Towards Climate-Informed Practice: Insights from Climate-Aware Mental Health Practitioners

Katrina Wong

Climate change has been described as the greatest threat to global human health of our time. However, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring how people are experiencing climate-related mental health distress, how mental health practitioners are responding, and the broader role of the mental health sector in addressing climate change. This research aimed to address these gaps by interviewing eight climate-aware mental health practitioners. Rich data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed through thematic analysis. Four main themes emerged: (1) Climate change experienced as anxiety, grief, and trauma; (2) Disempowerment and disconnection; (3) Empowerment through values-based collective action; and, (4) Systemic engagement as a profession. These findings provide qualitative insights into how people are experiencing climate-related mental health distress, and highlights the importance of connection, collective action, and systemic responses. These findings may contribute towards the development of climate-informed practice, paramount given the escalating impacts of climate change.

Keywords: *climate change, mental health, eco-anxiety, climate related mental health distress, climate-aware mental health practitioners, thematic analysis, climate-informed practice.*

Climate change and its increasingly devastating impacts are being felt by communities globally; the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) reports that the heatwaves, cyclones, and other human-influenced natural disasters attributable to climate change are set to worsen significantly, and will continue to affect marginalised communities first and worst (Arias et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2018). As the world hurtles towards climate crisis, many feel that international governments are failing to act with requisite haste, gravity, and co-operation (United Nations Climate Change Conference, 2021). Mental health professions are now beginning to document the mental health burden associated with climate change (Clayton et al., 2017). The Black Summer bushfires which raged across Australia over the summer of 2019-2020 brought this issue to domestic shores (Zhang et al., 2020), highlighting the current lack of climate-appropriate responses and the urgency with which mental health professions must develop these (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO], 2020).

This research aims to turn the spotlight on how climate change is impacting mental health and wellbeing, through the perspective of climate-aware mental health practitioners. Just as one might consult trauma therapists for issues relating to trauma, climate-aware mental health practitioners were chosen for this research due to their experience in the intersection between climate change and mental health. This research further aims to explore how these practitioners are responding to climate-related mental health presentations, and their view on the growing role of the mental health sector in addressing climate change more broadly.

Literature Review

Climate Change as a Direct Threat

The most well-established area of the literature is on the direct psychological impact of events such as natural disasters and extreme weather events; for example, increased incidences of PTSD, depression, and elevated alcohol use in communities affected by the Black Saturday fires in Australia (Bryant et al., 2014), and an increase in mental health symptoms in rural

Corresponding Authors: Katrina Wong
Email: katrina.wong.sl@gmail.com

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Australia during prolonged periods of droughts (Obrien, Berry, Coleman & Hanigan, 2014; Berry et al., 2011). The challenge for this field of research is 'connecting the dots' between these discrete research outcomes, climate change, and mental health (Reser, Morrissey & Ellul, 2011). Rickards, Neale and Kearnes (2017) argue that in the Australian context, this challenge is systemically compounded by governmental manoeuvres such as the defunding of CSIRO climate research, frustrating efforts to link natural disasters and extreme weather events with climate change.

Establishing the link between climate change and climate-related events such as floods and droughts is crucial to this area of research, so that empirical research on discrete issues can increasingly be viewed under a more holistic, climate-informed lens (Clayton et al., 2017). There have been several publications which integrate existing literature, and posit that the extreme weather events, natural disasters, and displacement associated with climate change are likely to increase people's vulnerability to grief and loss, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression (Clayton et al. 2017; Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Hayes et al., 2018; Obradovich et al., 2018). Furthermore, marginalised groups with lower recovery capital (for example, Indigenous peoples, elderly, climate change refugees, and outdoor labourers and farmers) will be disproportionally affected both materially and psychologically by climate change, as peoples' homes and livelihoods are increasingly impacted by climate change (Clayton et al., 2017; Weissbecker & Czinez, 2011; Zhai et al., 2018). However, these reviews are not of empirical field research (Reser, Morrisey & Ellul, 2011), and commonly note the need for more empirical research on the intersection of climate change and mental health specifically (Clayton et al., 2017; Hayes et al., 2018).

Climate Change as an Existential Threat

For those without direct experience of climate impacts, climate change may be experienced primarily as a vicarious and existential threat (Hayes et al., 2018). One way of establishing a direct link between climate change and mental health is to ask people expressly, and there have been several surveys conducted to this end.

Whilst Australians in rural and coastal areas are increasingly exposed to the direct impacts of climate change, most Australians are still relatively sheltered from impacts such as bushfires and coastal erosion (Fritze et al., 2008). However, several surveys have been conducted which demonstrate increasing concern about climate change amongst the general Australian public. For example, the Australia Institute's annual Climate of the Nation survey polled 2626 voters and found that 75% of Australians were concerned about climate change, with 82% concerned that climate change will result in more natural disaster and species extinction (Quicke, 2021). These results are supported by other comprehensive Australian surveys that not only demonstrate increasing concern, but also demonstrate strong support for government interventions and policies related to the mitigation of climate change (Kassam & Léser, 2021; Ipsos, 2019). These statistics lend weight to Gifford's (2011) postulation that people do not have to be directly impacted by climate change to experience climate-related mental health distress and concern.

Whilst these surveys are important in substantiating climate-related concerns amongst the Australian public, qualitative research on the impacts of climate change on mental health is limited. A seminal work by Albrecht et al. (2005) introduced the concept of 'solastalgia', or a sense of loss and longing for an environment that once was. This research involved community interviews with those impacted by mining and long-term drought in the Hunter Valley region in Australia (n = 50), and described emotional distress caused by a landscape forever changed by mining and drought. McManus, Albrecht, and Graham (2014) conducted further qualitative work in this area and described 'solastalgia' and 'eco-anxiety' as 'psychoterratic' symptoms: mental health symptoms related specifically to a changing environment and climate. Whilst these studies describe how people are experiencing climate-related mental health distress, there is still a significant lack of qualitative research in this area.

