Impact of Eco-Anxiety on Mental Health

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Abstract

Eco-anxiety, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is the chronic fear of environment doom characterized by a range of emotions, including grief, worry, and guilt. It is an increasingly recognized concern to mental health as suggested by recent studies. This literature review aims to delve into the psychological impact of eco-anxiety, focusing on how climate change influences mental health. Through an in depth analysis of the five studies, the review will explore the mechanisms contributing to eco-anxiety, its impact on different demographic groups and the implications for health and policy. The findings suggest that the phenomenon of eco-anxiety is driven by a complex interplay of media influence, perceived threats, and feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness leading to significant behavioral outcomes. These outcomes include numerous types of coping strategies, impairment of daily lives and disruption of cognitive functioning. Furthermore, the review highlights the importance of addressing eco-anxiety. Furthermore, the review suggests the need for improved interventions, such as targeting cognitive appraisal, to mitigate the challenges posed by eco-anxiety.

Keywords: Eco-Anxiety, Climate Change, Environmental Psychology, Mental Health, Psychology.

Significance and Objectives

The accelerating climate change crisis has shown to have a range of impacts on mental health both directly and indirectly. Unlike other forms of anxiety, eco-anxiety is linked to environmental degradation and global climate change: a phenomenon that has gained the increased attention of younger populations. The intensification of the crisis underscores the importance of understanding the psychological impact of climate change and eco-anxiety.

The primary objectives of this literature review are to :

1. Explore the different types of eco-anxiety and the mechanisms behind them
2. Impact of eco-anxiety on mental health of various demographic groups.

Scopes and limitations

This literature review focused on five key studies to examine the impact of eco-anxiety on mental health. Though the review provides a detailed analysis of the studies, it is limited by the availability of research from demographics of non-English speaking regions, reducing the generalizability and applicability. Furthermore, it does not explore the various factors that may influence eco-anxiety such as economic and socio-political dimensions.

Methodology

The review approached the analysis systematically, selecting the studies based on their relevance, information, and contributions to understanding the phenomenon of eco-anxiety. The research was done

using the keywords of "Eco-anxiety", "environmental psychology", and "mental health". Both quantitative and qualitative studies were employed in the review. The analysis focused on the methodology, findings and implications of each study.

Introduction

The phenomenon of eco-anxiety has grown recognition in the past decades as a significant mental health issue, particularly among younger populations who are more aware and concerned for the future of the planet. The psychological impact of eco-anxiety is multifaceted, ranging from feelings of guilt, helplessness, grief and existential dread (American Psychological Association, 2017). As the climate change crisis accelerates, gaining an understanding of the psychological impact of eco-anxiety proves to be of great importance.

Background and context
Environmental Psychology

The field of environmental psychology has long examined the relationship and interaction between the natural environment and human health. Early research in the field explored how the exposure to nature reduced stress, improved cognitive functioning and overall enhanced mental health. Ulrich (1984) found that views of nature can greatly improve recovery from surgery, showcasing the therapeutic effect of natural environments. Though the earlier studies laid the foundation for understanding the relationship between the environmental and psychological well-being, concerns plaguing humans have shifted from local issues to global crises.

The rise of global issues has led to the emergence of a new form of anxiety - eco-anxiety. Clayton et al. (2017) highlighted the effect of the transition from local to global threats as a stressor that is considered more pervasive in nature. Climate change, unlike local issues such as pollution, is a more dynamic and complex threat that cannot be addressed through concrete actions and is much harder to manage psychologically.

Emergence of eco-anxiety

The concept of eco-anxiety started to gain recognition in the past decade as climate change began to be identified as a global threat. The American Psychological Association was one of the first major organizations to officially/formally acknowledge it to be a psychological concern. It was first formally mentioned in their 2017 report, this acknowledgment allowed the phenomenon of eco-anxiety to be legitimized and catalyzed further research into its causes and effects. Pikhala (2020) described eco-anxiety to be a multidimensional phenomenon that extends further than emotional responses to climate change but rather the complex emotional state that includes feelings of guilt for adding on to environmental harm, helplessness and grief for the loss of ecosystems. Pikhala's work is particularly known for its emphasis on the multifaceted nature of the concept, showcasing that these concerns are deeply ingrained in beliefs, community and individual values/identity (Pikhala, 2020).

