

Living through ecological breakdown

How privately-held emotions about the planet's future inform decision-making in public life

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Summary

As awareness of ecological decline grows and feeds collective concern about the future, we continue to study, live, and work in contexts that are irreconcilable with adaptation imperatives. While ecological economics and adjacent discourses offer conceptual and methodological strategies to reconcile present contexts with adaptation imperatives, its practitioners do not follow a practice of reflexively studying their own positionality and motivations. This study aims to contribute to the literature in ecological economics by interrogating how researchers, students, policymakers, and other working professionals perceive the gap between their subjective experience of ecological decline, and the institutional constraints in which they work and live.

Complex emotions about earth system decline produce a collective nervous system experience, individualized as “ecoanxiety,” “ecogrief,” “trauma,” and a broad cross-section of what Albrecht refers to as “psychoterratic syndromes” (Albrecht, 2019). These complex emotions, experienced individually and expressed collectively, ultimately influence our daily decisions, life choices, politics, and dreams. How does distress about planetary decline influence our narratives and decision-making over the short and the long-term? How do individual choices inform the way communities function and adapt, particularly under social stress? How do these complex emotions affect social cohesion, political dynamics, and policymaking in institutional life? What lessons does the COVID-19 pandemic hold for our capacity to process collective trauma and adapt over particular time horizons?

Through a series of surveys and interviews, this study will first seek to understand how students, researchers, and policymakers carry their privately-held emotions about the planet's fortunes, particularly how grief and anxiety are narrated in institutional life. While the study will first concentrate on direct and indirect emotional expressions among students, researchers and policymakers, it will also seek to understand how people and communities express their

emotions in alternative, non-institutional settings as a reaction against the limiting possibilities offered by conventional constraints (formal policies and laws; informal norms and customs).

Interviewees will consider their understanding of earth system decline, how their hopes and fears about the next half-century influence their decisions and motivations, and how their personal views are narrated in public or institutional life. Ecological economics will provide both a conceptual and human resource to draw from, as its research-practitioners routinely experience the social-psychological effects of earth system decline in their work.

1. Subject overview

1.1. The anxiety, grief, and collective trauma of ecological breakdown

A great deal of scholarly attention has focused on the obstructive nature of climate denial and associated social polarization (see Collomb, 2014), but less attention has focused on cultural paralysis due to fear and sadness about environmental breakdown, often referred to as “ecoanxiety” or “ecogrief,” respectively. The resulting collective trauma (or “terratriuma”) plays an important role in meaning-making as cascading shocks might eventually give way to sustained “periods of helplessness” (Park, 2013).

Social critic and cultural historian Theodore Roszak, credited for coining the field *ecopsychology* in 1970, was critical about how scientific thinking can exclude the affective or “felt” worlds of researchers in biology and ecology. This study will embrace that foundational orientation and consider the detrimental effects of splitting internal and external emotional worlds of people in a range of institutional settings. Professionals who carry private distress about ecological decline but must reflect a dispassionate public persona might have particular coping strategies that warrant interrogation; such a split between affect and behaviour must have implications for private decision-making as well as the way we see and work with one another, particularly under conditions of duress as planetary life support systems shift and decline.

Grief, anxiety, and trauma are closely related to one another, but have different orientations to future outcomes. Ecoanxiety refers to a range of complex emotions, including grief, shame, guilt, overwhelm, sorrow, fear, anger, and hopelessness; the umbrella term “anxiety” is rooted in both a fearful orientation toward a range of possible futures, as well as a strong desire to improve outcomes (Pihkala, 2020). Grief, on the other hand, reflects the sadness

and loss of something to which we feel love and attachment, including the feeling of “anticipatory grief” about future outcomes beyond our control (Kessler, 2020). Cunsolo & Ellis refer to ecological grief as related to “anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes” (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018, p. 275). Finally, “trauma” refers to more than mere “stress” from an event that has passed. It refers to a chronic rupture in meaning-making following an acute shock or series of shocking events; nervous systems are forced into high-alert over sustained periods of time (Park, 2013). Psychologists Horesh and Brown refer to COVID-19, for instance, as “a new kind of mass trauma” (2020). The public is once again becoming more attuned to the ecological crisis as COVID-19 becomes a less acute public health concern.

In a well-circulated piece on grief related to the COVID-19 pandemic, writer David Kessler describes anticipatory grief as a state where “our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can’t see it. This breaks our sense of safety. We’re feeling that loss of safety” (Kessler, 2020). In “Grieving Environmental Scientists Need Support,” Gordon et al (2019) found strong similarities between the ecogrief and ecoanxiety experienced by scientists encountering ecological breakdown and the traumatic experiences of those in emergency services, including disaster relief and the military.