Therapeutic Implications of Climate Change

Despite the potential for hopelessness, anxiety, and despair, the "wicked problem" of climate change has also given rise to climate activism and engagement (Hayes et al., 2018). This suggests that while the magnitude of climate change can be paralysing, for some the task of tackling climate change has an activating effect. Existing literature supports the idea that post-traumatic growth and strengthened resilience can occur after natural disasters (Lowe, Manove & Rhodes, 2013; Ramsay & Manderson, 2011). In a 20-month longitudinal and quantitative study, people who had experienced the effects of extreme flooding in Poland (n = 285), Kaniasty (2012) found that social support and altruistic engagement immediately following the floods were associated with greater psychological well-being among participants. This supports the results of similar studies on hurricane-exposed youths (Banks & Weem, 2014), which suggests that social and community engagement are both empowering and protective following climate-related events.

In a fundamental step towards the development of mental health strategies for climate-relate mental health concerns, Ojala (2010, 2012) published several qualitative research papers characterising the different forms of coping mechanisms present in young people regarding climate change. Ojala identified three forms of coping utilised by participants: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused coping (2012). While she views problem-focused and emotion-focused coping as necessary and valid responses to climate change, she recommends that educators of young people encourage meaning-focused coping strategies such as positive reappraisal and existential hope. This stems from her findings that young people who engage in meaning-focused coping tended to balance psychological well-being and pro-environmental activity (Ojala, 2012).

In an integrative review, Fritze et al. (2008) acknowledged the difficulty in recommending therapeutic interventions specific to climate-related mental health concerns, namely because of the myriad ways these may present in the therapeutic space (for example, grief, anxiety, trauma). Fritze et al. posit, however, that the promotion of hope is fundamental in empowering individuals into action against climate change, as well as building communities which are more emotionally resilient to the despair that climate change may cause. Furthermore, it is important to note that there are cultural differences in the expression and experience of mental health, and therefore there are differences in help-seeking behaviours and appropriate treatment of mental

health distress (Gopalkrishnan, 2018).

Despite the literature described above, there is still little known about how mental health practitioners might respond to climate-related mental health distress.

The Broader Role of Mental Health Professions in Addressing Climate Change

Organisations such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Australian Psychological Society (APS) have begun strategizing for a future wherein more people are seeking mental health support for climate-related issues (Clayton et al., 2017; Burke, 2017). The APA publication (Clayton et al., 2017) provides general recommendations on how to treat individuals and advises on how to engage communities. Many of their recommendations (such as training people in the community, developing post-disaster plans with the community, and increasing cooperation and social cohesion) are targeted at disaster-related mental health support (Clayton et al. 2017). The APS similarly suggests connecting with personal values and with nature itself, encourages community engagement and a collective mindset in addressing climate-related mental health distress, and cross-references many of the same articles as the APA guidelines (Burke, 2017). Psychology for a Safe Climate have developed professional development for the sector which will enable practitioners to better respond to climate-related mental health distress, in the hopes of developing a network of Climate-Aware Practitioners (Psychology for a Safe Climate, 2022). In a systematic review, Berry et al., (2018) furthers the discussion by proposing a systems-level approach to understanding climate change and mental health and emphasise the importance of acknowledging societal level context and constraints (for example, the influence of governments and big business). They posit that while individuals have a degree of personal control and responsibility to act, mental health in the context of climate change requires a “whole person, whole community, whole of life, whole of planet” approach, and note that political will on climate change is an indicator of mental well-being in this context (Berry et al., 2018).

Research Gaps

There is a lack of qualitative research in exploring experiences of climate-related mental health distress, and less so on how mental health practitioners are responding to these presentations. While valuable, current recommendations are not informed by in-depth research with mental health practitioners who have encountered climate-related mental health distress in their work.

Research Aims

This research aims to make a small contribution towards the above gaps, by exploring emerging climate-related mental health distress and its treatment through the qualitative perspectives of climate-aware mental health practitioners. This research aims to gain insights specifically from practitioners who may already practice with a climate-informed lens, as they are well-positioned to provide rich perspectives and contributions to the field. This research also aims to provide a more human, practical perspective to the climate-focused mental health guidelines that are emerging. These aims were explored through three main research questions: (1) How is climate-related mental health distress presenting in therapeutic spaces?; (2) How are mental health practitioners responding to this? and; (3) How do participants view the broader role of the mental health sector in addressing climate change? It is hoped that the findings will provide practitioners more considered pathways on how to approach climate change in session, as well as bring into consideration the broader role that the sector might play in addressing climate-related issues and presentations.

Method

Study Design

This study was a cross-sectional exploratory study. Qualitative methodology was chosen for this research, as a constructivist-interpretivist approach is best suited for addressing the current research questions and context. Interpretivism views realities as local and constructed, and “depend on the individuals and groups holding them”, while constructivism focuses on “meanings people bring to situations and behaviour” (Punch, 2014, p. 17). Qualitative research recognises reflexivity and acknowledges the influence of researcher experience and values on the interpretation of the data (Vossler & Moller, 2015). Vossler and Moller (2015) further state that qualitative research is well-suited to asking exploratory questions, which are asked especially when a research area is new. This research study is necessarily exploratory, as climate-related distress is a nascent field of mental health research. Qualitative methodology also allows for a semi-structured interview method and thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were chosen for this research given its exploratory nature. This research was submitted to and approved by the Australian College of Applied Psychology/Navitas College of Public Safety and Navitas Professional Institute Human Research Ethics Committee (NPI HREC) (approval number 564210220).

