Rejoinder to Guy Gladstone's Commentary on 'Climate Change on the Couch'

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Introduction

In my rejoinder to Gladstone's commentary from the previous issue (Gladstone, 2022), I will reflect on the points of critique Gladstone raises about where my personal voice rests in this piece of research, and what falls under the remit of 'faux objectivity', or too much head and not enough heart. Then I will very briefly respond to the notion of four converging hyperobjects (Morton, 2013) that Gladstone mentions: the climate and ecological emergency (CEE); the Covid pandemic; social justice crises; and augmented virtual reality; and I will add a fifth: the current war in Ukraine.

Following this, I will respond to Gladstone's comments about the title of my paper 'Climate Change on the Couch' and add my thoughts on my choice of title and the various psychotherapeutic approaches – humanistic-existential, cognitive-behavioural, and psychoanalytic and relational – that Gladstone mentions. Then I will expand on why counselling and psychotherapy approaches ought to integrate an ecosystemic approach both in terms of theory and in clinical work with clients, and explain why I think the detachedness of scientised environmentalism is the reason behind such limited progress in the last 40 years.

Further, I will respond to Gladstone's comments about the limitation of counselling and psychotherapy training and the conservatism in our field. And lastly, I will discuss whether our profession can leave politics out of the session, and respond to the topic Gladstone raised about moving beyond the one-to-one session module in response to the CEE.

My Voice in the Paper – a Response from a Personal and Feminist Perspective to Gladstone's Objections

I would like to express my gratitude for Gladstone's thorough and stimulating commentary on my research paper. His highly personal piece invites me to respond in a similar vein. As Gladstone remarks, my piece was conceived as a research paper, and not a journal article or opinion piece. One of Gladstone's critiques relates to his objections about my 'un-egoic pose' in the paper, and an absence of my voice. My voice not coming across made me think about the formulaic way in which research tends to be presented in professional journals, and to what extent I felt obliged to fit in. Admittedly, I have a love–hate relationship with fitting in. I express my rebellious nature through my participation in Extinction Rebellion's (XR) activism, albeit mostly by offering psychological support to activists.

Choosing not to write in a personal way balances my egoic with my un-egoic self. Analysing and presenting data is definitely an un-egoic activity. It is very time-consuming and labour intensive. For me, telling peers and friends about my publication is by far the most egoic and, dare I say, exciting aspect. Another part of the un-egoic style relates to my wish to distance myself from writing as a self-serving activity. I would define my role as the researcher as mostly un-egoic. Listening to what participants have to say about a topic whilst also asking questions is humbling. The role I take when conducting a semi-structured interview is similar to the role I take as a therapist. In both instances, the conversation is participant- or client-led, where my view is kept in the

background. Semi-structured research interviews are inherently intersubjective in the sense that my role as a researcher is not just to ask the questions, but to be an active partner in making meaning of what the research participant is conveying to me, picking up on areas of particular interest and prompting participants to clarify and expand. Because the research project was my own initiative, and not part of a Masters or Ph.D. programme, it was my decision to what extent I wanted to fit in with a prescribed way of doing and reporting data. Importantly, but based on the themes that emerged in the data, I set the angle and tone of my paper, and this is where my voice comes through.

Qualitative research methods such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) are, by their very design, subjective. IPA aims to capture the lived experience of an individual, which, as a researcher, I then interpret. This is one of many examples where the 'I' is manifest. I am hearing, selecting and creating a focus with the data through my subjective lens. I suggest that Gladstone would have drawn different conclusions, had he been in my shoes. So in the sense I conveyed, IPA is not a research method that seeks objective truth. However, my interpretation of using IPA as a research methodology is to remain truthful to the participants' experiences. It is certainly not 'faux objectivity', as the aim is not to distil objective truth.

Gladstone's question as to whether the formal style of writing was a way of fitting in with academic standards prompted further thought. Evidently, on some level I chose to fit in, but without feeling constrained by a top-down dynamic in academia, as I mentioned above. In the analysis and reporting of data, I adhered to IPA conventions. On the question of intellectual gravitas, I think that a research paper is on par with a journal article. The angst that Gladstone referred to regarding how my research was going to be received, and whether I felt I would have been taken less seriously had I opted for a freer style, was present in the form of background noise.

Looking at the angst from a deeper personal and socio-political perspective, my place as an elective immigrant is intertwined with the prevailing *Zeitgeist* of Switzerland, where I spent my formative years – a country where women gained the right to vote only in 1971. This perception that women are lesser beings than men is evident, for example, in the writings of the founding father of psychoanalysis. In his paper 'The psychical consequences of the anatomic distinction between the sexes' (1925), Freud writes that 'women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own' (Cherry, 2020). This quotation gives a flavour of the prevailing gender politics in the early-to-mid 20th century which dominated Western societies.

