unconcerned about climate change are more likely to see nature as a resource. On average, they are more supportive of extractive industries than people who are concerned (Lucas & Warman, 2018). In the cultural narrative of nature as a resource, humans are part of a hierarchical order that places them above the natural, and the use of natural resources is seen as a fundamental human right. This narrative has deep historical roots, both in the Christian traditions and in the colonial drive to settle and exploit new frontiers across the globe (Head, 2016).

Not surprisingly, then, a narrative that emerged strongly from interviews was that a "balance" must be maintained between nature that is protected and unused and nature that is available for human use. Participants subscribing to such views felt that existing legislation in Tasmania was out of balance, with too much land and too many resources being "locked up" in reserves. Narratives that presented people as a problem, such as suggestions of overpopulation, created friction with their values.

Neil is a science student who was brought up in relative poverty by his grandmother in a tight-knit Christian community. At 21, Neil decided to leave that community because of his ethical concerns about some of their beliefs. The experience led Neil to interrogate his own beliefs and morality and left him with a strong sense of his own values. There are some issues on which Neil has a strong moral position. Other issues, including climate change, he described taking less seriously, for instance, by adopting a particular narrative for reasons of political identity, or to take part in the "game" of politics with other politically minded students. In this, he felt he and his friends were following the lead of the former Australian Prime Minister: "Tony Abbott was sort of like our hero."

Neil revels in the heat of confrontational political debate and enjoys sparking argument. He described to me a student politics dinner he attended at which there were members of the left-wing student union, the Australian Greens party, and the right-wing Liberal Party (of which Neil was a member). After an hour and a half of polite discussion, Neil recalled making a controversial claim about climate change just to create friction.

> It was like a little bit of flint and bam! Everyone's like at each other's throat ... That was so much better ... So then we could just have a few drinks and like, get into it.

Despite this mischievous attitude, Neil has a strong sense of moral obligation particularly focused on protecting people without power, such as children, the poor, and refugees. This commitment is not only theoretical but also enacted—he volunteers for several organisations involved in helping those in need. Sometimes, these moral commitments put him at odds with the Liberal Party.

> Initially, when they came out with the "stop the boats" slogan you know—I was vehemently against that because I thought it was a bad policy, from a moral point of view.

He described how going to university and making a friend who identifies as gay put his values about friendship and sexuality in friction with his experience of this friendship, leading him to change those values. He explained that he now holds these "tested" values more firmly because they are personally relevant.

> I think values change over time because it's easy enough to say that "this is something that I believe in," or "this is a value of morality that I hold to be true," but ... if it hasn't been tested ... it doesn't really mean much either way.

For Neil, then, forms of understanding that are experienced indirectly are of lesser importance than those that are personal and embodied. What he described is a reactive form of value creation—he does not actively seek ways to test his values but adjusts his values when he finds they no longer fit his experience.

When we came to discuss climate change during our sixth interview, Neil said:

> The problem is that if you're talking about climate change and it's a political debate, you've probably got someone from the Greens. And it is inbuilt into our political culture that if the Greens are on one side, the Liberals have to be on the other. So, if the debate is about climate change, you'll hear very ... eloquent [Liberal] speeches about how it's nonsense.

He told me that he "believes in" climate change and could recite the history of Australian climate policy from John Howard's prime ministership (1996–2007) to the present day (including his view that its failure is attributable to the Australian Greens and the Australian Labor Party). Yet, Neil remains unconcerned; this is not an issue that has any personal purchase on him. His position on it seems pragmatically political and unemotional.

When I asked him to imagine the Tasmanian climate in 2100, he said:

> I think that it will probably be fairly similar as it is today. I don't think it will be particularly warmer or colder … I think there will probably be a few changes in the environment, but I don't think it's going to be disastrously different.

In my reading, Neil has been drawn to climate counter-narratives through his political group membership—and I think his unconcern is group based more than ideological. Given his experience-centred model of values, one might expect that if he had had personal experiences of a bushfire or a heatwave, he might change his views on climate, but there are clear social and political disincentives for him to do so. Like most participants, Neil saw advocacy for climate action as fundamentally linked to membership of the Australian Greens party and environmental movement, and he identified his own social group as in friction with green identity. By sharing cultural narratives opposed to environmentalist narratives, individuals such as Neil perform and reinforce their social identity as not green.

