

A learning activity for students based on the psychology of climate change

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Overview: This is a student learning activity focusing on some of the psychological concepts involved in everyday thoughts, feelings and behaviours in relation to the climate crisis.

- The **aims** are to promote / consolidate students' understanding of:
 - psychological concepts and theories
 - how these are relevant to real-life situations
 - some of the psychological implications of climate change (in the particular sample scenario of this activity)
- **Summary** of task: Students are presented with an everyday **scenario** relevant to climate change / environmental issues and are asked to **identify** and **explain** the **psychological concepts** at play.
- This learning activity format – **scenario + identify concepts + explain concepts/theory** – can be used with virtually any everyday scenario, but I have chosen the **climate change** context for this particular activity in order to demonstrate the relevance of psychology to just one of the major challenges that our students will face in their lives. The topic is an urgent one that is relevant for psychology students everywhere in the world.
- The activity can be done in small **groups** (preferably) or **individually**, and a group version could be done either in-person or online (e.g. via Zoom). As a group activity it will stimulate discussion amongst the students.

How the activity can be used within different types of psychology courses

- If the 'psychology of climate change' is being taught as a discrete topic in a psychology course, this activity can be just one part of coverage of the topic.
- If 'psychology of climate change' is NOT a topic on the course you are delivering, but you DO teach some of the various concepts, you can use the activity to provide examples of how these concepts are involved in everyday experiences.
- The activity can be a useful revision exercise: where students have already gained an understanding of the concepts, the scenarios can be a way of applying that learning to 'real life' situations.

Instructions for teachers, for conducting the activity

Teachers need to provide materials (suggested here on paper/card, but could be created in a digital application):

- a set of scenarios describing thoughts, feelings and action choices of an individual in everyday situations (we are using just one example here). Write your own scenarios or find some online. Scenarios can consist of a storyboard (story in pictures) with a brief 'story', or just the story in text, on a sheet of paper or card. One example is given here (below) to demonstrate this activity (see page 2).

- set of 'concept cards' each card showing one psychological concept (see page 3). Some spare blank cards.

Instructions for students:

1. Form small groups of 3 – 4.
2. Look at the scenario / story.
3. From the pile of concept cards, choose one concept that you think is relevant to the scenario / story. Each person in the group chooses a concept. You can also suggest a different concept from those in the pile, by writing it on a blank card. Now you have a scenario with concepts scattered around it. A concept may be relevant to one particular part of the story, or may be relevant to the whole story. A story can involve lots of concepts, or just a few.
4. Each of you should now explain why / how you think your chosen concept is relevant to the scenario. This will involve (a) explaining the concept itself in theoretical / abstract terms, and (b) explaining its specific relevance to the scenario / story.
5. Optional: you may discuss the concepts and evaluate each other's choices of concepts, for example by drawing on your previous learning of specific concepts, theories, alternative explanations, as well as other real-life examples.

Scenario



1. Angela's Dad buys bottles of water for all the family members so they can take a bottle with them to school or work every day.



2. But Angela worries about climate change and plastic pollution. On social media she reads about a survey that found 80% of people had switched to a re-usable bottle. She wants one too!



3. She asks her Dad to stop buying bottled water. He says climate change is nothing to worry about! But he agrees and gives her some money that he would have spent on bottled water.



4. Angela goes shopping for an eco-bottle. She buys one just like the ones she knows some of her friends already have. She feels she is doing something positive to protect the environment.

Concept cards – these can be printed on paper and cut into separate concepts, or handwritten on card. You, the teacher, can add your own, depending on the scenarios you use. You could also try getting students to compose their own scenarios based on experiences of everyday life situations.

minority influence	learned helplessness	motivation
attitudes	locus of control	connectedness to nature
emotion	attitude change	denial
perseverance	cognitive dissonance	subjective norms
pro-social behaviour	confirmatory bias	altruism
personality	empathy	self-efficacy
anxiety	defence mechanisms	moral reasoning
conformity	intergenerational influence	parenting style

Here are some additional suggestions and broader considerations on teaching the topic area of psychology of climate change and environmental issues. These are just a few points to consider. This is an area of education that is, rightly, receiving increasing attention in the design of school curricula.

Extending the current scenario-type activity by applying psychological theories

Teachers / students can apply various well-established psychological theories to the scenario activity or to other learning activities on the topic of climate change / environmental issues. Theories that might be applied may come from a range of psychological perspectives, e.g: a cognitive emphasis in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), developmental perspective in the theories of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Baltes et al (1980), emotion / motivation via Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954), social learning and self-efficacy (Bandura, e.g. 1977, 1986), behaviourist learning theory from Skinner (1938), defence mechanisms from psychoanalysis, etc.

Teaching the context beyond the individual

Whilst the scenario of this particular activity focuses mostly on the internal psychological processes of an individual, it's important to set the individual in context, and point to the various levels of responsibility for tackling climate change: individuals can be encouraged (e.g. via behaviour change initiatives) to recycle, use public transport, etc, but the actions of local communities, businesses, overall society, government policies, and international co-operation are crucial. Some psychological theories take a systems approach that can explain these 'nested' layers of influences and their interaction, a good example being Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). Baltes et al (1980) also set individual development in context: within this theory, climate change is an example of an external, historical influence on development that affects whole generation(s), other such examples being famine, war, pandemic. Levels and sources of influence for understanding humans' response to climate change can also be addressed via disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, politics etc; in fact, for teachers, the climate change topic can provide an ideal basis for inter-disciplinary projects.

Ethical aspects

It is very important that teachers address the ethical aspects of dealing with such a topic which is perceived as a threat (and indeed climate change *is* a very real threat). Young people already experience high levels of mental health issues, due to various contemporary factors including the impacts of the pandemic on their development; the climate crisis has been identified as a source of stress, anxiety and other mental health issues (see O'Hare, 2022). The experience of being taught about it in school may add to young people's eco-anxiety. There is a substantial body of pedagogical literature on teaching sensitive topics, which teachers can consult, as well as CPD resources.

* O'Hare, D.P. (2022). The climate crisis, children, young people and educational psychology. British Psychology Society Division of Educational and Child Psychology (BPS DECP).

This presentation from the EFPTA webinar in March 2023 addresses issues of climate change in teaching psychology: 'Climate change - learning activities in the psychology classroom'. It includes references and a list of useful sources. See <http://www.efpta.org/home/index.asp?SID=12#69>.