Climate Change on the Couch:

How Psychotherapy Can Respond to the Climate and Ecological Emergency – and Why It Should

PART 2

Brigitta Mowat

Integrative Psychotherapist; The Minster Centre, London

Summary

This is Part 2 of 'Climate Change on the Couch' (Mowat, 2022). It considers how the counselling and psychotherapy profession could be preparing trainees to support clients presenting climate-related issues such as distress or trauma. The paper expands on the theme of framing the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) as a social-justice issue by looking at it through an environmental intersectional lens, whereby our relationship with each other and the environment is seen as an intersectional emergency. Applying an interpretive phenomenological (IPA) approach, six counsellors and psychotherapists concerned about the CEE were interviewed to explore their personal thoughts and feelings, and how the CEE manifests in their clinical work. This paper offers a theoretical underpinning for two domains identified in the interviews: (1) Perception of past, present and future in relation to life on the planet; and (2) Why it is difficult to think and talk about the CEE.

Key words

Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE); social injustice; intersectional environmentalism; climate trauma; relationship with the other-than-human world

Introduction

What Has Gone Wrong?

Despite, as I write, some 27 years of climate negotiations at UN Climate Change Conferences (COPs), greenhouse-gas emissions are still rising. This, together with environmental and social degradation, lack of action by governments and so forth, causes anxiety, anger, sadness, frustration – the list of responses is long – in a large section of the population. One of my key questions is: who is most impacted by the resulting climate and ecological crisis / emergency (CEE)?

Since the 1960s, climate science has known that CO_2 emissions destabilise weather patterns, and thus food production. Reports of 'food shortages' appear regularly in the UK media (Timmins, 2023). However, from the perspective of the Global South, to call this

lack of availability of unseasonal fruit and vegetables in Britain's supermarkets a 'shortage' is offensive to the Global South, where climate change is more advanced and is having an existential impact on whole populations. In short, the CEE, for which Western politics and our consumptive lifestyles are mostly responsible, is divisive. Collectively, we are facing a human-induced existential/social-justice crisis which requires socio-political and psychological responses, as well as deep behavioural change.

The climate scientist Peter Carter, who assesses Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, calls the CEE the 'crime of all times' (Carter, 2020). Arguing from an indigenous perspective, Vandana Shiva characterises the CEE as 'crimes against the Earth and against humanity' (2019, p. 7). There are myriad social and existential issues to consider. The poor suffer far more from extreme climate-related weather events – flooding, storms, wild fires, heat waves, droughts, snow – than the well-off, as they lack the financial resources to protect themselves. The CEE is a local as well as a global issue that requires a collective response going beyond reducing carbon emissions and switching to renewable energy. In a recent interview, Naomi Klein articulated the multiple overlapping crises we are in: 'We have a health, housing, inequality, racial injustice and climate emergency […] we need responses that are truly intersectional' (De Trenqualye, 2023).

The Slow Response of the Counselling and Psychotherapy Profession

As discussed previously (Mowat, 2021, 2022), the counselling and psychotherapy profession has been slow to engage with mental-health issues related to the CEE or to offer appropriate clinical training. Things are moving, however: in a significant step, the Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy College (HIPC), one of the largest colleges within the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), recently approved a set of

Sustainability and Environmental Awareness criteria in their Standards of Education and Training documents (SETs), which training institutions are required to meet in their syllabi (UKCP/HIPC SETs, 2023).

The Focus of the Paper

In this paper I argue that the therapy profession has a moral obligation to engage with the CEE. To invite clients to talk about the CEE, or any socio-political issue come to that, is still out of bounds for many practitioners, as it challenges the traditional psychotherapeutic notion that therapy is, first and foremost, about addressing relational issues that clients bring to therapy. Arguably, this form of therapy ignores what is happening in the wider world – a reflection of the Western tendency to deny humankind's dependency on nature (Weintrobe, 2013).

Contributing to the planetary crisis are multiple overlapping socio-political issues. Based on the data contained in two domains – the perception of past, present and future in relation to life on the planet, and why it is difficult to think and talk about the CEE – I will explore the relevance of intersectionality from the perspective of privilege, supremacy and the 'other', in order to highlight how conscious and unconscious dynamics interact and intersect to culminate in the CEE. Furthermore, I will draw from trauma theory and socially informed relational psychoanalysis to examine how the counselling and psychotherapy profession can conceive the psychological and social dynamics that are inherent in the CEE.

