

Integrative psychotherapists working with eco-anxiety: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore their experiences

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Summary

Background: Despite a recent surge in mental health research discussing the concept of eco-anxiety, very little qualitative research has been conducted investigating therapist or client experiences, or possible responses to it in psychotherapy. This research aimed to address this gap by conducting a qualitative exploration of the experience of Integrative psychotherapists experiencing and working with clients who present with eco-anxiety.

Subjects and Methods: Semi-structured interviews examined the experiences of 8 Integrative psychotherapists. IPA analysis followed with the assistance of 'Atlas.ti Web'.

Results: 7 themes were identified and these themes encompassed what kind of anxiety eco-anxiety represents, what emotions co-occur with the experience of eco-anxiety, how eco-anxiety is upheld, and what responses eco-anxiety elicited in participants and in their clients. Eco-anxiety was reported as an existential anxiety that raises questions about mortality and is a response to a threat to human meaning-making as well as survival. The major emotions and feelings accompanying eco-anxiety were hopelessness, upheld by the awareness of the systemic nature of the ecological crisis, grief, both due to awareness of current losses in biodiversity and for future losses in the natural environment, anger, induced and perpetuated by political inactivity, and guilt stemming from action-value misalignment and participation in an uncaring system. Stigma was seen as worsening eco-anxiety by inducing a sense of alienation.

Conclusions: Working to accept eco-anxiety as a rational response, avoid pathologizing it, and acknowledging the ecological crisis through group participation and open conversation in psychotherapy are important markers in destigmatising eco-anxiety, and fostering meaning-making and agency in clients affected by it.

Keywords: eco-anxiety; integrative psychotherapy; IPA; systemic issues; ecological crisis

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INTRODUCTION

Clayton & Manning, 2018; Hayes et al., 2018; Hayes & Poland, 2018; Safdar, 2023; Zhang, 2021).

Background to this Research

Planetary mechanisms and structures, like seasons and food supply, countless species, and human life as we know it are threatened by large-scale environmental decline and loss of biodiversity, otherwise known as the ecological crisis (Ceballos et al., 2020; IPCC, 2019; Lenton et al., 2019; Misra, 2014; Seneviratne et al., 2012; Stott, 2016; Thomas et al., 2004). The mental health impacts of the ecological crisis are varied. They range across conditions from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to direct exposure to environmental catastrophes like floods, depression due to unemployment following, for example, land loss to drought, to anxiety and grief due to indirect exposure, knowledge, anticipation, and awareness of the ecological crisis through media and testimonials (Berry et al., 2010; Cianconi et al., 2020; Clayton et al., 2017;

Eco-Anxiety

The term 'eco-anxiety', coined by Albrecht (2012), refers to the anxieties and negative psychological effects resulting from the rapid decline of the global natural environment and biodiversity (Pihkala, 2020a). Officially recognized by the American Psychological Association as a "chronic fear of environmental doom" (Clayton et al. 2017, p.68), it encompasses feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, grief, anger, despair, distress, and guilt (Baudon & Jachens, 2021). Psychotherapists and researchers have advocated for multifaceted interventions, including cognitive reshaping for acute anxiety, existential therapies to address the paralyzing effect of eco-anxiety, nature therapies to restore connection to the environment, and positive psychology to foster hope (Baudon & Jachens,

2021; Hickman, 2020; Ojala, 2012). Given the varied interpretations of anxiety and associated eco-emotions, and the prevalent use of 'eco-anxiety' in public and academic discourse (Bonevski & Naumovska, 2018; Passmore et al., 2023), this study, in line with Pihkala (2020a), defines eco-anxiety as 'the various anxieties and associated negative psychological effects experienced in relation to the awareness of the impacts of the ecological crisis'. This aligns with the study's focus on the depth and nuance of individual experiences, addressing the limited qualitative research on eco-anxiety (Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Pihkala, 2020b).

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith & Shinebourne, 2012) was employed for this study, adhering to interpretivism, which views knowledge as subject to interpretation (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). IPA is a bottom-up approach, focusing on individual participants' eco-anxiety experiences and letting the phenomenon of eco-anxiety guide the study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA utilizes hermeneutics, which emphasises an understanding of participants' mindsets and language use in interpreting their experience (Freeman, 2008). Idiography was employed, ensuring extensive analysis before making general statements, aligning with the call for a more in-depth understanding of eco-anxiety through a focus on the complex internal worlds of individuals (Levitt et al., 2019; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The current study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Derby. The current research was guided by the ethical framework of the British Psychological Society (2008), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the *BACP Ethical Guidelines for Research in the Counselling Professions* (BACP 2019). All research procedures were performed following the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association). The research took place between December 2022 and July 2023.