Young adults in particular have been observed to be vulnerable to the psychological impact of climate change due to their awareness of the issue and perceived responsibility for addressing it. A recent study surveyed more than 10,000 individuals across 10 countries and found that a major chunk of the respondents felt powerless, anxious, and angry about climate change. Moreover, these feelings were intertwined with the perception of government inaction, suggesting that eco-anxiety also links to a sense

of betrayal by institutions that are supposed to protect the environment. (Hickman et al., 2021). Furthermore, it demonstrated the underlying importance of eco-anxiety amongst young people, who will play a crucial role in solving the crisis in the future.

Review of Literature

Review 1 : Pihkala (2018)

Pihkala (2018) delved into the generational aspects of eco-anxiety, exploring how younger generations perceive and respond to climate change concerns. The study employed qualitative case study methods such as interviews and focus groups to understand the experiences of eco-anxiety in a range of age groups, focusing on youth. The study found that younger populations are particularly more vulnerable to the psychological impact of eco-anxiety, leading to feelings of frustration and hopelessness. This effect was further intensified by the perceived inaction from the responsible institutions, such as the government and older generations, adding on to the broader sense of disillusionment. The findings of the study emphasize the need for mental health interventions for young people as they are more likely to view climate change as an immediate and pressing threat.

Review 2 : Clayton et al. (2017)

Clayton et al. (2017) was a pioneer in the domain of eco-anxiety, emphasizing the link of the phenomenon with other psychological disorders and the newly introduced stressors. The study used a holistic approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods to assess experiences of those concerns about the global crisis. The results demonstrated the correlation between eco-anxiety and psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety. Moreover, the study emphasized on the role of social support in alleviating eco-anxiety, with many left feeling isolated in their concerns. The study concluded that the phenomenon is a legitimate, growing concern that calls for awareness and support.

Review 3 : Ojala (2012)

Ojala (2012) explored the coping mechanisms used by adolescents when experiencing eco-anxiety. The study employed a longitudinal survey design to track the responses of the sample, adolescents, over time to examine how different coping strategies influenced their behavior. Researchers identified three primary strategies : emotion-focused coping, meaning-focussed coping and problem-focused coping. Though eco-anxiety demonstrates debilitating effects on one's mental well-being, it can also motivate pro-environmental behaviors. Hence it was concluded that by promoting adaptive coping strategies, the negative effects surrounding eco-anxiety can be alleviated.

Review 4: Hickman et al. (2021)

Hickman et al. (2021) explored the prevalence of eco-anxiety across different countries using a large-scale survey of over 10,000 individuals to assess their eco-anxiety levels and psychological impacts. The study revealed that the majority of the sample suffered from high levels of eco-anxiety. It indicated that the younger population felt anxious and hopeless about the future due to the inaction by governments. The results also depicted the differences in eco-anxiety across countries, with individuals experiencing severe climate impacts showing higher levels of stress. Hickman et al. (2021) concluded that eco-anxiety is common in younger populations and deeply influenced by perceptions of government action/inaction.

Review 5: Helm et al. (2018)

The study investigated how uncertainty and existential dread contribute to eco-anxiety. The study employed a mix of quantitative surveys and assessments to understand the impact of perceived climate threats on mental health and found that those who perceive climate change as a severe threat are more

likely to experience symptoms of mood/psychological disorders like anxiety and depression. Moreover, uncertainty surrounding the future intensified these effects creating a sense of existential dread. The study concluded that cognitive appraisal plays a significant role in eco-anxiety and interventions targeting these appraisals can alleviate the psychological impact.

Exploration

Mechanisms linking mental health and climate change

Perceived threats and uncertainty

One of the primary mechanisms through which climate change contributes to eco-anxiety is the perception of threats. Climate change is perceived as a force that poses a direct threat to survival. Helm et al. (2018) conducted a study to examine the role of perceived threats on mental well-being and found that people who saw climate change as a severe threat are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and other forms of distress. This effect is further impacted by the sense of uncertainty around the long-term impact of climate change. This 'uncertainty' is marked by the sense of existential dread as individuals are forced to cope with the possibility of a future marked by environmental calamity.

Moreover, the research shed light on the role of cognitive appraisal in eco-anxiety. Cognitive appraisal is the subjective interpretation made by an individual to the stimuli in the environment (Wikipedia, 2015). In the context of the study, individuals who appraise the threat as severe experience heightened anxiety and distress. This appraisal is influenced/impacted by media, personal experiences and social discourse.