Climate Change from an Intersectional Perspective, and How It Relates to Past and Present Power Dynamics Linked to Socio-political Systems

My research participant Susan, a lady in her early 60s, pointed out a need to see the CEE through an intersectional lens, which includes

our relationship with the other-than-human world, a term coined by David Abram (1996):[1]

> It's becoming more and more conscious to me that I have much more awareness of not wanting to exercise my power over other people, animals included. Yet I couldn't quite grasp the way in which we are exercising power over the Earth and the environment. (Susan, 99–102)

Here, Susan is bringing into focus human detachment from, and power over, other people and the other-than-human world. The question as to who exerts power over whom is central to the CEE debate. For example, in the way it interprets the Bible, Judeo-Christianity sets itself against the rest of life on Earth (Sancton, 1989), which has normalised binary thinking in terms of 'us' and 'them'. The academic and social psychoanalyst Lynn Layton points out that the tendency to categorise intimations of universal truths is evident in structuralist thinking, and is challenged by post-structuralist ideas. Layton states that post-structuralist thinking challenges the universal 'truth' of categorisation and thus regards pairing as inviting binary and dichotomous values. Furthermore, Layton notes that in binary pairing such as male– female, able–disabled, straight–gay and so on, the first of each pair is perceived as the ideal. The pairings are constructed not only as different, but also as superior/inferior dynamics. Additionally, whilst these categories do not fully define who we are, they are embedded in our unconscious psyche (2020a, p. 174).

From a post-structuralist perspective, Susan's quotation illustrates the unconscious superior/inferior dynamic between the human and other-than-human world that is embedded in Western cultural paradigms. Layton's concept of 'normative unconscious processes', as discussed in Part 1 of my research project (Mowat, 2022), theorises how unconscious biases are enacted (Layton, 2020b). 'The concept of "normative unconscious processes" […] links the psychic

and social in a way that illuminates how intersecting binary and hierarchically defined identity categories are unconsciously reproduced in the clinic' (Layton 2020a, p. 173*)*. The binary dynamics in Susan's quotation are evident, and exemplify the socio-political forces at play in man's relationship with Earth. 'Normative unconscious processes' reveal that humans place themselves at the top of the hierarchy. It is tempting to rephrase the Miriam Webster Dictionary's definition of white supremacy thus: '**Human supremacy**: the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable humans to maintain power over all other living things on Earth'.

The psychoanalyst and writer Sally Weintrobe (2021) argues that the causes of the CEE are rooted in capitalist, neoliberal profit-before-people ideologies. Such economic systems are in conflict with, and prevail over, indigenous cultural values, to which dependency on ecosystems has been integral for thousands of years. The imposition of Western values on the Inuits (Watt-Cloutier, 2016) is one of numerous examples of binary, hierarchical, structuralist dynamics subverting indigenous cultures. The author of *Sand Talk*, Tyson Yunkaporta (2019), who speaks from within indigenous culture, captures the dilemma in which indigenous populations find themselves. Observing the seductive nature of Westernised values, he states: 'People of colour in their struggle for economic equality join the rush to exploit Aboriginal land and resources, and are welcome at the boardroom table as long as they embrace settler values and identities' (2019, p. 63). The deep disturbance and dilemmas that Western culture has created amongst indigenous societies is painfully obvious.

Some of these power dynamics are replayed in neo-colonialism which, as Yunkaporta notes, has seeped into indigenous cultures. Nowadays, wealthy individuals come from different cultures and races, although white men living in the USA, according to the list of

the 100 richest individuals in the world (from forbes.com), are by far the majority. Thus, a contemporary interpretation of supremacy is more complex, and has superseded old colonial structures of white men enslaving and colonising Africa and India.

Individuals who belong to and identify with the supreme class tend to be obsessed with their self-image, and there are intersecting links between supremacy and hubris – a Greek term meaning 'excessive self-pride or self-confidence' (Trumbull, 2010, in Turner, 2023, p. 34). The academic and psychotherapist Dwight Turner argues that a sense of hubris is present in the counselling and psychotherapy profession. He states that within the world of psychotherapy, hubris is a type of cultural and psychological inflation, and by its very nature ego-centric and conscious only of its own existence (2023, p. 34). This is one of many possible reasons why it has taken the counselling and psychotherapy profession so long to engage with the CEE, and to recognise that the CEE is a social-justice issue.

How Do We Move Forward?

Looking at the psychological dynamics of privilege and supremacy, Turner states that 'privilege becomes supremacy only when we reject our responsibility for the other, and when we reject the idea that the other is part of us' (ibid., p. 37). A recognition of the other, seeing and feeling the other, is a necessary step towards healing colonial wounds from the past. Recently, the aristocratic Trevelyan family made history by travelling to the Caribbean to publicly apologise for its ownership of more than 1,000 enslaved Africans. The Trevelyan family paid sums of money to the people of Grenada, where the family owned six sugar plantations (Lashmar & Smith, 2023). With the apology made by members of the Trevelyan family came recognition of the other, and of the hurt and denigration that slaves endured.

Many historical, transgenerational, colonial and racist wounds have not been addressed, and are contributing to a perpetual re-enactment of the patriarchal power dynamics that have led to the CEE. Power dynamics and colour blindness are present in the environmental sector. The environmentalist Leah Thomas noted the presence of 'colour blindness' as a student. During her studies of environmentalism she was 'heartbroken to discover […] how the global environmental community has historically disregarded and silenced people of colour, a breach that carries on today' (2022, p. 5). Parallels can be drawn with counselling and psychotherapy training courses, which have left people of colour feeling unseen and marginalised.

