

Chapter 9

**THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN PREPARING
FOR LEAN TIMES: THE BEHAVIORAL
CONTEXT OF ENERGY DESCENT**

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INTRODUCTION

A one-time era of vast energy and natural resources allowed modern civilization to emerge and flourish. This gift of abundant resources supported the building of industrial society's urban settlements and infrastructure. The material richness also supported the creation of a consumerist society now characterized by a massive global flow of goods and services. None of this can be sustained indefinitely since, despite how vast those resources were, they were never limitless.

A NEW BIOPHYSICAL CONTEXT

Society is approaching biophysical limits-to-growth (Meadows, Meadows, Randers & Behrens, 1972; Meadows, Randers & Meadows, 2004). Under this scenario, resource supplies first tighten and then begin a long, drawn-out but

deep descent. Simultaneously, defensive expenditures rise to address the ecological damage caused by past resource consumption and mismanagement of waste. The notion that there are limits to material growth has been controversial – an astonishing fact given that humans exist on a finite planet. In fact, the very idea of resource limits has been, for decades, much maligned when it was not being ignored. But the expectation of an impending end to modern society's material growth has recently received renewed attention from both ecologists and economists (Bardi, 2014, 2011; Daly & Farley, 2010; Gordon, 2016; Hall & Day, 2009).

Voracious over-consumption of finite resources, coupled with biophysical constraints, is bringing ever closer the day when the resources at our disposal will be insufficient to maintain growth in, and perhaps the full maintenance of, the personal, social and urban systems to which we have become accustomed. Undeniably, a deep decline in resource availability will significantly alter daily life patterns in industrial society. The scope of the implicit challenges being faced has increased tremendously over just the last few decades (McKibben, 2010). Consider that, near the end of this century, the day-to-day challenges of addressing climate disruption will involve producing only about a tenth of current greenhouse gas emissions, and likely requiring a reduction in the consumption of energy and materials by a similar magnitude. The environmental movement has previously argued for major reductions in resource consumption, but rarely have changes of an order of magnitude been envisioned. It may be time for the psychological and behavioral sciences to take seriously the possibility of an unprecedented change in day-to-day living patterns brought on by the end of material growth.

A NEW BEHAVIORAL CONTEXT

It is difficult to know when this scenario might begin to unfold – and distractions like cheap gasoline can make one doubt that it ever will – but it clearly constitutes a new behavioral context, one that the psychological and behavioral sciences least attends to. There are many features of the coming transition that are unfamiliar to a society enmeshed in a fast-paced, even frenetic, era of over-consumption. Fortunately, although dramatic and deep, the needed changes in behavior would be drawn-out. This is not at all what the popular folk mythology of resource apocalypse predicts. The reality of what is being faced lacks Hollywood's sudden and catastrophic collapse motif. The

change is more likely to occur over many decades – a persistent, although punctuated, downshift to a new normal.

Despite the slow nature of the transition, the anticipated changes in the biophysical basis of everyday life will come to seriously tax our social, emotional and attentional capacities. Individuals and groups will be challenged to remain mentally and behaviorally effective while coping with ever-present biophysical limits. The degree to which a given society thrives will depend in part on how well individuals cope with the everyday challenges of energy and resource descent (De Young, 2010). There likely will be a priority placed on such psychological concepts as emotional stability and clear-headedness, the ability to maintain pro-social inclinations, the capacity to plan and restrain behavior, and a willingness to continue building competencies. As disparate as these aspects of coping seem, they share a common foundation: the ability to keep our wits about us in the face of potential chaos. It is here that the behavioral sciences will play a major role in supporting the coming transition, since what is being faced is not a technological or political challenge, but a psychological one.

Research has begun to explore the effects of energy descent on public health (Frumkin, Hess & Vindigni, 2009; Neff, Parker, Kirschenmann, Tinch & Lawrence, 2011; Poland, Dooris & Haluza-Delay, 2011). Likewise, the possible mental, physical and community health impacts of climate disruption are being mapped out; particularly useful are the guidelines on how communities can cope with the psychological impacts of climate disruption (Clayton, Manning & Hodge, 2014; Doherty & Clayton, 2011). A similar effort is needed to help individuals and communities cope with the equally dramatic social and psychological impacts of energy descent (De Young, 2014; De Young & Princen, 2012).

A ROLE FOR PSYCHOLOGY

There are a great many ways in which psychological research and practice can assist people as they first envision and then navigate new life patterns over a long-drawn-out transition. A few are introduced here, meant only to suggest how central psychological insights will be in our successfully coping with limits-to-growth. Very early in the process, people may need assistance in exploring alternatives to the current societal relationship with resources. Fortunately, the human mind evolved for just such exploring (Kaplan & Basu,

2015), with fascinating work emerging on the psychology of prospection (Seligman, Railton, Baumeister & Sripada, 2013).

Behavioral scientists and community practitioners must pre-familiarize people with the coming transition in ways that are neither frightening nor overwhelming. It may prove useful to encourage many small, social experiments in simple living – what might be called behavioral entrepreneurship – as exemplified by the growing transition town and ecovillage movements (Liftin, 2013a, 2013b, 2011). The goal of this pre-familiarization would be to craft and share stories that not only honestly portray life under a prolonged and involuntary energy descent, but do so in a way that people crave the experience enough to seek it now.

Another body of psychological research that may be helpful is that focused on the role of nature in restoring mental effectiveness, emotional stability and subjective well-being (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2008; Kaplan & Basu, 2015; Kaplan, 2001, 1995). One of the more useful findings emerging from this research is that the psychological benefits derived from time spent in nature do not require outstanding natural environments. Nearby nature, even the small scale and ordinary, will suffice for the restoration of mental effectiveness, emotional stability and well-being. This is a hopeful finding since under a resource-constrained scenario it will be necessary to get by with the nearby nature already present in our settlements; there may not be the resources, time or political support to secure and maintain new urban and suburban parks, public gardens or open spaces. Time spent in nearby nature is proving to be as effective as dwelling within the beauty of extraordinary natural settings.

There is, of course, a great deal more existing and emerging psychological knowledge relevant to the issue here being discussed than is mentioned above. But it will be important to be future oriented throughout the coming transition – in particular, field-based applications of existing and emerging findings must be a priority. Since it is likely that no single response will fix things everywhere, for all people or for all time, it will be useful to conduct a great many social experiments. Indeed, a culture of small experiments should be fostered. In so doing, and although a resource-limited future will be austere, it may be possible for people to live well while they live within ecological limits. In fact, the coming downshift may provide an opportunity for people to reconnect with nature and other people in ways that provide deep and durable well-being.

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