Over time, an event or series of events can cascade into trauma, which then shifts the way you see yourself, the world, and other people (Park, 2013). A gap then arises between your “orienting systems” – the tools that interpret experiences and motivate functioning – and that event or series of events. The experience can then induce a sustained and severe feeling of helplessness, inducing a feedback loop that inflames and sustains grief and anxiety.

1.2. Effects on behaviour, decision-making, and social cohesion

Anthony Giddens’ theory of “ontological security” applies to the ecological crisis and wider socio-cultural divisions, as deep feelings of insecurity and trauma have consequences for our behaviour; the compounding effects of the pandemic and the ecological crisis can make one’s existence and future feel insecure, causing anxiety, depression, and defensive reactions. Ontological insecurity concerns a “person’s fundamental sense of safety in the world and includes a basic trust of other people” (Giddens, 1991). This phenomenon can inflame pre-existing social divisions and erode the trust required for social cohesion.

In a survey of early literature on the mental health impacts of ecological breakdown, psychologists Coyle and Van Susteren (2011) describe how fears of extreme weather have become phobic on a widespread level and are experienced similar to the “unrelenting day-by-day despair” that can be experienced during a drought. Watching the slow and possibly irreversible impacts of climate change unfold and “worrying about the future for oneself, children, and later generations,” is a source of stress, loss, guilt, helplessness, and frustration that inflames existing day-to-day concerns (Searle & Gow, 2010; Moser, 2013). The slow, daily sense of climate change can be “just as damaging” as acute climate impacts (Nixon, 2011). These concerns were expressed prior to the dramatic fires in the Amazon, Australia, and other parts of the world, and they were being carried by a population that is now experiencing the added tensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is a great deal of literature on ecoanxiety as a general public health concern, there is insufficient literature on how this pervasive issue influences learning and everyday decision-making. Under conditions of grief and anxiety, private decisions are anchored in narratives of disconcerting futures on a mass scale (Knapp 2011; Kolko 2012; Martin and Hanington 2012; Dunne and Raby 2013). Futurecasting occurs when one anticipates long-range problems to develop and test present-day moral imperatives. Such imperatives are narrated individually and collectively, as human nervous systems become attuned to the degradation of nonhuman life. Pandemic-induced distress also shares similarities: each is an individual and collective experience highlighting the relationship between human and nonhuman life; furthermore, each requires acceptance of mortality and uncertainty over a long time horizon.

On a societal level, how do earth emotions inflame existing political and economic divisions? While ecological breakdown is not the first or only existential threat facing humanity, those who are aware of the pace and magnitude of planetary life support decline may be uniquely able to make effective long-term plans; conversely, perhaps, those who are acutely aware of ecological decline will be paralyzed by the magnitude of the problem. Fears and frustrations might otherwise be expressed towards power-holders (eg. “politicians” and “corporations”); nationalities (eg. “China”); other political affiliations, or other ethnic groups (eg. “immigrants”) who are perceived to be competing for scarce land and resources.

1.3. Exploring models to productively channel “earth emotions”

Grief and anxiety can be channeled toward productive courses of action. Gordon et al call on using grief to “strengthen resolve” and “avoid getting trapped in cycles of grief” (2019). Similarly, Pihkala (2020) explains how anxiety can be harnessed to achieve hopeful, practical ways forward. It can be harnessed for pragmatic use under conditions of near-term threat (ie. an orientation to “fight” or “flight”), rather than paralysis (“freeze”). While some social groups will choose to *fight* the perceived antagonists referenced above, other social groups will physically *flee* to more ecologically stable locales, and still others will psychologically *freeze* out of a sense of intergenerational helplessness.

The concept of “earth emotions” was coined by philosopher Glenn Albrecht in his 2019 work by the same title (“Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World”). Albrecht has invented names for a number of useful neologisms that he believes more appropriately describe human emotional life with a rapidly changing planet; among the terms is “solastalgia,” which describes a form of existential distress caused by negatively perceived earth system change (Albrecht, 2019). In this proposal, I will embrace the term “earth emotions” to refer to emotions about earth system decline; I intend to use a range of Albrecht’s nuanced terms in the final work, including “psychoterratic syndromes,” which he uses to describe earth-related mental health impacts.

As a conceptual and human resource, I will explore ecological economics and adjacent fields as a potentially helpful outlet for those experiencing complex emotions related to planetary decline. Foundational texts related to ecological economics balk at the idea of the subject area as a “discipline,” referring to the knowledge area instead as a “transdiscipline” (for example, see Daly & Farley, 2011). While ecological economics may not have clear disciplinary boundaries, its research-practitioners do participate in a discursive community with common characteristics and “feelings” about earth system decline. I will therefore refer to ecological economics as an umbrella *discourse* rather than a discipline, and will use discourse analysis methods to evaluate participants’ contributions.¹

2. Problem and Objectives

¹ Michel Foucault defines *discourse* as a “system of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, and courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Weedon, 1987, p. 105).

