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## **Socially constructed silence? Protecting policymakers from the unthinkable.**

**Paul Hoggett & Rosemary Randall**

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The scientific community is profoundly uncomfortable with the storm of political controversy that climate research is attracting. What's going on?

Some things can't be said easily in polite company. They cause offence or stir up intense anxiety. Where one might expect a conversation, what actually occurs is what the sociologist Eviator Zerubavel calls a '[socially constructed silence](#).'

In his book [Don't Even Think About It](#), George Marshall argues that after the fiasco of COP 15 at [Copenhagen](#) and '[Climategate](#)' — when certain sections of the press claimed (wrongly as it turned out) that leaked emails of researchers at the University of East Anglia showed that data had been manipulated — climate change became a taboo subject among most politicians, another socially constructed silence with disastrous implications for the future of climate action.

In 2013-14 we carried out [interviews](#) with leading UK climate scientists and communicators to explore how they managed the ethical and emotional challenges of their work. While the

shadow of Climategate still hung over the scientific community, our analysis drew us to the conclusion that the silence Marshall spoke about went deeper than a reaction to these specific events.

Instead, a picture emerged of a community which still identified strongly with an idealised picture of scientific rationality, in which the job of scientists is to get on with their research quietly and dispassionately. As a consequence, this community is profoundly uncomfortable with the storm of political controversy that climate research is now attracting.

The scientists we spoke to were among a minority who had become engaged with policy makers, the media and the general public about their work. A number of them described how other colleagues would bury themselves in the excitement and rewards of research, denying that they had any responsibility beyond developing models or crunching the numbers. As one researcher put it, “so many scientists just want to do their research and as soon as it has some relevance, or policy implications, or a journalist is interested in their research, they are uncomfortable.”

We began to see how for many researchers, this idealised picture of scientific practice might also offer protection at an unconscious level from the emotional turbulence aroused by the [politicisation of climate change](#).

In her classic study of the ‘stiff upper lip’ culture of nursing in the UK in the 1950s, the psychoanalyst and social researcher Isobel Menzies Lyth developed the idea of ‘[social defences against anxiety](#),’ and it seems very relevant here. A social defence is an organised but unconscious way of managing the anxieties that are inherent in certain occupational roles. For example, the practice of what was then called the ‘task list’ system fragmented nursing into a number of routines, each one executed by a different person—hence the ‘bed pan nurse’, the ‘catheter nurse’ and so on.

Ostensibly, this was done to generate maximum efficiency, but it also protected nurses from the emotions that were aroused by any real human involvement with patients, including anxiety, something that was deemed unprofessional by the nursing culture of the time. Like climate scientists, nurses were meant to be objective and dispassionate. But this idealised notion of the professional nurse led to the impoverishment of patient care, and meant that the most emotionally mature nurses were the least likely to complete their training.

While it’s clear that social defences such as hyper-rationality and specialisation enable climate scientists to get on with their work relatively undisturbed by public anxieties, this approach also generates important problems. There’s a danger that these defences eventually break down and anxiety re-emerges, leaving individuals not only defenceless but with the additional burden of shame and personal inadequacy for not maintaining that stiff upper lip. Stress and burnout may then follow.

Although no systematic research has been undertaken in this area, there is anecdotal evidence of such burnout in a number of magazine articles like those by [Madeleine Thomas](#) and [Faith Kearns](#), in which climate scientists speak out about the distress that they or others have experienced, their depression at their findings, and their dismay at the lack of public and policy response.

Even if social defences are successful and anxiety is mitigated, this very success can have unintended consequences. By treating scientific findings as abstracted knowledge without any personal meaning, climate researchers have been slow to take responsibility for their own carbon footprints, thus running the risk of being exposed for hypocrisy by the denialist lobby. One research leader candidly reflected on this failure: “Oh yeah and the other thing [that’s] very, very important I think is that we ought to change the way we do research so we’re sustainable in the research environment, which we’re not now because we fly everywhere for conferences and things.”

The same defences also contribute to the resistance of most climate scientists to participation in public engagement or intervention in the policy arena, leaving these tasks to a minority who are [attacked by the media](#) and even by their own colleagues. One of our interviewees who has played a major role in such engagement recalled being criticised by colleagues for “prostituting science” by exaggerating results in order to make them “look sexy”. “You know we’re all on the same side,” she continued, “why are we shooting arrows at each other, it is ridiculous.”

The social defences of logic, reason and careful debate were of little use to the scientific community in these cases, and their failure probably contributed to internal conflicts and disagreements when anxiety could no longer be contained — so they found expression in bitter arguments instead. This in turn makes those that *do* engage with the public sphere excessively cautious, which encourages collusion with policy makers who are reluctant to embrace the radical changes that are needed.

As one scientist put it when discussing the goal agreed at the Paris climate conference of limiting global warming to no more than 2°C: “There is a mentality in [the] group that speaks to policy makers that there are some taboo topics that you cannot talk about. For instance the two degree target on climate change...Well the emissions are going up like this (the scientist points upwards at a 45 degree angle), so two degrees at the moment seems completely unrealistic. But you’re not allowed to say this.”

Worse still, the minority of scientists who *are* tempted to break the silence on climate change run the risk of being seen as whistleblowers by their colleagues. Another research leader suggested that—in private—some of the most senior figures in the field believe that the world is heading for a rise in temperature closer to six degrees than two.

“So repeatedly I’ve heard from researchers, academics, senior policy makers, government chief scientists, [that] they can’t say these things publicly,” he told us, “I’m sort of deafened, deafened by the silence of most people who work in the area that we work in, in that they will

not criticise when there are often evidently very political assumptions that underpin some of the analysis that comes out.”

It seems that the idea of a ‘socially constructed silence’ may well apply to crucial aspects of the interface between climate scientists and policy makers. If this is the case then the implications are very serious. Despite the hope that COP 21 has generated, many people are still sceptical about whether the rhetoric of Paris will be translated into effective action.

If climate change work is stuck at the level of ‘[symbolic policy making](#)’—a set of practices designed to make it look as though political elites are doing something while actually doing nothing—then it becomes all the more important for the scientific community to find ways of abandoning the social defences we’ve described and speak out as a whole, rather than leaving the task to a beleaguered and much-criticised minority.

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Paul Hoggett is [Chair of the Climate Psychology Alliance](#) and Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at University of the West of England, Bristol.

[Rosemary Randall](#) is on the committee of the Climate Psychology Alliance and helped develop the award winning [Carbon Conversations](#) project. Paul and Rosemary are both psychoanalytically trained psychotherapists.

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