The way white people have exploited the Global South over hundreds of years, as well as the injustice that people of colour experience in many aspects of their lives, led Jeremy Williams (2021) to conclude that climate change is racist. In a similar vein, Asad Rehman, Executive Director of War on Want, recently said in an interview: 'I was really struck… on racial justice, on economic and social justice, [the climate and ecological crisis] was an epitome of all those issues' (Taylor, 2021). He is inspired by social-justice movements in the Global South, which often see the climate crisis in terms that differ from mainstream environmental NGOs in the UK, Europe and North America (Taylor, 2021). The bias of many institutions in the Global North resembles the experience that Thomas had while studying environmentalism.

Similar parallels can be drawn with counselling and psychotherapy institutions that are still caught up in eurocentrism. However, recent publications, including *Black Identities + White Therapies. Race, respect + diversity* (Charura & Lago, 2021) and *Therapy in Colour: Intersectional, Anti-Racist and Intercultural Approaches by Therapists of Colour* (Carberry et al., 2023), point to a cultural shift within the profession.

This shift away from eurocentrism is helping us to address 'the ways our institutions, our training models, our theories […] unconsciously reproduce […] a racist, sexist, classist and heterosexist status quo' (Layton, 2020a, p. 173).

Environmental Intersectionality Can Help Us Address Our Relationship with the Other-than-human World

Intersectionality, a term coined by the American race scholar Kimberley Williams Crenshaw, analyses the overlapping and intersecting social identities and systems of oppression, domination and discrimination, which are continually enacted consciously and unconsciously. Building on this definition, environmental intersectionality brings the environment, which is subjected to systemic extraction and destruction, into focus. Environmental intersectionality gives a symbolic voice to fauna and flora in the broadest sense; it acknowledges that social and environmental issues are intertwined, as suggested by Thomas (2022), Williams (2021) and Rehman (Taylor, 2021). Importantly, environmental intersectionality expands the human-centric focus of intersectionality to include the other-than-human world.

If we want to avoid the end of life on Earth as we know it, there is an urgency to examine – and resist – our impulse to repeat on a conscious and unconscious level (Layton, 2020a, p. 173), such as repeating inequality in relation to the human race and the other-than-human world (Thomas, 2022). Conscious and unconscious interpersonal destructive patterns are issues that are explored in counselling and psychotherapy. The planetary crisis demands that we expand our awareness to examine and heal not just our relationship with ourselves and with each other, but also our relationship with the other-than-human world. There is an urgency for humanity to listen empathically to the flora and fauna that cannot directly speak to us. They too have traumatic stories to tell

and, like humans, need safe havens to roam freely and have the conditions to grow and blossom without adverse human interference. The heartbreaking stories from nature resonate with the racist, classist, sexist and ableist stories we hear from clients. As Yasmin Kapadia puts it:

> The way I hear it, a client relaying painful experiences of sexual violation tells a story that is uniquely and distinctly her own and yet also linked to the stories of other women who have been similarly violated, and also to the raping of the body of the Earth. (2023, p. 159)

Why Is It So Difficult to Talk about the CEE, and Why Is It So Little Talked about in Counselling and Psychotherapy?

The CEE sends most people into emotional overwhelm, which reflects just how emotionally dysregulating this topic is. Emotional dysregulation activates our defences, notably denial, disavowal, intellectualisation and dissociation. There is a need for safe spaces to share climate emotions, such as the 'climate cafés' offered by the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA). Other reasons for not talking about the CEE might relate to a deep sense of guilt and shame about the damage – for example, freak weather events destroying homes and livelihoods, and killing millions of trees, plants and animals – that we in the Global North are causing to communities in the Global South. The least privileged are the hardest hit, as they lack the financial resources to protect and recover from climate-related disasters, which, as Leah Thomas asserts, highlights 'the devastating impacts of environmental injustice and its close ties to racial identity' (2022, p. 123). Seeing the CEE from the perspective of environmental intersectionality offers counsellors and psychotherapists a framework for addressing the CEE as both a social- and an environmental-justice issue that intersects with racist, classist, sexist and ableist experiences.

Research by Trudi Macagnino has explored why the CEE is talked about so little in counselling and psychotherapy. A significant finding suggests that some in the profession still see therapy solely as providing a space for exploring interpersonal issues, 'and in so doing keep socio-political concerns such as the CEE out, as though external contexts have no impact on the internal world' (Macagnino, 2023, p. 17). As therapists, we send out signals to clients regarding what can and cannot be talked about in the therapeutic space; the limits we set may be related to our unexplored emotions and lack of understanding of the CEE. This, in part, explains why a client's eco-anxiety might be ignored or sidelined, or related back to unresolved personal issues, as was the case for Joanna Macy. Her analyst suggested that her distress over the destruction of old-growth forests related to a fear of her sexuality (Macy, 1995, in Mowat, 2021 p. 4). Macagnino arrived at similar conclusions. Helen (one of her research participants) described her therapist as 'cerebral'. When Helen tried to talk about her grief regarding the CEE, her therapist interpreted it as a projection of her grief for her mother who had been absent for much of her childhood (Macagnino, 2023, p. 18). Macagnino suggests that such an interpretation 'can be seen as an unconscious avoidance by the therapist of opening up material which they themselves may also find distressing' (2023, p. 18).

