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Talking about Climate Change and Eco-Anxiety in Psychotherapy: A Qualitative Analysis of Patients' Experiences

Abstract

Citizens' worries about climate change are often realistic and legitimate. Simultaneously, these worries can also become a source of distress so severe as to impair everyday functioning and prompt someone to seek psychotherapy. These emergent phenomena are often referred to as "climate anxiety" or "climate depression" by the popular culture and by patients themselves. Psychotherapists around the world report seeing more and more patients who report that they are experiencing distress due to climate change. This article documents a study that involved engaging 10 Swedish adults who sought help for climate change-related emotional distress in in-depth conversations about their psychotherapeutic experience. This was followed by analyzing accounts of psychotherapeutic processes to understand patients' experiences and outcomes. Interviews were examined with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Therapists' knowledge about climate change and competence in coping with it, validation of climate change-related emotions, and learning to manage these emotions were salient aspects of psychotherapy from the patients' perspective. Connecting psychotherapy to personal values and action orientation, resulting in an enhanced sense of meaning and sense of community, were also considered important. In conclusion, based on participants' experience, we offer practical guidance for practitioners.

Keywords:

climate anxiety; climate depression; psychotherapy; interpretative phenomenological analysis; psychotherapy outcomes

Clinical impact statement:

Question: How do patients who suffer from climate change-related distress experience the psychotherapy process in relation to this issue? What aspects of psychotherapy are experienced as helpful and what aspects are considered unhelpful or detrimental?

Findings: Therapists' knowledge about climate change and ability to cope with this knowledge, validation of climate-related emotions, learning to understand and manage emotions and connecting psychotherapy to meaning, values and action orientation were experienced as helpful psychotherapy aspects from the patients' perspective.

Meaning: Patients may need support in facing the awareness of climate crisis, thus therapists need to educate and confront this issue themselves, as well as understand its complex psychological dynamic.

Next Steps: This study opens up avenues for qualitative and quantitative research, including interviewing clients from different backgrounds and stages of awareness of climate issues, conducting single-case

analyses of climate themes throughout therapy, and researching the effectiveness of specific interventions and training programs for therapists.

Talking about Climate Change in Psychotherapy:

Analysis of Patients' Experiences

Changes to the global climate are progressing, leaving the public deeply concerned. A scientific consensus stresses that climate change constitutes a major threat to human health, well-being, and future pathways of global civilization (IPCC, 2018). In most countries worldwide, the majority of people already consider climate change to be one of the major dangers to their future (Pew Research Centre, 2019). In 2021, a new widely discussed study found more than three quarters of young people in ten surveyed countries thought their future is frightening, with more than half of them at times thinking that humanity is doomed (Hickman et al., in press). The gravity of climate threat, especially when contrasted with the lack of adequate action, affects more and more citizens psychologically, leaving them worried, anxious, helpless, and sometimes fatalistic (Pihkala, 2020). Thus, the issue of climate change has also entered the psychotherapeutic room and has become a subject of psychotherapeutic conversations (Cianconi et al., 2020; Haseley, 2019; Hayes et al., 2018; Lewis, 2018; Lewis et al., 2020). In the present study we seek to provide a better understanding of helpful and unhelpful aspects of psychotherapeutic

interactions related to climate change distress from the patients' perspective.

Climate Change and Mental Health

Climate change will affect the number of mental health problems worldwide, multiplying already existing risks and threats (Palinkas & Wong, 2020; WHO, 2018). Among others, special reports by the American Psychological Association summarize the existing knowledge on the intersection between climate change, psychology, and mental health (Clayton et al., 2014; Clayton et al., 2017). Observed and predicted mental health impacts include, among others: a rise in post-traumatic stress; strain on relationships and identities via loss of livelihoods and forced migration; anxiety and depression (Cianconi et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2018). The indirect effect of climate change, the anticipatory stress related to apprehension of the seriousness of the problem, is also on the rise (Clayton et al., 2017; Palinkas & Wong, 2020).

Climate Anxiety

Climate anxiety or broader "eco-anxiety" represents mainly indirect and anticipatory effects of climate change. In recent years, especially since climate activist Greta Thunberg shared her anxiety, this topic has been regularly discussed in the media and culture (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). In 2021 the online Google searches for the term have increased sharply by over 500 percent, just as the new report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) called climate change code red for humanity (Yoder, 2021).