Participants

This research is being conducted as part of a Master of Counselling and Psychotherapy; however, the researcher chose to widen the research scope to include a range of mental health professions as broader perspectives may be valuable in addressing an issue of this magnitude, and may broaden the generalisability of these findings across mental health fields. Inclusion criteria for this research required that participants were mental health practitioners who considered themselves to be involved in the climate/environmental justice, and who have encountered clients presenting with climate change anxiety and distress. Eight participants (n = 8) met these criteria and agreed to participate in this research, with the ages ranging between 25 and 55. Three were clinical psychologists, three were counsellors, one a psychotherapist and the remaining participant worked in mental health research. The level of climate involvement and clinical experience varied between participants.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule with ten open

ended questions was used to explore this research question. Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to collect a broad range of rich data and allows for the exploration of spontaneous ideas and themes which may also steer the direction of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Research aims were explored with the questions such as, "How is climate-related mental health distress presenting in session?". The complete interview schedule can be viewed at Appendix 1. Interviews lasted 60 minutes, recorded through the online program Zoom, and transcribed by the researcher through online/computer programs Wreally and Microsoft Word.

Procedure

Data Collection

Purposive sampling is a non-random form of sampling in which the researcher sets out to find a group of people who are well-informed on the research subject (Etikan et al., 2016). Given that the inclusion criteria for this research study was quite specific, purposive sampling was used for this research study. The researcher digitally distributed a flyer detailing inclusion/exclusion criteria (as stated above), research design, and researcher contact details through social media amongst environmental/mental health groups. Participants self-selected by emailing the researcher. Participants were able to withdraw consent at any point and were sent their transcripts for member checking. Member checking is a process by which qualitative research can improve credibility (Morrow, 2005). Two participants requested that small sections be redacted from their transcripts to protect the identities of their clients, however this did not impact on the data analysis process.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher by watching the audio-visual recordings, and the audio files were also listened to again during the analysis process. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process which comprised of six phases: the researcher became familiarised with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed themes, defined themes, and finally, produced this report. An inductive approach was chosen for the research, allowing for themes to be generated from the "bottom-up", rather than generating themes to fit pre-existing theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process was recursive, with the researcher re-reading transcripts and reconceptualising mind-maps until final themes and subthemes were formulated in a way that highlighted participant voices. Thematic analysis allows for researcher immersion in the data, and beyond the organisation of data, analysis often goes further into the interpretation of these themes.

Data storage

All recordings were conducted and stored on a password protected computer only accessible by the researcher; audio-visual files were also password protected. The data was treated in accordance with the Australian College of Applied Psychology/Navitas College of Public Safety and NPI HREC data storage policy. Participants were informed of measures to protect confidentiality prior to signing informed consent forms.

Positionality Statement

This research is being undertaken due to researcher interest in the intersection between climate change and mental health, as both a novice counsellor and a climate activist. This research was conducted as part of the Master of Counselling and Psychotherapy, which the researcher completed 2020. The researcher has also engaged in climate activism by participating in various climate justice groups over the last three years.

Bracketing is a process wherein researchers are asked to set aside their preconceived notions and prior knowledge about a research topic as a way of ensuring validity and accurately describing participant responses (Chan et al., 2013). However, Chan et al. (2013) observe that the scope and methods of bracketing are ill-defined and dependent on the various phenomenological approaches under which the research is being conducted. Given the researcher's embeddedness in both mental health and climate activism contexts, a hermeneutic approach was an intuitive and common-sense approach for this research study. A hermeneutic research tradition acknowledges that researchers exist within a context, and that while efforts to bracket preconceived notions during the research are necessary, it is arguably impossible for researchers to completely detach from their previous experiences, knowledge, and perspectives, particularly when the researcher holds "insider" positionality (Neubauer et al., 2019; Chavez, 2008). This approach asks that researchers acknowledge their preconceived notions around the topic, engage in ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process, and overt any potential biases or presuppositions where possible. As such, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling as a means of encouraging further self-awareness and reflexivity, particularly on the experience of bracketing and potential bias. Reflexive journaling encourages both methodological rigour and critical self-reflection which can impact the research process as it is happening (Ortlipp, 2008). The researcher also engaged in regular supervision.

Results

Four main themes were identified across participant responses, along with fourteen subthemes.

Climate Change Experienced as Anxiety, Trauma, and Grief

All participants spoke about climate change as being felt as anxiety, trauma, and/or grief, either as a direct result of climate-related disasters or as an impending disaster and anticipatory loss of future. This theme consists of two subthemes: *direct impacts*, and *existential and impending*, both of which are defined below. As Participant 3 stated, "Because climate crisis is just an existential trauma for everybody. And it will become an actual trauma for everybody." (3, 502-503).

