

Experiences of Environmentally Aware Young Adults at the Transition From Late Adolescence to Early Adulthood



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The climate crisis is having a significant impact on development and wellness. Young adults face challenges that no earlier generation has experienced, impacting their path toward wellness and thriving. This hermeneutic phenomenological study endeavored to illuminate the experiences of a group of environmentally aware young adults through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis, analyzed through Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, illustrated participants' experiences of fear for the future, anxiety, and loss; limited coping strategies for dealing with climate-related emotions; and a perceived tension between their desire to make life choices aligned with their environmental values and a financially stable career. Recommendations for counselors to best serve this population included increasing counselors' mental health literacy, developing specific strategies to support resilience, and exploring counselors' ethical responsibilities as advocates.

Keywords: climate crisis, young adults, phenomenological, environmental values, resilience

The climate crisis is expected to have a profound impact on human life in the 21st century (Wuebbles et al., 2017). Evidence of the changing environment is evident everywhere, including historic storms, catastrophic wildfires, record-breaking heatwaves, and severe droughts (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). Americans increasingly believe that the climate crisis is impacting their mental health, with 57.9% of 16–25-year-olds very or extremely worried about climate change, and 38.3% indicating that feelings about climate change negatively impact their daily life (Lewandowski et al., 2024). The consequences of the climate crisis are predicted to continue profoundly impacting mental health (Clayton et al., 2021; Hickman et al., 2021; Sturm et al., 2020).

Definition of the Climate Crisis

The climate crisis poses a significant threat to the future of human civilization. Each day, millions of tons of man-made greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane, are released into the atmosphere (Wuebbles et al., 2017). Burning fossil fuels, such as oil and natural gas, to fuel modern lifestyles is one of the most significant sources of pollution that contributes to global warming (IPCC, 2023). As greenhouse gas emissions rise, global temperatures exhibit a corresponding increase, leading to sea level rise, heat waves, floods, droughts, and severe storms (IPCC, 2023). In 2014, the United States Department of Defense reported that climate change “will likely lead to food and water shortages, pandemic disease, disputes over refugees and resources, and destruction by natural disasters in regions across the globe” (Banusiewicz, 2014, para. 3). By 2050, anywhere from 200 million to 1 billion people will be displaced from their homes, communities, and possibly countries because of climate-related events such as extreme heat, flooding, and famine (IPCC, 2023). For over three decades, the scientific community has warned of the grave danger of global warming and climate change (Borenstein, 2022). Despite the dire warnings, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase (World Meteorological Organization, 2020). Young adults are inheriting a world full of unprecedented and complex challenges (Hickman et al., 2021).

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Impact of the Climate Crisis on Young Adults

A growing body of literature is documenting the impact of the climate crisis on mental health and wellness, particularly among young people and young adults (Clayton et al., 2021; Hart et al., 2014; Hickman et al., 2021; Sturm et al., 2020). Youth, as defined by the United Nations, encompasses individuals aged 15–24, although this definition may vary (United Nations, 2025). This age range also consists of those emerging adults in the unique developmental period of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). According to a large study ($N = 10,000$) published in *The Lancet*, 77% of young people (aged 16–25) surveyed reported that they think the future is frightening, and 45% indicated that their feelings about climate change had a negative impact on their daily lives (Hickman et al., 2021). Research illuminates how experiencing the direct impact of climate change, such as exposure to wildfires, floods, and displacement, can lead to acute anxiety-related responses and chronic and severe mental health disorders (Clayton et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2015).

Climate change and related disasters can cause direct anxiety-related responses and chronic and severe mental health disorders (Pihkala, 2020). A 2018 meta-analysis found an increased incidence of psychiatric disorders and psychological distress in populations exposed to environmental disaster (Beaglehole et al., 2018). Flooding and prolonged droughts have been associated with elevated anxiety levels, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorders (Hickman et al., 2021). Even among members of the population who have not been directly exposed to the impacts of climate change, such as environmental-related disasters, a simple awareness of the problem may evoke feelings of anger, powerlessness, fear, and exhaustion (Moser, 2007).

Emerging research has highlighted the mental health impact of the indirect effects of the climate crisis, such as climate anxiety (Clayton et al., 2021; Hickman et al., 2021; IPCC 2023). Climate anxiety is a response to the current and future threats of a warming planet (Clayton et al., 2021; Hickman et al., 2021). The associated feelings can include grief, fear, anger, worry, guilt, shame, and despair (Clayton et al., 2021; Doherty & Clayton, 2011). It is essential to acknowledge that scholars recognize anxiety as a natural condition of living and acknowledge its potential benefits, as it can motivate individuals to take action and effect change (Hickman et al., 2021). Climate anxiety, although it can be a complex and intense experience, can also be viewed as a congruent response to the dangers and challenges that global citizens will face now and in the future (Hickman et al., 2021).