Impactfully, the term eco-anxiety appeared in the 2017 APA report about the impact of climate change on mental health (Clayton etc., 2017), where it was narrowly defined as a chronic fear of environmental doom. However, in a recent overview of terminology Pihkala (2020) distinguishes multiple meanings of the term including: an emotion in the face of uncertainty – closely related to fear

and worry; a complicated psychological phenomenon originating from repressed feelings; an existential anxiety derived from confronting fundamental questions of life; and lastly, strong psychological symptoms, similar to pathological anxiety or anxiety disorders. In relation to the later, Clayton and Karazsia (2020) have developed an instrument to measure clinical forms of climate anxiety. They demonstrated that this type of anxiety is not uncommon, especially in younger populations, and can at times cause severe cognitive-emotional, functional, and behavioral impairment. They propose this debilitating phenomenon should be clearly distinguished from other forms of climate anxiety, which are less severe and most often appear in milder form (Clayton, 2020). Indeed, many authors (Kemkes & Akerman, 2019; Lewis et al., 2020; Pihkala, 2020) have pointed out that most reports of climate anxiety concerned everyday emotions, that were not a clinical problem and did not require treatment. However even severe forms of climate anxiety can be conceptualized as understandable trauma response to a traumatic situation/existential threat (Pihkala, 2020; Verlie, 2019, Zalta et al., 2021). Thus, their medicalization should be avoided due to the danger of making normal reactions to an abnormal situation a form of pathology. Pihkala (2020) proposed that some forms of eco anxiety should be clearly understood as a "practical anxiety," leading to potentially adaptive outcomes and problem-solving attitudes.

Living with Climate Change – A Phenomenological Dimension

A group of studies have explored the lived experience of "living with climate change" (Jones & Davison, 2021; Kemkes & Akerman, 2019; Marczak et al., in press; Norgaard, 2011; Verlie, 2019) and demonstrated that it is deeply emotionally affecting citizens across various everyday contexts, such as learning about climate change at school, watching news, dinner table conversations, or being in nature. In a phenomenological study conducted in the US, Kemkes and Akerman (2019) studied feelings that emerge out of the everyday experience of living with climate change and demonstrated how

helplessness and fear are interwoven not only in the perception of environmental catastrophes but also in the very experience of living in harmful social systems that contribute to the problem. Thus, the dominant sentiment in contending with the nature of climate change is not only about the environment; it contains deep social criticism of modern society. The major asset of the phenomenological perspective is to normalize emotional struggle with climate change as a shared experiential dimension, part of living in the modern global world. Many authors claimed simultaneously that today's societies can be metaphorically understood as being in the developmental stage of learning to see climate reality and to live within it, while working on potential solutions, which cannot be applied before a more mature stage of reality acceptance is reached (Kemkes & Akerman; 2019; Lewis et al., 2020; Verlie, 2019; Weintrobe, 2020). Randall (2009) has compared this process work to the work of grief, which also needs time, and acceptance for loss and change.

In an early anthropological inquiry, Norgaard (2011) observed the apparent paradox: As the climate is warming, people's sense of security is affected; and yet the theme remains silenced to avoid unpleasant emotions and maintain societal status quo. Works of multiple authors coming from the psychodynamic tradition (see for example: Weintrobe, 2013) contributed to understanding denial, which is part of the socially constructed experiencing of climate change. Sally Weintrobe has recently (2020) developed her earlier work on disavowal, a complex psychological state of simultaneously knowing and not knowing about a problem, to demonstrate how contemporary sense of entitlement and narcissistic parts of self contribute to the maintaining of a global "culture of uncare" in relation to climate change. In this culture, uncare and destructiveness are normalized, while care and worry are seen as problematic. She proposes that all global citizens, including practitioners of psychotherapy, are collectively at different stages of emerging from this disavowal. In this process of emerging from what she calls the "climate bubble" (Weintrobe, 2020), climate anxiety may actually be a healthy sign of overcoming the split and getting in touch with reality, as difficult as this reality might be.

Climate Change in Psychotherapy

Taking the complexity and experiential validity of climate change into account, it is not surprising that psychotherapists increasingly report patients seeking help in this context. These reports are, however, often based on first-hand communications of mental health practitioners, not on systematic studies (Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Haseley, 2019; Lewis, 2018; Weintrobe, 2013). Missing data, on when and how the issue of climate change is discussed in psychotherapy, is connected to the relative novelty of this topic, as well as to its complexity.

There has been a long-standing tradition of psychotherapists' and psychologists' engagement with the issue. It involved reflexive work, theoretical contributions as well as offering advice for self-help and clinical work with patients. For example, the Australian Psychological Society (AuPS) has prepared advice for dealing with climate change distress, as well as advice for related contexts, such as talking about this issue with children, or sustaining community engagement (AuPS, 2021). To date, many professional organizations, such as the Climate Psychology Alliance, Climate Psychiatry Alliance, and the Climate Committee of International Psychoanalytical Association, have joined the effort, building extended networks of engaged professionals. Psychotherapists have offered advice for clinical work with climate issues, based on psychodynamic, humanistic, existential, cognitive- behavioral, and systemic perspectives (Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Lewis et al., 2020, Weintrobe, 2013). In a recent theoretical review (Lewis et al., 2020), the authors propose an overview of how diverse climate issues, from disavowal to anger and fear, can present in psychotherapy, and how practitioners should receive them. They name several climate relevant dialectical pairs, such as individual agency – collective agency; hope – hopelessness, and similar, that should be understood by practitioners, and in the course of therapy held open, offering containment and transformative space for what might else be irreconcilable conflicts at individual level. Thus, they propose climate anxieties should be contained and transformed in a

process that involves both clients and practitioners, and they should be not reduced, as it might be appropriate in the cause of other anxieties.

Seaman (2016) was one of the few who researched practitioners' experiences by collecting answers of practicing psychotherapists in the US. In her study, over 70% of therapists responding to the survey believed climate change was relevant to their field, and over half did not feel their training had prepared them enough for dealing with the subject. While not all surveyed therapists encountered working with this problem first-hand, those who did, acknowledged that their own emotional responses to the subject have impacted how they receive clients, and they noted a large number of countertransference issues, for example identifying with the client fears, or trying to minimize them in order to self-protect.

In a recent scoping review of interventions proposed for eco-anxiety Baudon and Jachens (2021) found there are recurring types of advice given to practitioners, regardless of theoretical orientation. This advice includes: encouraging clients to take action; supporting clients' resilience; supporting clients' connectedness to nature and their seeking of appropriate social support; as well as advice for practitioners for their own education and inner work. This review listed 34 relevant literature sources but found only four of these sources were based on actual empirical research. The rest were conceptual or reflexive papers and a few were first-hand personal perspectives. Within four empirical studies reported in the review, -none included psychotherapy patients as participants. One – the Seaman (2016) study described above – included psychotherapists, the rest included students, community members, and self-help groups.

Current Study

The aim of the present study was to explore the experiences of persons who had discussed

climate change-related distress within psychotherapy. We aimed to focus on the aspects of psychotherapeutic interactions, which were considered helpful or unhelpful by the patients, in order to understand the experience from their perspective.

We asked the following research questions: How do patients who have used psychotherapy to address issues associated with climate-related distress experience the psychotherapy process in relation to this issue? What aspects of psychotherapy are experienced as helpful? What aspects are considered unhelpful or detrimental?

Methods

Research Design Overview

We decided to employ a qualitative method called "interpretative phenomenological analysis" (IPA) as an overall research approach (Smith et al., 2021). IPA is especially suited where the research goal is to "give voice" to a certain experience, and interpret it systematically, in order to understand it and learn from it (Larkin et al., 2006). Grounded in phenomenological tradition, IPA is idiographic and interpretative. By using IPA we decided to explore in depth, interpret, understand, and situate the ways our participants make sense of their psychotherapy experiences (Larkin et al., 2006). This study is exploratory in nature. We explore the psychotherapy process as it is experienced and understood by patients, as well as interpreted by researchers. This process is called "double hermeneutic" in IPA (Smith et al., 2021). More detailed explanation of the hermeneutical and phenomenological stance toward ontology and epistemology can be found in dedicated descriptions of the IPA method (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2021). Because experience can only be grasped from situated, contextual, and personal positions, researchers are understood as actively present and engaged in the process of interpretation.

Results presented here are part of a larger research project. A separate analysis based on the

same interviews, but with a different focus, was presented elsewhere (Budziszewska & Jonsson, 2021). In the previous article we focused on climate anxiety experience and proposed its understanding in light of the existential theory, using Spinelli's framework of the themes of existence (Spinelli, 2015). We made an argument that climate anxiety and distress could be understood in terms of existential crisis, and explored it via their relation to existential principles such as relatedness and uncertainty. In the present study we take an inductive approach (not using predetermined theoretical categories) and focus more on participants' experience of psychotherapy, and on helpful and unhelpful aspects of psychotherapeutic process from their perspective.

Researchers Description and Self-reflexivity

Magdalena Budziszewska is an academic researcher with interests in clinical and environmental psychology and experience as a psychotherapy practitioner. Sofia Elisabet Jonsson is a practitioner specialized in clinical psychology and psychotherapy. Both share long-standing support for climate action and awareness, and are engaged in promoting it in their professional environments. In line with the methodology, the researcher's prior expertise is likely to facilitate the research process. Previous experience with the topic enhances contextual knowledge and understanding during all stages of the study, including the interviewing process. A structured process of analysis (Smith et al., 2021), discussions inside the research team, supervision, and self-reflexivity were used to manage the impact of researchers' perspectives.

In particular, we reflected on how our own psychotherapeutic training, which was integrative with a humanistic and existential focus, could influence our understanding of helping aspects of psychotherapy and how our own engaged stance toward climate action could influence our understanding of participants. We let this reflexivity influence our writing in the way we pay attention to both convergence and divergence in data, consciously giving voice to diverging experiences. To manage

the impact of our own psychotherapy training, we used consultations from therapists trained in different approaches (systemic and psychodynamic). Finally, in line with the IPA approach, our results are to be understood as interpreted and reflected from our perspective, and not as the ultimate or only possible understanding of the data.

Participants

Participants in this study were a purposive sample recruited from climate/environmentally related groups on social media. Inclusion criteria were: experience of distress over present climate change and experience of discussing this distress within psychotherapy. Exclusion criteria were age below 18 and experience of in-patient psychiatric care. The number of participants and point of data saturation was decided collaboratively via discussion.

Ten Swedish adults, five men and five women, took part in the interviews. Their age ranged from 18 to 49 with a mean age of 35. All of the participants were born in Sweden, one participant had immigrant parents, and they all lived in or close to five large Swedish cities. All of the participants reported moderate or high socio-economic status. Most of them declared as nonreligious, two declared as nonpracticing Christians, one person felt close to Buddhism. A few identified with self-descriptions such as atheism, modernist western culture, Swedish culture or left wing. Just one person was a member of a formal green organization; a few were active in their local communities on a small scale (for example, helping with children's environmental education, or building homes for bees), but most of the group felt they contributed to climate change mitigation only by making small personal lifestyle choices. Thus our participants group involves mainly nonactivists.

All participants had past or current experiences of being involved in psychotherapy; some have undergone several episodes of climate-relevant psychotherapy – for example, due to frequent moving

between cities. The types of treatment varied. Several persons mentioned receiving cognitive behavioral therapy, which is refunded within the Swedish healthcare system, as a short-term therapy – 10 sessions. A next most popular type of treatment was integrative; one person mentioned short-term psychodynamic therapy in combination with cognitive behavioral therapy.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in 2018 and early 2019 by Sofia Elisabet Jonsson in person and audio-recorded; they lasted from 1 to 2 hours, with a mean duration of 100 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore patients' beliefs and emotions, perceptions of climate change, the reasons for seeking help, treatment history, and treatment experience. Example questions included: Which worry do you consider the most concerning in regard to the future of civilization and the natural environment?; When did you start having this concern? How and on what occasion did this topic come up for discussion in your therapy?; How were your concerns received in therapy?; What did you experience as the most effective treatment, in terms of your climate-related concerns, in therapy?; Has your experience in psychotherapy changed how you feel regarding climate change? The interviewer actively explored participants' ideas by asking follow-up questions and inquiring into the experiential dimension and personal meanings.

The study received ethical review board acceptance and ethical guidelines were followed, including participants' right to withdraw from the interviews. No person withdrew. In the following sections, participants' names are changed to protect anonymity, and all identifying details have been removed from the descriptions and quotations.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Both authors went through several close readings of

each transcript and documented their interpretative ideas by annotating the transcripts. We did this by adding notes and comments to a shared online document, and discussing this work. We first discussed each transcript separately, and then discussed cross-case analysis by searching for similarities and differences, and proposing preliminary ideas for themes. Based on this collaborative work, the first author wrote the first draft of the analysis. Both authors reviewed the analysis, making several adaptations and changes, including adjusting the names of the themes to better express the emerging interpretative ideas, and reviewing the selection of quotations. We selected the examples with the purpose of demonstrating convergence but also divergence and variability in participants' experience. The number of themes was determined in order to seek a clear yet compact presentation of the qualitative material. Each of the final themes is supported by material from more than half of the participants, and is illustrated in the results section, with material coming from at least three different participants (Smith, 2011). Both authors agreed on the final written form of the manuscript.

Additional steps, enhancing rigor and reliability, involved documenting the analysis by taking detailed notes, using supervision within and outside the team at different stages of the research process, and practicing self-reflexivity. To manage researchers' perspectives and possible bias, we consulted our interpretation of participants' statements and the therapeutic guidance offered in the results section with experienced therapists outside of the research team. However, in accordance with the interpretative character of IPA, the final presentation of results is to be understood as interpreted from our perspective, and thus not as the only possible or ultimate understanding of data. According to the paradigm-specific criteria in qualitative research (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005), transferability, confirmability, fairness, and authenticity are good quality criteria for the results. These criteria include honoring the patient's subjective constructions, providing an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, appreciating different perspectives, and educative and action stimulating narrative (Morrow, 2005).

Results

For participants in our study, climate distress demonstrated mostly as anxiety. In particular, the time they first acquired knowledge about the gravity of the climate crisis was remembered as frightening and disorienting. An important reason for this was connected to the apocalyptic anxiety, the expectation of civilization getting gradually worse and worse under climate change, with looming war, migrations, human suffering, and global conflicts. Few persons mentioned also feeling depressed at experienced and anticipated environmental losses and struggling with ethical dilemmas related to living in modern society. Many reported difficulties in finding hope, a loss of previous ideological convictions, and a sense of meaninglessness. In an earlier interpretation of the climate distress taken from the participants in this study (Budziszewska & Jonsson, 2021), we have proposed understanding this experience in terms of an existential crisis.

For some of the participants climate distress was the main motivation for seeking psychotherapy, while for others it co-existed with other reasons, such as broken relationships, conflicts in the family, loss, and trauma. In participants' narratives these issues often reinforce each other. For example: broken relationships contribute to a sense of insecurity in an unstable climate change world; early childhood trauma adds gravity to the expectation of future chaos from climate crisis; death of a close other is experienced together with the sense of dying nature due to climate change.