2.1. Problem: privately-held earth emotions and their implications are not well understood

For researchers close to the subject matter, and for increasing numbers of people in mainstream institutional settings, privately-held emotions about earth system decline are poorly understood. This refers as much to dispassionate discursive appeals in research as it does to livelihood strategies and practices in mainstream business and public policy. The study will concentrate on direct and indirect emotional expressions among students, researchers, and policymakers.

How does the COVID-19 pandemic provide lessons for understanding and managing fears, or working through collective trauma? Policy campaigns are now underway to pair responses to the pandemic with responses to the ecological crisis. For instance, the OECD and WHO have each released campaigns suggesting that policymakers should “Build Back Better and Greener.”

2.2. Objective A: How are emotions expressed reflexively in the private sphere?

How are earth emotions acknowledged in the private sphere? At its most basic level, this study will consider how complex privately-held emotions influence the trajectory of lives over the short and the long-term. What are the detrimental effects of splitting the internal and external emotional worlds of students and working professionals? How are those worlds narrated? Of particular interest is the gap between the expectations of youth (ie. undergraduate students) and those already involved in the professional sphere and familiar with its constraints.

3.3. Objective B: How are emotions expressed in/directly in the public sphere?

The split between affect and behaviour has implications not only for private decision-making, but also the way we see and work with one another. How do earth emotions affect rule-setting and planning in institutional life? Is there a gap between reflexive awareness and performance in the public sphere? How do competing ideas about justice affect the cohesion of society and our capacity to adapt to ongoing social and earth-system change? What lessons does the pandemic hold for the ways we think about processing privately-held trauma? By focusing on a range of institutional and non-institutional settings, the study will forge a better picture how “affect” leads to particular behaviours and life choices.

3.4. Objective C: How can earth emotions be better processed and integrated in ways that drive productive change and preserve social cohesion?

What are some strategies participants use to integrate and reflect on the scope and rapidity of ecological decline? Each respondent will reflect moral imperatives about earth system decline in their narratives. The study will observe how an awareness of earth system decline influences (and is influenced by) the social-psychological interests of researchers and practitioners with particular orientations to institutional life.

While the primary line of inquiry in this study is to interrogate how complex emotions about earth system decline generally affect decision-making and social cohesion, a secondary line of inquiry will interrogate what makes ecological economic discourse useful within its own knowledge community; and conversely, what makes it un/appealing to the institutional decision-makers whose audience it requires in order to produce meaningful change.

3. Methods

The central question of this work is to examine how privately-held emotions about ecological breakdown affects personal and professional decision-making. To that end, the study begins by surveying a random sample of individuals with particular orientations toward institutional life, incorporating the questions outlined above. The study will focus centrally upon the behaviours and attitudes (personal; political) of students and researchers with an interest in ecological decline, but will also seek responses from non-academics.

For the purposes of this study, each respondent will be asked to reflect upon their understanding of earth system decline, and to narrate their hopes and fears about the implications of decline over the next half-century. In the context of a human life, a half-century is a perceptible timeframe in which to consider impacts and intergenerational consequences. Respondents will then be asked to reflect upon how their hopes and fears drive daily decisions, research interests, and motivations toward particular life goals, as well as their socio-cultural and political values and orientations.

3.1 Fieldsites

The study will seek to understand how individuals express their emotions primarily within academic institutional settings. I propose to extend an open invitation to those in the *Economics for the Anthropocene (E4A)* and *Leadership for the Ecozoic (L4E)* program between McGill University and the University of Vermont, as well as undergraduate students at Canadian Mennonite University (CMU).

In addition, however, I will seek supplementary responses from those in non-academic institutional settings (ie. those related to public policy) as well as non-institutional fields; the latter to consider how conventional institutional constraints hinder possibilities for imagination and action. By institutions, I'm referring broadly to structures that coordinate action at the collective level and specifically to settings that acculturate individuals to collective action; in this study, that refers to institutions of higher learning as well as government and business settings. To set a working definition of "institutions" using North's terms, I'm referring to the "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction," including formal rules and informal constraints that "create order and reduce uncertainty in exchange" (North, 1991).

Two such examples of non-institutional settings might include land-based initiatives as well as independent, non-academic research settings. By "land-based initiatives," I'm referring to learning and livelihood strategies located in naturalized settings rather than artificial ("built") environments, including "back-to-the-land" movements, and those which practice Indigenous knowledge or cultural rewilding.

