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Eco-Anxiety in Undergraduates: An Exploration of Western Washington University Students' Beliefs of and Personal Experiences with Climate Change and Ecological Crisis

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Eco-Anxiety in Undergraduates: An Exploration of Western Washington University Students' Beliefs of and Personal Experiences with Climate Change and Ecological Crisis

Objectives: To examine the prevalence, population demographics, and experiential trends of eco-anxiety among undergraduates at a medium-sized university in Washington State.

Participants: 194 undergraduate students at Western Washington University participated in a survey disseminated in April and May of 2023.

Methods: Participants completed an online cross-sectional survey with sociodemographic information. The survey featured questions from three questionnaires: the Eco-Anxiety Questionnaire, a global youth survey published in the Lancet, and a climate anxiety scale addressing negative beliefs and personal experiences of climate change and the ecological crisis. Analyses were performed with SPSS 29.

Results: Findings suggest a high prevalence of eco-anxiety among undergraduates within the measure of habitual ecological worry (80.9%), which represents externally focused concerns. Directly experiencing or being affected by climate change was associated with higher eco-anxiety scores ($p\text{-value} < 0.001$).

Conclusions: Further research is required to examine experiences of eco-anxiety at other higher education institutions and to understand how courses and services can be designed to best prepare students in a climate changing world.

Keywords: eco-anxiety, university students, mental health, climate change

Introduction

Eco-anxiety defined

Eco-anxiety describes the negative emotions associated with climate change and ecological crisis characterized by worry, guilt, hopelessness, anger, fear, and despair (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022; Pihkala, 2020b). These emotions can negatively impact an individual's well-being resulting in loss of appetite, irritability, weakness, sleeplessness, and panic attacks (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). Currently, eco-anxiety lacks a universally recognized definition and operationalization (Coffey et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2020a). Similar terms include solastalgia,

which describes distress produced by environmental change impacting people directly connected to their home environment (Albrecht et al., 2007), and climate anxiety, which is anxiety related to anthropogenic climate change (Clayton et al., 2017).

Eco-anxiety classifications

There are multiple forms of environmental concern including eco-grief, eco-anger, and eco-anxiety; people respond in a variety of ways to climate change and ecological degradation (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Helm et al., 2018). A growing body of research is focused on separating the psychological impacts of climate change and ecological degradation by type: ecological guilt, anxiety, and anger (Ágoston et al., 2022; Helm et al., 2018), by cause: direct, indirect, and psychosocial (Doherty & Clayton, 2011), and by response: inaction versus healthy motivation (Stevenson & Peterson, 2016; Verplanken et al., 2020). There is much debate on whether eco-anxiety is a practical response that can be managed or mitigated by environmental activism (Gunasiri et al., 2022). Few manifestations of eco-anxiety are considered pathological or functionally interfere with an individual's school, work, or relationships (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2023). However, eco-anxiety is potentially less adaptive than eco-anger and less indicative of collective action than eco-depression (Stanley et al., 2021). Regardless of terminology and classification, the mental health impacts of climate change are estimated to be significant (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022).

Eco-anxiety and college students

The subject of popular media and scientific interest, eco-anxiety is growing nationally and globally (Hickman et al., 2021; Leiserowitz et al., 2018). Women, indigenous peoples, and young people are identified as experiencing higher levels of eco-anxiety, which is also associated with pro-environmental action or behaviors (Kricorian & Turner, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2020). Among children and youth, this is theorized to be the result of

low-perceived or actual control and government or adult inaction (Hickman, 2020; Stevenson & Peterson, 2016). For indigenous populations, eco-anxiety may be experienced more acutely due to an intrinsic closeness or reliance on the natural environment (Vecchio, 2022). Socio-economic disadvantage can also expose a population to more severe physical impacts of climate change (Dodds, 2021). However, drivers of eco-anxiety among young adults, ages 18-24, including traditional undergraduate students, are less understood despite their prominent role in climate protests and environmental action. Studies featuring college students are limited and have a focus on strategies for educators addressing sustainability or directing eco-anxiety into environmental action (Eriksson et al., 2022; Pihkala, 2020 Eco-Anxiety; Sims et al., 2020). The current study utilizes previously validated scales to better understand experiences of and beliefs about eco-anxiety within a vulnerable population of young adult undergraduates.

Methods

Study design and participants

Data were collected from 194 undergraduate students who completed an online, cross-sectional survey between April 19 and May 12, 2023. Participants were recruited via social media posts, email, word of mouth, and flyers. Recruitment posts were sent to social media accounts of student government associations, student-led clubs, and the Western Washington University Counseling and Wellness Center. Professors in the International Studies, Education, and Public Health majors were requested to email the survey to students. Recruitment flyers were posted on all open-posting areas of the university campus.