Both Macy's and Helen's experience can be understood in terms of Layton's concept of 'normative unconscious processes' (2020b), whereby socially unwelcome parts are split off and projected on to others – notably, people of colour or climate activists, who hold disagreeable feelings for all those who are dissociated from the unfolding climate trauma (Woodbury, 2019). Lertzman (2015) notes that ecologically aware people tend to bear deniers' unconscious sense of guilt about their destructive life choices. These accounts suggest that there is an urgent need for counselling and psychotherapy institutions to offer CEE-oriented training to facilitate therapists' engagement with their own climate emotions. Clients sense if they can talk about their climate concerns with their therapists.

Typically, climate activists seek out therapists who offer climate-informed therapy. My experience of working with climate activists is that they find it easier to express their feelings about the CEE than they do their personal tragedies, something other practitioners have encountered. Yasmin Kapadia, a psychotherapeutic counsellor offering climate-informed therapy, moves with ease between the individual and the collective story of the CEE: 'The sessions weave in and out between focussing on personal and collective levels of wounding, allowing for the emphasis to contract and expand organically, like the dance of a breathing diaphragm' (Kapadia, 2023, p. 159).

Climate Trauma – Our Collective Wound

As I outlined in part 1 of my research paper (Mowat, 2022), climate-informed therapy (Greenspun, 2023; Kapadia, 2023) or an ecosystemic approach to therapy (Maiteny, 2012; Rust, 2020; Totton, 2021) challenge the Western notion of equating psychological health with an ability to be independent and economically productive. Climate-informed and ecosystemic approaches to therapy recognise humans as an interdependent species that is part of, and not superior to, the other-than-human world (Mowat, 2022). The fact that ecosystems worldwide are degrading is altering the stable climate that humanity has experienced for the past 12,000 years. This is coming at the same time as growing political authoritarianism – witness, for instance, the UK's introduction of the Public Order Bill aimed specifically at muzzling climate protests. The degradation of ecosystems, combined with a clampdown on the right to protest, are two of a series of factors causing

what Zhiwa Woodbury has termed 'climate trauma'. He states that the CEE 'challenges the very idea of a shared future in a way that fundamentally indicts our present identity as a species' (2019, p. 4). Indeed, it is the human species that has to take responsibility for the 'crime' that Shiva (2019) and Carter (2020) have identified. Woodbury suggests that climate trauma is superordinate to generational, personal or cultural trauma, the reason being that it affects the entire human race and intersects in various degrees and severity (Thomas, 2020). The example of the Inuits as reported by Sheila Watt-Cloutier (2016) illustrates how trauma has entered a new dimension – trauma at a human level and on a planetary level are one and the same. Watt-Cloutier has spent decades defending Inuit human rights in the face of worsening climate change in the Arctic. In climate trauma, there is no past tense (Woodbury, 2019). Many people will not recognise that they are traumatised by the CEE because of the denial, repression and dissociation that operates on a social, political and individual level (Herman,1992) and creates a sense of pseudo-safety. There exists a desperate desire to hang on to normal life, even though there is an awareness at the back of the mind that climate change is happening. We are collectively impacted by the 'crime of all times' (Carter, 2020) or 'crimes against the Earth and against humanity' (Shiva, 2019, p. 7).

When working with clients, it is important to be aware that one of the 'elephants in the room' may well be climate trauma, and that both the client and therapist are impacted by it, consciously or otherwise. To help therapists not dissociate from climate-related traumata presented by clients, they need training to explore their own feelings about and responses to the subject matter. Given that climate trauma impacts the entire human race, counselling and psychotherapy seems ideally placed to process this global trauma, and to give words to perceptions and sensations that need integrating.

How Do We Process and Heal Climate Trauma, or Any Form of Trauma?

Spending time in nature has a healing effect. Walking through woods and meadows, along streams and over hills helps us to connect with the other-than-human world and contributes to our well-being. Ecotherapy taps into these resources, and some clients value outdoor therapy. Being in nature can lift depression and sooth anxiety – two conditions commonly experienced in relation to trauma. Many people feel safe in nature, and this lays a foundation for trauma work.

Arguing from an attachment perspective, Martin Jordan suggests that 'nature can be seen as representing a secure base, an aspect of both our internal and external relational world that can provide great comfort' (2009, p. 28). Spending time in nature can enhance a sense of connection with ourselves and the other-than-human world, and regulate climate anxiety. The fact that we all, consciously and unconsciously, suffer from climate trauma is a call for humanity to restore, regenerate and heal the abusive relationship that Westernised societies have with indigenous cultures and nature. Will Adams, who wrote about Gestalt ecopsychology, reminds us that healing needs to be bidirectional and mutual (Adams, 2015, in Taylor, 2021, p. 161). Reciprocal relationships ease us into a more hopeful place, and better able to face what the CPA refers to as 'facing difficult truths' amid advancing ecological collapse and political oppression. As Kassouf (2022) suggests, '[thinking] catastrophic thoughts may allow us to make meaningful contact with these evolving realities, enabling us to translate thought into long overdue action and make change in the world'. To invite catastrophic thoughts into our consciousness is to process climate trauma, which in turn can energise us into meaningful communal actions.

