Framing support for parents managing their own and children's climate anxiety

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Abstract

Anthropomorphic climate change, inclusive of increasing temperatures and a complex of other global climate effects, is raising worldwide concern. *Climate anxiety* and *Eco-anxiety* are terms commonly used to describe feelings of anxiety, anger, helplessness, and guilt related to climate change. It is a growing concern, with many couples citing climate anxiety [1] in their reasons for not procreating. This paper draws on findings from a recent study published in the *Journal of Sociology* to attend to the importance of how the issue of climate anxiety is framed in the public domain (Olson, Smith, McKenzie, Patulny, & Bellocchi, 2024). Dominant conceptions, including those generated by psychologists and within popular media, frame climate anxiety as an individual pathology that requires individual coping strategies. Such an individualistic approach misses the *relational* dimensions of experiencing and managing climate anxiety, including the important work that parents, families, and schools do in managing (e.g., softening and supporting) emotions such as anxieties related to climate change, which exacerbates associated feelings of isolation and ineffectiveness experienced by some people. In designing interventions, climate anxiety should also be framed as a relational experience, and initiatives should recognise and build on important, supportive, social relationships.

[1] Reflecting their broad usage in popular and academic discourse, both terms are used here.

Background & Context

Emotions

Emotions motivate and orient us towards objects and thoughts, they connect us to each other and to broader social and cultural contexts in the past, present, and future (McKenzie & Patulny, 2022). Emotions are central to future decision making (Wettergren, 2019), with anxieties about climate futures, for example, impacting decisions on starting a family and parenting younger and older children (O'Shanassy, 2021). Climate anxiety is thus a pressing emotional concern for large numbers of people globally, potentially impacting present and future behaviour.

Climate anxiety

Unpleasant emotions associated with climate change, collectively named *climate anxiety*, are increasing in prevalence and impact with international estimates ranging from 25 to 68 per cent prevalence (Pihkala, 2020). Australian studies point to the impact of climate anxiety on increasing mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorders (Patrick et al., 2022). How we conceptualise the emotions related to climate change matters for how we might effectively treat this challenge.

Individualistic conceptualisations of emotion as internal states underpin dominant definitions of climate anxiety and the similar conceptual term of eco-anxiety. Such definitions typically portray climate anxiety as a distinct psychological experience that includes affective and behavioural symptoms, rumination, and concern for the planet and one's impact on planetary health (Hogg, Stanley, O'Brien, Wilson, & Watsford, 2021). However, by conceptualising climate anxiety and its treatment as phenomena contained largely within the individual, this approach arguably pathologises what could easily be considered a reasonable response to our current climate crisis. Socio-cultural conceptualisations of emotion, in contrast, recognize and treat emotions as collective phenomena. More specifically, sociologists argue that common, shared emotional experiences emerge and acquire recognisable social labels and characteristics via 'the synchronous convergence in affective responding across individuals towards a specific event or object' (Von Scheve & Ismer, 2013, p. 406).

Sociologists also emphasise how relational work involves emotion management, or the requirement to regulate one's own and others' emotions in particular ways specific to social contexts (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). High levels of emotion management have been identified in careers, professions, and roles traditionally dominated by women, with Hochschild and others concluding that such emotion management is under-acknowledged (Cottingham, Johnson, & Erickson, 2018; Olson et al., 2019; Simon & Nath, 2004; Strazdins & Broom, 2004). It is concerning if the everyday management of climate

anxiety is similarly under-acknowledged, and the efforts of parents and teachers in this regard continue to go unrecognised and unsupported by educational institutions, governments, and policies.

Discourses of climate anxiety in the media

Our analysis of how emotions relate to climate change were framed within a study of 2022 Australian news media reports, which revealed that individualistic conceptualisations of climate-related emotions as pathologies did indeed predominate in the Australian news context (Olson et al., 2024). Climate-related emotions were positioned as an epidemic that needed to be 'combatted', or sometimes even as a form of 'psychological damage' that 'climate combatants' were inflicting on children and 'patients'. As indicated above, such a framing is deeply problematic. First, it individualises and pathologises a collective and (arguably) reasonable response to the Earth's urgent climate problems, which have been produced collectively by society rather than through the actions of any individual. Second, it shifts public and scholarly discourse away from the potential effectiveness and appropriateness of difficult collective climate action towards a more medicalised focus on illness, cause and symptoms, positioning those experiencing climate anxiety as passive patients being manipulated by active instigators (i.e., 'climate combatants').

Importantly, rather than focusing on individuals and their coping strategies in isolation, a socio-cultural framing of climate anxiety positions emotions related to climate change as legitimate, societal or collective emotions. It sees these emotions emerging from every day relational experiences to underpin appropriate decision-making and political action. The latter framing serves to validate rather than pathologise or weaponise climate anxiety, and further serves to emphasise the collective nature of these emotions and the collective and relational work done to act on them, manage them, regulate them, and respond to them. Moreover, it opens the possibility that political action or inaction regarding climate change is the cause of anxiety – and the erosion of hope – for many individuals and collectives, as much as or even instead of anxiety over climate change itself.

Implications for policy, practice, and thinking about the emotions of climate change

Sociocultural conceptualisations of emotions and emotion management are of particular and novel significance when we consider how emotions around climate change might be understood and incorporated into new approaches to policy and practice. The significance of our approach is framed by a link between emotion management and the recognition of social and relational elements in how people respond to climate anxiety, the impact of these responses in terms of family and parenting responsibilities and choices, and the potential of emotions to then spur collective/inter-group social and political action on climate change/threats.

As governments, communities and NGOs respond to our shared climate crisis, and as climate anxiety is both constructed in the media and experienced by individuals as a prominent concern related to this crisis, action should be guided by conceptualising emotions related to climate change as a collective experience with social origins, just as anthropomorphic climate change is the result of collective activity. It is important to study and understand these collective emotional experiences, rather than assume their origins and consequences (and remediation) through individualistic, pathologizing models. Responses to and mobilisation of these emotions in the context of climate change and climate action can be conceptualised as a collective, sociocultural pursuit. Rather than relying purely on individual mental health interventions, such an approach could involve:

- Acknowledging climate emotions as a grassroots, collectively derived, wide reaching set of complex social developments and social-relational responses, rather than a mere category of feelings to be overcome or treated, or an *individual problem* to be *solved* through individual responses;
- Recognising the particular toll climate anxiety places on parents, teachers, and others closely involved in the care of children and the management of their emotions;
- Supporting the validation and management of climate-related emotions as this occurs within key social institutions, such as within family units and schools; and
- Critiquing media representations that attempt to delegitimate climate action by attacking climate activists as 'causes' of the 'sickness' of climate anxiety.

When emotions around climate change are conceptualised as collectively generated and experienced, and as productive rather than pathological, collective and productive community and government action around and responses to climate change can also be more easily conceptualised and enacted.

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