Direct Impacts

Half of the participants described either living in and/or working with communities that are already very affected by climate-related impacts. Participant 1 noted:

> The smoke has meant that … the Elders have, you know, all of the health problems we know that go with trauma and with being part of an oppressed group. So like, it's killing them. Climate change is killing them. They can't breathe. They literally cannot breathe. (1, 122-123)

Existential and Impending

All participants described emotional responses to

climate change as an anxiety over impending trauma, or grief over potential futures. Participant 6 offered this metaphor:

> It's sort of like you've been diagnosed with a fatal illness - in some ways, if you want to conceptualise what it would be most like. Because … people are at the point where... it is irreversible, probably at this point… And how do you process that? (6, 270-273)

Participant 8 described the impact this has on mental health:

> I would say the summer just gone, people were terrified in Kinglake. We could so easily have had another major fire, as there were major fires all up in the east coast ... You know, that was just constantly raising people's arousal levels and anxiety and fear, and you know, the memory that was stored in their cells … Yeah, you're going to get that [trauma] happening every summer. (8, 305-310)

Disempowerment and Disconnection

All participants spoke of themes of disempowerment and disconnection in relation to climate change, which appear to be perpetuated in a top-down manner. This theme is comprised of 3 subthemes: *systemic disempowerment, community disconnect, and the burden of perceived responsibility and powerlessness.* These will be expanded below. Participant 8 summarised this theme:

> We know that when we don't have power, people tend to turn on one another and they don't hold power collectively. And then the worst thing they do is then turn on themselves … they individualise and it becomes shame, which is super toxic. (8, 544-548)

Systemic Disempowerment

All participants spoke about the difficulties of treating individuals within a system that places the burden of responsibility for addressing climate change on communities and individuals. Participant 5 observed the link between the lack of systemic leadership on climate change and community disconnect around climate change:

We have a Prime Minister who literally rips away the laws and things to support it, and denies it [climate change] essentially. And so it would be quite a confusing time for people if they were like, oh I'm really worried about this … because they'd go back into the real world and they'd talk about it, and people would be like … 'We don't care about that in this country. (5, 288-293)

Community Disconnect

Many participants noted divisions in communities about climate change owing to the disconnect between the reality of climate crisis and systemic responses. Participant 7 captured this feeling of disjuncture, which was echoed by other participants in relation to both youth and adult clients:

> It's where it gets hard for the kids too, I think. Because they do know that there are many people out there who ... go by 'ignorance is bliss'. So it is that conflict of interest, like do I speak up and get shut down and it was all worth nothing and my anxiety is going to fall over into a heap again, or am I going to keep pushing? (7, 421-425).

Powerlessness in the Face of Perceived Individual Responsibility

All participants noted a sense of individual burden and powerlessness in addressing climate change, both in their clients and in themselves. Participant 5 observed:

> I was speaking with a lot of clients, who - they would just call up crying, and really, really panicked … kids who are 8, 9 years old … You've got these young people who are concerned about having a future and concerned about what happens when they grow up … And so they're just left with this overwhelm, and not knowing how to shift it or how to empower themselves. (5, 76-87)

Empowerment through Connection

All participants spoke of the importance of connection in empowerment. There are four subthemes within this theme: *acknowledging underlying connectedness, connecting with self: safety and self-compassion, empowerment through values-based collective action, building community resilience.* Participant 8 summarised this theme as:

> How we turn to one another, not turn on one another… We need to be constituted much less as a neoliberal hero individual and much more as someone who's part of a web of connections - an ecological, cultural, and social web of connections. (8, 330-333)

Acknowledging Underlying Connectedness

All participants reflected on the larger connectedness between the self, others, and the natural world, and this appeared to underline most of their practices. Participant 1 noted:

> They [First Nations people] get climate change much more deeply and much more viscerally than I do… I was like, can you explain to me the link between, as an Aboriginal woman, the link between yourself and the earth, like what is that relationship. And she's like it's not a relationship, we are the same. The earth and my personhood, we are the same being. So when the earth hurts, I hurt. (1, 303-310)

Connecting with Self: Safety and Self-Compassion

Most participants commented on the lack of real or perceived safety felt by clients and noted that to overcome emotional overwhelm and engage in action, clients needed to feel a basic sense of safety, connection, and self-compassion within and towards themselves. Participant 2 reflected:

> So how do we - in a world which is unsafe in terms of the … collapse of multiple ecosystems - how do we create that safety for someone to actually feel engaged enough to make those changes in the first place? Changes in terms of wishing to engage in any kind of climate action. (2, 385-388)

Participant 3 described the importance of self-compassion in engaging in reconnecting with values and engaging in action:

> And we… invited her to see that [self-reproach] as a signal that she was not in complete alignment. But then, self-compassion, self-compassion, self-compassion. Because that kind of self-reproach is toxic … It only helps as like a kickstarter, to motivate us to do something. (3, 364-371)

Empowerment through Values-Based Collective Action

Most participants noted that hope and mental well-being was derived from action and engagement, and that this was particularly prominent with collective rather than individual action. Participant 1 provided this summary:

> The way through eco-anxiety is action. And it's belonging and creating a community that fosters a sense of belonging. And that fosters self-efficacy, you know. … You get hope by taking action. Not only do you feel better, but it has an actual ripple effect in the world. (1, 95-98)

Participant 6 provided an example of this amongst youths:

> They all talk about how upset they are about it, and then they rally for change. And each of them gets a little bit of control

> back. … they go and help someone on a farm who needs their fences redone, they go and attend the climate change rallies - not on their own, they take a friend with them … the faster they engage in … things that they would previously do around climate change, the quicker their anxiety is amended. (6, 278-284)

Building Community Resilience

Most participants observed the importance of building and empowering community in response to climate change and its mental health impacts. As Participant 1 stated: *"And that's where the way forward comes from, doesn't it. Just, community. Just keep building community, keep healing together, keep joining in the circles."* (1, 754-755).

Half of the participants noted how deep listening and non-violent communication can help build resiliency in the communities at the front line of climate action. Participant 7 posited, "I would want to get non-violent communication training for all of the activists and really working on enabling better communication. And just ... oiling the cogs … making sure that everything's running smoothly." (7, 462-466).