Four consecutive themes were developed in the process of the interpretative phenomenological analysis. These themes are relevant to understanding the psychotherapy experience from the patients' perspective. An overview is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes' Overview

Major themes developed in the interpretative phenomenological analysis
1. "It is a person who understands what I am talking about" – looking for a competent companion while facing the climate reality
2. "I cannot help you with your anger because it is valid" – experiencing validation of climate change-related emotions
3. "You don't have to live this way" – learning to manage climate change-related emotions
4. "We talked about trying to find a meaning in what I am doing" – searching for meaning via climate-related actions and values

"It is a person who understands what I am talking about" - looking for a competent companion while facing the climate reality

In the participants' narratives, the decision to start psychotherapy was often colored by previous experiences of social isolation with regard to climate emotions. They expressed the need for in-depth conversations about this theme, however struggled to find good conversation partners. For example, Boris explained "I would like to talk about climate anxiety with the people closest to me. Generally, there is a tendency not to want to listen." Eric and Britt recounted how their family members at times painfully ridicule their climate feelings. Leif was angry at shallow ways of talking about the subject in his social circle: "I would lie if I claimed to know anyone interested in discussing these issues. The majority of my friends say 'Oh, it is so terrible with global warming' but at the same time, they have two cars …" Gabriela believed climate emotions are a taboo topic in society: "One can talk about politics and feminism but never about feelings about the climate."

As a consequence, psychotherapy was seen as a valid place for an open conversation. However, the complicated nature of the topic made talking about climate difficult also in the psychotherapeutic setting. For patients, it was important to perceive their therapist as having an earlier, reliable knowledge on the topic. Hedwig speaks of a positive experience with her therapists in regard to this:

> It is a person who understands what I am talking about. She is well read about these issues, which is something I find very important, actually. If I were to sit there and enlighten her about the state of the world it would be rather annoying! (…) I am normally supportive of others revealing their ignorance, but in the therapeutic setting it simply would not work. I think it's very good that she conveys that she knows what's going on and has followed it for some time.

For Hedwig, there is a contrast between "normally," where people are often ignorant and can be coached into understanding, and psychotherapy. There may be an intuition behind Hedwig's sentiment not to "enlighten" a therapist, that the confrontation with the gravity of climate change can be a massive and disorienting experience, similar to the one patients' themselves are experiencing. Hedwig's perception of the therapist as someone who has followed the climate change issue "for some time," gaining knowledge, but also possibly having enough time to process it, has facilitated the psychotherapeutic alliance. Hedwig elaborated on that: "I have some sort of trust in her (. . . .) She does not break down when we talk about it (climate anxiety), which gives me some stability in relation to it all." Hedwig valued her therapist not only for her previous knowledge about the topic, but also for her perceived ability to cope with it. On the experiential dimension such a person can be perceived as competent and thus offer containment for facing existential turmoil and anxiety.

In contrast, Silvia felt her therapist was not really informed about the topic, so during the therapy she was careful not to frighten her, and thus at times restrained from exploring the topic in full depth:

> Regarding the environment… It rather came as a shock for her. I felt that she didn't quite understand the climate issue, but it could also be because of me, I didn't really dare to talk about it. I am scared of frightening people, so it was my choice not to talk about it. Now I wish I had put more time into finding someone' with an environmental angle.

Britt reported a similar mechanism; she explained how she usually tries to play down the issue in her everyday conversations – "my standard phrase, when people are about to tell me about the climate situation, is to 'sugarcoat it' a bit" – and explored how it influenced her perception of therapeutic relationship. As a conclusion she also stresses the importance of therapists' previous knowledge:

> I think that those who work with climate anxiety are also scared. I thought a lot about that during my therapy. "Look at you, sitting there with your own anxiety, I know you feel it, too!" (. . . .) It is important to have someone that is knowledgeable about the topic.

On the experiential dimension, talking about climate change is perceived as a risky and burdening subject, where the amount of therapist previous knowledge cannot be assumed. Participants, especially if they were anxious, felt that informing professionals about the gravity of the climate crisis is too difficult a task for patients. Both Britt and Silvia report limiting the depth of their exploration of the climate change topic due to the perception that their therapists were earlier not really aware of the scale and meaning of this problem, and the fear that the therapist would be emotionally burdened if this were to be explored in all its seriousness. On the other hand the perception of therapist as having previous knowledge and being able to cope with the climate crisis awareness created a safe space for the patients to explore the theme.

"I cannot help you with your anger because it is valid" – experiencing validation of climate change related emotions

If, based on the therapist's previous knowledge, climate reality could be acknowledged in therapy, patients' strong emotions could also be validated and normalized. Many participants recounted the moment of validation of their climate-related concerns. For example, Leif remembers precisely the exact wording used by his therapist:

> The thing that he [the therapist] said, "I cannot help you with your anger because it is valid. You are not angry at things that didn't happen, but at difficult things that actually have taken place."' I really appreciate this sentiment; it was worth the therapeutic fee.

Hedwig also recalled a moment of acknowledging the realistic nature of her fear and her right to be scared:

> I remember her saying that she did not want to be "the distraught psychologist" because the worry that I have is, after all, anchored in reality. She said it wasn't wrong to be scared (. . . . .) it has helped; it causes less anxiety when you get confirmation that "It makes sense that you feel this way."