Young people with marginalized identities will face the most devastating impacts of climate change (Watts et al., 2015). Low-income and Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color are often the most vulnerable to the worst impacts of climate change, such as flooding, drought, fire, and extreme heat (IPCC, 2023). Furthermore, because of intersectional marginalization, some individuals will be at even greater risk for severe impacts and negative mental health consequences (Hayes et al., 2018). Marginalized communities may lack access to mental health resources after traumatic weather-related events or to process the ongoing challenges associated with climate change (Hilert, 2021). The cultural stigma that reduces help-seeking behavior and lack of access to mental health services may also lead marginalized groups to suffer more from poor mental health outcomes (Priebe et al., 2012).

Research indicates that young people are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, largely because of their ongoing physical and mental development, their dependency on adults, and their likelihood of repeated exposure to climate-related events over time (Hart et al., 2014). However, there is a need for more research on the impact of climate change on mental health, especially as it impacts young people (Hickman et al., 2021). The counseling literature has a paucity of studies

in this area (Hilert, 2021; Mongonia, 2022). As the impacts of the climate crisis continue to grow more severe, the profession must deepen its understanding of the climate crisis's effects on young adults and explore paths toward resilience and wellness (Hickman et al., 2021).

Climate-Aware Counselors

There is a growing need for counselors who are aware of and trained in the mental health impacts of the climate crisis, including climate anxiety (Hilert, 2021). This form of counselor competency includes identifying clients who are experiencing climate-based distress and anxiety (Mongonia, 2022). Although climate anxiety has yet to receive a formal classification in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, it is well accepted by counselors as a fear of impending environmental collapse that elicits strong and sometimes debilitating anxiety (Thomas & Benoit, 2022). Counselors must be able to assess and understand how to treat those who present with clinically significant levels of climate anxiety that interfere with functioning and developmental tasks (Pihkala, 2020). Treatment modalities often include teaching resilience and coping skills and increasing support systems (Baudon & Jachens, 2021). Counselors are called upon to support not only their clients through their environmental action but also to take action themselves (Thomas & Benoit, 2022).

Environmental Action

One intervention that can promote positive mental health outcomes for young adults concerned about the climate crisis is climate activism or sustained efforts to effect positive change (Gislason et al., 2021). Young people have been at the forefront of creating new U.S. climate policy (see Sunrise Movement; Bauck, 2022) and driving action (Rashid, 2023). Climate action can positively bring about necessary social change and provide mental health benefits (Hart et al., 2014). Research suggests that young people engaged in climate action experience several benefits, including increased resilience, agency, a sense of purpose, and community, all of which support positive mental health outcomes (Gislason et al., 2021). However, focusing on the climate crisis can also expose individuals to difficult feelings, such as fear, sadness, loss, and hopelessness (Hickman et al., 2021). It is common for people to employ defense mechanisms, such as denial and minimization, to maintain more positive feelings and a more optimistic view of the future in response to the realities of a changing world (Doherty & Clayton, 2011).

Environmentally Aware Young People

Environmental awareness can be broadly characterized as a level of consciousness concerning the importance of the natural environment and the impact of humans' behavior on it (Ham et al., 2016). Environmental awareness often leads to a deeper understanding of the severity of climate change and the urgency to address it (Orunbode et al., 2019). Youth awareness of the climate crisis is associated with a range of emotional and mental health impacts, such as climate anxiety and feelings of grief, loss, anger, guilt, and existential dread (Hickman et al., 2021). However, environmental awareness can also lead to increased action, a sense of purpose, and resilience building (Clayton et al., 2021).

In the 2024 American Climate Perspectives Survey, Americans aged 18–24 reported the highest levels of environmental concern among all age groups (over 80%; Speiser & Ishaq, 2024). Concern over the environment drives some young adults to action, but not all. Scholars suggest that to prevent the most severe consequences of climate change, humans must take action and alter their ways of life (IPCC, 2023; Wuebbles et al., 2017). Environmental awareness and action will be increasingly important as the impact of the climate crisis grows more pervasive and severe (IPCC, 2023). Young adults, in particular, may need to take steps to adapt to the rapidly changing planet. This study involves young people who are aware of the climate crisis, are motivated to act, and have taken a step toward creating change.