Participants

Purposive sampling was implemented to prioritize data quality over quantity (Campbell et al., 2020; Sandelowski, 1995). The selection criteria included qualifications as Integrative or Eclectic psychotherapists, training in at least two therapeutic modalities, and experience working with and being affected by eco-anxiety. Partic-

ipants had to be based in the UK, as the impacts of the ecological crisis are experienced differently depending on the country and the corresponding climate, political, and social landscape (Pihkala, 2020a). Invitation letters were sent to 64 psychotherapists, of which 16 replied; 5 declined due to time constraints, 2 had not encountered eco-anxiety in their practice and 1 was not an Integrative psychotherapist, excluding them from the study. This resulted in 8 participants after exclusions. Of these participants, 6 are part of mental health services that explicitly advertise work with eco-anxiety. Of the other 2 participants, one was found through an online search for integrative psychotherapists, and the other was referred by an invitee. 6 of the participants are women, and 2 are men. All participants are trained in at least two therapeutic modalities, and they range in experience between 12 months to 25 years, and in age between 27 and 75. All participants are British.

Data Collection

Prior to participation in the study, participants filled out an informed consent form which outlined the study, each participant's involvement, and the use of their data. Data was collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted online via 'Zoom', ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a pre-established schedule informed by open-ended research questions (Adams and Lawrence, 2015; Pawar, 2004). A pilot interview was conducted to refine the interview schedule prior to the commencement of the study.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, capturing participants' meaning-making processes (Alase, 2017). The 6 steps of IPA were followed for the analysis process (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Atlas.ti Web (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH., 2023) was employed as an aid in coding and thematic analysis, facilitating the identification of overarching themes (See Figure 1, Hwang, 2008). The automatic AI coding feature in Atlas.ti was not utilized. 7 Themes were identified from the data: 'Eco-Anxiety as an Innate Experience of Existential Threat', 'Eco-anxiety as the Experience of Hopelessness', 'Grief', 'Anger', 'Guilt', 'Stigma Makes Eco-Anxiety Isolating', and 'Recognising Eco-Anxiety as a Rational Response'.

Bill:

Yeah, so I said, I said, you know, it was like big picture stuff at first, perhaps because I was aware of these big sort of global trends and the fact that they were probably irreversible, and then the other side of things came in behind that really. Things like what does that mean in terms of bird numbers? And you know, insect numbers? And what does that then about ecosystems and stuff like that? So it kind of felt like a sort of complexity. You know, it felt like things rippling out and the eco-anxiety there is the centre heart of that really. Because there is a sense for me that it's not going to get much better and you know, that will work. It's almost like you can't get better. It's possibly the reason those people don't make the decisions at COP-26 or whatever, is because they understand at one level that it's almost too complex now, it's too built in, too baked in, which then adds to the anxiety you know.

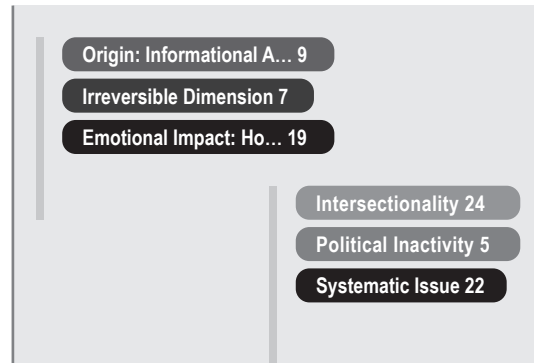


Figure 1: Coding sample

	Anne (55)	Bill (64)	Darren (42)	Emily (43)	Josie (54)	Li (27)	Paula (75)	Rachel (62)
Client worry about future of children	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Client worry about future of grandchildren	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Clients not having children	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Not having children	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Offspring not having children	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Worried about future of children	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Worried about future of grandchildren	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0

Figure 2: Intergenerational impact of eco-anxiety

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Eco-Anxiety as an Innate Experience of Existential Threat

All participants referred to eco-anxiety as an experience rooted in human survival and threat to the foundations of life as we know it. In every instance, narratives of eco-anxiety progressed from localised and personal experience to ultimate concerns about the state of the world in general. Eco-anxiety was often described through metaphors that evoked a subconscious and instinctual dimension to its origins, such as Bill's description of it as a "geological layer in the mind" and Anne likening it to the "implantation of the blastula into the uterine wall." Dreams featuring "post-apocalyptic scenes" were also noted as manifestations of eco-anxiety in the subconscious.