As a consequence of the normalization of climate anxiety, a sense of community beyond the therapeutic room was fostered in Hedwig. She recounts: "Therapy has made me more open to talk with all kind of people about it. I feel that it has helped me a lot, especially when realizing how many there are who feel the same."

In turn, having the validity of climate anxiety questioned by professionals added to participants' already painful isolation, and hindered the therapeutic alliance. Britt, who changed professionals due to frequent moves, recollects several such interactions: "The psychiatrist simply looked at me and said 'Climate anxiety, is that even a thing?' [looks defeated]." Or, she recollects a one-time encounter with another professional, which was also frustrating.

> Then I said I didn't want to go any more, because he wanted to link my climate anxiety to the fact that my parents are divorced. Every time I said I had climate anxiety, he asked me to tell him about my relationship with my mother, father, and sister. He didn't take me all too seriously; he really didn't take it seriously.

On the subjective level, patients perceived psychotherapists and doctors as having a privileged role in validating their strong feelings about climate. This is perceivable in the way these types of experiences were remembered after time, and told as memorable moments. Thus patients often experienced validating moments as one of the most important points in therapy.

"You don't have to live this way" – learning to manage climate change related emotions

Acknowledging the reality of climate change and the validity of the resulting emotions opened space for a good therapeutic alliance. Paradoxically this also enabled addressing psychological dimensions of the problem. This is visible in Gabriela's story, which combines previous themes and introduces a new one. For Gabriela, who studied climate science and was very burdened with her newly acquired knowledge, it was first important "to have the space to talk about the problem (climate anxiety) and feel that it was accepted." Then she enjoyed the perspective, brought by the therapists, and could find relief in her suffering despite the problem being real.

> It was not like "If you are an environmental scientist you have to deal with the consequences, that's life," but instead "You don't have to live this way." At first, when I was at my lowest, I felt "If the world is like this, why should I have the right to be happy, why should I contribute to this?" But then it was confirmed that "Even if the world is not the best place, I do not deserve to feel bad."

Many participants mentioned enhanced competence to understand and manage emotions, as one of the important assets of psychotherapy. For example, Eric recounted: “Becoming aware of my feelings was the greatest gain. To actively focus on the presence and existence of emotions.” In similar vein, Paul said, “I started to try to make sense of the actual feelings that I was experiencing. The realization that I could structure them. That is something I gained from therapy.”

The emotion that most participants in this study sought to modify was anxiety. Some report profiting from CBT techniques aimed at anxiety reduction. Britt remembered: “Before, I was not even able to say the word ‘climate.’ I simply shut down. From therapy I learned that it is not allowed.” Boris valued the perspective, brought by his therapist, to perceive climate anxiety simply as anxiety, even if he at the same time thinks there is not much realistic hope for solving climate crisis. He recounts: “She (the therapist) had an outside perspective and I had several moments of enlightenment through talking with her. Again, anxiety is anxiety.” Eva also valued learning how to handle anxiety, but as a divergent voice she believes climate concern is different than other anxieties:

> CBT therapy had some effect. I learned how to handle my anxiety and to become aware of patterns, such as my tendency to worry more at certain hours of the day, maybe. Realizing that anxiety does not give me anything. But the climate concern, I have difficulty not to worry about it. Especially as it is upon us!

For Eva, the realistic character of the climate issue posed a problem to seeing it just as an emotion regulation problem. Nonetheless, understanding how emotions, especially anxiety (but also grief, sadness and anger) work, focusing on them, and learning how to manage them was still experienced as a salient and helpful aspect of psychotherapy by most participants.

"We talked about trying to find a meaning in what I am doing" – Searching for meaning via climate-related action and values

Several participants recount that a loss of hope and meaning were an important part of their climate distress. For example, Paul described how a sense of "existential nihilism" connected to the climate situation was, for him, the most important reason to seek therapy. And Jon described this sentiment by saying: "If everything is going to hell anyway, why even try?"

The last theme that stands out in participants' narratives about the experience of psychotherapy, are the conversations regarding the theme of finding meaning in a life that is lived from the point of awareness of climate crisis. This theme often connects to the theme of climate action personal values.

Gabriela, who is engaged in pro-environmental actions in her local community, remembers a conversation about climate action, which was a turning point in her therapy:

> We talked about trying to find a meaning in what I am doing (. . . .) Then we started to talk a lot about the kids. I came to the conclusion that I wanted to do better for the kids than what I had done for myself. It became my driving force (....) It was as if he had to say it, or for us to talk about it, for it to sink in (. . . .) It felt really good, it was probably after that session it actually felt good to walk away from there (. . . .) Before it had been about so much misery, so much I had to be exposed to, I felt so lonely in that process. But at that time I didn't feel alone, I was reminded that I was doing this for someone other than myself, that it was something that I could be proud of (. . . .) I do not know if it was the therapy itself that helped, or if it was that talk [laughs].

For Gabriela, the therapy rediscovers the sense of meaningfulness in her actions. Loneliness and misery is mentioned as something that changes experientially in this process. In terms of interpretation

there is a link between action and a sense of connection to others. Climate action is by nature also always done for others. Therapists' presence contributes here to a transitional, interpersonal space "as if he had to say it, or for us to talk about it" for this change. Also, the presence of children is important, and a link between children and climate action was also salient in other participants' narratives.

Hedwig also remembered her therapist's encouragement toward action as something positive: "I also remember her encouraging me to do something about it, to transform my anxiety into action." She recounts the therapist's rightly believed sense of agency was important: "that I ought to feel that I can have an impact on things. So it's interesting that it actually helps." However, Hedwig also experienced herself as alternating between different positions.

> I have changed my perspective of myself, I have given myself a direction. I am now more determined to be a person who does right by the environment, who is on the right side, so to speak… At the same time I have the feeling of meaninglessness, and the idea of this planet as fragile and endangered is a feeling that grows stronger day by day. I tend to alternate between these two states.

Hedwig's experience of tension can be understood as resonating with the fundamental uncertainty of climate futures, which is true both experientially and in terms of what climate science is telling citizens. However, Hedwig's therapeutic conversations contributed to strengthening the hope/action side in her, and she experienced these contributions as a memorable and positive one.

Paul found a solution to climate anxiety in political engagement. He connects this to the sense of meaning; he declared: "to work with something I sometimes find disturbing gives me some sort of meaning." Jon offered a similar conclusion: "If one can manage to channel that (emotional distress) to something positive [he smiles], then, sure, maybe there is a meaning in that," and he also elaborated on his efforts not to be cynical, because "a cynic does not have many friends."

Some participants endorse a sense of hope, and undertake individual or collective action, but this is not universal. There are also diverging experiences, especially with regard to the question of activism and hope. For Example Boris believed activism "won't work', and is a "waste of time." He reinterpreted his climate distress, however, as an occasion to focus on present time, and to show love to family, thus also in relation to personal values and connection to others. Eric saw the value of therapy in achieving personal congruence, but he did also not believe it could influence many people:

> It has given me a lot, everything. I am trying to have a better holistic mindset overall (. . .) Congruence, I feel that I am about to find it for the first time in my life. I am starting to live as I am taught. (….) I don't think my way of living inspires the larger number or makes a difference, but it enables me to live, to eat and to breathe. The alternative is that I dig myself a well and place myself in it [laughs]. I think my way of living is about coping with climate anxiety.

For the participants, the value of climate action was often related to finding personal meaning and a sense of connection, thus it was related to basic existential questions posed by climate change. Creating personal meaning around climate anxiety, and endorsing its functional aspects, channeling it "into something positive" were thus experienced as an important part of therapy and recovery.

Discussion

This study is to our knowledge the first to analyze experiences of discussing climate change in psychotherapy from the patients' perspective. Therapists' knowledge about climate change and ability to cope with this knowledge, the validation of climate-related emotions, learning to understand and manage these emotions and connecting psychotherapy to meaning, values and action orientation were salient psychotherapy aspects from the patients' perspective. In the following we discuss these results from a theoretical perspective and propose guidance for practitioners.

Coming from a variety of traditions, many authors (Lewis et al., 2020; Norgaard, 2011; Randall, 2009, Weintrobe; 2013, 2020) have simultaneously conceptualized the mainstream societal approach toward climate crisis as a combination of denial and disavowal, an array of defenses against assimilating this knowledge and its consequences. Thus, confrontation with climate crisis can be understood in terms of relationship with reality. Sally Weintrobe (2020) puts forward that we all live in an organized, perverse culture of disavowal, a culture that seeks to downplay the significance of environmental destruction, and thus we are all emotionally very fragile while first emerging from what she calls the "climate bubble". From this perspective confronting the significance of climate crisis needs time, effort, and continuous support from other people. Therapists and mental health professionals have as much reason to be disoriented here as everybody else. If patients come to therapy to speak about their process in relation to climate change, but perceive therapists to be unaware of the scale of the problem, they may be cautious not to start this process with their therapists. This may in turn frustrate their need for help, and disrupt therapeutic alliance. Thus we understand patients' sensibility to therapists' perceived knowledge, as reported within the first theme in the present study, as a wish to build a relationship with someone, who does not need to be informed or protected, but instead can offer containment (Bion, 1962). Results from the present study, especially the first two themes, support Lewis and co-authors' (2020) model, for they demonstrate the centrality of containment in the face of a yet unsolved problem and of maintaining a developmental focus without downplaying the seriousness of the issue.

Drawing from the empirical research tradition, one of the most predictive factors in persons coping with emotional suffering and trauma is social acknowledgment of the difficult experience (Zalta et al., 2021). Participants in this study experienced a considerable amount of social isolation, misunderstanding, and resistance with regards to their climate feelings. This may result from the inconvenient, socially and politically silenced character of the messages these feelings convey (Grebenyuk, 2015). A psychotherapeutic concept of "witnessing" is relevant here. While working with

these kinds of situations, practitioners can draw from traditions that highlight the interpenetration of private and social/political issues, such as the feminist mantra “private is political” (Lewis et al., 2020). Taking this theoretical perspective would also help to avoid the privatization of public problems (Kemkes & Ackerman, 2019); that is, making a general societal problem just a private “anxiety” issue. In a sense, those who talk about their emotional suffering related to climate are doing the broader society a favor by acting as signalists of an important issue (Norgaard, 2011). Clayton (2020) puts forward an important dynamic related to climate change fear. It is in the private interest not to feel too much genuine negative emotion around macro-social problems to maximize well-being. But it is in the collective interest that people worry about climate change and rally for support for solutions. Psychotherapists should be well aware of this dynamic between private and collective interests and its multilayered character.