Participants were eligible for the study if they were 18 years of age or older and attending Western Washington University as undergraduate students. 216 people started the survey; 194 met eligibility requirements and completed it. Informed consent was obtained

from all participants. IRB approval was obtained from Western Washington University's Research Compliance Office (Protocol Number WWU034/2023).

Measures

The survey was administered online using Qualtrics; it contained 44 questions and took approximately ten minutes to complete. Five undergraduate students piloted the survey with corresponding adjustments to wording. The survey collected participants' demographics including age, college, year in school, gender identity, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. In addition, survey questions were derived from three previously published eco- and climate anxiety studies to measure concerns and negative impacts of eco-anxiety, negative beliefs associated with climate change, and personal experience with climate change. The Eco-Anxiety Questionnaire, EAQ-22, was the bulk of the survey and contains two factors, habitual ecological worry (Appendix A) which measures externally focused concerns such as moral outrage and uncertainty about the future, and negative consequences (Appendix B) of eco-anxiety which focuses on personal consequences such as irritability and relationship strain (Ágoston et al., 2022). Expanding on the EAQ-22, seven questions examining negative beliefs associated with climate change (Appendix C) were selected from a global youth survey published in the Lancet on young people's psychological experience with climate change and government response (Hickman et al., 2021). Examples include the belief that humanity is doomed or that people have failed to care for the planet. Finally, three questions examining personal experiences (Appendix D) of climate change were selected from the Experience of Climate Change Scale (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020).

Data analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS 29. Frequency counts were calculated for all demographic variables. Descriptive statistics were conducted for negative beliefs about, and

personal experience with, climate change. One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to analyze trends in EAQ-22 scores by demographic variables, personal experience of climate change, and negative beliefs. The EAQ-22 utilizes a Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree with corresponding points one to four. It contains two factors: 13 statements of the EAQ-22 are associated with habitual ecological worry, and 9 statements examine negative consequences of eco-anxiety. Participants were identified as experiencing eco-anxiety in the habitual ecological worry factor if they received a score of 39 or higher via the corresponding statements; participants were identified as experiencing the negative consequences of eco-anxiety if they received a score of 27 or higher within the negative consequence statements. More specifically, a participant responding “Agree” to all statements of the habitual ecological worry factor would receive a 39, and a participant responding “Agree” to all statements of the negative consequence factor would receive a 27.

Results

Sample characteristics

Participants identified as majority women, 64.9% (men 12.9%, nonbinary 10.8%, genderqueer or genderfluid 6.7%, other 4.5%). 95.4% of participants were young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. Participants were evenly split by year in school with 19.6% as first years, 22.7% as second years, 23.2% as third years, and 24.2% were in their fourth year. 10.3% of participants were in their fifth year or above. The sample was 87.1% white, 6.2% multi or biracial, and 5.2% Asian. 1% of the sample was of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Participants were primarily from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the College of Science and Engineering, and the College of the Environment (43.8%, 16.0%, and 14.4% respectively). As a proxy for socioeconomic status, 46.9% of participants estimated they would have no student loan debt after completing their undergraduate degree.

Negative beliefs related to climate change

In response to questions from the global youth survey published in the Lancet, 97.9% of participants believe that people have failed to take care of the planet. 92.3% think that the future is frightening, and 74.2% are hesitant to have children because of climate change.

Personal experience of climate change

From the three experience of climate change questions, 92% of participants said they have noticed a change in a place important to them because of climate change. 77% know someone who has been directly affected by climate change, and 76% say they have been directly affected by climate change.

Eco-Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ-22) scores

Within the Eco-Anxiety Questionnaire, scores for the 13 habitual ecological worry statements ($\bar{x} = 48/52$) were higher than scores for the nine negative consequence statements ($\bar{x} = 17/36$). 15 participants responded “strongly agree” to all statements of the habitual ecological worry measure, and 22 participants responded “strongly agree” to all but one of the statements. 80.9% of participants were identified as experiencing eco-anxiety related to habitual ecological worry, receiving a score of 39 or higher. No participants responded “strongly agree” to all negative consequence statements. Only, 3.6% of participants were identified as experiencing the negative consequences of eco-anxiety. However, a higher score in the negative consequence factor was strongly associated with directly experiencing climate change (p-value = < 0.001). Scoring highly in one factor of the EAQ-22 was associated with a higher score in the other factor (p-value = <0.001).

There were no significant differences in eco-anxiety scores (calculated via the combined habitual ecological worry and negative consequences scores of the EAQ-22) by

participants' college, year in school, age, debt/loan status, race, or ethnicity. The sample displayed universally high EAQ-22 scores, the median score was 65, with a total possible score of 88. Women, agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, nonbinary, transgender, and Two-Spirit individuals scored significantly higher than men on the EAQ-22, which is well established in the literature (p-value = 0.005 for women, p-value = 0.002 for agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, transgender, nonbinary, and Two-Spirit individuals).

