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Climate Change on the Couch:

How Psychotherapy Can Respond to the Climate and Ecological Emergency – and Why It Should

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Abstract

This paper considers the position of the counselling and psychotherapy profession within the context of the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) and the profession's responsibility in addressing it. The paper frames the CEE as a social justice issue driven by power structures such as colonialism, oppression and capitalism, which has its roots in intersubjective dynamics that must be addressed by the profession. The paper takes the view that the profession is part of the social ecosystem and must therefore take an active stance in beginning to question its own position and complicity in the CEE. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), six counsellors and psychotherapists in the United Kingdom concerned about the CEE were interviewed to explore their personal thoughts and feelings and how it manifested in their clinical work. Socio-cultural and political issues in therapy and therapy training, difficulties in clinical work, and the need for sustainable thinking in the profession were identified. In arguing for an ecosystemic approach to counselling and psychotherapy – where the relational space is expanded to include extra-psychic realities – this paper bases its reasoning for new approaches on themes identified in the interviews.

Key words: Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE); ecosystemic approach; intersubjective theory; power; psychotherapy; racism; social justice

Introduction

The eco-psychotherapist Mary-Jayne Rust comments on the link between cultural and political power dynamics on the one hand, and social justice issues on the other. Quoting Prentice (2003, pp. 35–6), she remarks that anthropocentrism relates to oppression of the human and more-than-human world, the former being manifest in racism, sexism and classism (Rust, 2020, p. 58). The following extract from Rust's 2020 book, *Towards an Ecopsychotherapy*, broadly captures the three selected domains and themes that the present paper is discussing:

> Certain peoples are seen as closer to the earth with a 'lower', more animal nature. For some this justifies their domination and abuse; the genocide of Indigenous people, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the oppression of women are three examples of this. It is this collection of oppressions that enables capitalism to function. (Rust, 2020, p. 58)

Led by the data of the three selected domains and their accompanying themes, which Rust's quotation succinctly captures, this paper frames the CEE as a systemic issue, with its underlying power dynamics of oppressor and oppressed.

Intersubjective theory (Benjamin, 2018), the theory of 'memetic mutation' (Rees, 2010) and 'normative unconscious processes' (Layton, 2020) are used to frame the CEE in social and relational terms. Literature from climate psychology and relational psychoanalysis are used to examine how the counselling and psychotherapy profession engages with the CEE theoretically and clinically. I am using the term 'CEE' as shorthand for all environmental and social degradation and breakdown.

How Intersubjective Theory Can Help Us Understand the Socio-cultural and Political Dynamics that Have Created the CEE

Power dynamics that relate to social-justice issues have, since the early 1980s, become a focus of the psychoanalytic relational paradigm. This movement marked a distinct shift away from the solely intrapsychic focus in classic psychoanalysis to an interpersonal focus (Kuchuck, 2021). Whilst this has greatly democratised therapeutic treatment, it is nonetheless a theory that is largely tailored to a White middle-class population. The academic and social psychoanalyst Lynn Layton (2020, p. 19) suggests that 'relational analytic theory is the least dogmatic and most egalitarian theory we have, and the theory most capable of recognising diversity of experience' (ibid.). It is for this reason that this paper draws on relational psychoanalytic theories to develop an understanding of how and why oppression and domination are core dynamics in the CEE, and how such dynamics are enacted in social relationships and in the therapeutic setting.

The talking therapies are known for their human-centric focus. Based on the selected data, this paper argues that such a focus is too narrow, and that relational dynamics of oppressor and oppressed create a set of defences in us, and in our relationship with what David Abram (1996) terms the 'more-than-human' world. The academic and relational psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (2018) developed a theory of intersubjectivity that offers a promising way to work with power issues in, as well as outside, the consulting room. This paper proposes that intersubjective theory is applicable to our relationship with the more-than-human world. Embedded in this proposal is the view that humans are in reciprocal relationships with the planet's flora and fauna, and are mutually influenced and impacted by, and dependent upon, each other. Furthermore, the paper suggests that the talking therapies need to question their alliance with socio-economic and political ideologies which regard the more-than-human world as a commodity that can be traded and sold – akin to the haunting period of the human slave trade.

At the heart of Benjamin's (2018) intersubjective theory is the premise that power imbalances may constitute a failure to recognise the other, and may get stuck in a relational impasse. A relational impasse represents a situation where the oppressor – the 'doer' – fails to recognise the other, who feels oppressed or 'done-to'. Benjamin (2018) argues that a resolution of such power dynamics requires a shift from the 'doer/done-to' to a 'doing with' dynamic. Shifting into a shared state of mind is key because it allows space for differences to be acknowledged and respected; this is crucial, but it does not mean that both parties have to, or will, agree with each other. It means that both sides are willing to understand each other's views. The process of democratising the relationship is especially important in the therapeutic setting, where the therapist is often perceived as the one holding the power. This process addresses binary mindsets of right and wrong. 'Doing with' requires both sides to surrender their defended positions and move towards mutual recognition and respect. This collaborative state of mind, which Benjamin refers to as 'thirdness' (2018, p. 5), is representative of a momentary surrender of power dynamics, and moves both parties potentially into a state of vulnerability, visibility and interdependency. The notion of visibility needs emphasising here, because in the 'doer/done-to' position, the other's needs remain invisible to the narcissistic doer. In the therapeutic encounter, a moment of 'thirdness' is a felt experience of mutual connectedness with each other. In relation to the more-than-human world, it could resemble a state of oneness we

might feel in relation to, say, a tree: during the first, long Covid-19-related lockdown in 2020, many people talked about how they formed a meaningful relationship with a particular tree on their daily walk in the park.

People, especially the young, are increasingly feeling a sense of doom, which is evidenced in a recent study that interviewed 10,000 young people from ten countries about climate distress. One key finding from the study relates to young people's perception that they have no future, that governments are failing to respond adequately, and that humanity is doomed – combined with feelings of betrayal and abandonment by governments (Hickman et al., 2021). Owning up, in this case by governments and destructive industries, is essential in gaining common ground, and is akin to Benjamin's definition of 'moral thirdness': 'The moral third depends upon acknowledgment of disruptions, disappointments, violations of expectancy, and more broadly upon acknowledgement of injuries and trauma that challenge principles of fairness, and respect for human dignity' (2018, p. 51). One of the key implications evidenced in the study by Hickman et al. (2021) states that 'the failure of governments to adequately address climate change and the impact on younger generations potentially constitutes moral injury'. If governments do not act according to the values of 'moral thirdness', the existential and psychological consequences will be serious.

Can We Control Our Instinct to Expand and Grow?

In a paper entitled 'What's blocking human sustainability?', William Rees (2010) suggests that one of the reasons we struggle so much to reduce consumption is due to a powerful inbuilt instinct to grow, reproduce and expand – one that we share with other species, mammals in particular. This inbuilt survival instinct is manifest in our consumer culture, which takes full advantage of it and needs to be challenged on moral and ecological grounds. An instinct is embedded in our unconscious behaviour and can only be switched off by a conscious decision. It follows that the only way we can control growth is to consciously decide to stop growing, to consume less and to consider those who have significantly less. To gain some control over instincts and drives was one of Freud's missions: 'Wo Es war, soll Ich werden' – Where It is, shall I be, according one translation (Freud, 1990). This seems key in solving the CEE we have created. We need to treat our numerous addictions.

Rees (2010) expresses doubts as to whether we are culturally advanced enough as a species to change our behaviour in order to live within our planetary boundaries. Technological advances, our expansion as a species and our addictions (such as to fossil fuels) have removed us further and further from an ecosystemic way of life. Put simply, the more one species takes, the less others have. Rees (2010, p. 21) asserts that 'the central question is whether we can muster the national and international political will required purposefully to create a set of "memetic mutations"[1] that reinforce these natural "other-regarding" feelings (both for fellow humans and other species)'.

Climate Change Is Racist

Structural changes in society require us to examine what Layton (2020) describes as 'normative unconscious processes', which are formed from cultural inequalities such as sexism, classism and racism. Layton's work provides a nuanced perspective on power dynamics through a social justice and intersubjective lens. At the core of Layton's concept of 'normative unconscious processes' is the notion that our identities are formed by splitting off and projecting parts that have not received social approval or parental love, which create a sense of isolation from the culture we are born into. If, for example, vulnerability has been a shaming experience for an individual, that part of the self gets split off and projected on to another. These processes get played out relationally, whereby cultural and racial inequalities are constantly being enacted. 'Normative unconscious processes' are replicated across large groups in society, including politics and the media. The case of the Black climate activist Vanessa Nakate from Uganda illustrates this well. She was cropped out of a photograph taken at the

Economic Forum in Davos in January 2020, where she posed with four White climate activists, and was not mentioned in the press release by the Associated Press (Rafaely & Barnes, 2020)

The academic and psychoanalyst Donna Orange goes as far as to state that '[…] neither governments nor citizens can seriously tackle climate injustice until we confront this 400-year history' (Orange, 2017, p. 37). This is a call for society at large to examine the toxicity and trauma caused by the human slave trade. Framing climate change as a violent form of racism is an idea that has been put forward by Jeremy Williams (2021a). In *Climate Change Is Racist: Race, Privilege and the Struggle for Climate Justice*, he talks about climate change as relating to multi-layered, interconnected forms of violence – a concept developed by Johan Galtung in the 1960s (in Williams, 2021a). 'Cultural violence', for example, relates to White supremacy and male superiority; these then interlink and legitimise the *structural violence* manifest in racial or gender inequality.

The third form relates to *direct violence* as, for example, manifest in police shootings or in attacks on women. Williams (2021a) argues that the three levels of violence – cultural, structural and direct – are interconnected dynamic forces that have led to the CEE. In the foreword to Williams' book, Shola Mos-Shogbamimu states that 'climate change as a global existential crisis exacerbates racial inequality and racial injustice', and that 'without drastic action to eradicate the roots of systemic racism, humanity is creating a blueprint for devastation and destruction of epic proportions' (Williams, 2021b).

Even amongst those who are environmentally aware, violent forms of racism can come to the fore. When Beth Collier (2020), a psychotherapist of colour, examined the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF), she discovered that it created wildlife sanctuaries by evicting indigenous Africans from their forest homes. Her research into WWF's practices reveals how some Western environmental organisations enact White supremacist ideology because they consider White people as the true custodians of the land, and assume that non-Whites do not value nature (Collier, 2019). This example illustrates how 'normative unconscious processes' are played out within a predominantly White environmental organisation, whereby Whites split off their destructive selves by displacing and destroying homes of indigenous Africans in the name of conservation.

In his book *My Grandmother's Hands* (2017), Reesma Menakeem writes about how People of Colour still carry the unprocessed trauma from their ancestors in their bodies. He distinguishes between 'dirty' and 'clean' pain, the latter referring to trans-generational trauma that has been processed, versus the 'dirty' pain that has not, and that therefore may be enacted in a 'doer/done-to' dynamic and present in some form in 'normative unconscious processes'. Arguably, we all carry unprocessed trauma or 'dirty pain' – the sort that becomes subject to enactments, such as in structural racism, where Black, Indigenous and People of Colour are disadvantaged and evicted from the land they have been husbanding for centuries. Collier (2019) observed that racism is a major part of why People of Colour are less present in nature. Many People of Colour in White-dominated spaces feel an apprehension about stepping into nature, especially in more remote and open settings, wondering how they are going to be received.

The Slow Engagement of the Counselling and Psychotherapy Profession with the CEE – a Call for an Ecosytemic Approach

Writers who apply climate psychology to counselling and psychotherapy have remarked on the absence of the profession's engagement with the CEE and the more-than-human world. They include Searles, 1960, 1972; Bernstein, 2005; Totton, 2011, 2012, 2021; Dodds, 2011; Maiteny, 2012; Rust, 2012, 2020; Weintrobe, 2013; Bednarek 2018, 2019; and Tait, 2021. The Gestalt psychotherapist Steffi Bednarek (2018) states that our notion of community, relationship and kinship stops at the threshold of our own

species. It rarely includes our relationship with trees, rivers, mountains, salmon, bees or the water flowing through our bodies.

As early as the 1960s, Searles noted that 'the nonhuman environment […] is […] considered as irrelevant to human personality development […] as though the human race were alone in the universe, pursuing individual and collective destinies in a homogenous matrix of nothingness' (1960, p. 3). Ecosystemic thinking challenges the 'cultural meme' of the dominant culture, collectively absorbed from previous generations of 'better' and 'lesser' humans, and the denied interdependence with the more-than-human world.

Nick Totton's concept of wild therapy incorporates ecosystemic thinking (2011, p. 184). At the centre of it is the recognition of our interdependence with everything that exists, a view which runs counter to Western cultural values. Layton remarks that 'Western culture holds as an ideal the autonomous individual while it simultaneously creates people who are insecure, status-craving, and dependency denying, yet deeply dependent on the approval of others' (2020, p. 111). Independence is a value that is embedded in Western culture and in psychoanalytic developmental theories (e.g. Winnicott, 1991), which runs counter to ecosystemic thinking.

Totton's ecosystemic approach to therapy perceives an individual conflict in the context of its particular relational (human and more-than-human) field (2011, p. 188). In other words, the problem of a client is also a problem in the client's various fields (family, workplace, friendships) that may inhibit a particular human ecosystem from growing and developing. Everyone who has contact with this individual will be affected. In the relationship between the client and the therapist, the therapist becomes part of the client's relational ecosystem and will become part of the client's problem, and hopefully be encouraged to develop and grow.

The ecosystemic approach shares similar values with a contemporary relational approach. Both take critical stances in relation to the socio-political and cultural values that play into clients presenting issues (Benjamin, 2018; Layton, 2020; Totton, 2011, 2021). The ecosystemic approach challenges the Western notion of equating psychological health with an ability to be independent. Instead it uses the term 'inter-dependency'.

The ecologist and psychotherapist Paul Maiteny approaches the questions of domination and oppression in terms of how and why humans have created the CEE from an ecosystemic and spiritual perspective. He declares: 'Essentially, the causes of our planetary crisis are emotional and spiritual, rooted in our yearnings for meaningfulness in life and how we seek to satisfy them' (2012, p. 48). Arguably, what we perceive as meaningful is embedded in our 'cultural memes' and is likely to change by a process of 'meme mutation' (Rees, 2010). The psychological challenge we are facing is how to live within the constraints of the planetary boundary. All other species are bound by their instincts and live within their ecosystemic constraints. In the more-than-human world there is no over-consumption: this choice is only available to humans. Maiteny argues that 'our distinctly human cleverness, ingenuity and technology – especially our use of fossil fuels – has temporarily freed us from constraints on our behaviour imposed by natural bio-ecological limits' (2012, p. 49). We can control our instinct to expand by consciously deciding to stop expanding, and to consume less (Rees, 2010) – in other words, by enacting Freud's maxim (1990) 'Where It is, shall I be'.

In order to address the CEE, it is necessary to untangle power relationships of oppressor and oppressed that, on closer examination, manifest in every aspect of human/human and as well as human/more-than-human relatedness. The untangling of power dynamics is emotionally challenging as it demands of us to step into vulnerability and humility. This is highly problematic, when our sense of entitlement to Earth's resources, reinforced by capitalism, exceptionalism and neoliberalism (Weintrobe, 2021) – and even religion (Sancton, 1989, p. 4) – overrides sensibility, humility and regard for others. Misuse of power, as played out in the

oppressor and oppressed dynamic, ought, in a psychologically healthy society, to evoke feelings of guilt and shame for the damage we have individually and collectively caused to our planet (Rust, 2012; Allured, 2020) and prompt gestures of reparation.

Clinical Issues Related to the CEE

In line with the psychoanalytic theory of guilt as the driving emotion for reparation (Klein, 1998), Anouchka Grose writes that we need collectively to 'admit to the horror of our history and our present, and then make it our urgent business to do all we can to make reparations' (Grose, 2020, p. 78). This process is akin to Menakeem's (2017) call to transform 'dirty' pain into 'clean' pain – processing trans-generational trauma.

Anxiety, despair and depression are clearly on the rise around the world amongst those directly impacted by, as well as for those witnessing, accelerating climate change. Climate distress is particularly acute in young people who are facing an uncertain future (Hickman et al., 2021). Eco-analyst Elizabeth Allured's recent paper (2020) contains a moving account of Jennifer, a 17-year-old client, who felt that her anxiety about the CEE was greater than all her other worries: 'She could not stop thinking about it' (Allured, 2020, p. 1). Similarly, child survivors of climate-related disasters, such as in the Maldives, are likely to experience long-term difficulties including depression (American Public Health Association & others, (nd).

The enormity of the problem elicits a sense of helplessness, and this can induce what psychoanalyst and philosopher Robert Stolorow has referred to as 'apocalyptic anxiety'. Stolorow states that it is apocalyptic anxiety that we defend against when we deny the extreme perils of the CEE (Stolorow, 2012). In order not to leave clients in overwhelming and unmanageable states of anxiety, it is important that counsellors and psychotherapists address their own anxieties, anger and grief in relation to the CEE, as this will help clients contain their climate-related emotions.

The psychoanalyst Wendy Greenspun (2020) writes about a client who suffered from severe levels of climate anxiety. Her client showed typical trauma responses, including compulsive reading on the subject, disrupted sleep, loss of appetite and an inability to take any actions that would have given some hope. Greenspun reminds us that Black, Indigenous and People of Colour can suffer from multi-layered trauma responses: from environmental and familial trauma, as well as from the trauma of racism, which she refers to as 'trauma within trauma within trauma' (2020, p. 2). Greenspun (2020) summarises the complexity and emotional challenges when dealing with multiple layers of trauma, pointing out that we all have a tendency to dissociate from environmental trauma, regardless of how aware we are.

Dissociation seems to be playing a significant part in how we cope with overwhelming anxiety, and is a typical response to psychological trauma. This raises the question of how the counselling and psychotherapy profession can more effectively engage with indirectly expressed trauma. Rust describes how she worked with her client Amber, who started a session by expressing her concerns about the unusually hot spring weather. By deliberately reflecting back Amber's concern about the weather, it enabled the latter to express her multiple fears about where the world is heading, right-wing politics and (former US President) Trump's climate denial by declaring 'we are completely f****d' (2020, p. 80).

Bednarek (2019, p. 38) reported a case of a client who was desperate to talk about his climate despair, and where the therapist, out of her depth, tried to redirect the origin of the client's distress to his personal history. Clearly the defences were activated in the therapist.

Weintrobe states that 'we need to tell the truth in a caring way, relating to how people might be feeling. This is not different to the way we would wish to tell anyone bad news' (2021, p. 241). Indeed, the use of the term 'climate change', as opposed to 'climate trauma', could be argued to be a defence to the painful reality (Woodbury, 2019). When clients talk about loss

and bereavement in therapy sessions, therapists tend to focus on the loss of people. In relation to the CEE, the profession clearly needs to think beyond personal loss, and to consider that clients are likely to grieve about all kinds of loss – not least the catastrophic loss of attachment to nature itself, the loss of endangered species, the loss of living in a functioning community, the loss of meaningful rituals, the loss of connection to a place; yet these are losses so deep that they change who we believe we are (Bednarek, 2018).

A recent article by Isobel Whitcomb (2021) suggests that there is uncertainty on both sides, therapists and clients, as to whether psychotherapy is the right place to talk about eco-anxiety and other related issues that the CEE is bringing up: for example, parents' concerns about what kind of world their children will find, or whether they will survive in increasingly hostile social and climate conditions. In conversations with psychotherapists who have done a lot of work around CEE (notably Tree Staunton, Caroline Hickmann, and the CPA collectively in the UK and internationally), Whitcomb (2021) concludes that there is a real failure on the part of psychotherapy training institutions to engage with the CEE.

Anecdotally, it would seem that psychotherapy training in the UK and USA does not, by and large, touch on our conflicted relationship with the more-than-human world, or ask questions about how and why we as a human species have created the CEE, and how it is linked to social-injustice issues. The relative silence around the CEE in the psychotherapeutic field strongly suggests that the profession is not yet sufficiently picking up on concerns that clients express about the issue. Allured (2020, p. 2) mentions how Steve Kuchuck, one of the moderators of a 2018 IARPP conference, was asked about the absence of analytic focus on the topic of environmental crises, to which he replied: 'I think we are all feeling overwhelmed'.

As of 2021, the teaching of sustainability and environmental awareness is a training requirement enshrined in the Specific Standard of Education and Training Document (SETs) for the Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy College (HIPC) within the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), and discussed in a recent article by the present writer (Mowat, 2021). As Allured put it: 'We need to stand in the gut-wrenching spaces of great current and potential losses' (2020, p. 6). Freud's main premise in his seminal paper *Mourning and Melancholia* (2001/1917) was that loss needs to be recognised by the self and the other, and needs to be mourned. If a loss is not mourned, we are likely to become depressed. Mourning environmental loss and degradation is thus essential, as it can prevent the onset of mental health conditions such as chronic depression. Lertzman's (2015) term 'environmental melancholia' is helpful in identifying a common psychological response to the devastation being wrought by the CEE.

Methodology

About the research project

The present research received ethical approval from The Minster Centre, where I am a tutor and supervisor. Participants were recruited through the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) Google discussion group and the Relational School in the UK. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) was used to analyse the six semi-structured interviews. IPA is a methodology that is concerned with the nuances of people's experiences and in making sense of participants' articulated perceptions in response to phenomena (Finlay, 2014).

In December 2019 I recruited six counsellors and psychotherapists in and around London who are, to varying degrees, concerned about the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE). The interviews were held in person and were conducted between December 2019 and February 2020. The semi-structured research interviews consisted of between six and eight questions that aimed to explore the participants' personal experiences of the CEE, and how, if at all, their clients bring it up in their therapy. The intention was to find out how the UK's counselling and psychotherapy profession interacts with CEE issues when they arise directly or indirectly in clinical material, and

where the profession stands in relation to the CEE.

Ethical considerations

After preparatory email correspondence with each participant, I arranged an initial phone conversation to check for suitability and to arrange a time for the interview. All interviews, apart from one, took place in my own home. In one case, the interview took place in the participant's office. Recruitment information, which consisted of a brief outline of the research, the handling of data protection, anonymity, confidentiality, aftercare and the interview questions, were sent out a week before the interview to give participants the opportunity to withdraw, and time to reflect on the questions. Before the interview, participants signed a consent form, received details of the aftercare if needed, and were given the option to request a copy of their recorded interview.

Participant demographics

All the participants are trained counsellors or psychotherapists from the psychodynamic, transpersonal or integrative theoretical orientations. They all work in or near London. Five participants identify as White middle class, one participant identifies as a Person of Colour. Three participants identify as cis gender women between the ages of 35 and 70, and three as cis men between 40 and 65. To preserve anonymity, all participants were given a pseudonym. Apart from holding a qualification in counselling and psychotherapy and being invested in the topic of CEE, no other criteria were asked of participants taking part in the research. Given that most participants are members of the CPA, the participants' demographic details are intentionally kept vague to ensure confidentiality.

The analysis of the six semi-structured interviews followed the IPA model outlined by Smith et al. (2009) by adhering to an iterative process of refinement. Each transcript was analysed for potential themes. As recommended by Smith et al. (2009), emerging themes were organised into major (superordinate themes or domains) and minor (subordinate themes) components. I identified themes that were common to most, or some participants. This process helped deepen the understanding of participants' accounts. The data analysis yielded between six and nine subordinate themes, which were grouped into six domains.

Findings

This paper draws on three domains and some of the allocated subordinate themes that relate to participants' experience of socio-cultural and political factors, and how they may link to the culture of therapy and therapy training, an ecosystemic approach to counselling, and participants' experience of clients talking about the CEE. The other three domains – perception of past, present and future in relation to life on the planet; emotional engagement with the CEE; and personal meaning of the environment to the individual – and their corresponding subordinate themes are equally important, and will be discussed in a follow-up paper.

First domain: socio-cultural and political factors – culture of therapy and therapy training

This domain seeks to engage with how participants perceive the personal, cultural and political environment in their personal lives; and it also explores the culture of therapy in relation to the CEE. Several participants talked about the CEE as a social-justice issue at the intersection of socio-cultural and political ideologies.

THEME: Power issues linked to colonialism/racism

Differences in skin tones are visible and form part of what Layton (2020) refers to as 'normative unconscious processes' (discussed earlier) through which Black people and People of Colour experience multiple forms of oppression. For example, they are frequently made to feel 'lower' than White people (Rust, 2020, p. 58). Mark, a Person of Colour in his forties, talks about his experience of his mother's conflicted relationship with the Indian culture she grew up in, which leaves him feeling confused and angry about his Indian heritage.

> The sense that she had what I observed as a child, that her insecurity could be fixed in some way by consumption of more, whether it's to achieve more status, whether it's to achieve a larger bank balance, whether it was to consume finer foods, richer foods. She grew up in India and was poorer than the rest of her social group. It's something that she discussed with me a lot when I was a little older. And I think that she was sort of constantly chasing this idea that if I have more, that feeling will go away. (Mark, 69–76)

Mark mentions multiple factors that have led to the CEE, including the displacement of native people from their land to grow crops, the experience of being an immigrant, a desire to gain financial status, and consumption of luxury food. His mother's sense of displacement and confusions is palpable in him, and at the same time he tries to distance himself from them. His mother's need to consume more and more perhaps covered up deep feelings of inferiority and shame about being poor and belonging to a lower caste. The patterns that Mark sees in his mother could be seen as keeping feelings of loss at bay. Striving for comfort and buying things to keep psychological pain at bay, notably loss, dovetails with the ideological values of consumerism.

Later in the interview, Mark expresses his views on the dominant group, the White British, who colonised India and destroyed forests and the communities that lived in them.

> India was a very heavily forested country 300 years ago, give or take. So much of the central belt of India between the Western and the Eastern mountains was forest, and the British show up on the coasts, take the coastal areas, the big cities on the coast, the ports, etc. and start trading. What are we going to do with all these hunter gatherers in the middle? I tell you what, we'll chop down the trees, get them in the cities, and we can tax them to stop them bloody moving around. (Mark, 98–104)

Mark's outrage over the destruction of forests and the displacements of the guardians of these forests into cities is evident. On a psychological level it feels that this comment reflected deep ancestral wounds. The strength of feeling with which Mark delivers this passage conveys the immense brutality and tragedy of displacement of people, and the multiple trauma that was passed on from one generation to the next one.

The following extract illustrates how Mark copes with the pain of racism:

> One of my defence strategies is based on race, which I think is very interesting. One of my ways of coping or dealing with it within myself is to say this is a White man's problem. They did this. They've done it to all of us. (Mark, 90–2)

Mark's anger in this instance is projected on to the White man. It exemplifies black-and-white thinking, akin to the splitting that forms the basis of 'normative unconscious processes' (Layton, 2020). However, if the anger was directed against the individual colonisers responsible for colonisation programmes, Mark's anger would be a healthy response.

Naomi, in her mid-thirties, touches on racism from her White perspective. In the following extract, she recalls a documentary film about countries exporting their unrecyclable plastics to India, China and elsewhere in Asia:

> There's one scene, I can't remember where it was, and it's just like piles of garbage, and this is their lives, they are picking through all this rubbish, I mean, I'm feeling so emotional on that […] and to realise that that's where it's coming from, you know, all these impoverished people and they're making a living off of going through rubbish. (Naomi 54–60)

Naomi is clearly upset by Western countries sending countless tonnes of waste to poor countries, which contaminates their soil and water. The image of people rummaging through plastic rubbish in the hope of finding something useful or valuable to sell depicts the deep economic inequality in the world. It is emotionally challenging to take these images in without instantly wanting to dissociate from them. At this point in the interview, Naomi's anger gradually turns into guilt.

Susan, in her early sixties, gives a more analytical account of the CEE as a social-injustice issue:

> It's only when I truly understood systems theory and the interconnection between everything that I started to understand that I cannot be fighting for social justice, racism, homophobia, gender, sexism… all of that, without seeing that it's also connected to what we're doing to the Earth. (Susan, 60–4)

Susan sums up well current thinking on how various forms of oppression in society intersect. The extract captures the various forms of oppression and exploitation that are enacted globally involving classes, races, sexuality, gender and the more-than-human world, and illustrates how these dynamics are embedded in normative unconscious processes (Layton, 2020).

THEME: Culture of therapy and therapy training

This is a theme that also strongly features in the third domain – clinical issues related to the CEE in therapy and therapy training, as discussed below. The participants all remarked on the fact that the CEE is not a topic of conversation in staff rooms, supervision groups and the clinical setting. Susan remarks:

> I think that mostly people, colleagues are concerned [about the CEE] but there is still a sense of a split, or misplaced if it doesn't quite relate to psychotherapy if we're talking about it in the field, although I think there is a change. I think the change around the inseparability of politics and social justice from psychotherapy comes together with the inseparability of ecology from psychotherapy, so I think it's changing. (Susan, 155–60)

Susan is describing the dissociation in the counselling and psychotherapy profession from the CEE.

Peter, like Susan, is involved in training psychotherapists; he remarks on the fact that he perceives psychotherapy – as practised by many therapists – as not separate from the narcissistic consumer culture that is prevalent in the Global North:

> The traditions of psychotherapy […], even Jungian, so-called transpersonal, has been about my spiritual experience, my this, my that. But in a sort of product consumption kind of model rather than my role, my part, my place in it. Subtle but really important difference. (Peter, 814–17)

Here, Peter argues strongly for a cultural change that is needed in the psychotherapeutic profession. The change he envisages is a clear shift away from seeing ourselves as separate from the more-than-human world.

Second domain: Ecosystems – ecosystemic approach to counselling and psychotherapy

This domain seeks to engage with how participants express what 'needs to shift in our (psychotherapeutic) thinking and theorising so that we can be part of, rather than split off from, the more-than-human world' (Mowat, 2021, p. 1).

THEME: Relationship with nature

All the participants, in different ways, share a deep concern about the Western disrespect for and disconnection with nature, something that has worsened in the past 50 years – witness the emergence of 'super farms', for instance. The participants in the 50-plus age bracket commented on the decrease of butterflies, insects and other species in the past 50 years. One participant in particular conveys a strongly felt sense about the degradation of ecosystems since childhood. He expresses doubts as to whether the CEE will create a cultural shift in the psychotherapeutic profession:

> Where a lot of people are right now is with a sense of the crisis that I've had for decades, and where I'm at now is a place that I still find very few people can connect with, because it's [...] always been ecos and psyche [together], [...] but that's not where people are at with the crisis; people are [...] adapting according to the same basic criteria that caused the problem in the first place. (Peter, 483–9)

Peter conveys a strong sense of feeling alone and misunderstood by many psychotherapy professionals with regards to our disconnection from nature. His observation regarding people not understanding what is causing the CEE – our drive for comfort and addiction to consume, combined with our unwillingness to let go of our collective addiction – illustrates humanity's destructive side, which is played out in normative unconscious processes (Layton, 2020).

This extract speaks for the growing numbers who are yearning for a political system that cares for people according to the principles of the 'moral third' (Benjamin, 2018, p. 51). Van Susteren and Al-Delaimy's (2020) concept of 'pre-traumatic stress condition' is helpful to have in mind when working with clients' fears about predictions and the uncertainties of the future, as expressed by Rust's client Amber (2020, p. 80) – a future that the latest IPCC report (2021) characterises as 'a code red for humanity'.

THEME: Ecosystemic view

This theme captures a view expressed by several participants – the Western inability to see itself as part of a holistic, interrelated ecosystem. Their views align with Searles' (1960, 1972) observation that such cultural values are embedded in the counselling and psychotherapy culture. Susan remarks on a cultural dissociation from our interdependency:

> I think it's the power relationship. You know, the way we treat the Earth is not dissimilar to the way we treat each other, as if we're unconscious of the interdependency. It's very connected for me. (Susan, 326–8)

Susan's account frames the damaging effects of the misuse of power in interpersonal relationships as well as our relationship with the more-than-human world, which gets played out in the 'doer/done-to' dynamic (Benjamin, 2018).

Norbert talks about how the industrial revolution has alienated and separated us from an ecosystemic way of life:

> I mean, city life. You go back to people like Blake, the Romantic poets; they were already warning us of [it]… and Marx said it in a different way – that factory workers were alienated, that we just don't get time or the place to connect. (Norbert, 659–61)

Norbert depicts multiple themes that speak to the theme of oppressor and oppressed, which in this context intersect with the industrial revolution that accelerated the division between the working and the ruling classes.

THEME: Separation from the more-than-human world

This theme depicts how participants perceive our disconnection with place, community and the more-than-human world, and what they think caused this separation. The excerpt from Naomi conveys her experience of her family having moved several times during her childhood to different countries and continents:

> If you don't have a place, I think it's probably quite easy to dissociate from your connection to the natural world if there's no ritual, there's nothing that ties me to a place on this Earth. (Naomi, 251–3)

Naomi talks about how living in many places and different cultures during her childhood has compromised her sense of belonging to a place and community. It conveys a sense of homelessness that derives from a particular lifestyle that is inherent in a neoliberal culture where changing jobs is often a necessity to make ends meet.

Awareness of the damage caused by Western-style living can induce shame and guilt amongst the privileged. Susan, who identifies with the privileged, shares her sense of shame about not having thought much about the more-than-human world:

> In terms of actually 'clicking' into the Earth as hurting, I'd say it's more recent, and I think that I feel some shame about how long it took me to bridge my understanding and my feeling for the Earth. [...]. It's becoming more and more conscious to me that I have much more awareness of not wanting to exercise my power

> over other people, animals included. Yet I couldn't quite grasp the way in which we are exercising power over the Earth and the environment. (Susan, 94–100)

Embedded in these lines is Susan's acknowledgement of humankind's collective misuse of power over the more-than-human world.

Third domain: Clinical issues related to the CEE in therapy and therapy training

This domain focuses on how participants talk about ways in which the CEE presents itself in the clinical setting. All the participants consider human-centric activities as the key driver of the CEE. Some participants express concerns about consumerism, the current political system, the 'technological fix' society, and unsustainable economic growth as amongst the main causes of the CEE. Most participants find that clients often express their eco-anxiety by commenting on the unusually hot (or whatever) weather. Some participants talk about how the CEE is triggering self-harming behaviour in their clients.