Storylines and cultural narratives that prioritise economic interests are one such set of cultural narratives often opposed to green identity. In the same way that foregrounding climate science allows the climate concerned to claim the authority of rationality in the debate, storying the economy as natural and foundational allows those who are unconcerned to mobilise economics as a means of creating culturally legitimate modes of rationality. The facts themselves have little purchase, because on the whole people reason selectively, based on values, worldviews and social identity. Attention to those narratives focusing on the economic risks posed by climate action also highlight the need to give people the opportunity to thrive through the freedom to extract and profit from natural resources. Such narratives are at the heart of conservative identities and worldviews that prioritise allowing individuals to make their own ways in life, as opposed to more socially oriented narratives that prioritise caring and nurture of both nature and humanity (Lakoff, 2002).

7 | CONCLUSION: A NEW POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

I aspire to a politics of climate change in which people such as my participants—reasonable, moral, intelligent people whose social identities and worldviews are at odds with the dominant narratives of climate change—can be included, respected, and enabled to influence conversations about our climate future. To engage these broader publics, advocates for climate action must build common ground across diverse moral, social, and political aspirations. This work involves both seeking to understand shared values across differences in politics and social backgrounds and respecting the importance and legitimacy of values that may be at odds with our own.

The means to foster this democratising form of climate politics is relational communication, not persuasion, nor social marketing, but attention, dialogue, and a resolve to collaborate across difference. There is an opportunity to break the climate deadlock by recognising and acknowledging the political legitimacy of fellow citizens with whom one disagrees. Such conversations must respect those with different opinions as sharing equal status and must also recognise that their participation in political engagement is vital for the health of democracy.

It is clear that people need to see their own values and people like them reflected in the stories told about climate change, but they must also see different values and experiences in order for climate narratives to enrol, enable, and activate broader political and social membership. Dialogues across difference can help to develop a wider range of narratives about the nature and benefits of climate action. My research has highlighted some areas where current climate discourse is counterproductive in building coalitions for social change; it has also offered insights on perspectives held by people who identify as "unconcerned" about climate change and how dialogues with the unconcerned might lead to more inclusive climate narratives. Existing climate narratives too often recreate nature/human dualisms by assuming a fundamental conflict between human and more-than-human interests. Co-creating narratives that resonate for broader sections of society may involve a focus on human life and dignity rather than on environmental values (Prins et al., 2010). These narratives may acknowledge the social foundation and diversity of scientific understandings of climate (Hulme, 2015). They may recognise the political legitimacy of multiple ends and diverse means in climate action (Ney & Verweij, 2015).

Friction is inevitable, and conflict can never be ruled out of dialogue about climate change. However, productive, *agonistic* rather than *antagonistic* forms of friction are possible. As Mouffe (1999, 2009) describes it, antagonism results from the total othering of the identities of those with whom we disagree. These others are placed as a "them" outside of the political "us" with which social groups identify. Agonism, however, involves respecting the rights of those with whom one disagrees to equal participation in (sub-)political negotiation. Importantly,

sub-politics are part of an emergent decentralisation of politics through which expert systems become open to renegotiation by the broader population (Beck et al., 1994). Sub-politics also subverts processes of scientisation and consensus that aim to depoliticise issues such as climate change and reduce them to questions of technical management (Swyngedouw, 2011).

In order to find a starting point for useful, agonistic, political discussion about the multiple pathways forward to climate action, a democratised spectrum of climate stories is needed, rather than a narrow set of dominant narratives to which one can only opt in or opt out. On that basis, when speaking with "unconcerned" participants, I found that we had many shared interests, values, and worries. Dialogue uncovering shared aspects of identity countered a tendency to see people as other (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). This relational understanding, forged in ways independent of the issue on which we disagreed, was important in creating mutual trust. Several female participants, including Margaret, told me they avoided talking about climate change because of fears of being judged or of sparking conflict, either within their family and social groups or outside them. One product of such fear of being othered is climate silence. Fearing to talk about it means that social groups fail to process knowledge about climate change, let alone act upon that knowledge (Norgaard, 2011). A second product of the fear of being othered is to attach oneself so firmly to the dominant narrative of your social group that it makes one deaf to other narratives. Whereas none of them introduced climate change into our discussions themselves, male participants on the whole appeared more willing to talk about it—but tended to stick closely to familiar counter-narratives associated with their social identities.