Methodology

About the Research Project

The research received ethical approval from The Minster Centre, where I am a tutor, supervisor and head of year. Participants were recruited through the CPA's Google discussion group and the Relational School in the UK. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) was used to analyse the six semi-structured interviews. IPA is a methodology that is concerned with the nuances of people's experiences and to make sense of participants' articulated perceptions in response to phenomena (Finlay, 2014).

December 2019 saw me recruit six counsellors and psychotherapists for whom the CEE is a great concern. The interviews were held in person and were conducted between December 2019 and February 2020, just before the Covid-related lockdown. The semi-structured research interviews consisted of between six and eight questions aimed at exploring participants' personal experiences of the CEE, and how, if at all, their clients bring it up in their therapy. The intention was to find out how the UK's counselling and psychotherapy profession addresses CEE issues when they arise directly or indirectly in clinical material, and where the profession stands in relation to the CEE.

Ethical Considerations

After initial email correspondence with each participant, I arranged an initial phone conversation to check for suitability and to arrange a time for the interview. All interviews bar one (the latter taking place in the participant's office) were conducted in my own home. Recruitment information – a brief outline of the research, the handling of data protection, anonymity, confidentiality, after-care and the interview questions – was sent out a week before the interview to give participants the option to withdraw and time to reflect on the questions. Before the

interview, participants signed a consent form, received details of the after-care if it should be needed, and were given the option to request a copy of their recorded interview.

Participant Demographics

All the participants are trained counsellors or psychotherapists from the psychodynamic, transpersonal or integrative theoretical orientations. They all work in or near London. Five participants identify as White middle class, one as a person of colour. Two participants identify as cis gender women, and one as lesbian, between the ages of 35 and 70, and three as cis men between the ages 40 to 65. To preserve anonymity, all participants were assigned a pseudonym. Apart from holding a qualification in counselling and psychotherapy and being invested in the topic of the CEE, no other criteria were asked of participants taking part in the research. Given that most participants are members of CPA, the participants' demographic details are intentionally kept vague in order to ensure confidentiality.

Analysis

Analysis of the six semi-structured interviews followed the IPA model outlined by Smith et al. (2009) by adhering to an iterative process of refinement. Each transcript was analysed for potential themes. As recommended by Smith et al., emerging themes were organised into major (superordinate themes or domains) and minor (subordinate themes) components. I identified themes that were common to most, or some participants. This process helped deepen my understanding of participants' accounts. The data analysis yielded between three and six subordinate themes, which were grouped into five domains, three of which were discussed in part 1 of this research report (Mowat, 2022).

Findings

This paper (part 2) draws on two domains, neither of which were discussed in the

previous paper (Mowat, 2022) – **perception of past, present and future in relation to life on the planet**; and **why it is difficult to think and talk about the CEE** – and their corresponding subordinate themes. The wording of the domains has changed slightly from that stated in the first paper, but the meaning remains the same.

FIRST DOMAIN: Perception of Past, Present and Future in Relation to Life on the Planet

This domain looks at how participants expressed their fear for their own survival and the survival of generations to come. Some expressed deeply felt grief, and visualised the end of a way of life as they knew it.

Theme: *Survival of future generations*

Concerns about the survival of humanity are real and founded on scientific evidence. The most recent IPCC report (2023), as reported by Isabelle Gerretsen, addresses (for the first time) the mental-health impacts of climate change.

Mark, a person of colour in his 40s, revealed how watching Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) unleashed a cascade of thoughts about his early childhood and how he felt about the lifestyle he grew up in:

> I had just watched Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* and I was really moved by it. It spoke to something much earlier and younger about my own childhood relationship with capitalism and insecurity, greed, acquisitiveness, all of these qualities I saw in my family of origin. It made me very uneasy as a young child. […] So there was a sense of growing up in an environment where I observed hypocrisy in terms of what was said versus what was done, […] but something about watching that film made me think, you know, young people need to know about this. (**Mark**, 7–15)

Here Mark is forging a link between the reality of global warming as depicted in Gore's film and his parents' affluent lifestyle.

Being a father himself, the climate change portrayed in the film rang alarm bells, engendering a sense of fear. In that sense, Mark's family aspired to a lifestyle that would earn them the recognition they perhaps craved, whilst being blind to its consequences on future generations.

Naomi, in her mid-thirties, talked about feeling unsafe about sharing her existential anxieties about the future of the planet with people outside of her 'climate-aware bubble', as she put it, and how she finds the silent denial around the climate crisis oppressive. In this extract she reveals how she sees a future Earth:

> I remember thinking and having images of – we're not going to have food, we're going to starve, and I really just want to find a way of living in nature. I don't know how, but I want to live in community. (**Naomi**, 104–6)

This is an emotionally complex and charged moment for Naomi that is similar to what Kassouf (2022) calls 'catastrophic thinking'. Beneath the thought of starvation is a personal feeling that is deeply upsetting, namely whether she wants to – and whether it is morally responsible to – bring a child into a world undergoing social and ecological collapse (see next theme). Naomi's concerns are shared by many women, particularly those engaged in the climate movement.

