

**Speaker:** Carol J. Nemeroff, Ph.D.

**Title:** Professor of Social and Behavioral Sciences

**Organization:** University of Southern Maine.

**Title:** Public acceptability of recycled water: Getting the cognitive sewage out after the physical sewage is gone

**Abstract:** Water reclamation and reuse (WRR) technology may be critical to managing emerging water shortages globally and in the American Southwest. However in the U.S., such projects have not been well received by the public. Negative responses have included fears about human health risks and adequacy of safeguards, and stigma-based responding related to ‘toilet-to-tap’ imagery. Understanding the intuitive psychology of contagion and purification beliefs can help direct efforts to minimize inappropriate concerns and increase the acceptability of WRR. Disgust is a powerful emotion that carries both biological imperative and moral force; once evoked, it is exceptionally difficult to undo. Opponents of recycled water initiatives often make use of disgust-based words and images to block efforts to promote and expand water reuse - anecdotal evidence suggests that even opponents whose opposition is not based in disgust, but is instead based in other concerns such as limiting population growth, may utilize such strategies, knowing how effective they are. Little attention has been given to how laypersons think about contamination in general, and contamination and purification of water in particular. Yet research on the intuitive psychology of contagion shows that the intuitive (or “magical”) concept is closely tied to disgust, and that it diverges in important ways from expert biomedical models of contagion. Understanding these differences can help inform us as to how to best promote, and how NOT to try to promote, water reuse initiatives. In particular, it is critical to present the purified water in a way that breaks the connection between its history as waste- or sewer-water and its current state. Further, the intuitive model of contagion suggests that institutional trust or mistrust not only directly impact public perceptions of threat, but may also exaggerate or ameliorate intuitive contagion concerns.

**Professional Background:** Carol J. Nemeroff, Ph.D., University of Southern Maine. Dr. Nemeroff is Professor of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Southern Maine, and Vice-President and Director of Curriculum Development for Portable Ethics, a Windham-based consulting firm specializing in research design, research ethics, mediation, and malpractice prevention. Prior to joining USM, Dr. Nemeroff was core faculty for 18 years in the Doctoral program in Clinical Psychology at Arizona State University, where she taught various graduate and undergraduate courses including a seminar entitled Magic, Metaphor, and Mind. Dr. Nemeroff’s research focuses on the intuitive psychology of contagion, exploring its relevance to everyday activities including illness risk perceptions and precautionary behaviors; moral overtones of eating; mind-body health related to emotional processing and placebo; and public perceptions of recycled water. Related lines of research include HIV prevention, cognitive escape, and institutional mistrust. Dr. Nemeroff is internationally recognized for her work, with Paul Rozin and colleagues, on magical contagion-based thinking. She

received her B.A. from McGill University, and her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania.