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Editorial: Affective Dimensions of Climate Risk

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Affective Dimensions of Climate Risk

Climate change is rapidly becoming a climate crisis. Ever more frequently we witness the devastation of floods, droughts, bushfires, heat waves, sea-level rise, and extreme weather events in the media, or feel the impacts to family, friends and ourselves. Within the research community, there is a growing recognition that we can no longer rely solely on the political and scientific rhetoric that frames climate change adaptation as a largely technological endeavor. We need to think more deeply about how to engage people with climate adaptation, but also to realize that the climate crisis is already having a range of impacts on people's mental wellbeing. As such, we bring together a collection of papers that investigate the role of affects and emotions on people's capacity to perceive the threats of climate change—not only how these impact on mental wellbeing and ultimately their ability to respond, but also how we might use these insights to develop tailored and effective interventions that recognize the unique relationships that exist between weather, place, and people. Our goal in this issue is to stimulate discussions around the emotional and affective dimensions of climate crisis, in how we approach it, research it, and respond to it at an individual and community level.

The first paper in our special issue provides a systematic review. Reyes et al. chart the literature on climate change risk research over the last 20 years to analyse how emotion and affect have been theorized in different paradigms and through different theoretical frameworks. This paper argues that studies that consider the affective dimensions of climate change in the Global North do not adequately explain responses in the Global South. Thus, Reyes et al. suggest that future studies address some of the key gaps in the literature—how culture, embodied experience, gender or even temporality alter the way people respond to climate change.

Following this review, Pihkala presents a taxonomy of emotions and climate change to inform therapeutic interventions and foster emotional reflexivity. Pihkala recognizes that a number of attempts have been made to produce a taxonomy of climate emotions or “eco-emotions” in fields such as environmental psychology and yet, the approaches are varied and diverse in conceptual framing. In this paper, rather than working to produce a taxonomy that excludes and delimits emotions according to occurrence, intensity or relevance, Pihkala's approach is inclusive. Pihkala begins with a comprehensive list of emotions identified in the literature, groups these together according to an alternative logic which allows the author to discuss each in relation to the work that has been carried out in climate change studies.

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Next, the paper by Andrews gives us insights into the emotional dimensions of actively participating in policy development. She discusses the emotional experiences of members of Scotland's Climate assembly and compares these to wider population data about perceptions of climate change. Findings indicated that participants both "loved and loathed" their involvement. This research points to the need for similar citizen engagement processes to consider the emotional wellbeing of members as a part of a duty of care, and that there be further consideration of interventions to support adaptive emotion regulation and enhance resilience in the context of climate change distress.

Along similar lines Albrecht et al. examine how the procedural values and the overall objectives associated with the participatory development of the Finnish Climate Change Act were perceived by citizens in Finland. As a country with strong agriculture and forestry advocacy not all citizens supported the objectives of the policy. Taking a procedural justice approach they analyse survey data to conclude that transparency and openness of information and opportunities to participate in the drafting of legislation are integral to securing citizen acceptance and implementation of policy.

From a very different context, Hutchings et al. provide the findings from an empirical multi-method research project undertaken in Ethiopia. Given that Africa is a continent with high climate change vulnerability with a history of government water policy failure, they suggest that emotions provide insights to water security. Hutchings et al. suggest that measuring emotional responses among populations that are poorly understood may be useful for understanding water security experiences and water use patterns.

Hall then takes us on a journey that explores the links between weather lore, cultural identity and memory in the "rainy" city of Manchester, UK. Hall uses a narrative voice to think through local culture of the "Mancunians" and how it develops in tune with the experiences and perceptions of weather along multiple lines—historical, industrial, social, musical, aesthetic, and linguistic. Hall argues that more attention is needed on the social, familial, and everyday ways that people know climate and that it is important to explore how locales are sites of climatological knowledge. This has implications for the development of communication and behavior change interventions that are place specific.

Next, Hamilton suggests that opportunities for emotional reflexivity—acknowledging the movement of emotions—is a first step for people to be able to process some of the more difficult emotions that they encounter when trying to act on climate change. Dealing with fear, grief or guilt may in fact help to moderate defensive tactics or denial. Hamilton suggests that

emotional reflexivity could be more positively supported and promoted as an enabling strategy for adaptive behaviors and advocates for opportunities that can support individuals for example in workplaces.

Then, Robison et al. provide a review of the literature that links mental health to climate change mitigation. This review is complementary to Reyes et al.'s which is focused on affect in climate risk perception and communication rather than mental health. Robinson et al. note that health and psychology are the dominant approaches to research on mental health and climate change, that studies tend to focus on the Global North, and that they are concerned mostly with disaster events. They note a lack of research that explores the potential positive impacts on mental wellbeing that occur as a result of adopting mitigating behaviors (e.g., moving to a sustainable lifestyle). The authors suggest that rather than measuring problems it would be helpful to focus on "active hope" as an emotional theme that can be more effective than approaches that emphasize the negative consequences of living with the climate threat.

The collection of papers in this special issue addresses the affective dimensions of climate change from a variety of perspectives. We hope that readers will be inspired to incorporate thinking about emotions and mental health into their practices, whether that be how we conduct research about climate change, communicate the risks of climate change, invoke citizen participation in policy development, or broaden conceptual discussions that can enhance our collective response to the climate threat.

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TH wrote the first draft. All authors provided comments. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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