

CONSCIOUSNESS STRUCTURES AND ATTACHMENT RESPONSES TO STRANGE SITUATIONS

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Abstract. As occupants of Planet Earth, we are currently experiencing what might be described as “strange situations”: 9/11, global warming, and the demise of the grand narrative, to name three. Strange situations pose threats of psychological and physical annihilation. Individual reactions to strange situations have been extensively studied in young children by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978a, 1978b). The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze cultural strange situations. Appreciating cultural responses to strange situations requires an acknowledgement that cultural consciousness exists. The discussion relates the structures of consciousness identified by Jean Gebser (1949/85) with cultural reactions to strange situations. This paper connects attachment and cultural consciousness theories as a new way to understand complexity and to face cultural strange situations with mindfulness, innovation, care and resolve.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we attempt to draw attention to two very different ways of perceiving reality: individual and cultural. The perspectives are drawn from the theories of attachment (Bowlby, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1988) and cultural consciousness (Gebser, 1949/85). For individuals, “strange situations” were first described by Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978a, 1978b). They are situations in which we find ourselves losing contact with our secure base – the person who can look after us and protect us from danger. Collectively strange situations also challenge our cultural ways of perceiving reality, e.g. global warming changes world views.¹ The strange situation test was designed to measure the reactions of infants and young children to the temporary loss of a secure base object or attachment figure. Researchers using the test found a number of universally predictable reactions from infants to strange situations. These can also be seen mirrored in the cultural reactions to the strange situations that face us communally. We attempt to define points of contact and points of departure between individual and cultural responses to three strange situations: 9/11, global warming, and the demise of the grand narrative.

2. ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory, a psychological theory of relationship dynamics, developed partly as a result of the new world order that emerged from Europe during and after the Second World War. John Bowlby, a young psychiatrist, was commissioned by the World Health Organization to discover ways to cope with the human trauma resulting from forced separations between people. His brief was to document the effects on children separated from their parents and significant caregivers either permanently through death, or temporarily through relocation to “safe havens,” and develop reparative strategies. Attachment theory was developed as a result of these efforts and has become one of the most powerful theories of childhood development. Recently, the theory has been expanded to conceptualize adult relating also. John Bowlby’s long time collaborator

Mary Ainsworth made a significant contribution to the development of the theory, not least for the development of the strange situation test. The test involves a separation between an infant and a primary attachment figure (or caregiver), usually but not always the mother. The baby's reaction to the separation and the manner in which s/he responds to the reunion was carefully observed in hundreds of cases. What was revealed were broad classes of behavior by babies, categorized as secure and insecure attachment behavior, directed toward the secure base object. Further research revealed that babies constructed a model or schema of "self" and "other" via interactions with caregivers. This was termed the "inner working model" (IWM). It has come to be understood that this model is carried into adult life and used to scaffold internal responses to the world and events – a kind of behavioral and emotional operational manual. The IWM is carried in the unconscious and is fairly impervious to change, although changes do occur over time (Bowlby, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1988).

3. THEORY OF CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

At the same time that John Bowlby was developing his thinking around the ideas of attachment, Jean Gebser (1949/85) was developing his theory of cultural consciousness, also in war-ravaged Europe. According to Gebser, as Western culture evolved so too did cultural consciousness. Cultural consciousness reflects how we perceive reality. When a particular way of perceiving reality becomes deficient culturally, another manifests itself (see Table 1). However, the newly emerging perceptions of reality create insecurity and resistance as we seek to avoid strange situations.

Table 1: *Recognizing the Characteristics of Consciousness Structures* (Gebser, 1949/1985)

Structure	Efficient	Deficient	Essence	Space and Time Relationship		
Archaic	None	Presentiment/ foreboding	Identity (integrality)	Zero dimensional	None	Prespatial Pretemporal
Magic	Spell casting	Witchcraft/ Sorcery	Unity (oneness)	One dimensional	Preperspectival	Spaceless Timeless
Mythical	Primal myth (envisioned myth)	Mythology (spoken myth)	Polarity (ambivalence)	Two dimensional	Unperspectival	Spaceless Natural temporality
Mental	Menos (directive, discursive thought)	Ration (divisive, immoderate hair-splitting)	Duality (opposition)	Three dimensional	Perspectival	Spatial Abstract Temporal
Integral	Diaphainon (open, spiritual "Verition")	Void (atomizing dissolution)	Diaphaneity (transparency)	Four dimensional	Apersepectival	Space-free Time-free