Sub-Theme: Intergenerational Impact

In most cases, participants paired the existential dimension of eco-anxiety with accounts of intergenerational worry for both them and in their clients. Here, the

narratives highlighted worry and fear in relation to the future of grandchildren or children, anxiety in young parents who had had children and were now wondering "what have I done? I'm bringing my children into this," or choices not to have children at all due to the state of the world (see Figure 2). Intergenerational anxiety was expressed by participants over 40-years-old, while Lisa (27), did not raise concerns related to future generations but focused on anxiety around her own future.

Sub-Theme: Eco-anxiety as an Existential Response to the Breakdown of Society

The ecological crisis was never cited in isolation when participants explored their experience of eco-anxiety or that of their clients. In every interview, participants referred to the interrelatedness of the ecological crisis with other systemic issues, marking eco-anxiety as part of a wider response to the perception of threat to the foundations of society itself. Participants cited racial injustice, COVID-19, colonialism, war, technology, corruption, poverty, capitalism, patriarchy, and political inactivity as systemic issues parallel to the ecological crisis (see Figure 3).

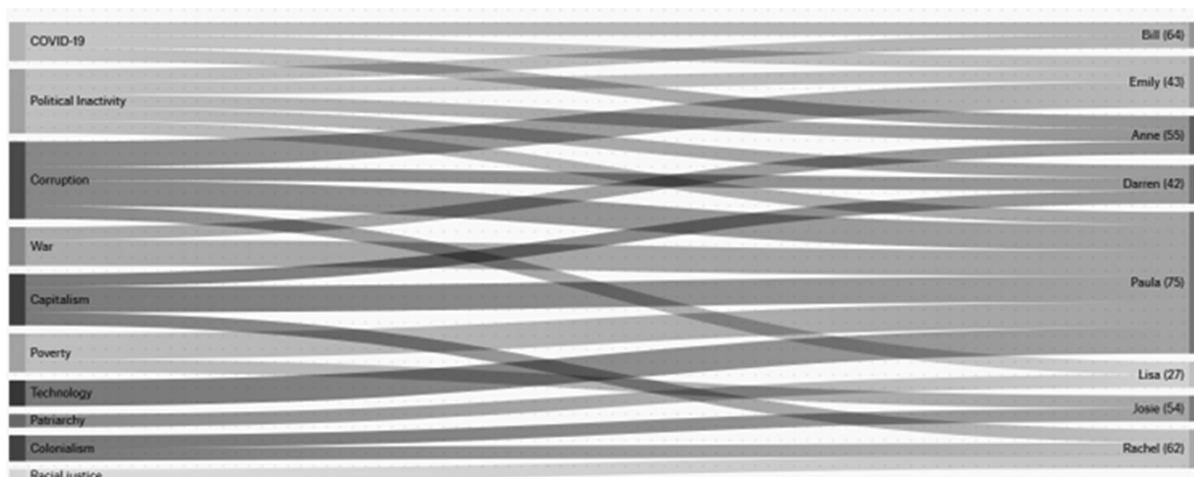


Figure 3: Systemic issues mentioned alongside the ecological crisis

Theme 2: Eco-anxiety as the Experience of Hopelessness

In this study, the feeling most cited, both in terms of overall mentions and by number of participants, was hopelessness. Hopelessness was mostly described as a felt sense of being out of control in relation to the ecological crisis. Lisa described her experience as feeling as though she were in a car on its way to crash. The two male participants, in particular, explicitly described themselves as hopeless, which the female participants did not (see Figure 4). Despair was distinguished from hopelessness by its paralyzing and disruptive impact on functionality. Bill describes his eco-anxiety as a “place where at the worst it was that sort of dark despair. Going into that place where you just didn’t know the way out”. Similarly, Josie describes a point of “hitting real despair” in her clients as the accumulation of awareness of the ecological crisis and worsening hopelessness.