My father being an authoritarian, I lacked ego-boosting recognition in the family I grew up in, which drew me to therapy. It is commonly experienced that oppressive forms of child-rearing can give rise to rebellious behaviour as well as to depression. These two responses that so many people experience, especially women, relate to the doer/done-to dynamic which I aired in the research paper under discussion (Mowat, 2022). My identification with the rebel that holds anger and rage against the oppressor draws me to the type of political activism that challenges these dynamics that have created the CEE. It explains why I feel drawn to environmental organisations such as XR, where I offer psychological support. In hindsight, I might add that my personal therapy which, unlike Gladstone's, was not on the couch, boosted my ego and shrank my super-ego. Perhaps Gladstone's 'polemicising and polarising' style comes more naturally to him due to his strong egoic core.

As I continue to reflect on Gladstone's critique regarding a perceived lack of my voice in the paper, I wondered about the relatedness between the thin voice I had in my birth family, and the one I have in society. My story is the story of

millions of women. Where is the voice of women in the field of counselling and psychotherapy? In early psychology and psychoanalysis, male thinkers dominate the lists of important pioneers. The reality is that many pioneering women in the field faced considerable discrimination and obstacles. Many, for example, found it difficult to secure academic positions that would allow them to research and publish. Mary Ainsworth, Karen Hornby, Melanie Klein and Anna Freud were amongst a relatively small number of women whose voices were heard alongside Freud, Jung, Beck, Rogers and Kierkegaard, to name but a few. The power dynamics they must have experienced with their male counterparts would make for an interesting study. We commonly talk about the founding fathers at the expense of the founding mothers.

Response to Converging 'Hyperobjects'

My motivation to do a piece of research around the climate and ecological emergency was my way of engaging with the phenomenon of global warming, which is an example of what Timothy Morton (2013) refers to as 'a hyperobject'. I equate engagement with a way of coping with my eco-anxiety. In a nutshell, a hyperobject is a phenomenon that is so vast and complex that it is beyond human comprehension. Gladstone mentioned three further hyperobjects that weave in and out of the CEE – namely, the Covid pandemic, social justice crises and augmented virtual reality. I would add the current war in Ukraine as a fifth hyperobject, one that certainly intensifies my eco-anxiety. The UN chief Antonio Guterres warns that the war, like the pandemic, is distracting governments from moving away from oil, gas and coal (Harvey, 2022).With each year of inaction, eco-anxiety is rapidly on the increase, especially amongst young people – something that is well documented by a recent study by Hickman et al. (2021).

'Climate Change on the Couch' as a Title

On the subject of the couch – which I use as shorthand for psychotherapy – Gladstone suggests that the title of my paper sat 'awkwardly in the one-time house magazine of Humanistic Psychology in Britain'. *Self & Society* is probably one of the most diverse and inclusive journals there is in the field of psychology. As (in part) a Minster Centre-trained integrative psychotherapist, I see myself adhering to both the psychoanalytic relational and humanistic-existential approaches. Professionally, I am not suffering from 'an inferiority complex', as Gladstone perceives the integrative school to be. He writes that the humanistic school is often 'decried', and there is truth in that.

The power dynamics between the three (main) pillars – psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioural and humanistic/existential – have been played out in various forms amongst clinicians and in mental health politics. For a start, humanistic-existential therapies have been significantly marginalised in IAPT services throughout the UK, as they do not comply with IAPT's requirement of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and the culture of evidenced-based practice. In my mind, evidence-based practice has more to do with economics than with scientific evidence – offering psychological therapies in a manualised way. Certainly in the past, the humanistic school was perceived by many in the profession as less worthy than other approaches, which I suggest is a form of 'othering'. There is a real lack of explicit acknowledgement of the extent to which humanistic core principles have influenced contemporary psychoanalysis and the relational school – something worth expanding upon at some point. (Also, as Gladstone mentioned, the humanistic approach is used in XR talking-circles.)

It is worth mentioning that in terms of expanding the therapeutic frame to the more-than-human world, the integrative school has

woven in an ecological approach (Hawkins & Ryde, 2020), which I commented on in a previous paper (Mowat, 2021). I offer a few crumbs of wisdom by Winter and Koger:

> The debate about which approach is better can distract us from solving our problems…. Ecosystems will not care if we spend our time debating the relative merits of behavioural or cognitive theory, nor which theory wins the most followers. Ecosystems will collapse whether or not we win our intellectual debates. Only changing our behaviours will make any difference to the outcome of our crisis. (Winter & Koger, 2004, pp. 215–16, cited in Dodds, 2011, p. 11)

In his self-proclaimed 'polarising and polemic style', Gladstone questions the word 'couch' in the title of my research, suggesting that it is at odds with a journal that is the voice for Humanistic Psychology internationally. In the same breath, he suggests, to my mind disdainfully, that integrative psychotherapy sits between psychoanalysis and humanistic psychotherapy, and as a consequence suffers from an inferiority complex – a term coined by the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler in 1907. I hoped that the snappy title 'Climate Change on the Couch' would bring a smile to readers' faces and appeal to a broad church of psychotherapists. I am aware how little time we have to avoid a major human and environmental catastrophe. Because of my tendency to intellectualise as a defence, I personally opted for body psychotherapy, which in many ways opened my heart.

The conception of my research coincided with XR's occupation of five major Thames River bridges in London on 17 November 2018, in which I participated. I was aware that the world of psychotherapy was not talking about climate change at that point. The voice of XR resonated with my inner voice of panic about the environmental degradation that consumerism was causing, and a deeply felt perception that our human-centric way of life was out of balance with the more-than-human world (Mowat, 2021). I was also deeply troubled by a growing awareness that the poorest people and countries are going to be impacted most by our high-carbon Western lifestyle. If the affluent classes took this reality on board and were to make serious attempts to address this deep social injustice, it would require, as Gladstone points out, a change of our value systems, notably neoliberalism, capitalism and religions that place humans at the top of the hierarchical pyramid.

At its most basic, Western culture has to shift to a low-carbon lifestyle which brings with it a profound change in how we live our lives. I would agree with Gladstone's sentiment that Carbon Conversations would need to be an integral part of psychotherapy training, something that Randall and Brown (2015) pioneered. The Carbon Conversation asks us to be conscious of the impact our consumption patterns have in relation to the warming of the planet – an awareness that leads to behavioural change. What is becoming clear is that we cannot rely on our governments to lead us in making these changes, as they are more concerned about pleasing the shareholders of polluting industries. Governments tend not to act according to the 'moral third' (Benjamin, 2018), a point I raised in the research article under consideration (Mowat, 2022, p. 3).

A Call for an Ecosystemic Approach

Gladstone seems to agree with my suggestion that relational psychotherapies are primed for an ecosystemic approach because of their core notion of interconnectedness – a notion that lends itself well to extending the therapeutic gaze to the more-than-human world. Gladstone remarks on the detached quality of 'scientific environmentalism' – a kind of environmentalism that is overly rational and at odds with ecosystemic principles, in that it sees the human species as separate from and superior to every other creature. This requires a radical cultural shift in Westernised societies, which hope against hope that the climate crisis can be halted through techno-fixes and such-like. The mentality of the techno-fix maintains the social

status quo of 'every man for himself' – notably Thatcherism, to which Gladstone refers. Eco-philosopher Charles Eisenstein (2018) remarks that even if we succeed in removing all surplus carbon from the atmosphere, the cultural conditions that lead to the CEE would not fundamentally change.

Although environmentalism is a social movement dedicated to protect the natural world, it tends to discount the guardians of the natural world, as Collier (2020) noted in her research. The removal of indigenous people from their land is what the colonisers did for centuries, something that has now morphed into neo-colonial and racist practices, which are forms of ecocide. The late environmental lawyer Polly Higgins tirelessly campaigned to make ecocide the fifth crime against peace (Higgins, 2015). Below I offer an example of ecocide, neo-colonial practice and racism.

The Samis in Lapland (Crouch, 2022) have just lost a long-fought battle to protect their land from the British Beowulf Mining Company, which has won approval from the Swedish government to start an open-cast iron-ore mine on land belonging to the indigenous Sami. There are clearly winners and losers – the latter tend to be indigenous communities which are, as far as possible, living within ecosystemic boundaries, and importantly act as guardians of their native fauna and flora. Perhaps one of the issues that environmentalism and the psychotherapy profession have in common is that they are predominantly populated by the white middle classes – something that the Minster Centre, which I work for, has in recent years been striving to address.

Alongside Gladstone's observation that the detachedness of scientised environmentalism is a reason why there has been limited progress in addressing the CEE, Orange (2017) pointed out that ignoring racism and colonialism means that we are not solving the CEE. Racism and colonialism urgently need to be addressed and linked to the CEE. Environmental organisations as well as psychotherapy training colleges need to engage with their white middle-class attitudes and psychotherapeutic approach towards Black and People of Colour.

The Limitation of Psychotherapy, Psychotherapy Training and Conservatism in Our Field

Gladstone remarks on the conservatism in the psychotherapy field, in particular how approaches – especially psychodynamic ones – adhere almost religiously to the writings of their predecessors, the emphasis being on looking back rather than into the future. Whilst working through past trauma is vital for individuals as well as for societies that have suffered collective trauma, it would seem almost negligent of the psychotherapeutic profession not to take the impact of the CEE seriously. Similar to wars, climate-related disasters such as wildfires, floods, hurricanes and drought will continue to displace millions in the near future. Poor countries, with the lowest carbon footprint, will be affected far more than rich nations such as the UK. Putting it starkly, counselling and psychotherapy training colleges should, on moral and human grounds, teach students about the CEE and, importantly, link it to racism and colonialism. Awareness of racism is on a par with the CEE, and should lead to change in our behaviour. Addressing both inevitably results in a drastic reduction of consumption patterns in the widest sense. In this context I suggest that a high-carbon life-style is indeed racist (Williams, 2021).

There is an ongoing debate in the profession as to whether the CEE falls within the remit of counselling and psychotherapy. Why would it not, given that it poses the biggest existential threat on Earth? In an article in *Therapy Today*, Linda Aspey put it this way:

> If we agree that climate change is the greatest existential threat we face, are we colluding with clients' denial by not bringing it into the room? It's a genuine ethical concern for me, as it should be, I believe, for our profession as a whole. (2021, p. 17)

At the heart of the CEE lies social injustice, and this is the very reason why counselling and psychotherapy training should, alongside racism and other diversity issues, take this issue seriously and make it part of the curriculum. I was recently asked to teach a weekend on working therapeutically with eco-anxiety and environmental trauma at the Minster Centre. Teaching about the CEE, especially as a social justice issue, is now finally embedded in the Minster curriculum. It took many years of speaking about it in team meetings and the Diversity and Inclusivity Committee at the Minster Centre for this to come about.

Why is there such resistance in the counselling and psychotherapy profession to engaging with the CEE? I do not see the academicisation of counselling and psychotherapy training programmes and the introduction of a Masters qualification, as Gladstone suggests, as having impaired engagement with the CEE. I personally welcome academic rigour, as this broadens horizons and develops critical thinking. Essay writing has helped me develop my writing skills and, importantly, articulate my thinking around a subject. On the other hand, academia clearly disadvantages those who are neurodiverse. In that sense, assessments ought to look further than the written word. Gladstone makes a valid point in observing that our profession is over-regulated. On the other hand, in their Standards of Education and Training (SETs), the UK Council for Psychotherapy/HIPC are now making it mandatory to integrate environmental awareness and sustainability into the curriculum.

Coming back to conservatism in our field, a reader responding to the article by Aspey in *Therapy Today* (2021) wrote:

> I was somewhat concerned by Linda Aspey's suggestion in 'Breaking out of the climate bubble' that we are potentially colluding with clients if we don't bring the topic into the counselling room. I feel that we are in danger here of imposing our own agendas on our clients. (Published in the February 2022 edition of *Therapy Today*.)

This is a common argument used in the debate about the CEE. Whilst I agree that it is important to be client-led, the argument by the quoted reader can also be used in a defensive way and collude with the 'normative unconscious' (Layton, 2020), where talking about our feelings about the CEE is out of bounds.

As counsellors and psychotherapists, we have to be aware of our own dissociative processes; they exist to help us survive unmanageable distress, but they also need to be worked through in order to feel our emotions, so that we can take action. We need to feel how we are impacted by destructive climate events, as well as our guilt and shame about excessive consumption. I believe this is particularly challenging for our profession, which is, as Gladstone points out, predominantly white middle class and colour blind. In other words, it requires a willingness to be aware of our privileges and our resistance to step out of our comfort zone, or Weintrobe's 'climate bubble' (2021). Living in a climate bubble is indicative of the neoliberal system that needs to burst and change, as Raworth (2017) suggests. In Gladstone's words, there is 'no therapy on a dead planet'. This is why we urgently need an economic system that is sustainable and feeds all. Like the Covid pandemic, the CEE is traumatic for all. When clients express their eco-anxiety with me, I am aware that I hold similar anxieties and concerns which I keep alive inside me, and might share if appropriate. I am also mindful, as in all good trauma therapy, to keep the client's distress and mine within a 'window of tolerance' (Siegel, 2009). In the research paper under consideration here (Mowat, 2022), I framed the CEE as a trauma that sits alongside familial and racial trauma, which Greenspun (2020) framed as 'trauma within trauma within trauma'. To hold and interact with these three levels, and add war as a fourth trauma, is a tall order, but a necessary move.

Myopias – Can We Leave Politics out of the Session?

Gladstone notes that politicisation in therapy is a view implicit in my therapeutic approach. My stand on this is clear. How can we not be political on a dying planet? I would even say that a therapeutic stance that is not political in relation to the CEE is immoral and negligent. This Earth is our collective home, which we need to care for collectively. The question of how to sustain human and more-than-human existence on Earth is a core question in psychology.

In his paper 'The "activist client": social responsibility, the political self, and clinical practice in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis', Andrew Samuels (2017) discusses depression as having social and political roots. Depression is related to more than parents, partners and relationships, which are the usual therapy lines. The view that depression and anxiety are caused by the current political inaction that has created the CEE is a pressing one. Findings from a recent and very extensive study – *Climate Change and Youth Mental Health* by Dooley et al. (2021) – supports Samuels' argument that depression, anxiety and PTSD are particularly prevalent amongst young people, especially Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, as they often live near industrial complexes, or in parts of cities that have no green spaces. As therapists, we need to avoid pathologising normal responses to the climate crisis, and distinguish between familial, racial and environmental traumas. Above all, and very much in line with the study by Dooley et al. (2021), we need to educate counsellors and psychotherapists about the mental health issues that people experience in relation to the CEE, and how to create safe spaces in therapy for clients to talk about their climate-related emotions. Counselling and psychotherapy colleges need to provide training for their students and to offer CPD for their alumni. The Minster Centre will be offering a weekend on eco-anxiety and environmental trauma, which will be taught as a social justice issue where racism is central.

Depression often relates to a lack of action and a passivity in response to an inner or outer damaged and rigid world. Samuels (2017, p. 687) suggests that '(…) the therapy client, revisioned as a socio-political healer, may now be understood to be a socially responsible agent of "Tikkun Olam", the drive to repair and restore the world'. Equally, counsellors and psychotherapists need to become agents of 'Tikkun Olam'. Following the release of the film *Don't Look Up* by the director Adam McKay (2021), I feel we have a moral obligation to Look Up. Looking up requires us to be critical of the politics that have created the CEE, as Weintrobe (2021) so eloquently wrote. I wholeheartedly support Gladstone's plea to make Weintrobe's book a core text for counsellors and psychotherapists.

Beyond the Session

Gladstone raises two points I want to respond to. First, he suggests that neutrality within the session is questionable, as it suggests a position of non-involvement or, as he puts it, sitting on the fence. I argued earlier that we as a profession have a moral obligation to engage with the CEE so that we can respond to clients traumatised by it. The world is plagued by human-induced extreme events such as storms, floods and wild fires, which impact millions directly, and all of us indirectly. Do we not have a duty of care? Or, as Gladstone puts it, non-engagement would represent 'a refusal of joined-up thinking, a failure of compassion and above all an abdication of savoir-faire'. I am in full agreement with Gladstone's point that being bystanders to the CEE is unconscionable.

The final point and question I want to raise is, what role will psychotherapy play in future? In times of crisis, psychological support needs to be measured and adapted to the circumstances people face. It is often not appropriate to revisit traumatic experiences that have just happened. This is mainly because our nervous systems

cannot cope with revisiting recent trauma. Most Holocaust survivors found it too painful to talk about their trauma. In the event of acute life-threatening situations such as massive storms, the psychological work needs to focus on building resilience and community support of the kind that Doppelt (2016) and Dooley et al. (2021) suggest.

How relevant is one-to-one psychotherapy to the CEE? Many psychotherapists report that very few clients present environment-related anxieties in sessions. This was certainly what participants in my research reported. Immediate relationship issues are often more pressing. In contrast, dedicated groups that create a safe space for people to air their environment-related anxieties, such as climate cafés, are suitable forums for expressing feelings about the CEE. Weighing up a collective versus an individual therapeutic intervention, Steffi Bednarek writes:

> I wonder whether we need to re-wild some aspects of the support we are able to offer in our profession. Whilst there is no doubt that some people will need the safety of one-to-one support and the clinical expertise of a well-trained psychotherapist, others may need community as an antidote to the extreme individualism that we all have been subjected to. After all, a collective wound may require collective healing. (2019, p.10)

In my role as a climate café facilitator for the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA), I am often moved by how participants share their deep concerns, anxiety and anger about their children's future. This is particularly the case for mothers of young children. I too fear for the kind of future my grandchildren are facing. I repeatedly hear participants of climate cafés saying that they do not feel safe sharing their concerns and climate emotions with friends and family. Sharing our climate emotions, like sharing our grief about loved ones, is still taboo in our society.

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