We have many structures of consciousness. Gebser (1949/1985) named the structures archaic, magical, mythical, mental and integral. Cultural reality is complex as it is perceived through being (archaically), experiencing (magically), envisaging (mythically), and, viewing (mental/rationally) (see Table 1 above). The fifth newly emerging structure integrality makes transparent all structures of consciousness. Gebser signaled that the enfolding and unfolding of cultural consciousness assists the ever-present origin to be realized. "The ever-present reality, or origin, is by nature 'divine and spiritual....' With the arational-integral structure the

origin becomes ... directly accessible, when the mature ego is transcended" (Feuerstein, 1987, p. 217). Eco-learning is dependent on a transcendent (mental rational) ego, integral reality, the transparency of verition (world as truth), and begins from a secure base – the ever present origin.

Gebser (1949/1985) carefully selected the term structures of consciousness to emphasize that it was "merely an attempt to structure events for convenient accessibility" (p. 37). He did not believe structures of consciousness to be associated with human development or progress. Each structure has its deficient and efficient characteristics, expression of reality, and sense of truth, space and time. Gebser suggested that we are not single-minded animals but instead multi-structured conscious beings.

In the next section, we apply the frames of attachment and cultural consciousness to three pressing global issues: ongoing reactions to the 9/11 event, global warming, and the perceived end of the grand narrative. In each case attachment theory is first applied and a cultural perspective follows. Our aim is to better understand reactions to these events through the joint application of psychological and cultural frames of reference.

4. STRANGE SITUATION: 9/11

Attachment perspective

The current state of flux and instability offers promise as well as peril. The promise is probably not a return to institutionalised, collective forms of meaning – of identity, belonging, and purpose – but a different sort of individualism. (Eckersley, 2004, p. 42)

From an attachment perspective, when Americans, and indeed Westerners, linked through culture and capital and trade watched a significant financial and symbolic center – the Twin Towers – destroyed, they were suddenly faced with the loss of a secure base. One way of recognizing and analyzing Americans' loss of their secure base is through the media portrayal of the 9/11 event. The global media portrayal of this event and the aftermath is also significant because this too reflects the West's loss of a secure base. This was reported in both word and image as the loss of reason and order. The headline in Figure 1 (p. 19) could easily be describing an infant's reaction to the moment when s/he loses contact with his or her attachment figure. The sense of urgency and fear is overwhelming.

Newsday records how a *safe haven*, a term also used by Bowlby (1988) as synonymous with a secure base, has been transformed into a "war zone," with people "screaming, crying and running." In attachment theory the safe haven is the place of protection to return to when stressed, tired or ill, yet the image shows individuals desperately running from it. The emergency service personnel were also clearly distressed by the magnitude of events. This is no surprise; however, for most citizens they represent the secure base object in a crisis. Their level of distress would serve to heighten their *separation anxiety* from the secure base. President Bush attempted to restore the secure base of the system by declaring, "My resolve is steady and strong about winning this war that has been declared on America" ("Bush Visits New York Destruction," 2001).

What made 9/11 strange in cultural terms was a ubiquitous symbol of human "triumph" over the environment, the airplane, which was used now as an instrument of destruction. If war had indeed been declared through this action, it was done in an emphatic and surprising way to say the least. The variation in people's reactions to this event seemed to mirror the predictable reactions of infants facing the strange situation test. The calls for retaliation were swift in many quarters. This could be seen as a collective form of separation protest that always accompanies the loss of the secure base in individuals. Some felt that as a culture we needed to show that we had been wounded psychologically as well as physically, even if we

did not have any contact with the unfortunate occupants of the building or their families and friends. The collective wounding justified reactive retaliation. Also affected was the cultural internal working model by the forced change of dealing with “the other.” The West’s dismissive attitude toward the other changed to an attitude of preoccupation, leading to pre-emptive defensive positions and an invasion of a country that looked close enough to the other to justify receiving our collective wrath. Destruction of the secure base took with it the idea that the world can be predictable and therefore safe to operate within. Thus, separation protest was an inevitable reaction.

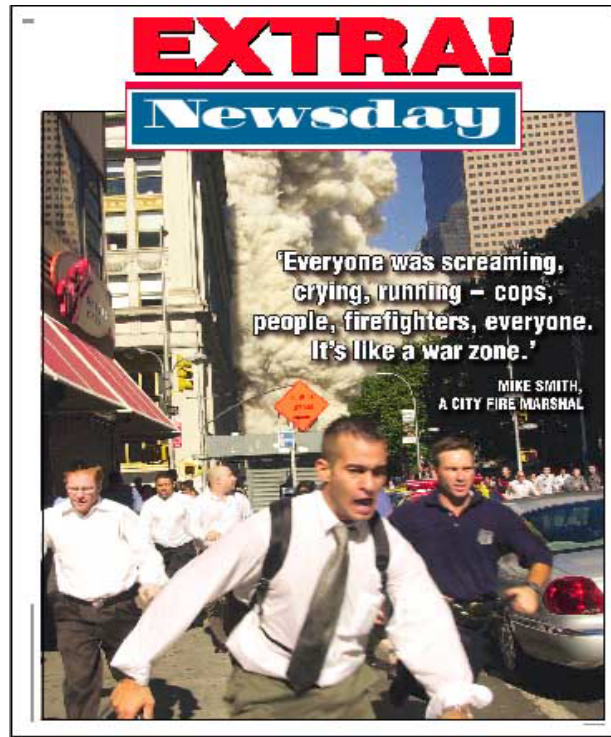


Figure 1: *Newsday*.

Source: <http://www.september11news.com>

Cultural perspective

The event known as 9/11 and what has proceeded from it – the war on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan – can also be understood as a melodrama of consciousness. All structures in the deficient and efficient forms are transparent. In cultural terms, sorcerers combined two Western symbols, the skyscraper and the airplane, to destroy each other, which highlighted both the power and tenuousness nature of cultural symbolism. The use of sorcery struck fear into the psyche of American citizens. Televising the event evoked the deficient magical consciousness in the rest of the Western world.

The *Newsday* headline of September 14, 2000 (Figure 2, p. 20) represented an official response to the event and a wish to become publically united to form a coalition force “to defeat terrorists.” This is the magical response to threat – increasing feelings of security by delineating “us” from “them.” However, it also serves to increase the fear of the other through representing them as the unknown, or as unpredictable. In responding to the 9/11 event President Bush evoked the fear of the stranger, the need to protect against another strange situation occurring anywhere in the Western world. On September 13, 2001 he proclaimed, “We have just seen the first war of the 21st century.” He vowed to “lead the world to victory” in the battle against terrorism. The President further stirred the emotions of magical consciousness by saying, “I weep

and mourn with America,” and “There is a quiet anger in America” (“First War of 21st Century,” 2001).

Mythical irrationality abounded with notions that threatening strangers all look the same, and different from the Westerner. This notion was aided by the photographic publication by the United States Justice Department of the terrorists and the planes they hijacked (See Figure 3, p. 21).



Figure 2: *Newsday*, September 12, 2001

Source: <http://www.september11news.com/USANewspapers.htm>

Having all the hijackers' images published together projected a powerful message of threat, and promoted fear of the stranger, and therefore the strange. These appeared to be deliberate attempts, in the cultural sense, to evoke the feeling that chaos was implanted by the invasion of strangers and that rational consciousness had to regain control by eliminating them. Hence, exaggerated rationalism took hold as Western culture determined how to minimize the stranger threat. Didactic myths abounded citing strangers in control of weapons of mass destruction, gaining support for the creation of the coalition of the willing. Gebser (1949/1985) predicted this kind of magical response to magical threat, rationalizing and fostering oppositional thinking of good versus evil. This was particularly evident in Senator Clinton's comments at the time:

In the four years since the inspectors left, intelligence reports show that Saddam Hussein has worked to rebuild his chemical and biological weapons stock, his missile delivery capability, and his nuclear program. He has also given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al Qaeda members. It is clear, however, that if left unchecked, Saddam Hussein will continue to increase his capacity to wage biological and chemical warfare, and will keep trying to develop nuclear weapons. (“Words of Mass Destruction,” 2007)

Magical fearfulness, irrational mythologizing and mental rationalizing combined, resulting in a “pre-emptive defensive strike.” However, for many in the West, what became apparent was that these actions were born of a deficient way of viewing reality and would result in greater

loss of life and environmental hardship. The death toll on both sides of the war in Iraq, since the invasion to promote peace has proved this to be the case. In this we have all been sorcerers who have tried to intimidate and control the other. Gebser argued that this way of thinking would ultimately lead to destruction whatever its forms. He posed Verition (world as truth) would transcend deficient thinking. There has been a growing recognition that we are autonomously inter-dependent and by destroying the other we destroy ourselves.