Sub-Theme: “Our Systems are so big and powerful and what can be done against those?”

Participants consistently linked eco-anxiety to systemic issues, emphasizing the colossal scale of the ecological crisis, the passing of ‘tipping points,’ and the outlook that ‘the damage is done.’ The awareness of the global scale and systemic nature of the crisis was reported as upholding eco-anxiety and intensifying feelings of hopelessness, despair, helplessness, and powerlessness.

Sub-Theme: Living in the Here and Now

Addressing the uncertainty of the ecological crisis, participants advocated for a focus on the ‘here and now.’ Prioritizing personal relationships, creative expression,

cultivating gratitude for the present, and spending time in nature were strategies employed to reduce eco-anxiety. Participants reported a renewed sense of control from a focus on the here and now, which aided in the management of feelings of hopelessness.

Theme 3: Grief

Participants who did not emphasize hopelessness often identified grief as the predominant emotional response of eco-anxiety (see Figure 5). Loss, particularly of biodiversity, was a focal point for these participants. Rachel describes her grief in terms of “the empathy that I feel for nature, and the loss of species, and the loss of nature.” Comparatively, the object of focus of those participants who posited hopelessness as their main experience of eco-anxiety usually focused on the systemic nature of the ecological crisis.

Sub-Theme: Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief, characterized by the awareness of imminent loss in nature, was highlighted. Participants described the experience as a recognition that the world would become markedly different. Lisa describes how she used to have flash-forwards to catastrophic climate events, such as her house flooding, which would lead to a profound sense of grief for the deaths of those around her.

Sub-Theme: Facing Mortality

Participants largely reported facing the ultimate concerns of death and extinction as precursors to being able to manage eco-anxiety and live in the present, by

