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Mourning the Planet and Signs of Hope: The Role of Grief and Resilience in How Students Understand Climate Change

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Mourning the Planet and Signs of Hope:

*The Role of Grief and Resilience in How
Undergraduates Understand Climate Change*



introduction

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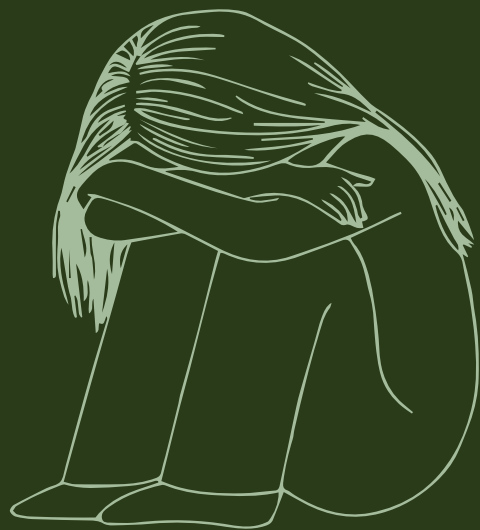
Global Political Studies

M.A. in International Migration and Ethnic

Migration / WCU Alum 2023

The “...accumulating personal experiences of declines in ecological conditions frequently give rise to strong emotional reactions in individuals, colloquially referred to as ‘global mourning’”

(Marshall, et al., 2019, p. 580).



Marshall, N., Adger, W. N., Benham, C., Brown, K., I Curnock, M., Gurney, G. G., ... & Thiault, L. (2019). Reef Grief: Investigating the relationship between place meanings and place change on the Great Barrier Reef, Australia. Sustainability Science, 14, 579-587.

**The American Psychological Association
characterizes “climate anxiety” or “eco-
anxiety” as an ongoing fear of
“environmental doom”**

Clayton et al., 2017, p. 68



Clayton, S., Manning, C., Krygsman, K., & Speiser, M. (2017). Mental health and our changing climate: Impacts, implications, and guidance. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica.

**One of the functions of hope is
“the translation of despair into knowledge,”
which can empower young people to act.**

(Nairn, 2019, p. 438).



Nairn, K. (2019). Learning from young people engaged in climate activism: The potential of collectivizing despair and hope. Young, 27(5), 435-450.

Research Questions

Question 1

RQ1: What is the role of grief in undergraduate students' reported understanding of climate change at a suburban public institution in the Northeastern United States?

Question 2

RQ2: What coping mechanisms or resilient responses do undergraduate students enrolled in a suburban public institution in the Northeastern United States perceive as useful in addressing the impacts of climate change?





Method

INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

a qualitative research approach creating detailed explorations of personal lived experiences.

We interviewed 11 undergraduate students for an allotted time of sixty minutes via Zoom.

The study was approved by the West Chester University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (approval notification dated April 7, 2023, IRB-FY2023-267)

Analysis of Data

Steps for analysis included: familiarization with the data, identifying initial codes, seeking themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and the production of a report.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 11(4), 589-597.

Participants

undergraduates representing multiple disciplines (business, education, Spanish, etc.)

Interviews took place within one semester at various times.

Motivation

All of the participants agreed that climate change is occurring and a legitimate concern; many voiced motivation for participation in the study as related to their concern.





Data Analysis

THEMES

- **Climate Grief**
 - Climate Anxiety
 - Climate Shame/Blame
- **Well-Being**
 - Coping with Anxiety
 - Coping Online
 - Collective Action
- **Hope**
 - Hope in Gen Z
 - Higher Education's Role



Climate Grief & Anxiety

“I did just graduate thinking... am I even going to have many years in my career because of this?”

“The fact that we were the first generation to grow up in an age of the Internet and having information...from everywhere, across the world, open to us at our fingertips that has made us see a lot of the damage more... It creates some mental health issues.”

Anticipatory climate grief is almost a form of anxiety that can either be paralyzing or motivating for action.





Climate Blame & Shame

Students questioned their role as students, the United States/the Global North, and previous generations.

“Society makes it very hard to focus on global issues, particularly being a full time college student who is involved.”

“...The grief of... the people in charge don't want to change anything...[joined with the idea that]...personal responsibility does nothing. It means nothing. It will change nothing.”

Negative climate emotions led to a sense of **Learned Disempowerment**



Coping Strategies

DOES CLIMATE ACTION ALLEVIATE STRESS,
OR IS IT A SOURCE OF STRESS?

“...the action, like the protesting...that kind of stuff is the stress to me.”

“Instead of...feeling like fear or anxiety about it, I try to instead... channel that energy into wanting to do something about it.”

“Well, one of the ways that I cope is love. I love getting outside. Getting outside is the best and just chilling right? I think humans are meant to be outside and connect with nature...I think that's huge on an individual level and a global level, because then we'll want to respect it more. And our actions will reflect that.”

Coping Through Collective Action

The recognition that when participants are “making an individual change... there are also other people around you making that individual change”

“Human beings are a pretty resilient species.”

However, participants had a hard time finding meaningful collectives and doubted the university as an important arena for activism.

But if not here, then where?

If not you, the future generations, then who?





Hope in Each Other & Higher Education

How do cautionary hope and campus environment influence students' climate action?

“The damage has been done, and more damage will be done... But my optimistic view is that once the people who give a crap get power, they can stop it.”

“I plan to put solar panels on my home when I have one...I love plants and gardening... So I think that my actions create a little bit of hope.”



Promoting Collective Action in Higher Education

CAN HIGHER EDUCATION HELP OVERCOME LEARNED DISEMPOWERMENT IN STUDENTS?

“What specific practices produce hope, and which ones extinguish it?” (Bryant & Ellard 2014, p. 497)

Practices to employ:

- Climate campus & community relations
- Radical hope in the classroom
- Recognition of advocacy as a skill & the various forms of advocacy
- Uplifting student voices & leadership in sustainable solutions

Conclusions

Participants expressed anticipatory grief, anxiety, shame, and blame. They found comfort in internet humor as well as local action within their sphere of influence while awaiting the opportunity for their generation to make meaningful systemic change as their peers amass more power.

The Utility of (Anticipatory?) Grief

Though uncomfortable and destabilizing, “...embracing the possibility of loss may be the best means of offsetting its harm”
(Barnett, 2016, p. 978).

Future Research

Other scholars will explore the role that transnational care may play in Americans’ sense of awareness, grief, and hope as well as the role of higher education leaders, meta-analyses, and quantitative modes of inquiry.



TC Sustain Ability in Zaragoza, Spain





Thank You

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Student Research Assistants

In addition to Jocelyn Brown, Emily Miller and Caroline Straw also contributed as research assistants on this project.

You!

Thank you for taking the time to listen to our presentation today.