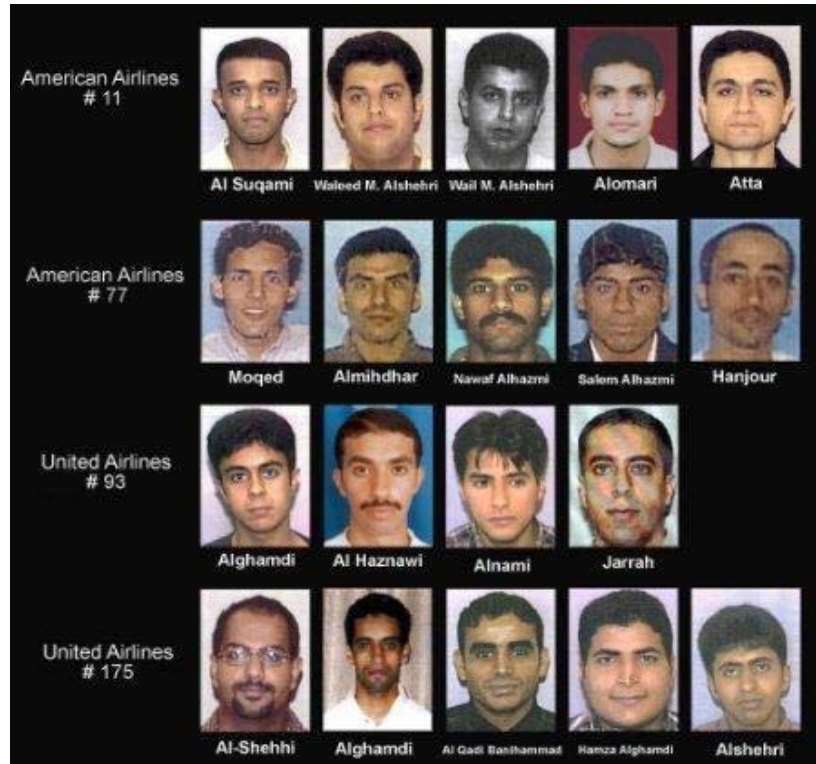


Figure 3: United States Department of Justice images of 9/11 terrorists.
 Source: <http://www.september11news.com/AttackImages.htm>

5. STRANGE SITUATION: GLOBAL WARMING

Attachment perspective

It's easy to foresee that, in the future, when science and technique have attained to a perfection which we are as yet unable to visualize, nature will become soft wax in man's hands, which he will be able to cast into whatever form he chooses.
 (Pokrovskiy, 1931/2005)

Human variation in responses to the issues of global warming (Figure 4, p. 22) can be viewed in attachment terms as responses to the threat of the secure base (literally the earth). The variation in response among and between communities mimics attachment behaviors. The economic skeptics, disconnected from the earth as system, have learnt to be more strongly attached to economic well-being, and therefore find it difficult to conceive of a problem with the environment that cannot be directly or at least economically experienced. This is akin to the child who has a dismissing attachment. They have a distrust of the other because of a developmental history of being either neglected, ignored, inconsistently related to, or abused by those in whom they had to place their trust. Consequently, they learned that to survive they needed to rely on their own resources and they developed an inner working model that repressed attachment needs – their need to rely on others. Bowlby described such people as the

obsessively self-reliant (Bowlby, 1988). In collective terms, films such as *The Great Global Warming Swindle* (Durkin, 2007), which attempts to deny that global warming is a creation of our own collective stupidity and greed, soothe these people by denying the existence of the problem. This is akin to dismissing attachment. The skeptic's denial that we are all dependent on each other if we are to face and hopefully overcome this current threat is a cultural form of defensive exclusion. This has been studied empirically by many researchers (Bowlby, 1988; Dixon & Henley, 1991; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005; Miller & Noirot, 1999; Pierce & Lydon, 1998; Rowe & Carnelley, 2003). Defensive exclusion operates at a cultural level when information that is important to grapple with is denied from perception to guard against evoking painful memories. It also serves to blinker from awareness the potential futures we face, the choices we might make because of the information excluded, and our collective willingness to face the future together as interdependent beings.