Theme 4. Systemic Engagement as a Profession

Almost all participants felt that mental health professions had a larger role in addressing climate change than treating individual symptomology. This theme has five subthemes: *learning from resilient communities, mutuality and access to services, communicating informative effectively and accessibly, advocacy, being courageous and engaging imperfectly.* These are addressed below.

Learning from Resilient Communities

Half the participants noted that learning is multidirectional, and that a wealth of knowledge that is pertinent to mental health fields exists within communities that are already resilient. Participant 1:

> Community is crucial to our existence and Western society has lost a huge amount of the skills and the knowledge about that, so First Nations people have just, despite everything, have kept alive the importance of community … so it's like, these are the people to join up with, these are the people who know how to survive atrocity and disaster and climate change. (1, 761-768)

Mutuality and Access to Services

All participants identified a need for more accessible mental health support and training for activists, clients, and for practitioners themselves, with half emphasising the importance of mutuality between these groups. More than half of the participants had either facilitated or participated in free (or close to free) skills-sharing/space-holding groups. Participant 8 noted:

> One of the challenges and opportunities is … to not hold a professional boundary around something that you own because you've been privileged enough to have some professional education ... How do we democratise that … so that more and more people can respond well to people in crisis, emotional crisis and existential crisis as well as things that are exacerbated by trauma and oppression and violence. (8, 133-140)

Communicating Information Effectively and Accessibly

Half the participants commented on the inaccessibility of information to the public, and how this may impact attitudes and actions relating to climate change. Participant 4 discussed the implications of ineffective communication:

> The psychology of behavioural change is very important, so we need to do a better job at getting people on board. So I think, on a big level, psychologists can help change the messages … People feel, probably overwhelmed by climate change, "I can't do anything, it's too big", so changing the narrative so it's like, we can all do something actually. (4, 269-272).

Participant 1 noted:

> Knowledge is often hidden behind paywalls, and is often written in language that is totally, totally inaccessible to the majority of people, and we take pride in how clever we are in our words. But yeah, that just means that people can't understand what you're saying. (1, 410-412)

Advocacy

Half the participants spoke about how mental health practitioners could use professional privilege to speak up about climate change. Participant 4 observed the changing dynamics within mental health professions around advocacy:

> I think that's shifting a bit and people [practitioners] are like, no, we probably should stand up for social justice as well. We need to actually stand up for what's right and speak up more and not be neutral… So I think we have a huge part to play in climate change issues and getting people on board. (4, 262-265)

Being Courageous and Engaging Imperfectly

This subtheme was discussed by all participants in relation to their own experience, not just as practitioners but as humans experiencing the threats from climate change. From a practitioner perspective, participant 1 described the challenges voiced by some participants about addressing the rise of climate-related mental health concerns within existing mental health frameworks:

> You've got to take risk. We are in uncharted territory here as far as climate change goes. The colonial structures that support patriarchy, that support racism, that support climate destruction ... we need to be creative and remember that we're part of these systems. (1, 722-728)

Participant 3 reflected on how their process and journey likely mirrored a universal process, and similar sentiments were shared by almost all participants:

> So active hope to me is that we do what we can, even without knowing the outcome. ... who knows whether we'll be successful in anything that's happening, but my goodness we're going to try. And we don't want to feel bad that we're not doing enough, we just want to try. (3, 415-423)

Further participant excerpts on all main themes and subthemes may also be viewed at Appendix 2.

Discussion

The nascent research area on climate-related mental health distress, treatment, and broader systemic response is unique in that it responds to a real threat facing all of humanity - practitioners and clients alike. As such, more research around the mental health sector's response to climate change is urgently needed. This study sought the perspectives of climate-aware mental health practitioners as they are well placed to describe and provide insights into what is happening "on the ground", having experienced the intersection between climate change and mental health both personally and professionally. The three research questions were: (1) How is climate-related mental health distress presenting in therapeutic spaces?; (2) How are

mental health practitioners responding to this? and; (3) How did participants view the broader role of the mental health sector in addressing climate change?.

Previous papers proposed that there would be a wide variety of emotional responses to climate change, and that these would increase as the impacts of the climate crisis are directly felt by communities (Arias et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2018; Doherty & Clayton, 2011). This was supported by the findings of this research, as most participants reported client mental health distress due to the major fires over the summer of 2019-2020. In addition to the mental health burden likely attributable to these direct events, the results of this research are also supportive of literature positing that the impact of climate change is also indirect – experienced as an impending, existential, psychological threat (e.g. Doherty & Clayton, 2011). Specifically, participants described how their clients presented with anxiety and worry, depression and despair, grief and mourning, unconscious defences, numbness and apathy, and vicarious psychological trauma. Most prevalent was anxiety, grief, and trauma. The prominence of trauma relating to client presentations was a unique and interesting finding, as it was not only mentioned overtly as post-traumatic stress responses following Black Saturday and the 2019-2020 bushfires, but also in more subtle themes of powerlessness, personal responsibility, shame, and guilt. The themes of disempowerment and disconnection from self and community were universally reported by participants regarding their clients' climate-related mental health distress. A unique finding of this study is the influence of systemic disempowerment on community disconnection, and the implications this has on the powerlessness, personal responsibility, shame, and guilt reportedly experienced by participants' clients. While not expressly about trauma, these are common characteristics and outcomes of traumatising situations (Herman, 2015), and further research on how the general trauma literature may be extrapolated to those experiencing climate-mental health distress would be valuable.