Aims of Study

This study focuses on the experiences of U.S.-based environmentally aware young adults who are moved to take action, aiming to understand their lived experiences as they transition from adolescence into adulthood. This is a significant period in life, as many young people are culminating their educational experiences and choosing who they want to be as adults, both personally and professionally (Arnett, 2014). The research questions guiding this study are: What are the lived experiences of environmentally aware young people as they transition to adulthood? How have their experiences impacted their mental health and understanding of themselves and their roles? How are their environmental experiences influencing their actions and aspirations for their futures (e.g., familial and career goals)?

Method

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a constructivist approach that scrutinizes individuals' subjective experiences and their interpretations of those experiences, asking "what is the nature of this experience from the individual's perspective?" (Moustakas, 1994; Ramsook, 2018). The study focused on interpreting the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants, which is crucial given that the experience of entering adulthood during the climate crisis is novel and new structures to understand the nature of this experience may be necessary. Climate engagement for emerging adults involves layered emotions, developmental stage influences, and societal pressures (Arnett, 2010; Clayton et al., 2021; Ogunbode et al., 2019). Hermeneutic phenomenology is well suited to context-rich experiences that cannot be separated from the social, political, and developmental realities in which they occur (Ramsook, 2018; van Manen, 1997). This method enabled us to explore not only what the participants said, but also how they understood themselves in this particular life stage.

Theoretical Framework

Arnett's developmental theory of emerging adulthood provided the framework for this study. According to this theory, between the ages of 18 and 29, young people consolidate their identity and explore career paths (Arnett, 2000, 2014). This is a time of possibility, in which multiple futures are open, and instability, as individuals transition from the structure provided by their family of origin and formal education and endeavor to make career and personal choices aligned with their values and aspirations (Arnett, 2000). Social and cultural factors also influence young people as they crystallize their identities and career paths (Arnett, 2010). This theory was selected because we were interested in the dynamic interactions among experiences, emotions, and actions within a critical developmental period and how these factors shape participants. Arnett's theory and hermeneutic phenomenology both emphasize process, interpretation, and the evolving nature of identity within a specific context.

Participants

Twelve interviewees, aged 20 to 25, participated in this research. All participants viewed climate change as an important issue and engaged in environmental action, although their methods for addressing it varied. There were seven female and five male interviewees. The majority identified as non-Hispanic White Americans, but two individuals described multiracial identities: one as South Asian and White, and the other as Asian Pacific Islander and White. All but one of the 12 participants were from a middle-class background; one described growing up in a working-class family. Eight participants were residents of New Jersey or Pennsylvania at the time of data collection, while the other four were residents of New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, and Washington, D.C.

Data Collection

To be included in this study, participants had to be aged 18–25, view climate change as an important issue, have actively engaged in some form of environmental action for at least 6 months, reside in the United States, be able to communicate in English, and consent to participate in an audio-recorded interview lasting 60–90 minutes. Following IRB approval, we contacted key informants—academics in the climate movement who are recognized as leaders because of the reach of their speaking engagements and publications, and with whom we (Kathleen L. Grant and Melissa A. Alvaré) had a prior relationship—to recommend individuals who met the selection criteria. We also utilized social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, and posted an IRB-approved recruitment flyer on our personal and publicly accessible sites. Snowball sampling was used, as several respondents recommended their peers for interviews. Recruitment emails described the research study, detailed the interview procedures, and invited people to contact us if they were interested in participating. Once individuals responded to these emails, they were screened to see if they met the inclusion criteria. If so, they were asked to read and sign an informed consent document and complete a demographic questionnaire before scheduling the interview.

Interview questions were designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences and perspectives. We utilized Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, specifically the five features of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibilities/optimism, and considered how these factors would appear in climate awareness and action (Arnett, 2010, 2014). We drew from the existing literature to develop our initial interview guide, first drafting broad, open-ended domains. Then, we met to revise them with a critical eye, working to ensure that we were not asking leading questions or probes that were overly influenced by our own biases and expectations. Taking a phenomenological approach, we also ensured that our questions were crafted to go beyond eliciting descriptions to allow us to explore the meanings participants attached to phenomena of interest (e.g., climate change and career trajectories). We then sent a draft of our interview instrument to a renowned scholar in the field of climate justice, who made recommendations for further revisions.

All interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom by one of the three authors. In line with the phenomenological tradition and our intentions to explore topics introduced by participants, we used semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured format promoted fluidity, allowing the informal dialogue to emerge and take unexpected directions, as respondents could discuss the topics most meaningful to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). The interview guide included questions such as: "How has learning about the environment impacted you personally, if at all?" "Has your environmental awareness had any impact on your life goals and/or career plans?" "When you think about the future, what feelings come up for you?" and "How, if at all, do you think you have changed as a result of your involvement in environmental action?"

We asked follow-up questions based on participants' responses and probed—when appropriate—to gain clarity and delve deeper into their experiences and viewpoints. Interviews ranged from 55 to 75 minutes in length, and participants received \$15 gift cards as compensation for their time and participation. The audio files from the recorded Zoom videos were sent to a professional transcription service.

Analysis

Given our hermeneutic phenomenological design, the analysis followed van Manen's (1997) approach, which involves a cyclical process of reading, reflecting, and writing to uncover thematic structures.

Researchers (a) turn to the nature of lived experience, (b) investigate experiences as lived, (c) engage in hermeneutic phenomenological reflection, (d) engage in hermeneutic phenomenological writing, (e) maintain a robust and oriented relation, and (f) balance the research while exploring the parts and whole (van Manen, 1997, pp. 30–31). As Starks and Trinidad (2007) wrote, in coding data from phenomenological inquiries, “specific statements are analyzed and categorized into clusters of meaning” with close attention to “descriptions of what was experienced as well as how it was experienced” (pp. 1375–1376). Transcripts were divided among us for an initial pre-coding of each interview. We each engaged in preliminary note-taking, marking repeated phrases and themes, and memo writing on potential codes and sub-codes during this stage. We then met to discuss initial interpretations of interviews, emergent themes, and perceptions of the powerful and insightful stories shared by participants. At that time, we also devised an initial inductive code and created a codebook and color scheme for the next coding round. We then re-divided the transcripts and each coded four transcripts in shared Microsoft Word documents. Once all 12 interviews were coded, we met again to discuss our analyses and refine and collapse codes. We repeated this process with each reading, using four new transcripts to examine our coding processes and contribute to our analyses with the new code list and interpretations of the data.

Trustworthiness

Our research team consisted of two counselor educators and one sociologist. We identify as White, middle and upper-middle-class women, aged 35–45, with shared concerns about the climate crisis. We engaged in ongoing discussions about how our social positions, interests, and privileges influenced all phases of the research process.

Trustworthiness was established primarily through prolonged engagement, critical reflexivity, and peer debriefing. We reviewed the audio recordings and transcripts for months. Both listening to the participants’ voices in the audio recordings of interviews and prolonged engagement with the transcripts is crucial for establishing trustworthiness, as it enables the researcher to see the world from each participant’s perspective and pick up on the richness and nuance of the narratives and ensures a thorough understanding of the participants’ statements, all of which are essential for phenomenological analyses (Moustakas, 1994). We were committed to maintaining an open stance and curiosity toward participants’ experiences. Each member of the team engaged in memo writing to document our emerging interpretations and consider how personal preconceptions and backgrounds might be influencing our interpretations. These memos were shared among the team and served as starting points for critical dialogue. We responded to each other’s memos, posing alternative perspectives and challenging probes to push one another to examine how personal biases might be shaping interpretations of the data. We also met regularly to engage in reflexive practice, unpacking the data collectively, scrutinizing our codes and emerging themes, seeking data that did not support the themes that were emerging, and interrogating how personal expectations and life experiences could be influencing our analyses. Whenever we found inconsistencies in our interpretations and/or data categorization schemes, we conducted thorough discussions to reach a consensus and ensure a uniform coding process.

Findings

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of young adults engaged in environmental action during the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood. In particular, this study focused on the impact of environmental awareness and action on the participants’ development, personally and professionally, as they transition into adulthood. Through a hermeneutic

phenomenological analysis of the 12 in-depth interviews, three key themes emerged from the participants' narratives: 1) Fear for the Future, Anxiety, and Loss; 2) Limited Coping Strategies; and 3) Tension Between Making a Difference and Making a Living.

Fear for the Future, Anxiety, and Loss

The environmentally aware participants expressed fear for the future, anxiety, and loss throughout their narratives. Most discussed pervasive anxiety and fear for the future related to the climate crisis. In contrast, other participants were triggered by specific situations, such as a severe weather-related event (locally or globally) or a climate change-related news item (i.e., the release of a UN report on the climate crisis). One participant, Theodora, also reflected on the present-day harm that communities are experiencing: "And it's here right now, and increased natural disasters are not a future thing; they're happening. . . . It's definitely impacted my mental health." Mary discussed how the climate crisis is causing a "collective trauma" in her generation. She said, "I think it's really impacting everybody because individual action feels so futile. I think we're just feeling really lost." Many of the participants discussed a fear for their future as adults.

The participants specifically shared their fears about the future in light of the climate crisis. They raised questions about where they will live, whether they should have children, and the state of the planet. Brianna stated that it is a "daunting and terrifying idea, if we don't start to get it [global warming] worked out, just how much of an impact it can have on our future." Amy stated, "I could say that the climate crisis has negatively impacted mental health . . . [I experience] anxiety and worry about the state of the planet, now and in the future." Briana described:

It's pretty hard to feel hopeful, especially since all of us live here in Colorado now, where fires are a big problem and stuff like that. We often have conversations where we're like, "So the West is going to be on fire, and the Southwest won't have water, and the coastlines are going to be flooded. Where can we live?"

Three participants (25%) discussed, without specific prompting, whether or not to have a child, as the climate crisis would profoundly impact their child's life. Nancy stated, "I feel like my generation . . . is not the biggest about having kids. . . . There's not going to be a good place for us to live."

Several participants used the terms *eco-anxiety* and *climate grief* to discuss their emotional experiences related to climate change. Nancy indicated that reports of natural disasters trigger her eco-anxiety, and Carol stated that she started psychiatric medication partly because of her eco-anxiety. Evan discussed his feelings of climate grief, helplessness, and powerlessness.

Limited Coping Strategies

The participants discussed various coping strategies for dealing with their intense climate-related emotions. The main strategies were adopting a positive mindset and ignoring or withdrawing from climate information/action. These two strategies are discussed below, after which the remaining strategies are briefly discussed.

The majority of the participants discussed choosing to stay optimistic about the future as a coping strategy. They discussed thinking about all the people, including themselves, who are engaged in climate action to make a difference. Alex discussed guarding against negative feelings by avoiding getting "too down on myself" or adopting "too negative of an outlook" and engaging in individual

action as a coping strategy. Participants elaborated on the challenges they faced in maintaining a positive perspective, especially as they age and see an increasing number of negative climate-related events. Jackson stated that it is “more and more of a struggle” to maintain a positive attitude and be motivated to take climate action.

Participants also shared examples of ignoring or withdrawing from climate-related information or action as a means of coping with negative feelings or protecting themselves. Daniel stated, “I have taken an approach of doing the most that I can in my community while choosing to stay a little ignorant on what’s happening globally.” Sarina shared, “I felt pretty stressed and sort of want . . . to give up on trying to help environmental problems because a lot of them are so far gone that it can be pretty discouraging to read about.” Mary elaborated on her emotional experience:

And it almost teaches you, I’ve found, not to feel your feelings. So in a sense, I find myself becoming more apathetic because you’re desensitized to it. You’re seeing it all the time, but you can’t feel it all the time because no one wants to stare into the impending doom of environmental decay or whatever.

Three of the participants discussed connecting with their community as a means to address their fears and concerns about the climate crisis. All three of these participants reported connecting with others who are environmentally minded or engaged in climate action. One participant discussed therapy as a strategy: “I do see a therapist occasionally. . . . She’s not trained on the eco-side of things. So she tries to understand and gets tools and whatnot, but definitely, it’s not her main area of concern. But she’s been helpful anyways.”

Two participants discussed being in nature, specifically hiking, as a coping mechanism. Mary stated, “Life outside and living a life that is environmentally based actually brings me a lot of joy, and that component of it doesn’t stress me out and give me anxiety.” Sarina shared that she does not have a clear coping strategy:

So even though me and my friends . . . are people who are trying to work towards improving things, I would say we all can feel pretty hopeless about the situation, especially [when] the current government-level response is not very strong. . . . I want to be hopeful, but I would say from a scientific perspective, it can also be pretty hard to feel hopeful for the future. Yeah, I don’t really have an answer. . . . it can be pretty overwhelming, and you just kind of have to try to think about something else. Because I guess I can remind myself I’m already working to try to increase knowledge, and that’s useful. So, I guess I’m playing some positive part, and so I can try to relieve myself with that information. But yeah, I guess I don’t really have a good way to feel better about it.

Tension Between Making a Difference and Making a Living

The participants in this study were all in a transition period between adolescence and adulthood. In their narratives, many of the participants ($n = 7$) expressed the tensions between their environmentally based values and the need for a job that would provide economic security. These tensions emerged as the participants struggled to make choices congruent with their stated values and career choices that might have long-term impacts, both individually and for their communities.

The role of money and financial stability was not directly probed for in the interview protocol; however, participants often brought it up when asked what prevents them from engaging in

environmental action. Jackson stated, “You can either pursue this as a passion and as an ideal and as a thing to do, or you can . . . make money and have a stable life.” He went on to state:

And so I grew up with a lot of that type of thinking, of like, eventually, you’re going to have to kind of settle your own goals and ideals in order to survive in the world on your own and provide safety nets to your family later on. And so I always kind of grew with that . . . in the back of my mind, and that became more present in college. . . . I think those have been the biggest kind of like detractors . . . like “You have to choose one or the other.” Like, they [parents] weren’t necessarily discouraging my passion or any of that, they were just kind of like, “It’s one or the other.” Most people fall for the latter, and that’s kind of why we have the issues in the first place.

Evan discussed grappling with either getting paid with a traditional job or engaging in more meaningful environmental activism on a volunteer basis. He shared:

I guess, unfortunately, money is a factor. I found more ways to get paid for teaching than for volunteering my time. You have to think about, “What’s the balance of that going to be?” I need to be able to support myself, and so when I can, I will dedicate time to being active in my community and engaging with environmental issues. So, finding a balance.

Brianna, who was in law school studying environmental law, discussed the tension as she sees it:

Society . . . pins people against environmental work because it’s not lucrative, or they paint it not to be lucrative because I think people can make a decent living and know that they’re doing something beneficial. But I would say that there’s still a stigma in society just surrounding environmental work, and that if you want to make money and you want to live decently, that’s not the field to go into. I fully don’t believe in that anymore, but I think that that played a role in my choices.

Although most participants indicated that financially providing for themselves was a significant detractor from an environmentally focused career, several participants had alternative narratives. Amy, an environmental educator at a nonprofit land trust, discussed the importance of taking time in college to discover her identity and selecting a career aligned with her values, even if it was not financially lucrative. However, her financial realities were still infused into her thinking, reflected by her parents’ repeated refrain: “My parents, from day one, always said, ‘Pursue your passion, do what you love, and the money will come.’” Other participants were exploring careers in academia and research as methods to bring about change and did not mention finances as an impediment to an environmentally oriented career.

Discussion

This study aimed to gain insight into the lived experiences of environmentally aware individuals as they transition from adolescence into adulthood. Specifically, Arnett’s developmental theory of emerging adulthood was utilized to frame these experiences, as it considers the dynamic interactions among experiences, emotions, and actions within this critical developmental period between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000). In particular, Arnett’s theory provides insight into the tension and instability that young adults experience during this transition, particularly in terms of identity, career, and emotional development.

Three main themes emerged from the participants' narratives, including feelings of fear for the future, anxiety, and loss; limited coping strategies; and tension between making a living and making a difference. Each participant described fear for the future, anxiety, and loss. These findings align with past research exploring mental health concerning the climate crisis (Gislason et al., 2021; Hickman et al., 2021; Ojala et al., 2021; Sanson et al., 2019). The depth and breadth of the participants' descriptions of fear and anxiety suggest that thoughts, feelings, and experiences around the climate crisis impact their daily lives. Some participants reported powerful emotional responses to negative news about the climate. They were pondering significant life choices because of the climate crisis (e.g., questions about where to live and whether to have children). As previous researchers have suggested, these responses appear appropriate given the realities of the climate crisis and the expected impact it will have on their lives and those of future generations (Hickman et al., 2021). However, although participants expressed and communicated these fears and anxieties, few seemed to have comprehensive structures (psychological, behavioral, or relational) to act on their pervasive and legitimate concerns. Participants often managed complex feelings and plans independently in the absence of communities informed about their fears and realities for the future, which could help them navigate the challenges and possibilities of a life and a future heavily impacted by the climate crisis.

Although all participants experienced a range of emotional reactions to the climate crisis, they also employed various strategies to manage their feelings. The participants generally appeared to have limited strategies for dealing with challenging climate-related feelings. Most of the strategies were individualistic, and young people had to figure out how to manage their deep and complex emotions independently. Several participants discussed being optimistic as a coping strategy but also voiced that this strategy is ineffective and exhausting. Although keeping a positive attitude in the face of adversity can be beneficial, doing so without acknowledging or feeling the vast array of emotions associated with the climate crisis and their fear for their futures may be ineffective. This finding aligns with the conclusions of Hickman et al. (2021), which demonstrate that young people are facing unique stressors arising from the climate crisis that can impact their development.

Several participants discussed ignoring aspects of the climate crisis or the climate crisis itself to protect themselves. Denial is a common psychological defense to reduce climate-related distress (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). Participants noted that they disengaged from environmental action to avoid challenging feelings related to climate change. These individuals may benefit from positive strategies to manage their emotions, allowing them to take care of themselves and continue to be active citizens working toward change. Finally, participants shared coping strategies, including spending time in nature and engaging in therapy, as strategies to support their mental health. Participants also engaged with environmental communities as a coping strategy, which can be a significant influence during such a developmental period. Social and cultural factors have been shown to influence young people during the development of emerging adulthood as they crystallize their identities and career paths (Arnett, 2010). As the future will include increasingly complex and challenging climate crisis-related issues, individuals in this study may benefit from additional coping strategies, which will be further discussed in the Implications for Counseling section.

The final theme illuminated by the participants is the tension between making a difference and making a living. Participants discussed the challenges inherent in creating environmental change, often in low-paying or volunteer capacities, and the desire to support themselves financially. Although the participants were interested in environmental action, both professionally and personally, they often struggled to create a life in adulthood where they could enact their values. Participants described examples of their engagement in environmental causes in high school and college but had a more

challenging time maintaining action as they transitioned to adulthood. Although part of the challenge seemed to be the lack of clear, viable paths for the participants to engage in environmental action and careers as adults, financial realities also shaped their choices. Participants viewed jobs in the environmental sector as less lucrative than others, and they would not be able to support themselves or their future families on this salary, especially if they wished to maintain the same socioeconomic level as they were offered. Additionally, the participants saw this tension as a dichotomy; they could either have a well-paying career or engage in environmental action.

Implications for Counseling

Young adults are increasingly experiencing mental health impacts of the climate crisis (Hickman et al., 2021). This study offers insight into the developmental and emotional experiences of young adult participants as they navigate the transition to adulthood, exploring how to make sense of their environmental concerns and act to create change. Counselors, including school counselors, college counselors, career counselors, and clinical mental health counselors, can play a crucial role in supporting mental health and wellness in the context of the climate crisis. Both the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC; 2025) and the American Counseling Association (ACA; Sturm et al., 2020) have issued statements emphasizing the need for counselors to advocate for climate action and educate themselves and others on the mental health implications of climate change.

The findings of the current study support the need for counseling services because of climate change impacts on mental health. Findings reveal that participants were experiencing challenging emotions related to the climate crisis and had limited strategies to cope with the changing world. Three implications for counseling are discussed below: increasing counselors' climate change mental health literacy, supporting resilience, and the ethical responsibility of counselors as advocates.

Recommendation 1: Increase Counselors' Climate Change Mental Health Literacy

Counselors must practice "within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, state and national professional credentials, and appropriate professional experience" (ACA, 2014, Section C.2.a.). Many counselor education training programs do not cover the unique experiences and challenges individuals face because of the climate crisis, resulting in a void in counselor education training (Heiman, 2024; Hilert, 2021). Therefore, to ethically assist clients with this need, counselors must continue their education and, where necessary, seek additional supervision to treat this population. As a first step, counselors can consider learning more about the nature of the climate crisis, including the impacts on future generations (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). Publications such as the American Psychological Association's 2021 report, *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Inequities, and Responses* (Clayton et al., 2021), provide a comprehensive overview of the nature of the climate crisis and strategies for mental health practitioners. Counselors can also seek support, training, and consultation through membership in the Climate Psychology Alliance of North America, a community of mental health professionals who educate climate-aware practitioners (<https://www.climatepsychology.us>).

Participants in this study noted that their mental health practitioners were not adept at addressing their climate anxiety and trauma in sessions. Individuals may not directly broach the topics of climate anxiety, eco-grief, and weather-related PTSD; therefore, counselors must address these topics directly with clients. Climate-aware counselors must facilitate the expression of clients' emotions about the climate crisis and help them further explore and articulate their experiences (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). Counselors can consider using interventions that facilitate emotional expression and create opportunities for adaptive behaviors (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). Interventions can also include existential therapy,

particularly exploring how to find meaning, peace, joy, and hope in the face of ecological collapse and climate-related disasters (Barry, 2022; Frankl, 2006). Finally, eco-therapy is a promising modality for clients that centers healing through nurturing a stronger relationship with nature and the physical environment (Delaney, 2019). As such, it is recommended that counselors expand their knowledge of the climate crisis and its impact on mental health to serve their clients better as well as any supervisees.

Recommendation 2: Supporting Young Adult and Client Resilience

This study found that participants lacked comprehensive structures to address their climate anxiety and fears about the future. Many participants felt overwhelmed by the climate crisis, which impacted their ability to take action in the climate movement. As a coping strategy to protect themselves from difficult feelings associated with climate change, some participants withdrew from climate information or action. As challenging weather-related events and the impact of the climate crisis are expected to increase in the coming years, young adults must develop both internal and external resources to survive and thrive in a changing world (Gislason et al., 2021).

Fostering resilience is an effective strategy for supporting the mental health and well-being of young adults, including those affected by the climate crisis (Clayton et al., 2021). Resilience can be fostered through the development of both internal and external resources, and counselors can play a crucial role in this process. Internal resources can include increasing self-efficacy or young adults' belief in their ability to overcome the stress and trauma associated with climate change. Research suggests that those who believe in their ability to withstand the challenges associated with climate change have more positive psychological outcomes than those with lower self-efficacy (Clayton et al., 2021). Belief in one's resilience is also correlated with fewer symptoms of depression and PTSD after natural disasters (Ogunbode et al., 2019).

Counselors can support young adults in developing external resources that enhance resilience, such as fostering social connections. Social connections to peers and those of different generations can be a vital source of emotional, informational, logistical, and spiritual support (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2019). Individuals' ability to withstand trauma and adversity increases when they are connected to strong social networks (Clayton et al., 2021).

Finally, this study found that participants did not have clear paths to enact their environmental values in their adult lives. They faced financial and cultural pressures to choose careers that would allow them to make a living. Although this study highlights that some participants may not have had the internal and external resources to cope with the emotional stressors of engaging in climate-related work, a viable career or civic path was elusive. All counselors who work with young adults, especially school and career counselors, have the opportunity to provide resources about the wide array of jobs available in the green economy, as well as methods to include civic involvement (i.e., participation on local environmental commissions, participation in activist groups, leadership in local government advocating for green policies) when planning one's adult life. Models of adults who engage in environmental action, both personally and professionally, must be provided to young people as examples of possible paths in adulthood. As taking action is seen to have numerous mental health benefits, specifically as it builds agency, counselors must support clients in developing the attitudes, skills, and behaviors necessary to engage in activism and advocacy (Gislason et al., 2021; Sanson et al., 2019).

Recommendation 3: Ethical Responsibility of Counselors as Climate Advocates

Counselors are ethically responsible for advocating for the well-being of their clients, as stated in the ACA *Code of Ethics* (2014): "When appropriate, counselors advocate at individual, group,

institutional, and societal levels to address potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or the growth and development of clients” (Section A.7.a.). The climate crisis is and will continue to significantly negatively impact the growth and development of clients, with young clients and clients from historically marginalized populations such as people of color and people with low incomes among the most vulnerable (IPCC, 2023; Watts et al., 2015). Counselors’ ethical responsibility is to advocate for local, state, and national policies and practices to prevent the most dire climate outcomes and support a livable future for all. This includes the counseling profession’s call for counselors to be active in policy initiatives and advocacy related to climate change (NBCC, 2025). Such policies may consist of those that support a just transition away from fossil fuels and to renewable sources of energy; agricultural strategies that reduce emissions, shift toward more sustainable diets, and reduce food waste (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020); and nature-based solutions such as stopping deforestation and ecological degradation and moving toward ecosystem regeneration (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020). As the impacts of the climate crisis are felt most significantly in communities of color (who are more likely to be situated in floodplains, heat islands, downwind from fossil fuel-burning plants, etc.), there is an added ethical responsibility to advocate for the well-being of the most vulnerable.

Limitations and Future Research

This study had several limitations. First, the majority of participants identified as White and middle class. The study would have benefited from a greater diversity of participants to gain a broader perspective on cultural differences as they relate to the experiences of climate change, development, and mental health. Additional research is necessary to gain insight into the experiences of young adults across the intersections of identity, specifically focusing on those who will suffer the greatest impacts of the climate crisis, such as individuals from the global majority and low-income households. Secondly, all participants in this study were currently or had been previously engaged in some level of environmental action. The results of this study may not be applicable to those who are concerned about climate change but not actively engaged in taking action. Finally, although a sample size of 12 was suitable for the goals of this research and the standards of hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1997), the nature of qualitative research limits the ability to generalize these findings.

The participants in this study struggled with diverging from the status quo to make choices aligned with their values. In particular, values associated with individualism and capitalism frequently appeared as roadblocks, such as pressure to make a certain financial living and engaging with problems and solutions from an individualistic perspective. More research is needed to understand how young people challenge and resist dominant cultural values that prevent them from taking action to bring about environmental change and may contribute to poor mental health outcomes.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the lived experiences of environmentally aware young people. Commensurate with previous findings, participants expressed fear for the future, anxiety, and loss (Hickman et al., 2021). This study highlighted the limited comprehensive strategies available to young people for addressing their climate-related emotions, which affected their ability to remain engaged in climate action. Additionally, participants felt significant cultural and financial pressure to make a living, which stood in contrast to their ability to engage in personal or professional environmental action. Counselors can support young adults by enhancing their climate-related mental health literacy, offering climate-specific interventions to increase their resilience, and engaging in social change through advocacy.

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