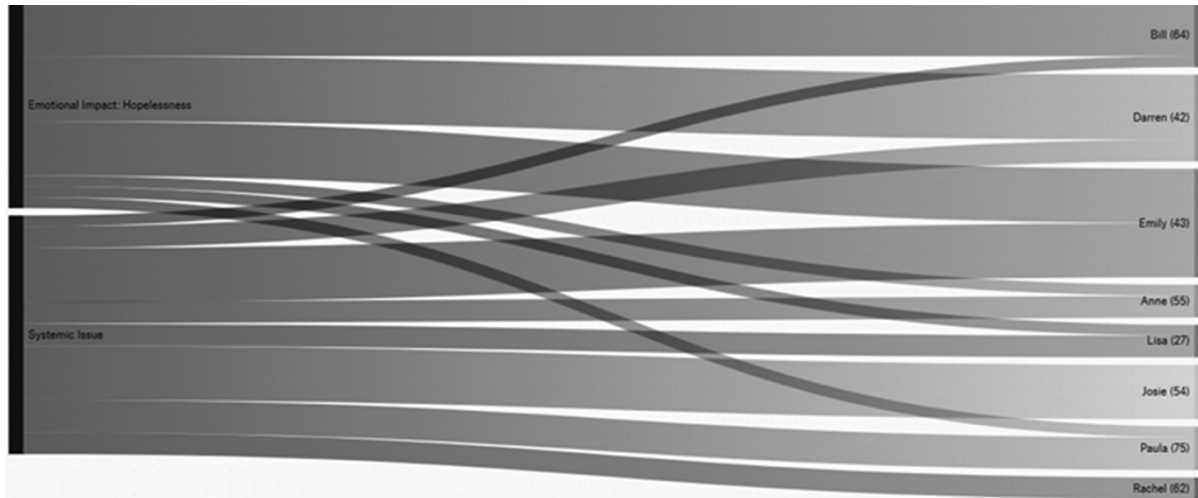


Figure 4: Interrelatedness of awareness of systemic issues and hopelessness

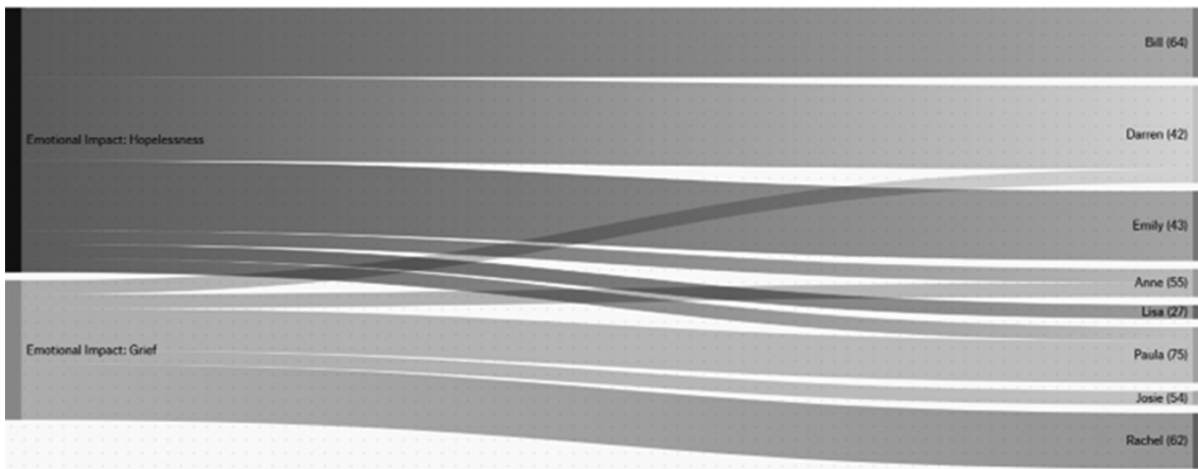


Figure 5: Low correlation between eco-anxiety related grief and hopelessness

fostering acceptance of uncertainty and decatastrophizing these notions both for themselves and in their clients. Participants reported personal and professional efforts to explore death, emphasizing the importance of being able to ‘go to death’ in providing the ‘emotional container’ for clients with eco-anxiety.

Theme 4: Anger

Anger was mentioned by all but one participant as a component of eco-anxiety and was the most cited emotion in relation to the presentation of eco-anxiety in participants’ clients. Participants often associated anger with hopelessness and systemic issues tied to the ecological crisis, such as political inactivity.

Sub-Theme: Political Inactivity

Political inactivity emerged as a significant factor upholding eco-anxiety-related anger. Participants expressed anger with governments and corporations, perceiving them as indifferent or obstructive to addressing the ecological crisis.

Sub-Theme: Activism

Several participants, identifying as previous or current environmental or social justice activists, shared their experiences of transitioning from anger-induced eco-activism to burnout. Eco-anxiety in these narratives was conveyed as a temporal experience, in which anger leads to action in young people, which gives way to feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and despair. This trajectory was mirrored in accounts of participants’ clients.

Theme 5: Guilt

Guilt was a prevalent emotion among participants and their clients, often paired with anger. Eco-anxiety related guilt appeared in two forms; privileged guilt related to having more resources than others and thus the ability to take responsibility for the ecological crisis, but colluding with a system that perpetuated it nonetheless, and existence/species guilt related to being human and having the knowledge of anthropogenic damage to the natural environment and biodiversity.

Sub-Theme: Value-Action Misalignment

Participants described a misalignment of their values and actions, both for themselves and in their clients, that upholds eco-anxiety by matching an ever-growing awareness of ecological issues with the demands of modern and carbon-laden lifestyles. Participants found that due to the knowledge of their relative ineffectiveness, traditional individual actions, such as recycling and using sustainable products, became increasingly ineffective in alleviating eco-anxiety.

Theme 6: Stigma Makes Eco-Anxiety Isolating

Stigma surrounding eco-anxiety exacerbated feelings of isolation and alienation. Participants highlighted the taboo nature of discussing the ecological crisis, leading to a sense of being a 'burden.' This stigma permeated interpersonal relationships, causing conflicts with family, friends, and the public.

Sub-Theme: Lifestyle Expectations

Participants who engaged in collective action through environmental groups, especially when in their twenties, experienced disillusionment at the ability to effect real change and to adhere to the lifestyle imposed by the group itself. The pressure to conform to these expectations intensified feelings of isolation, alienation, and further contributed to eco-anxiety for those individuals who perceived these groups as threatening their lifestyle.

Sub-Theme: Interpersonal Issues

Stigma caused interpersonal conflicts within families and among friends. Participants reported instances of family members dismissing their concerns or questioning their commitment. The perception of being labelled as 'oversensitive' or 'overreacting' worsened isolation and was reported as worsening the risk of developing symptoms of depression and trauma.