During interviews, although I expressed my own concern about climate change, I offered no arguments nor tried to persuade participants in any way. I asked about their interpretations of the issue and their lived experiences of climate change and the debate surrounding it. But when, in my final interviews with participants, they considered their experiences of our discussions, several participants admitted that they had not thought deeply about climate change before—seeking to avoid friction, they had slipped into a narrative pattern typical of their interactions with their main social groups. Yet, once Margaret had had the opportunity to reflect on her own thinking in conversation with me, she decided she needed to find out more about climate change. In turn, Henry, a right-wing pastor, felt that perhaps he had missed something—and he decided to start a climate change reading group. Oliver, an ex-Liberal Party staffer and a staunch climate denier, sent me a series of emails in which he put himself in my shoes and tried to think through how he might try to sell climate policy to the voting public, if he were me. I think almost all of my participants found their range of climate narratives shifting, after our meetings. And I was also affected—I no longer saw the unconcerned as "other" and I became more critical and reflexive about the group narratives that I slip into.

It is not in the public interest for climate change to be seen as a problem that is "owned" by a limited section of society, particularly if this sense of ownership contributes to oppositional social identities and polarisation. Productive, even transformative climate friction involves creating democratic engagement based on respectful listening, relational dialogue, and openness to negotiation with people from diverse social groups. Citizens' climate assemblies across Europe exemplify this commitment to working together mindful of differences in values and perspectives, but using these to expand, rather than limit the conversation (O'Grady, 2020). Although these assemblies differ in their terms of reference and political power across nations, they have some things in common. Citizens representative of different geographies, genders, ethnic backgrounds, levels of education, politics, and attitudes to climate change are brought together over a significant amount of time to make policy recommendations on a pathway to zero emissions. In the United Kingdom, the Climate Assembly included 19% of participants who were unconcerned about climate change. Representativeness is important for both credibility of the process and momentum to generate a national debate capable of shifting out of the ruts of existing narratives. Interestingly, the Climate Assembly agreed on key principles that changed the focus of the discourse, including values that are important to a diverse politics. Some of these principles were fairness across sectors, geographies, incomes, and vulnerabilities; collaboration across all levels of society; a mixture of natural and technological solutions; freedom of choice for individuals; and co-benefits spanning the economy, health, and well-being (Climate Assembly UK, 2020).

Forms of collective dialogue that help to generate engaged citizenry are essential to a de-polarised politics of climate change. Climate change communicators who see themselves as listeners and learners involved in dialogues with fellow citizens are more likely to facilitate the inclusive and collaborative politics of climate change required for climate action at a scale commensurate with the challenges facing societies. Undertaking such relational dialogue demands a reflexive step back from one's own goals in favour of more reciprocal forms of communication that begins by asking questions about the values and priorities of the citizens with whom one engages. Building engaged citizenry is not a "quick fix"—it

involves long-term investment in social capital and networked sub-political fora. Agonistic climate change discourse is therefore not a substitute for those areas of social policy where political coalitions already exist to support urgent climate action. Indeed, a key benefit of more agonistic communication about climate change is recognition that current climate politics, hardened through polarisation, could be loosened and disaggregated into diverse discursive contexts. In the most politically challenging of these contexts, climate change action might be best furthered by decentring climate change itself as the central discursive focus in order to enable change that can be seen to benefit multiple and diverse sets of values.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. This article is based on the 2020 Fay Gale Memorial Lecture, which I was invited to present by the Institute of Australian Geographers (IAG). I would like to thank members of the IAG Council for this opportunity. I would also like to express my deep appreciation to Aidan Davison, Peat Leith, and Ingrid van Putten for their contribution to this work and for their ongoing support and friendship.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: Lucas, C. H. (2021). Climate friction: How climate change communication produces resistance to concern. *Geographical Research*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12514