Participants who reported being directly affected by climate change often or always had significantly higher EAQ-22 scores than participants who were rarely or never affected by climate change (p-values = <0.001).

Discussion

According to the study, undergraduate students at Western Washington University are universally experiencing a high level of eco-anxiety, with 80.9% of the sample identified as experiencing anxiety within the habitual ecological worry factor. Eco-anxiety studies including college students have focused on supporting those studying sustainability or environmental science. However, given the universally high habitual ecological worry scores across colleges at Western Washington University, it will be important to consider supporting students regardless of major.

While participants scored significantly higher on the habitual ecological worry factor of the EAQ-22, the negative consequence factor could represent more pathological experiences of eco-anxiety which would require advanced support and resources. The lack of students experiencing negative consequences of eco-anxiety could point to effective coping mechanisms such as collective action, be the result of increased general knowledge about climate change through popular media or suggest that while many students are anxious about

climate change and ecological degradation, the anxiety is not yet severe enough to interfere with students' daily functioning.

Within the personal experience of climate change statements, although 92% of participants have noticed a change in a place important to them because of climate change, only 76% say they have been directly affected. Further research could elucidate how participants understand the "direct impacts" of climate change. In this study the greatest predictor of high eco-anxiety scores and negative consequences was the frequency and duration of personal experiences with climate change. This is important to recognize as the physical impacts of climate change will continue to worsen and affect larger populations. Climate change and ecological degradation are not just environmental or physical concerns but have consequences for mental and emotional health.

Limitations

This study has potential for over-sampling of eco-anxious students who may be more inclined to take a survey on the topic. The lack of significant difference in EAQ-22 scores by race and ethnicity could also be the result of lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the sample.

Future considerations

Future eco- and climate anxiety studies should feature different colleges and institutions of higher education. Effort should be made to achieve greater racial and ethnic representation in eco-anxiety research. Given the potential for oversampling of pro-environmental participants, it will be important to promote research to those not initially drawn to the topic of eco-anxiety. While college students are an accessible population, it is necessary to consider how to reach young adults outside of higher education.

Declaration of interest statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to report. The author confirms that the research presented in this article met the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements, of the United States of America and received approval from the Institutional Review Board of Western Washington University.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Eco-Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ-22): habitual ecological worry statements

People have many different thoughts, feelings, and reactions regarding climate change and the ecological crisis. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Habitual ecological worry statements	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
It really upsets me to see how animals are suffering because of environmental pollution.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I worry about the next generation because they will be drastically affected by climate change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It makes me angry that many people fail to do even the most basic things to protect the environment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel sorry for those whose health is already negatively affected by climate change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am terrified by how many things have changed in just a few years because of climate change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am worried about the increasing number of natural disasters caused by climate change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It makes me sick to think about how much certain countries are polluting the environment, and there is nothing I can do about it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It scares me that the weather is becoming more and more unpredictable because of climate change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

It is frustrating that we elect decision makers who do not seriously consider the work of climate scientists/experts.

I feel uneasy when I think about the consequences of climate change.

I find it terrifying that the seasons have changed a lot in a short time.

It makes me angry that our environmentally damaging behaviors increase the suffering of people who live in areas that are more impacted by climate change.

I have a very negative perspective on the future of the planet because of climate change.

Appendix B

Eco-Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ-22): negative consequence statements

People have many different thoughts, feelings, and reactions regarding climate change and the ecological crisis. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Negative consequence statements	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I am so anxious about climate change that I cry.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have unusual tension in my muscles since I've become more aware of climate change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My loved ones become irritated because I talk about my climate change concerns too often.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Thoughts of climate change often distract me from my current tasks.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am so anxious about climate change that it affects my performance at school/work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

People look at me in a strange way, because I am so passionate about environmental action.

I worry that every decision I make will result in something harmful to the environment.

I am constantly on alert because there could be a climate change related disaster at any time.

I sleep poorly because I keep thinking about climate change.

Appendix C

Global youth survey: negative beliefs about climate change statements

Does climate change make you think:

Negative belief statements	Yes	No	Prefer not to say
I'm hesitant to have children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Humanity is doomed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The future is frightening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I won't have access to the same opportunities that my parents had	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My family's security will be threatened (e.g. economic, social, physical security)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The things I most value will be destroyed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People have failed to take care of the planet	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix D

Experience of Climate Change Scale: personal experience with climate change statements

Please rate how often the following statements are true of you.

Personal experience statements	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
I have been directly affected by climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know someone who has been directly affected by climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have noticed a change in a place that is important to me due to climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>