Talking about climate change in psychotherapy involved an exploration of several fundamental, existential themes. In our previous work, within this research project (Budziszewska & Jonsson, 2021) we demonstrated how the experience of climate anxiety is embedded within themes of existence (Spinelli, 2015), such as meaning, relatedness, authenticity, freedom and responsibility. Practical actions taken in the world, from lifestyle changes to political engagement, are connected to all these themes. Encouragement toward an active stance to the climate problem was seen as supportive by the participants of the present study, while a sense of passivity and resignation was connected to a sense of lower well-being. However, the notion of patients’ encouragement toward more specific forms of climate action – for example, activism – needs caution. Climate activism is connected to a wide array of political grassroots and other movements, and depending on form and location, those engaged in it can bear high personal costs, from the risk of burnout to persecution. Even if many activists, including most notably Greta Thunberg (Pihkala, 2020), tell the story of overcoming their climate depression or anxiety by means of collective action, caution is needed not to put the task of social change disproportionately on patients. Also as much as climate action is needed in society, psychotherapy patients should not be

instrumentalized for any external agenda. Indeed Lewis et al. (2020) proposed understanding climate psychotherapy in terms of the ability to tolerate particular dialectics, and the dialectic of individual and collective agency and their limits is one of those.

Implications for practice

Based on the present study, several recommendations can be considered for practitioners working with climate distress. Psychotherapy needs space for acknowledging the realistic nature and gravity of climate crisis, and for witnessing the legitimate suffering related to it. The adaptive nature of all primary climate emotions, such as fear, grief, and anger in relation to threat, loss, and injustice interwoven with climate change apprehension should be acknowledged and explored. While working with climate anxiety, it may by useful to distinguish between anxiety as an adaptive primary emotion, and pathological, nonadaptive anxiety, or anxiety as a defense mechanism. Well-established techniques of approaching anxiety in therapy can be useful in the work with nonadaptive anxiety.

However, climate anxiety as a functional emotion should not be reduced or minimized, but sought to be transformed into ways of adaptation to climate crisis. These adaptive responses are likely to include cognitive, emotional, relational, and spiritual elements. One possible goal of therapeutic work could include helping patients feel a greater sense of control over their anxiety and other climate-related emotions and develop an ability to convey them to others – that will lead to a sense of greater connection rather than alienation. Adaptive processing of difficult emotions can also lead to enhanced agency in incorporating this learning in therapy to live more meaningful, engaged lives.

Existential themes, such as uncertainty, relatedness, spirituality, meaning, agency, and responsibility are important areas to be explored, since they often offer patients a personal road to recovery. Therapists need to be aware, however, that there is a complex dynamics connected to questions of hope or agency in relation to climate crisis. In existential terms, some inherent tensions –

for example, fundamental uncertainty of climate futures, or limits to personal and collective agency – need to be accepted and endured.

Implications for education and training

Given the growing importance of climate change for global citizens, therapists need to educate themselves about causes, mechanisms, consequences, and solutions of climate change based on sources that represent scientific consensus. Therapists should engage in reflexivity regarding their own handling of emotional and existential issues related to climate crisis. This process is likely to take time and include elements of confronting own disavowal, anxiety, and grief. Support from others, dialogue among professionals and supervision can be used for this purpose. To date, many professional associations, both locally and globally, offer community and support in this process.

Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations. Participants were a highly selected group of volunteers, and experiences of persons who are less willing to share their stories could be different. Moreover, the present study included mostly persons who were in the process of relatively fresh confrontation with climate change issues. Experiences of those who have engaged with this topic for a longer time (and this group is likely to grow), as well as experiences and problems of activists, might differ.

This study involved a Swedish sample of moderate and high socioeconomic status. Sweden is among the most climate-ready countries with relatively low climate risk. Thus experiences of people who already face direct physical, health, or economic threat of climate change are not represented in our group of participants. The direct vulnerability to climate change varies significantly between individuals and communities and might be among the essential factors moderating climate anxiety and other emotions. In terms of future studies, the experiences of people living in vulnerable and non-vulnerable

communities across various contexts should be given individual attention. It is also important to consider the intersectional perspective, as multiple factors influence climate risk vulnerability and resilience both on an individual and community level.

This study opens up multiple avenues for future qualitative and quantitative studies, including interviewing clients from different backgrounds and stages of awareness of climate issues, conducting single-case analyses of climate themes throughout therapy, and researching the effectiveness of specific interventions and training programs for therapists. A quantitative assessment of psychotherapy effectiveness regarding climate anxiety might also be important in future studies.

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