3.2 Target respondents

Academic respondents will range in expertise from undergraduate to the graduate level, and professional academics within and adjacent to ecological economics. The open invitation will be extended to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as professors in E4A and L4E, as well as undergraduate students at CMU.

Secondarily, the study will seek the behaviours and attitudes of respondents in non-academic settings who bear similar interests but face the constraints of acting institutionally in business and public policy settings. The ambition of the two-field approach (academic; non-academic) is to make dialogical inferences between researchers and practitioners in my final assessment, and to consider how emotional splitting might impact social cohesion among agents

working for competing interests, even where values are aligned. Finally, the study will invite respondents in alternative, non-institutional settings as a reaction against the limiting possibilities offered by conventional constraints.

Participants (approximately 50) will be recruited directly through the researcher's network, already established with the fieldsite settings. Recruitment will be conducted by email and social media; participants will be provided with a consent form explaining the research objectives. The participants will also be asked to suggest further potential research participants which will result in a 'snowball' effect in terms of research participation.

In the participation selection, I will be attentive to the need for representation of different groups, including not only demographic diversity, but also representation of those with lower levels of concern about earth system decline. My own subjectivity and positionality will be declared in detail, and integrated into the study as a participant-observer in the narrative. The study will consider differences in levels of attunement and concern to the crisis among particular demographics: notably age and income groups. Important questions have been raised in popular literature about how the crisis disproportionately affects certain groups more than others, with headlines such as "the Environmental Burden of Generation Z: Kids are terrified, anxious and depressed about climate change. Whose fault is that?" (Jason Plautz, Washington Post), and "Climate Anxiety is an Overwhelmingly Phenomenon: Is it really just code for white people wishing to hold onto their way of life or to get 'back to normal'?" (Sarah Jaquette Ray, Scientific American). This study will attempt to seek some clarity to the kinds of questions raised in popular discourse, though it won't focus primarily upon them.

3.2 Survey-interview method

Each respondent will first undertake a survey that encourages them to reflect their understanding of earth system decline, and to consider their hopes and fears about the implications of decline over the next half-century. I will ask how these futurecast projections influence their daily decisions, research interests, life goals, and political values and orientations. Respondents will be asked to consider their levels of trust in public institutions and how they think the ecological crisis might impact social cohesion.

Using Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater's 2016 *Fieldworking* as a manual, semi-structured interviews will be conducted through participant-observation methods and questions will be

tailored to draw out elaborations on key points within the survey. The participant-observation research method generally refers to the collection of data by a researcher who is involved in their community of study and is therefore more accurately able to reflect the subculture in their work (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2016).

Participant-observation would generally include interviews as well as group observation to inform inductive evaluations about a subculture; however I propose to emphasize interviews in order to adapt to the constraints of gathering in person due to COVID-19. Interviews will be audio-visually recorded by agreement, and oral consent will be required. If access to in-person field sites and interviews become feasible, I will adapt to undertake in-person observations and interviews.

In addition to the universal set of questions referred to above, an additional set of questions will be explored in the interview process regarding learning at the undergraduate and graduate levels: how do they believe their intended audiences respond to arguments? What set of psycho-social characteristics enable subjects to engage with the discursive community? What is the extent to which grief and anxiety about the future motivate their work? How do research-practitioners understand their own subjectivity, including their imagination about and orientation to the future?

3.3 Anticipated outcomes and contribution to knowledge

I anticipate that research-practitioners in ecological economics will offer insight into how earth emotions are channeled in their work; specifically, I hope to explore whether normative claims to inform public policy are primarily expressions of concern over ecological breakdown. At a broader level, understanding privately-held emotions might also provide insight into how ontological insecurity inflames pre-existing socio-cultural divisions.

Since ecological economics does not often succeed at creating policy-in-practice, the gap between explicit goals and implicit processes within ecological economics suggests that the discourse exists, in part, as a psycho-social outlet for complex emotions about the planet's prospects. It's likely that research-practitioners in the discursive community have always channeled grief and anxiety into a conversation couched in the rhetoric of governance and policy, though its practitioners do not follow a practice of reflexively studying their own positionality and motivations. From the narratives and data provided by the participants, the

study seeks to clarify how the discourse serves as an outlet for “earth emotions,” without undermining the policy prescriptions the discourse also seeks to earnestly provide.

Conclusion

Our private and public emotional orientation to ecological decline has great socio-cultural significance and constrains long-term decisions in ways that are not yet fully understood. Its influence has particular implications for public life and social cohesion – in business, governance, and the academy. In this study, I wish to gain insight about how complex emotions are processed individually and collectively, and how they inform present and future choices.

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