Norbert, a psychotherapist in his 60s, expressed concerns about the future his children are facing due to climate change, which were triggered by a keynote speech Nick Totton gave at a CPD event:

> […] What caught me there was the deep grief I feel for my children, that their lives, the choices they'll be making, are different from the ones I made in 1992. Even though I knew about climate change, it felt the biggest thing that's changed since 1992 for me is the timeline. Each prediction is worse than we thought it was going to be. (**Norbert**, 137–41)

It is hard for Norbert to stay with the deep sense of grief he feels for his children. I

sensed how he instantly switched into a dissociated mindset. Self-protective strategies like this help us maintain mental equilibrium in the face of unbearable emotions.

Theme: *Impact on young people*

This was the most emotionally charged theme I identified. The question of bringing children into this world is a topic that clients bring to therapy, and one that can also relate to personal issues that might be mirroring what is happening on the planet – see Kapadia's (2023) example, discussed earlier. **Manuela**, a semi-retired psychotherapist, talked about how her grandchildren will be far more affected than her own children. She felt this theme particularly keenly, as one of her grandchildren was born on the day of the interview:

> My ten year-old grandson is very, very worried, and said we're all going to die. He doesn't consistently feel like that […] but I feel a terror that there can't be a future for them. (**Manuela**, 47–50)

Manuela's extract is a clarion call for all of us – therapists, parents and teachers – to think about how to talk to young people about the CEE without overwhelming them; how to hear their concerns and offer support and containment, while at the same time managing our own fears. Our feelings about the CEE are a collective experience, and it is appropriate to share them with the younger generation.

Mark expressed his fear about what his children will encounter. In this extract, he talks about how millions of tiny pieces of plastic were washed ashore after a powerful storm in Wales.

> The fear is of the unknown. I don't know what they will encounter. To be perfectly honest, the fear is that they will inherit a vastly impoverished world. (**Mark**, 173–5)

Both Manuela and Mark are expressing what Mark calls their 'heartbreak' and their fears for the coming generations. These generations

are finding themselves in a 'done-to' position (Benjamin, 2018): the plastic, the pollution, the destruction of nature are being dumped on them.

Theme: *Shame, despair and fear*

This theme finds participants describing their feelings around what we are doing to future generations, the widening gap between rich and poor, and our innate instinct to grow, which jeopardises our species' very survival.

Susan, a psychotherapist in her early 60s, talked about the shame she feels around the lack of sensitivity with which we treat the other-than-human world, and the time it has taken her to realise the part she plays in this:

> […] In terms of actually clicking into the Earth as hurting I'd say [my becoming aware of it] is more recent, and I think that I feel shame [about] how long it took me to kind of bridge between my understanding and my feeling for the Earth. (**Susan**, 93–6)

Susan's shame centres around feeling that she has not done enough to mitigate climate change. She feels that others, for example those who joined Extinction Rebellion (XR), are doing more. Compared to climate activists, she feels to a certain extent worthless and powerless.

In the following extract, Mark addresses the widening gap between the rich and poor:

> [I feel] deep despair and I'm very scared about the kind of world, our values […] we are on a trajectory of everything, of the gap getting bigger and bigger between those who are continuing to profit […] and [the poor] […]. The Horn of Africa is turning into a desert. (**Mark**, 153–7)

Mark is expressing what Woodbury (2019) calls 'climate trauma'. In speaking about the gap getting bigger and bigger, Mark is indirectly referencing our economic systems, which allow a minority to capture the world's wealth and resources while keeping the majority in poverty. High-carbon lifestyles

have biospheric as well as global social-injustice consequences: the Horn of Africa is experiencing a climate-change induced four-year drought, with no end in sight. According to the UN World Food Programme, the number of people at risk of starvation in this drought-ravaged region has increased to 22 million (Presse, 2022).

Peter, a psychotherapist in his early sixties, spoke about his fear that the human species will not be able to resist its instinctual behaviour. He is quite philosophical about it in his distress:

> […] My greatest fear is that we carry on being imprisoned by these basic id instincts of growth […] of protecting ourselves, of trying to have a nice time. That is all very egocentric, both as a motivation for these gated ecological communities, a kind of meaning in life that is going to continue the same old dynamic and processes that caused the problem in the first place, rather than really listen to the deepest wisdom that our species has produced. This is my biggest fear. (**Peter**, 877–83)

Peter is tapping into the basic instincts of the human species outlined in Freud's structural model of the mind, and whether we can gain some control over our instinct to grow economically and as a population. He perceives 'gated ecological communities' as pseudo-ecological. Underlying Peter's fear is a longing for a harmonious way of life where humans are sensitive to, and feel part of, ecosystems that sustain life on Earth.

SECOND DOMAIN: Why It Is Difficult to Think and Talk about the CEE

This domain identifies some of the psychological blocks that participants encounter with respect to the CEE, notably fear of breakdown and being confronted with inadequate or destructive human tendencies. Participants also described their feelings of frustration about people's behaviour despite the reality of the CEE.

