PSU34790 - The Psychology of the Climate Crisis

Topic area: Social Psychology; Cognitive Psychology

Module Coordinator: Clare Kelly
Structure: 11 x 2-hour lectures; assessed through Continuous Assessment
Semester: MT
5 ECTS

Climate change is the biggest challenge facing our planet and its inhabitants. It is a direct result of human behaviour. Yet, it is a challenge that humans are struggling to address. This module will examine the role of human psychology in the climate crisis to answer three big-picture questions:

- *How did we get here*? What is it about human thought and behaviour and the structures and systems we have created that has led to the current crisis?
- *What are the effects?* How is the Climate Crisis affecting human health, behaviour, and well-being, and how will it affect us in the future? In what way are these effects unevenly distributed across the world and what are the implications of this inequity?
- *What can we do*? How we can leverage our understanding of human thought and behaviour to address the crisis at multiple levels of our society? How can we do this in a way that is just and fair?

Learning Objectives:
This module directly targets all four of the Trinity Education ***Graduate Attributes*** as it engages students with a real-world issue of global concern, allowing them to ***develop continuously*** by gaining new, applied knowledge and growing their ability to ***think independently*** and critically. It features specific instruction in how to ***communicate effectively*** to engage a variety of audiences, and its ultimate goal is to nurture students who will ***act responsibly*** - both in terms of their own behaviours and attitudes towards the Climate Crisis, but also in terms of their influence on others.

After completion of this module, students will be able to:

- Critically evaluate how human thought and behaviour, and our *inventions* - the structures and systems we have created - have led to the current crises (DC; TI);
- Explain how the climate crisis and biodiversity loss affect human health, behaviour, and well-being, and explain the need for climate justice and a just transition (DC; TI; AR);
- Critically evaluate information and information sources from the perspective of human cognition and explain how human thought, emotion, and behaviour can be manipulated for better and for worse (TI; CE; AR);
- Demonstrate how an understanding of human thought and behaviour can be used to make policy recommendations and to affect climate action at the individual and systems levels (CE; AR, DC).

Module Content:
The module will begin by introducing students to the current state of affairs with respect to the science on climate change (How bad is it, really?) and what psychological science tells us about human perceptions of, beliefs about, and attitudes to these facts. We then address our first major question (how did we get here?) through a series of sessions examining psychological perspectives on how humans "work," and how this has led to the Climate Crisis. Topics include: the limits of human cognition - the cognitive shortcuts we engage in and biases we are prone to; our inherently social nature, which means that our beliefs about the world are determined more by social identities than by facts; the role of consumption, of political ideologies, and of money, power, and vested interests.

In the next section, we will flip the discussion and move from thinking about the impact of human thought and behaviour on the Climate Crisis to thinking about the impact of Climate Crisis on human thought and behaviour. We will discuss climate justice - the fact that the greatest impacts of the Climate Crisis are on the poor, on women, on people of colour, and on those that have contributed least to the crisis in the first place. We will also examine the impact of the climate emergency on physical health, including the brain (Clare Kelly, School of Psychology), and on human mental health and well-being (with guest lecturer, Britta Thiemt, Counselling Psychologist).

Finally, we will ask how our knowledge of human thought and behaviour can be leveraged to address the Climate Crisis – that is, what can we do? We'll discuss biospheric values and insights from moral psychology, as well as the role of story-telling and emotion in motivating climate action. We'll consider how psychology can inform policy, and how thinking in systems helps identify leverage points for change. Finally, we'll discuss drivers of progressive societal change, social tipping points, and the psychology of collective action and social movements.

Teaching and Learning Methods
Each session lasts 2hrs, which will blend a lecture, discussion, and active learning approaches. An emphasis on in-person participation reflects a focus on student engagement and opportunities for questions, interaction, and student-centred learning. There will be assigned pre-reading for each session.

The Blackboard VLE is used extensively throughout for engaging and communicating with students and for sharing reading materials and links to other resources (e.g., recorded talks, podcasts, etc.). Discussion boards are used to facilitate communication and discussion of module material and related topics with peers.

Assignments (all continuous assessment):
- **Tailoring the message for the public** (40% of final mark). This assignment involves composing communications aimed at the general public. The communications are required to address topics covered in the module. Examples include, but are not limited to: barriers to action, motivated cognition, the role of vested interests, climate justice, disinformation and delay, social norms, storytelling, climate emotions, etc. The communications are also required to draw on a specific strategy, approach, or framework covered in the module to effectively communicate and to motivate climate action. Such strategies include but are not limited to: ensuring features of the message match the target social/group identity to overcome motivated cognition; using a story-telling and narrative to communicate and foster empathy; addressing the s-frame vs. the i-frame, etc.

  The communications can take a variety of forms. Students may wish to leverage social media and professional platforms such as Twitter/X, Mastodon, BlueSky, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn. Other possibilities include letters to the editor (e.g., of the Irish Times), an article in a newspaper (including College newspapers), magazine (e.g., Evergreen Trinity) or other news or popular media platform, an article for a platform such as The Conversation, a blog post, a speech (e.g., for a protest), a debate, an art or photography project, a flash mob, a poster campaign, a radio interview, a podcast. The module coordinator can be consulted about the suitability of proposed approaches to the assignment. Examples of previous efforts are shared with students on Blackboard.

Each communication must be submitted with a 500-word fully **referenced summary** of the research (evidence base) drawn on when formulating the message and the strategy/approach. All research must be appropriately cited, with a reference list included at the end of each summary, in APA format. While in-text citations *are* included in the word count, the reference list is not included.

- **Policy Brief** (60% of final mark).
  A Policy Brief is a paper that provides an identified decision makers (e.g., political group or politician, public body, etc.) with an authoritative overview of the evidence on an issue and offers solutions, particularly in the form of actionable recommendations (e.g., for policy change). As part of the assignment, students specify real-world stakeholders whom the policy brief targets. They provide a clear statement of the environmental problem or issue in focus, and an overview of the root psychological or behavioural causes of the problem. They identify shortcomings of current policy and make evidence-based recommendations for change. These recommendations must be based in theory and evidence covered in the module. Full guidelines for this 2500-word assignment will be provided.

Indicative Readings:

Books:
Aron AR (2022) The Climate Crisis: Science, Impacts, Policy, Psychology, Justice, Social Movements (digital copy available through the library)

Readings and other materials will be made available through Blackboard,