Media influence and social amplification

The media plays a crucial role in molding the perceptions of climate change, and subsequently, the development of eco-anxiety. Ojala (2012) carried out a study to explore the impact of media consumption on climate related anxiety in a sample of adolescents and found that frequent exposure to news, specifically through social media, was linked with higher levels of anxiety. The research highlighted the role of social amplification in heightened emotional responses to climate change (Ojala, 2012).

Social media, in particular, has proven itself to be an amplifier of eco-anxiety. Social media, unlike traditional media, allows for rapid spread of information. This can lead to an exaggerated perception of climate change adding on to the sense of panic and dread. In addition to that, social media allows for social comparison in the context of environmental behaviors, meaning that individuals can compare their own environment and behaviors towards it with others leading to feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

Furthermore, this amplification also shapes the types of coping strategies adopted by individuals. For instance, Ojala's study found that adolescents who were exposed to news about climate change were more likely to engage in problem focused coping strategies like activism. On the other hand, they were also more likely to be exhausted emotionally due to media-induced eco-anxiety. The results of Ojala's study depicts the underlying importance of media literacy and balanced reporting in the context of climate issues.

Impact on agency and control

Individuals experiencing eco-anxiety have reported feeling overwhelmed and powerless by the scale of climate change and carry the belief that their actions are insufficient to make a meaningful difference. This was explored in the study conducted by Clayton et al. (2017) which found that individuals with low sense of control over environmental outcomes had an increased likelihood of experiencing anxiety, depression,

etc. Perceived lack of control can lead to feelings of despair and anxiety and further contribute to social comparison and lead to the development of a sense of inadequacy and hopelessness (Clayton et al., 2017). Moreover, the study highlighted the importance that a sense of agency/control has on addressing eco-anxiety. It suggests that interventions aimed at improving an individual's self-esteem and sense of agency can help alleviate the psychological effects of eco-anxiety. This can be done through numerous ways such as environmental activism or sustainability initiatives that can bring a sense of control and purpose, enhancing their self-esteem and reducing feelings of powerlessness.

Nonetheless, the study also sheds light to the maladaptive coping strategies that one may take on as a result of eco-anxiety, such as denial or disengagement. When people feel overwhelmed by the idea of environmental doom they may resort to avoidance behaviors such as ignoring the issue as a whole or distracting themselves. This can perpetuate a cycle of inaction and distress where individuals struggle with eco-anxiety and their perceived inability to act against it leading to heightened feelings of stress, grief, and guilt. The study underscores the need for interventions that target one's sense of agency/control by providing them with resources that allow them to take action against climate issues.

Psychological/Behavioral outcomes

Impact on daily functioning

Eco-anxiety can impair daily functioning by affecting individuals' ability to focus, make decisions and engage in routine activities. Research found that those who experience high levels of eco-anxiety face intrusive thoughts and constant worry about climate change. This can lead to avoidance behaviors and lead to isolation and depression (Helm et al., 2018).

Emotional distress and depression

Eco-anxiety can take a huge emotional toll with significant effects on one's mental health. Pikhala (2020) found that individuals experiencing high levels of eco-anxiety were more likely to suffer from mood disorders, such as major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. Persisting worry about the future can lead to emotional exhaustion, especially for those who feel a deep sense of responsibility for working against climate change. This effect is further intensified by feelings of guilt for either contributing to environmental harm or not being able to take action against it.

Coping mechanisms

Ojala (2012) found that individuals who engaged in problem-focused coping strategies, such as environmental advocacy, felt more positive psychological outcomes than those who engaged in maladaptive coping strategies, such as denial and disengagement. Problem-focused coping strategies allow individuals to develop a sense of hope, for the future, and purpose, which act as a buffer against the negative effects of eco-anxiety.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review examined the psychological impact of eco-anxiety through an in-depth analysis of five key studies. Eco-anxiety proves to be a growing concern in the field of public mental health and in the context of climate change. As the review suggests, eco-anxiety is driven by a dynamic interplay of media, perceived threats, feelings of powerlessness/inadequacy which lead to significant behavioral/emotional outcomes. These outcomes include an array of coping strategies, impairment of daily

lives and disruption of cognitive functioning. The review underscores the need for improved mental health interventions that consider the challenges posed by eco-anxiety.

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