Theme 7: Recognising Eco-Anxiety as a Rational Response

Acknowledging eco-anxiety as a rational response to a real threat was reported as crucial for participants and their clients. This recognition helped alleviate the 'crazy making' dimension of eco-anxiety that alienation and lack of understanding through other interpersonal relationships reinforced. Participants warned against pathologizing eco-anxiety and advocated for a paradigm shift in psychotherapy, urging a more context-aware approach that integrates social issues as a routine part of client interactions.

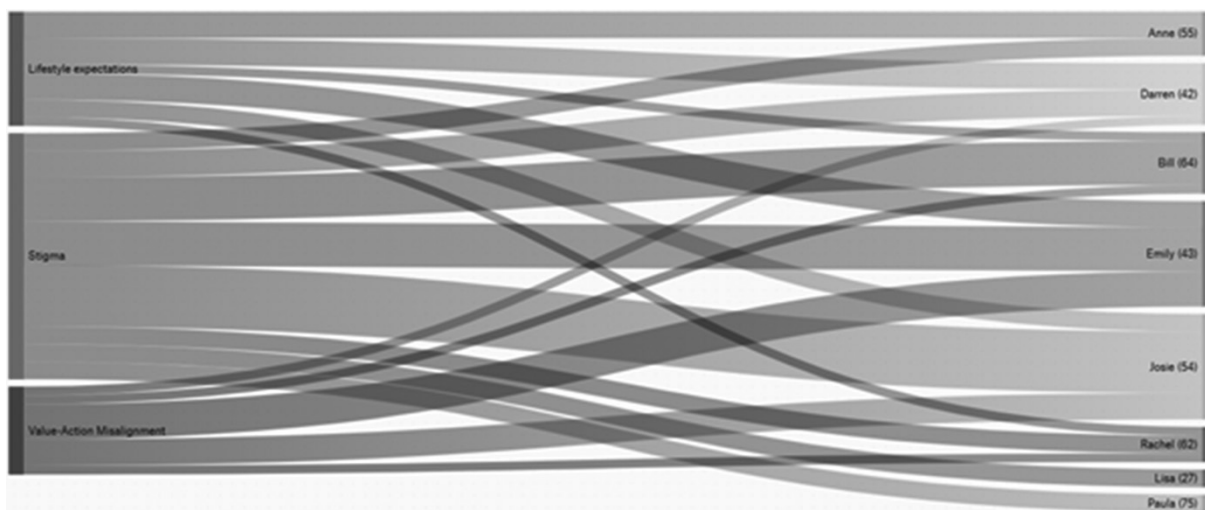


Figure 6: Stigma, lifestyle expectations, and value-action misalignment upholding eco-anxiety

Sub-Theme: Group Involvement

Despite the challenges participants faced in group involvement, they recommended encouraging clients to seek out eco-groups and communities. Tailoring group engagement to clients' interests was essential, focusing on meaning-making through connection rather than expecting substantial impact on the ecological crisis. Participants envisioned a shift towards community-focused models, emphasizing the role of therapists as facilitators in collective action

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Eco-anxiety as the Experience of Existential Threat

Participant accounts of eco-anxiety unanimously agreed with the interpretation of eco-anxiety as an existential anxiety in the research (Passmore et al., 2023; Pihkala, 2020b). The strong imagery used by participants to describe the depth of the feeling of eco-anxiety paired with reference to other societal issues like war and technology, and accounts of client dreams that evinced a deep-rooted fear of ecological and societal collapse (Gillespie, 2013), matched the extended definition of existential anxiety as fear of a threat to both humanity's existence and way of life, and a deep angst and insecurity in relation to 'life's givens' (Temple & Gall, 2018). Existential concerns, such as intergenerational worries and reproductive choices, underscored the gravity of eco-anxiety (Bodin & Björklund, 2022; van den Broek, 2023).

Participants evinced all the existential concerns posited by Passmore et al. (2023) in their account of eco-anxiety (identity, happiness, meaning/meaninglessness, freedom, death, and isolation). Identity was reportedly threatened by the need to alter lifestyle choices, happiness by diminishing enjoyment in nature-related activities due to ecological awareness, and meaning by a perceived lack of impact on the ecological crisis (Adams, 2006; Capaldi et al., 2014; Heine et al., 2006; Pritchard et al., 2020). Freedom was reported as endangered through e.g. restrictions on movement and choice to lower carbon emissions. Death featured as considerations of family, personal, and planetary demise (Almond et al., 2020). Concerns about isolation arose from reports of stigma and alienation (Clayton, 2020).