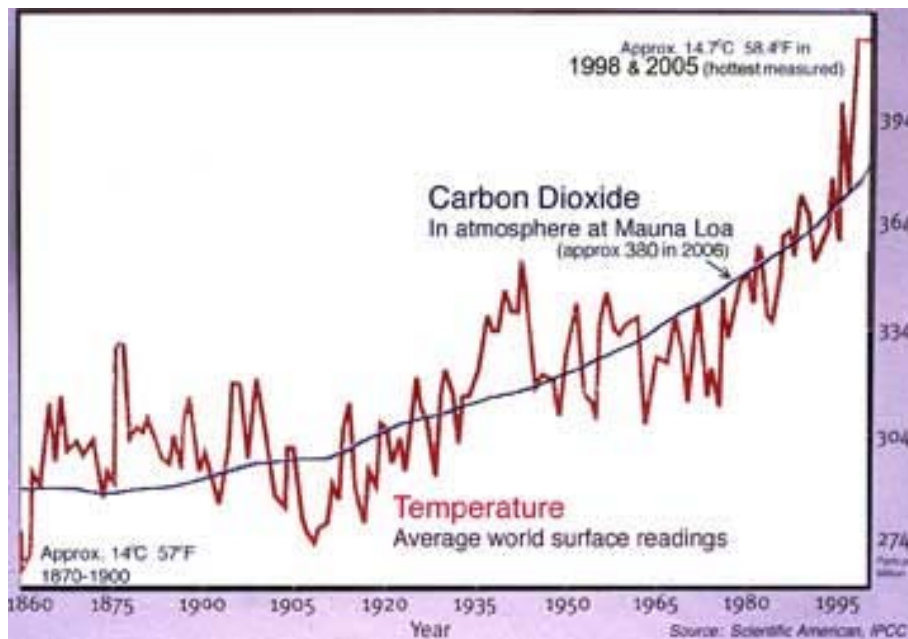


Figure 4: IPCC graph of growth of atmospheric carbon dioxide levels from 1860 – 2005
Source: <http://www.worldviewofglobalwarming.org/>

Indeed, Eckersley (2004) suggests that

Our materialistic, individualistic culture undermines, even reverses, universal values and time-tested wisdom. This situation amounts to what I have called “cultural fraud” ... the projection and promotion of cultural images and ideals that serve the economy but do not meet human psychological needs or reflect social [or environmental] realities. (p. 410)

Dealing with the problem of global warming by reference to the economy seems to be evidence of defensive exclusion. The dismissive reaction to the threat of physical and psychological annihilation is learned in the first three years of life (Bowlby, 1982). Termed “obsessively self-reliant,” these people have been let down too many times by attachment figures and have learnt to avoid any form of dependence as a result. Yet we are all dependent on the earth and to ignore or deny this fact is ultimately to deny our own existence. That is, however, exactly what is happening in some powerful political quarters. Politics, as it is played out in the West, the art of the possible, seems to rely on coercion rather than cohesion, and is based on a series of nego-

tiations predicated on outcomes driven entirely by self-interest. The dismissing response is the skeptic's view, perhaps better described culturally as the political view.

The skeptical view of global warming seeks to deny the voice of experts: it implies a mistrust of the other. This behavior has its antecedents in our earliest years as we learn how to relate to the other. In Ainsworth et al's (1978a, 1978b) strange situation test a person unknown to the infant enters the room and attempts to comfort the infant who is distressed at the disappearance of her mother. In the test, the stranger attempts to be as responsive and sympathetic to the infant as she can be. In a cultural context this might be seen as the equivalent of a series of experts offering advice on how best to deal with global warming, genetically modified foods, rapidly depleting oil and our ever increasing reliance on depleting forms of energy. Like those infants who reject the stranger, some will be distrustful of the advice. There are people who will always be distrustful of those who wish to look after Earth for future generations and those who don't understand the altruism of others, suspecting their motives. Then there are the obsessively self-reliant who will not believe in global warming until they feel a rise in temperature on their skin or run out of clean drinking water, or who will not believe in air pollution until it impacts on them personally.