Regarding how mental health practitioners were responding to climate-related mental health distress as it presented in therapeutic spaces, participants had different preferred modalities and interventions. Furthermore, as participants practice with a client-centred lens, they often used a range and combination of interventions to suit the variety of presentations and client needs. As such, this research was not able to validate any specific interventions as being particularly prominent or effective in relation to treating climate-related mental health distress. Nonetheless, this finding is consistent with observations by Fritze et al., (2008) that therapeutic approaches to treating climate-related mental health presentations will likely vary greatly due to the variety of presentations themselves, as well as being influenced by clinician training and affiliation towards different orientations. Although stemming from a broad range of professional backgrounds and therapeutic orientations, all participants referred to an underlying connectedness between themselves, others, and the world, and this informed the way they framed the treatment of climate-related mental health distress. By fostering a deeper connection with self, others, and the world, and further encouraging values-based actions, participants in this study were arguably encouraging meaning-focused coping through their various preferred modalities and interventions. Meaning-focused coping was found by Ojala (2012) to balance pro-environmental activity and psychological well-being.

Again, of interest was the prevalence of trauma in participant responses. For some practitioners, explicit trauma counselling was necessary due to the impacts of the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires. Participants reported encouraging empowerment through values-based collective action, and actions which build community resilience (see Appendix 2), which supports reports that community engagement and social support are protective following natural and climate-related disasters, and indeed may lead to post-traumatic growth (Clayton et al., 2017; Kaniasty, 2012; Banks & Weem, 2014; Ramsay & Manderson, 2011). On a more subtle level, however, fostering safety and self-compassion, encouraging values-based engagement, and increasing connection to self, others, and the world were universally reported by practitioners, regardless of their chosen modalities, as clients commonly felt a sense of personal responsibility, guilt, shame, and powerlessness. Although not explicitly trauma-related, these ways of framing treatment are commensurate with the general trauma literature, which emphasises connection and empowerment (Herman, 2015). More enquiry on therapist orientation and whether this was an artefact of timing following the Black Summer bushfires would be appropriate in further research on this area.

Hayes et al. (2018) had several recommendations for climate change adaptation on a systemic level, which included improving access and funding to mental health care, climate change adaptation/resilience planning in the mental health system, community-based interventions, and special training for care providers and first responders. The results of this study echo these recommendations, with many participants already participating or facilitating skills-sharing groups and proactively seeking out climate-related training. Many participants noted that further training and upskilling was needed in this area, for practitioners themselves as well as those in the community. The subtheme of mutuality as a parallel function in increasing access to services was an unexpected finding. Clayton et al. (2017) suggested building community resilience by training people within the community to respond to crises. The participants of the current research study took this a step further by acknowledging the wealth of knowledge that already exists within resilient communities (particularly First Nations communities) and that learning can be multidirectional, with mental health practitioners being the recipients of knowledge as well as the purveyors.

Most participants acknowledged systemic contributions to the climate crisis (particularly on a governmental level) and the privilege afforded to them as professionals, and saw a role for the profession as a group to advocate for more systemic change. This is supportive of the notion posited by Van Lange, Joireman, and Milinski (2018) that mental health professionals are well placed as "advisors" and "mediators" to not only speak out as a profession, but also upwards to wider systems and governments, representing those they are supporting. Hope is described by Ojala (2012) and Fritze et al. (2008) as being fundamental in maintaining engagement. The theme of being courageous and engaging imperfectly speaks to the way participants viewed hope and engagement on a multitude of levels - for their clients, the general public, as a sector, and for themselves as humans and practitioners.

Limitations

Two major limitations were noted for this research, both relating to the generalisability of findings. Whilst not a research question in itself, participants noted that the demographics

of people seeking therapy for climate-related distress were predominantly activists, young people, and people who had been directly impacted by the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020. Therefore, the findings for the first research question regarding climate-related mental health presentations may have limited generalisability to general populations that do not belong to these demographics. Furthermore, research interviews for this study were conducted between March and July 2020, following the Black Summer bushfires that raged across Australia over the summer of 2019-2020. The prominence of trauma may have been a consequence of the collective trauma experienced by participants and their clients due to the devastation of these bushfires. The research period also coincided with the emergence of COVID-19 globally, and therefore cannot be discounted as a contributor to the prominence of trauma in these results.

Recommendations and Implications

Recommended future directions for research include focused research studies on each of the three research questions. The findings of this research imply that on an individual level, the specifics of a modality are of less importance than fostering a sense of safety and connection towards the goals of empowerment and collective engagement and action. The generalisability of the general trauma literature to climate-related mental health distress (particularly in the context of systemic disempowerment) would be an interesting area for further research, and increasingly pertinent should global leaders continue to respond to climate in ways that many consider to be inadequate (Berry et al. 2018; UNFCC, 2021).

The implications of these findings are that while treating individual mental health is important, larger issues which impact mental health (such as change climate), and the urgency with which society must address climate change necessitates that mental health professions consider a wider system response, multidirectional learning, and action. Further research on the ethics and practice of engaging systematically (and the implications this has on the personal, political, and professional domains for practitioners) is recommended not only in response to climate change, but for social justice issues more broadly. These findings may be of interest to mental health practitioners in search of more informed pathways on addressing climate change as it presents in therapeutic spaces, and on responding to climate change more broadly as a sector. Furthermore, given that systemic engagement was a major theme, these findings may also be useful to mental health organisations such as the APS, Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation Australia (PACFA), Australian Counselling Association (ACA), and Australia Association of Social Workers (ASW) when considering their own positions and actions on climate change, and may assist in creating publications for dissemination among their members.

Conclusion

The intersection between climate change and mental health is a new field of both therapy and research. More research is needed as demand for climate-related mental health support is expected to grow as climate-related impacts increase in frequency (Arias et al., 2021). This research study adds a qualitative perspective to the direct and indirect climate-related mental health distress felt by the Australian public, hopes to provide a human voice to the statistics and guidelines that currently predominate the literature. This study also posits that in addressing climate change in therapeutic spaces and more broadly, it is necessary to move beyond the individual; to increase connection with self, others, and the world, engage in community and collective action; and finally, to acknowledge systemic influence and advocate upwards. It is hoped that these findings will go some way towards improving climate-literacy in the mental health sector, and subsequently towards developing climate-informed practice.

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Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself?
   a. How about your counselling and psychotherapy practice?
   b. How about your involvement with climate action?
2. How has climate change anxiety, distress, or other mental health concerns presented in session?
   a. Are there any particular presentations or issues that you are noticing more of?
3. How have you addressed this?
   a. Is there a particular framework you like to use?
   b. Are there any interventions or types of support that you have found particularly helpful?
4. Have you read any guidelines around addressing climate change and mental health?
   a. How have you interpreted these?
   b. Have you integrated this into your practice?
5. How do you view the broader role of counselling and psychotherapy in addressing climate change?
   a. Has your view on this shifted over time?
   b. What are your views on addressing climate change in session in general?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 2

Themes, subthemes, and examples of corresponding participant excerpts further to those above

Theme	Sub-theme	Subtheme Description	Participant Excerpts
Climate Change Experi-enced as Anxiety, Trauma and Grief	Existen-tial and Impending	Participants described anxiety, existential trauma and future-related grief	"The other stuff was sort of like that grief, for the environment and the more vulnerable people who would be affected. Also … for her future? She's very studious, she was like, 'Should I even finish, what's the point. I can't see myself having children in this situation.' Yeah, so kind of grieving what she would probably lose, if things don't change drastically." "But that has to be in there and I feel like, if we *are* experiencing this whole ecosystem potential disaster as a form of trauma, or like an impending trauma, then it has to come from a place of creating safety."
	Direct Impacts	Participants described being personally affected, living in areas, or supporting communities directly impacted by climate-related disasters	"But I guess for us, climate change is really real. Because we're seeing it everywhere. Where Tallangatta is situated, we're about 40 kms south of the Victorian/ NSW borders? So, Corryong fires, we're about 40 kms from that." "But I'm not literally out there, it's post. So it's either going to be PTSD or anxiety, depending on you know, how close that person originally was with their view of climate change? And of course, the second was how close they actually were to losing their life. … The two kids whose houses were lost, it was indeed trauma counselling."

Disempowerment and Disconnection	Systemic Disempowerment	Participants observed that political and organisational structures individualise responsibility, causing disconnection and disempowerment among individuals	"There's stuff we can't control and things we can, and having really awful governments in power in our biggest, big leading countries is *not* helping. Like, finally... I think Australians as a culture are so like, 'She'll be right, mate'. But now we're actually kind of going, 'Oh, maybe it won't. Maybe this is not going so well, maybe we *should* do something." "If you're looking at systemic interventions then you're looking at organisations, you're looking at families, you're looking at neighbourhoods, households. So I feel like that's one of the areas in which counselling and psychology is quite reductionistic - it atomizes people as separate individuals as if we don't have umbilical cords, as if we don't have a history of association and being influenced by all manner of people *and* species *and* landscapes."
	Community Disconnect	Participants described situations where individuals lose a sense of safety in the community	"So the key to survival is community right - so in your activist community you are held and you are supported. But often then, there's that disjunction with like - your mother doesn't approve, really strongly doesn't approve the fact that you got arrested - and you've got to choose between getting arrested again and having a relationship with your mother. So there's that continuum of the ways in which you are not supported by the other people in your life, and like, they kind of let me call that a sense of shame, that when we risk being expelled from a community because we've violated those values." "We've got a - a couple of kids are now actively speaking about it. Again, being a small community there's that stigma around touching difficult subjects. And climate change, for one of them... you know, cows - the things that produce the most methane - everyone produces them in our area. … They've almost not spoken about their personal feelings about climate change because it's been clouded by that financial stressor that their families have had."
	The Burden of Perceived Individual Responsibility and Powerlessness	Participants described the personal burden felt by their clients and themselves	"Yeah because psychology is often very self-focused, and I think there's harm in that, especially when it comes to climate anxiety, I think it's dangerous that self-focus." "There's definitely anxiety, there's definitely grief. I think there's a lot of anger as well... even shame, guilt, especially older people, I think. I've heard them talk a little bit more about feeling that sense of responsibility and maybe they could've done a little bit more." "So right there from a therapeutic standpoint, you've got self-criticism. So self-reproach isn't helpful, apart from a signifier of "I'm out of step with my values with something I want to be like" or "I'm not aligned with my values" "Yeah, this was kind of part of the process for me as well. So I had felt guilty like I hadn't really been doing … I'm not much of an activist, like just in my personality, I'm more kind of timid." "When the fires came through, it was anxiety