These results point to eco-anxiety as a collective experience rooted in humanity's existence and meaning-making processes. Moving forward, more research on eco-anxiety from the perspective of the existential

psychotherapies such as 'Logotherapy' and 'Daseinsanalysis' (Cooper, 2003; Frankl, 1992) may shed light on how best to address the various existential challenges that eco-anxiety presents in order to aid clients in harnessing and using their anxiety constructively (Moore & Goldner-Vukov, 2009).

Theme 2: Eco-Anxiety as the Experience of Hopelessness

Hopelessness emerged prominently in participant accounts, aligning with public sentiment surveys indicating widespread pessimism about the ecological crisis (Helm, 2021). In the largest and recent survey of 10,000 young people (16-25) evaluating feelings about the ecological crisis, 56% thought the world was doomed (Hickman et al., 2021). Contrary to the assumption that ecological cynicism is more prevalent in young people (Box, 2022; Glausiusz, 2022; Whiting, 2021), all participants in this study, ages 27 to 75, reported significant hopelessness. All participants displayed pro-environmental beliefs, most had participated in activism, and some had education in a relevant subject which, in line with Searle & Gow (2010), may have contributed to the strong focus on hopelessness.

Hopelessness, reported as a loss of agency over the outcome of the ecological crisis (Ojala, 2018), did not appear to equate to a loss of meaning in taking action, contrary to Nairn (2019). Participants managed eco-anxiety related hopelessness by focusing on present actions, regardless of whether they believed the world was doomed (Conyer, 2019). This agrees with the distinction made between 'active' or 'constructive' hope, in which meaning is found through working towards a goal despite uncertainty of the outcome, and 'idealistic' hope, in which meaning is based in achieving the goal in question (Ojala, 2018). The distinction points to interventions for eco-anxiety like that in Joanna Macy's 'The Work that Reconnects', which fosters hope that maintains "the belief that what we can do today is necessary even though we may not know how, when, or to whom it will matter" (Conyer, 2019: 8). These findings underscore the importance of hope focused on the recovery of the individual from eco-anxiety and the possibility of living a meaningful life, rather than on solving the ecological crisis (Acharya & Agius, 2017).

Theme 3: Grief

Participants evinced a strong connectedness to the natural environment and sensitivity to the loss of biodiversity in their accounts of grief relating to the ecological

crisis, mirroring current research (Barnett, 2022; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). The study differentiated between grief for present losses and anticipatory grief for future losses. The former was conveyed as akin to ‘traditional grief’, with its associated emotions (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Ojala et al., 2021). The latter was reported as stemming from anxiety over future loss (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). The distinction is an important one for future interventions, since grief for present losses emphasizes a focus on dedicated grief-work and mourning rituals (Bednarek, 2019), whereas anticipatory grief appears to have anxiety as its core, suggesting a focus on cognitive reframing and coping tools (Dockett, 2019). Participant accounts of time spent in nature alleviating eco-anxiety related grief point to engagement in alternative forms of tourism and healthcare, such as the ‘Forest Health Base’ posited by Zhang (2022).

Theme 4: Anger

Anger emerged as an integral emotion in the experience of eco-anxiety, particularly concerning political inactivity, aligning with surveys on young people’s eco-anxiety, in which the majority highlighted anger as part of their experience (Hickman et al., 2021). Anger motivated participants and clients to engage in pro-climate activism, supporting the notion that anger is an activating emotion, i.e., an emotion that energizes action in relation to a threat, associated with a tendency to confront (i.e., fight; Harmon-Jones, 2003). Anger correlated with increased collective pro-climate behaviors (Stanley et al., 2021). However, on a temporal scale, anger, while initially activating, led to subsequent feelings of hopelessness, burnout, and depression (von Hellermann, 2021; Weixia & Gorski, 2015). This challenges Stanley’s (2021: p.4) account of anger as a “healthy and adaptive form of expressive coping” and highlights a need for a focus on the mastery of the inner experience of anger in young people in therapeutic settings to foster its adaptability to the ecological crisis (Ćorluka & Vukojević, 2021).