Theme: *Difficulties encountered when talking about the CEE*

All the research participants, in different ways, fear a collapse of ecosystems caused by human behaviour. One participant mentioned feeling overwhelmed and fearing that conversations about climate change could trigger a mental breakdown in him. Others described the difference between talking to people who recognise that climate change is real and those who deny it. One participant admitted that talking about the CEE confronts him with the inadequacy and destructiveness of his own life.

In the following extract, Mark talks of his fear of falling apart when he thinks about climate change:

> There is very little clarity in terms of where I am with regards to the Anthropocene because it's too total for me to contemplate without fragmenting […] for me to stare at the sun directly and accept the level and how it permeates and penetrates absolutely everything. I think it could lead to a breakdown of some sort within myself. (**Mark**, 337–43)

Mark's fear of fragmentation chimes with Woodbury's (2019) definition of climate trauma. Mark's internal fragmentation mirrors the ecological and social breakdown and collapse that is starting to happen. The parallel between internal and external breakdown is striking.

Here is Naomi's experience of talking with deniers about the climate:

> If you bring that [climate] conversation outside of your own bubble […] I think about my brother […] it just doesn't faze him. And so then it puts doubt in me. It's like, how is it possible? Am I crazy? And you know who is right? Because there's, like, one side that's really saying there is not [a problem], and then I feel there is. (**Naomi**, 93–7)

Being around climate deniers is a disorienting experience for Naomi. The denial of truth and reality shifts the goalposts and creates confusion in us. Underneath the defensive

denial, I would argue, lie unconscious guilt, shame and fear. It links to Lertzman's (2015) observation that ecologically aware people tend to carry deniers' unconscious guilt and shame about their destructive life choices.

Peter suggests that one of the reasons why people find it difficult to talk about the CEE is because it confronts us with our innate destructive nature:

> [Talking about the climate crisis] is actually a contradiction […]. Because if I start talking about it, I eventually will have to talk about my meaning in life being inadequate and destructive. (**Peter**, 509–11)

Owning our destructive side is difficult to do, yet necessary to avoid polarisation of the 'doer/done-to' dynamic (Benjamin, 2018). Peter's extract expresses a recognition that the systemic issues that have led to the CEE also live within us as individuals.

Theme: *Changing our behaviour*

In this theme, participants expressed how they have changed their behaviour in the face of the CEE, and how they feel about people who do not. In the following extract, Manuela talked about friends with a 'business as usual' attitude:

> I have become much more challenging about my retired friends with more money than they ever had, which is also true of [me and my partner]. They say, 'We fly here and see this place, now we fly there and see that place'. [I challenge them by asking] What do you think about what this really means? Do you think about the climate? (**Manuela**, 86–9)

Manuela is questioning the morality of her friends' behaviour in the face of climate change. Questioning someone's environmental behaviour is contentious and can harden defensive positions. That said, there are moral grounds for challenging behaviour that increases inequality and worsens the CEE.

In a similar vein, **Norbert** commented on the materialism of a neighbour:

> The house opposite has two children [the same age as ours]. They've now got four cars: their two children also have cars. We have one car [for the whole household]. (**Norbert**, 233–5)

This illustrates how extreme consumerism is a driver of climate change.

Discussion

The foregoing interview extracts illustrate key points of the two domains chosen: they demonstrate how participants' perceptions of past, present and future in relation to life on the planet are coloured by the CEE, and what makes it difficult to think and talk about the CEE.

The data from the theme *Survival of future generations* strongly resonates with what participants absorb from social media, documentaries, climate science and conversations with climate deniers, and how all this affects future generations. The link between Western lifestyles and carbon emissions is perceived by the participants as one of the main contributing factors to the warming of the planet. For them, as well as globally, this phenomenon evokes feelings of injustice. The counselling and psychotherapy profession urgently needs to engage with psychological and social issues related to the CEE and to see it on a par with racism, classism, sexism and ableism, as discussed above.

Another important issue raised by several participants under the theme *Survival of future generations* is the question of whether to have a child or not. As Naomi's extract suggests, clients will have strong feelings about this, and will want to unravel the issue in therapy.

The data from the theme *Impact on young people* was the most emotive to emerge from participants' accounts, in particular with

regards to their own children or grandchildren. The theme is likely to come up in therapy. For a therapist-mother or -father, these concerns are likely to be shared. This requires the therapist to have explored their own feelings about the topic and to have received training in sustainability and environmental awareness. Such training should include developing an understanding 'that our current context of practice includes environmental breakdown, and an understanding of the implications and likely impacts this will have on the lives and wellbeing of us and future generations' (UKCP/HIPC SETs, 2023, p. 9). Because both client and therapist are impacted by the CEE, it is important for the therapist to think about what to share with the client, and how to create an atmosphere that is non-defensive and authentic.