			about just sheer lack of control. With climate change and everything, so many things are *out* of your control.”
Empowerment through Connection	Acknowledging Underlying Connectedness	An understanding of the interconnectedness of self, others, and the world appeared to be underline participant practices	“It was a regenerative thing and a lot of what was involved in “The Work that Reconnects” was *sharing* our experience with climate change, our grief. But then also connecting with ideas like, deep time. So, remembering that we are alive here today because of our ancestors, and even before that, going down to mammals and fish and single celled organisms. Such a long line of survivors. And when you have that perspective, it changes the way that you see climate change, and that comes from Joanna Macy’s work.” “And [Spell of the Sensuous] is more about how we interact with our senses, and how we as white people, have been… removed from the land so much. And kind of tending it and farming it and kind of making it so unnatural that we actually become really removed from it ourselves … And it was talking about how that’s a form of trauma as well and how that’s been going on for so many years, that this is why we’re so disconnected from our senses.” “So much of it is habitual and trauma-influenced, and you don’t know, maybe they [people with opposing views] are a lot more connected to you than our common humanity here?” “And I think what really pisses me off is when people... [ignore] the reality of the situation where the people who are going to get hurt the most are probably low socio-economic, um, people of colour, other countries that are less well developed. … I feel like we can get through, but we also have - in my eyes - we have to take a look at who we’re actually working for, and what’s happening in terms of everybody.”
	Connecting with Self: Safety and Self-Compassion	Participants noted that safety and self-compassion were important in reconnecting clients with their values and engaging in action	“I’m moving more to body-based sort of stuff. So, I guess, using mindfulness to try to help people connect with their body, connect with the emotions coming up, make sense of it.” “And I think compassion-focused therapy, self compassion - I did a little bit of that as well, with the first client, just with the distress... So sort of... fully being in the water, fully burnt out, just kind of overwhelmed with the issues - versus kind of standing on the side of the river and still giving herself care through it… giving herself that self-care, compassion for her distress, so she could still be engaged and not be burnt out.”
	Vaues-Based Collective Action	Once clients had established motivation, participants noted that participating in values-based collective actions further empowered their clients	“And especially for those kids who went and built the fences, not only were they helping the environment, but also getting that community connectedness. Because they were rebuilding their own towns, things that were close to home for them.” “They all talk about how upset they are about it, and then they rally for change. And each of them gets a little bit of control back. … they go and help someone on a farm who needs their fences

			redone, they go and attend the climate change rallies - not on their own, they take a friend with them. I see, the faster they engage in regaining control over the things that they would previously do around climate change, the quicker their anxiety is amended." "[Louise Hays] just mentioned that she'd done this webinar on coping with climate change distress using the DNA-v model… I guess that's actually the most clinical thing I've seen... accepting the distress and emotions, but taking values-directed actions to do what you can. Very in line with the APS but I guess in an ACT model instead of a CBT model."
	Building Community Resilience	Participants noted that building community resilience will be increasingly important in a changing climate	"So what [Dr Les Spencer]'s doing is looking at how do we prepare collectives to be able to adapt to profound levels of trauma and change." "We kind of co-create practices around - I mean it's all about inter-generational trauma and inter-generational resilience, right? That's what we're doing. So yeah, it's created by community and, you know, I use a lot more, kind of, liberation psychology, narrative therapy... I use whatever justifies it to funding bodies basically but before that it's relationship, it's yarning." "And what we're interested in is the generalisable community resilience, how do you do that preventable, up stream, generalisable community resilience. … So rather than specific preparedness, we say that it's better to create generalisable

			resilience that means people can adapt to all sorts of different crises, because we believe that concurrent crises are going to be the nature of reality." "Alright, how can you apply regaining control of yourself, to regaining control of your environment. The one thing I've suggested that a lot of the kids do is rebuild the fences. You know, go and be a part of the community."
Systemic Engagement as a Profession	Learning from Communities	Acknowledging the wisdom of and learning from resilient communities	"And I would say, by far and away the best tool - like if you were to ask me, having gone through Black Saturday - I would be looking at deploying, if I were a counsellor or psychologist, it would be emotional CPR - teaching people how to listen to one another. The Indigenous people call it Dadirri, so it's less about intervention, and more about deep listening… deep listening and truth-telling." "This is where the learning is. It's the people whose lives are more chaotic. It's the people who have already had to adapt. … So these are the people who are on the edge and they are the ones who have to be creative and do the hard work. They are the ones who have to work together to survive and thrive. So this is where the really interesting work is happening. It's not in research, it's not in departments of psychology or psychotherapy or clinical counselling. It's real people encountering challenges and where they've been marginalized"

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	Mutuality and Access to Services	Participants described the need for better service access for climate-related mental health concerns, which may mean moving beyond professional boundaries	"So these are the people involved with blockades and so forth, one of the things they've identified then is the need for more psychologists to support them, like bulk-billed or free… Someone needs to stick their hand up to identify and create a database of psychologists, and you know, professionals, mental health professionals, who will appropriately support activists, and who will do that either free or will just bulk-bill or just find ways to overcome the obstacles for activists who are not going to go to a GP and get a mental health care plan to do this." "But you know, we marketed that [regenerative retreat] to activists and it was very, very cheap. It was just, pay for your camping and bring along food."
	Communicating Information Effectively and Accessibly	Participants noted that information is not being communicated clearly or accessibly, both within or beyond mental health professions	"And I think, being able to explain complex ideas very simply to people is also really missing at the moment, and I think a lot of people just don't really understand some of these complex ideas." "How do we engage more broadly mental health professionals with these issues of justice and structural injustice? And so one of the things that emerged then was like a publication - so if we can create a publication that helps mental health professionals engage with these issues and think about them, which hopefully then prompts them to some kind of action, whatever that may be."
	Advocacy	Participants discussed using professional privilege to speak up and speak out	"And also I can use the skills I've got to try and speak up, so... like being a Climate Media Centre spokesperson, I can do that. ... So that's the stuff that isn't so much *directly* supporting *them*, it's trying to have my small, very small and limited bits of influence on the structures, you know trying to tackle the structures that keep us all trapped in climate change."
	Being Courageous and Doing it Imperfectly	Participants described their own journeys	"Like this period of time, if we're going to get through it, if we're going to lead our species through climate change and ecological collapse and everything else that's going to go with it, we're going to have to be profoundly courageous. So, really what we'll be requiring of our counsellors, our psychologists, and our psychotherapists, is how we're going to demonstrate both compassion and courage."