Cultural perspective

Cultural consciousness has fragmented ecology, with notions of the world as a machine, humans as engineers and the environment to be engineered. As a result, we have lost our connection with the whole. We find ourselves in a strange situation as we face global warming and need to recognize that we have played a significant role in bringing this about. The world as truth – verition – has highlighted that we have been making the environment sick. Lovelock's conception of Gaia (1988, 1991) helps us to imagine the world as living, invoking ecological awareness:

I often describe the planetary ecosystem, Gaia, as alive because it behaves like a living organism to the extent that temperature and chemical composition are actively kept constant in the face of perturbations.... I am well aware that the term itself is metaphorical and that the earth is not alive in the same way as you or me or even a bacterium. (Lovelock, 1991, pp. 6, 11, 31)

Similarly Bowlby (1982) conceived the attachment system as one of homeostasis where perturbations coming from the environment triggered reactions in the individual that ensured protection from harm. Gaia calls on the efficient mythical structure where polarity exists without oppositional/binary thinking and hearing is empathic. There is also our archaic consciousness structure of non-separateness, a magical sense of belonging and connectedness where there is environmental attunement combined with logical recognition of the existence of living systems, where autopoiesis triggers change (Purdy, 1998). Integrality assists in making transparent environmental and social ecology. Living systems thinking helps us to be aware of the human generative system nested within the environmental system. Verition makes manifest autonomous interdependency and how this is connected to sustainability. Verition highlights sustainability in both its recognition and acceptance of diversity with a transcendent ego.

6. STRANGE SITUATION: THE PERCEIVED END OF THE GRAND NARRATIVE(S) OF MODERNITY

Attachment perspective

The end of the grand narrative of the nuclear family has seen a dramatic shift in the Western attitude to childhood, child rearing, and transmission of generational patterns. With the ending of this grand narrative the role of the secure base is outsourced. The strange situations defined

by Ainsworth et al (1978a, 1978b) are part of the everyday life for children separated from primary caregivers as early as six weeks of age. What does the individual find himself/herself in this situation do? How should s/he view the world? To whom should s/he attach for safety and emotional scaffolding? These are questions that will have a direct bearing on how individuals experience attachment, and therefore their sense of security in relationships. It is likely also to have a bearing on their level of curiosity about the world they are growing up in, and their motivation to care for the physical, social and emotional ecology.

Cultural perspective

The deficient mental/rational way of perceiving reality reflects the construction of the grand narrative as being a patriarchal, hierarchical culture, worshipping progress and pursuing consumerism. Conspicuous consumption became a symbol of wellbeing in the West. This brought forth the rise of the individual, striving for power and security via control. This is now being challenged by strange situations in the West such as rising rates of mental illness (WHO, 2002; para 2), disenfranchised youth (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001), suicide (WHO, 2002; para 4), addictions, and the realization that finite resources cannot support existing forms of employment – continuous economic growth as unsustainable mythology. No amount of sorcery, or rationalizing, can uphold the grand narrative that continuous growth is good for the planet. As verition unfolds the grand narrative is experienced, and viewed, as meaningless. With the demise of the grand narrative, the etiology of integrality unfolds, bringing a greater sense of meaning to what appears chaotic from the previous perspective.

7. CONCLUSIONS

We have attempted to outline why taking a new perspective, by linking the tenets of attachment theory with cultural consciousness, might be useful in conceptualizing the current global crises facing us. Our human resolve to collaborate in combating the difficulties we face as a global community is crucial to success in talking about global issues. To this end, the inevitability of the commonness of our future, our differing perspectives and our interrelationships should be what begin this dialogue. Instead, the loudest voices appear to be those that highlight the differences through promotion of fear of the other from all sides in the debate. This may be driven by misguided self-interest, of both an individual and cultural nature. Our attachment relationships and cultural perceptions of reality will impact on our eco-learning in the 21st century. We would be unwise to ignore either the individual or the culture in shaping experiences. With uncertainty facing us all, untold strange situations are possible – even likely. An ecological consciousness (social and environmental) may assist in our ability to perceive the world as truth and become securely attached individually and culturally, even in a world that holds the possibility of many less than ideal futures. Acknowledging that diversity is life-sustaining and all relationships are interdependent, we can face strange situations less fearfully.

NOTES

- ¹ We prefer this term to “climate change,” which was developed by corporate voices interested in challenging or denying global warming.

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