The data from the theme *Shame, despair and fear* illustrate the feelings participants expressed in relation to the CEE, which are triggered by the ever-widening gap between the Global North and South, our id drives for growth, our destruction of the environment, and so on. On the one hand, such feelings could be regarded as appropriate human responses to growing inequality and the depletion of nature caused by the CEE. On the other hand, looking at feelings through an environmental-intersectional trauma lens may uncover individual, cultural and racial trauma (Thomas, 2022). As discussed above, Woodbury (2019) defines climate trauma as a 'superordinate form of trauma' which links into, and can trigger, multiple layers of trauma.

The data from the theme *Difficulties encountered when talking about the CEE* cover a multitude of reasons as to why climate conversations are challenging, not only because of the political contentiousness of the subject matter, but also because it encompasses social, cultural and scientific strands. Timothy Morton (2013) refers to the CEE as a 'hyperobject', whose vastness and

complexity can send us into a fragmented state of mind, something that participants expressed in different ways. Mark's account vividly illustrates this point. Fragmentation is a common trauma response to intense emotions, especially those we are unable to process. In a client session, it is important to attend to moments when both client and therapist might withdraw into a dissociative conversation, as Macagnino (2023) describes.

Some participants remarked on their feelings of confusion in the presence of climate deniers, an area that most therapists would find challenging, partly due to the intensity of projections – a phenomenon that Lertzman (2015) observed. Talking about the CEE confronts us with our destructive side, which can easily become split off as a defence against feelings we would rather not experience. Staying with such feelings, as Susie Orbach (2019, p. 67) suggests, 'can be bruising and can make us feel helpless and despairing', which offers an explanation for the difficulties that participants experienced when talking about the CEE.

The data from the theme *Changing our behaviour* uncovered the moral dimension of the CEE. Vandana Shiva, a powerful voice for indigenous rights, suggests that 'it is a moral imperative to rebel against a system that is driving extinction [and] exterminating species and cultures' (2019, p. 7). Seen through this lens, the CEE's impact on the Global South is a moral issue. A climate-aware therapist might be tempted to challenge carbon intense behaviour as a way of eliciting deeper reflections about the impact of self in relation to other, though doing so could trigger a defensive response, leading to an impasse around who the therapist represents for the client, and vice versa.

The extract by Norbert (see above), describing a family of four owning four cars, represents a scenario into which a climate-aware therapist might enquire. On the other hand, many therapists, as Macagnino's study

revealed, consider the therapeutic space as one for exploring interpersonal issues only, 'and in doing so keep socio-political concerns such as the CEE out, as though external contexts have no impact on the internal world' (Macagnino, 2023, p. 17).

Evaluation of the Study

As the researcher, I am aware that my personal values, experiences, interests and prejudices with regard to counselling and psychotherapy, and my interest in the CEE and climate psychology, influenced the formulation of the research questions and their subsequent analysis. I was affected by what participants shared, and I feel both fearful of, and passionate about, the topic. My personal orientation is Integrative Psychotherapy, and this may have influenced the wording and selection of the themes and domains. All these factors contributed to the manner in which I interpreted the data, as a result of which it must be considered as 'tentative and limited' (Macran et al., 1999, p. 430). The participants are not representative of the CPA, or of any particular counselling and psychotherapy institution or model.

Conclusions

This paper discusses the CEE from a socio-political and environmental-intersectional perspective, and how these parts intersect with our history of Global North supremacy. I argued that there is a need for counselling and psychotherapy training institutions to offer training in sustainability and environmental awareness, as outlined in the UKCP/HIPC SETs (2023). This is an important point, as both climate-aware therapists and clients are traumatised by the CEE (Woodbury, 2019). We need to face our own feelings about the CEE (Orbach, 2019) and notice when our own defences block them out. Maintaining awareness will help us make meaningful contact with each other, and possibly engage in some form of activism (Kassouf, 2022).

The data reveal how emotionally intense and complex the CEE is, and offers an explanation as to why the level of denial and dissociation from within the counselling and psychotherapy profession mirrors the inadequate response at the global political level.

The data also draw attention to the mental-health issues caused by the CEE.

The overall conclusion from the two domains of the study is that counselling and psychotherapy should perceive the CEE through the lens of environmental intersectionality (Thomas, 2022), and that the CEE should be incorporated into a 'diversity and inclusivity' syllabus.

Note

1 Nick Totton uses Abram's concept of the more-than-human or other-than-human world 'as a way of recognising and constantly reminding ourselves that we humans are not "higher" or more central than other species, and we have no right to define them reactively as "nonhumans" or "animal"; we ourselves are animal, and forgetting that fact is our problem' (Totton, 2021, p. 4).

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Supporting resource for climate science

Job One for Humanity. Climate Change think tank: uncensored, unbiased, and non-politicised climate change analysis and research; available at http://tinyurl.com/5n6tryu6 (accessed 8 February 2024),

About the contributor

Brigitta Mowat is an Integrative Psychotherapist in private practice and a tutor and training supervisor at the Minster Centre in London, where she is joint 1st year head of the MA in Integrative Psychotherapy. She designed and runs a training weekend at the Minster Centre on eco-anxiety and environmental trauma. She is an active member of the Climate Psychology Alliance, for which she regularly runs climate cafés.