# Audio file

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# Transcript

00:00:03 Announcer

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

00:00:09 Sofia Perez

Movies like Oppenheimer remind us of the link between environmental contaminants and illness.

Nuclear waste from the Manhattan Project was disposed across Saint Louis and disease clusters have popped up in the metro area in the metro area since. A disease cluster is an unusual aggregation of health events, real or perceived, that are grouped together in time and space and that are reported to a health agency.

Dr. Laura Hart is an assistant professor and program coordinator in the department of sociology, anthropology and gerontology at Missouri State University.

She has focused her research on health, inequality, race, class, gender and environmental justice. She recently published a book, Risk and Adaptation in a Cancer Cluster Town where she examines the effects of a disease cluster in the small town of Clyde, Ohio.

I’m Sofia Perez. Today, Doctor Hart discusses the role of emotion and its relationship to community experiences of social belonging and inequality.

00:00:58 Dr. Laura Hart

So, in a civic and social sense, Clyde is very much a factory town and from its beginning. Whirlpool Corporation has been very central to the town, and the company promotes this strong family culture narrative around itself. In 1953, the company built a 27-acre recreational park, but between 1996 and 2010, 35 children were diagnosed with or died of cancer in the area. Cancers of the brain and central nervous system. And then in 2012, the EPA discovered 9 feet of toxic PCB sludge buried beneath the basketball and tennis courts in Whirlpool Park. The contaminant was also suspected of seeping into the park swimming pool. PCB's are considered carcinogenic and were banned in 1979 because of their links to endocrine disruption and neurotoxicity.

00:01:55 Sofia Perez

In 2013, a class action lawsuit was filed by impacted Clyde residents against Whirlpool. Hart learned that the lawsuit against Whirlpool was more controversial than the discovery of the PCB sledge, with many residents remaining silent or anonymous throughout the lawsuit, which was dropped in 2015.

00:02:10 Dr. Laura Hart

When encountering threat to the health of so many children, and many adults too, as I would learn through my interviews, why would anyone choose to stand down? And the obvious explanation is that standing up to the town's largest employer was an economic risk.

Individual and civic engagement on issues like this cannot be grasped solely through an individualistic rationalist lens that ignores the complex tangle of meanings and feelings that influence our decision making and relationship.

00:02:45 Sofia Perez

Hart’s book looks at the role that emotions play in the reproduction of inequalities.

00:02:49 Dr. Laura Hart

Sites of environmental conflict provide a great opportunity to explore dynamics of power because they are sites of social tension that are rich with affective value. After the lawsuit was filed, rumors spread about Whirlpool employees being threatened or reprimanded for attending and speaking at public meetings about the lawsuit.

We can understand fear is not only a tool of governance, but also as involving the intensification of threats. This had real consequences for plaintiffs who were confronted in public spaces.

00:03:25 Sofia Perez

Hart explains that risk is an important undercurrent to the story of Clyde, Ohio. She describes that the desire of belonging versus the risk of not belonging played a big role in how the residents responded to the issue.

00:03:35 Dr. Laura Hart

There's fear driven not only by economic anxiety, but also by a fear of losing security within the community. A sort of pride that is not only about status but connectedness. And these things are very consequential to how people make judgments and respond to issues as well as how they make sense of themselves. Emotions are part of the mechanisms by which social inequality is reproduced in this story with the ultimate outcome of suppressing collective action.

We're all victims of a system that prioritizes profit over people, and socially, unfortunately, I think it's become easier to lose our sense of responsibility to one another.

Neoliberal logics have led to lax regulatory standards for chemicals and a weakening of institutions intended to safeguard public welfare.

And what this means in communities like Clyde is that people often have to rely on themselves, and that's an important part of this story to you that from the discovery of the cancer cluster to residents assuming the burden of proof of contamination, townspeople for the burden of personal responsibility, and ultimately, they were unable to hold anyone accountable.

We have all the sufficient scientific knowledge and technology to have healthy communities to increase access to affordable healthcare.

What we don't have is sufficient social knowledge and this is where sociology comes in and I think can be quite useful.

00:05:08 Sofia Perez

That was Doctor Laura Hart. Her new book, Risk and Adaptation in a Cancer Cluster Town, is now available where books are sold.

I'm Sofia Perez for the Missouri State Journal.

00:05:17 Announcer

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.