Theme 5: Guilt

In line with current research on eco-guilt, participants described guilt related to the ecological crisis in themselves and in their clients as an activating emotion for individual ecological action (Brosch, 2021; Mallett, 2012). Guilt manifested in various forms, including guilt about being human, contributing to a system that perpetuates the ecological crisis (what Ágoston et al. (2022) call

system maintenance guilt), and not doing enough individually. Guilt related to individual action prompted engagement, while system maintenance guilt and guilt for being part of the human species were linked to hopelessness and passivity. For those already experiencing high levels of eco-anxiety related guilt, participant accounts inform an approach in therapy that favors encouraging individual action to align client values with actions, whilst managing client expectations of individual action, as suggested by Sarchet (2019).

Theme 6: Stigma makes Eco-Anxiety Isolating

Participant accounts detailed experiences of stigma as part of the experience of eco-anxiety, echoing Passmore et al. (2023) concept of isolation. They posit that individuals tend to withhold eco-anxiety related feelings in order to avoid burdening loved ones. Indeed, stifling expression in social settings due to fear of ‘bringing down the mood’ and mockery was commonly reported, highlighting the risk of support-seeking avoidance that a stigma induced ‘culture of fear’ can create (Johnston, 2020; Mihevc et al., 2023; Passmore et al., 2023). Especially in activist clients, this sense of alienation was reported as amplified due to the public condemnation that environmental activists meet with, increasing the risk of burnout and hopelessness (Dominelli, 2012). Participants often reported isolation within environmental or social justice groups due to misalignment between their values and groups that adopted stringent ecological lifestyles. This emphasises the need for sensitivity to clients’ contexts and values regarding taking action, as well as practitioner awareness of their own internalised stereotypes in therapeutic settings (Štrkalj-Ivezić, 2013).

Theme 7: Recognising Eco-Anxiety as a Rational Response

Participants stressed the importance of recognizing eco-anxiety as a rational response to the ecological crisis, countering societal ridicule and alienation. The study aligned with research indicating adaptive responses to eco-anxiety that dispel concerns of pathological worry (Verplanken & Roy, 2013). Participants engaged in constructive responses (Baudon & Jachens, 2021) and reported no active impairment in daily functioning due to eco-anxiety, supporting the argument against pathologizing eco-anxiety (Albrecht et al., 2007; Hickman, 2020; Hogg et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2020b; Passmore et al.,

2023). The importance of prioritizing connection over the perceived impact on the ecological crisis agrees with scholars advocating for client involvement in groups that have an established focus on 'emotional safe spaces' for their members as well active engagement in pro-environmental behaviors, such as Rosemary Randall's 'Carbon Conversations Groups' (Büchs et al., 2015; Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Haseley, 2019; Randall, 2009; Seaman, 2016). In this way clients can engage in emotional processing of their eco-anxiety, reducing the risk of burnout, whilst aligning their actions with their values and making a positive impact on the environment.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Few qualitative studies have explored this topic.. This study's focus on Integrative psychotherapists who have both experienced and worked with eco-anxiety offers a unique perspective aligned with the call for holistic responses and further research into individual experiences of eco-anxiety (Berry et al., 2010; Cianconi et al., 2020; Pihkala, 2019; Pihkala, 2020a).

The study's limitations include a small sample size and narrow participant demographic, which restrict generalizations to broader communities. Additionally, the study's Western perspective limits its applicability, as the ecological crisis is a global issue. Research on psychotherapists' experiences in different parts of the world, where therapy approaches and the ecological crisis's impacts vary, is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of eco-anxiety.

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CONCLUSION

The results of this study highlight eco-anxiety as an existential human response to an issue that is deeply enmeshed in an array of systemic shortfalls and threatens both the survival of humanity and our natural home. Eco-anxiety is accompanied by various other emotions, including hopelessness, grief, anger, and guilt. Stigma surrounding eco-anxiety is reported as an alienating experience that reinforces the negative emotions of those affected. Comparatively, pathologizing eco-anxiety was seen as reinforcing this stigma. Acknowledging and embracing the mental health impacts of the ecological crisis as a rational response to a real threat in the therapy room was experienced as destigmatising and conducive to meaning-making.

Ethical Considerations: Does this study include human subjects? YES

Authors confirmed the compliance with all relevant ethical regulations.

Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest.

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Authors contributions: Jaz Henry: Conceptualisation, study design, data collection, statistical analysis, writing of the manuscript. Vaitsa Giannouli: Study design, final approval of the manuscript, critical feedback and revisions, supervisory guidance.

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