THEME: Difficulties in emotionally engaging with the CEE

Susan spoke about a client who exhibited self-harming behaviour that was triggered by the CEE and robbed her of any form of entitlement to self-care, which could be framed as a 'trauma within trauma' response (Greenspun, 2020).

> I have a client who is very self-depriving and has an anorexic attitude to life. We had to do a lot of work on her giving to herself and allowing herself to have things or treat herself. There's something about the way she's using the environmental crisis as a way of needing to deprive herself, needing to not do things or not have lights on, or not have hot water or heating. I found it very challenging – yes it's true [about the climate emergency], but the extent to which you're doing it or how you're choosing to do it is also to do with your pathology. It's legitimising self-harming. (Susan, 243–57)

This 'trauma within trauma' response posed a challenge for the client and her therapist, as both are experiencing trauma around the CEE. Susan, in this instance, chose to focus her therapeutic work around the client's self-care. The client seems to feel overly responsible for the CEE, perhaps carrying the disavowed and projected parts of those who are dissociated from, or in denial of, the CEE.

Manuela, a psychotherapist in her late sixties, talks about a climate-scientist client whose concerns could be framed as displaying 'pre-traumatic stress' (Van Susteren & Al-Delaimy, 2020) – a sadness stemming from anticipation of a bleaker future:

> [The client said] I've got a five-month old baby and, you know, my life is going really well. And sometimes in the morning I wake up and then I'm just sitting looking around my beautiful home and my lovely child, and I feel really, really sad. (Manuela, 246–9)

This extract captures a heart-breaking moment of emotional vulnerability around the CEE. It illustrates a deep-seated dilemma around the question of what kind of future children born today are going to face, as well as the unarticulated guilt that middle-class people are increasingly feeling.

THEME: Social justice issues and politics in the consulting room

This theme illustrates how some participants actively prompt and welcome their clients to talk about societal and cultural themes around the CEE in therapy. Mark talks about how some of his clients think there is something wrong with a political system that puts nature up for sale:

> I get from a lot of people that they can't bear a world where everything is commoditised – everything is for sale, everything is distorted to be commoditised, to be marketed to us, to be repackaged, and that is maddening [*laughs*]. It's maddening, and I can really relate to that. A lot of my clients are feeling very anxious about being in the city. And there's a sense of wanting to find ecos or home. (Mark, 296–302)

It seems that Mark's clients feel that they can express their fears and anxieties about the politics of consumerism, which they experience as a perceived threat to life. Moving away from

the city symbolises a deep longing for a life that connects them to a community and nature which is much harder to find in cities. Naomi, in recounting the effect of moving from place to place and country to country, expresses a similar longing.

THEME: The culture of therapy and therapy training

Several participants mention that some of their clients feel unsure about how, or whether, to share their feelings about the CEE in therapy. As discussed in the introduction, this could be due to a widely held perception that counselling and psychotherapy are primarily focused on interpersonal issues, ignoring the fact that the locus of distress in the CEE is external.

Manuela, who supervises psychotherapists, is puzzled by the fact that the CEE is not talked about by her supervisees or their clients:

> I supervise therapists who bring clients and none of them seem to be talking about it [CEE] either. So I think the most striking thing for me is how little it's talked about. Really that's quite astonishing. (Manuela, 214–16)

This is a common phenomenon in our profession, and it seems to indicate that the talking therapies are mostly used for addressing personal and familial issues. This is partly due to the White middle-class cultural values that are systemically embedded in the theories that underpin the practice of many types of talking therapies.

Naomi wonders to what extent a proactive stance in helping clients talk about their climate-related emotions, as exemplified by Rust working with Amber (see my introduction – Rust, 2020, p. 80), might be helpful. Here she describes adopting an approach where a socio-historical, political and racial context is part of the therapeutic enquiry:

> I've named it [the CEE]: I said, I wonder about the feelings you're having and whether they're not sourced from a wider issue. I expanded it for her. Part of me isn't sure whether that's OK, but it just ends up being so narrow. [...] Over the Christmas period, it was really busy, and I ended up making a comment around how it seems so unnatural, this is wintertime, everything is shutting down and slowing down in nature. Everything's quieting and it seems so at odds with what you're doing. So, I use nature as a metaphor, because it's the truth. So in that way I sometimes bridge things and the client can take it or leave it. (Naomi, 519–29)

Naomi's account illustrates how part of the remit of relational talking therapies is to help clients locate distress that might be held in normative unconscious processes (Layton, 2020). Naomi self-discloses her critique on the culture of consumerism, which peaks around Christmas in many countries.

As discussed in the introduction, there is a real failure by psychotherapy training institutions to engage with the CEE as a social-justice issue, an observation that participants highlighted. Mark, slightly cynically, alludes to many psychotherapy trainings conforming to neoliberal culture by not questioning the deep social and environmental injustice this system is causing to Black and People of Colour and the land they depend upon for their livelihood:

> It's almost dissociation from the situation [in the training], which is you know, to go… 'Yes, of course, we can all go on a voyage […] to Jupiter. It's very beautiful. The rings of Saturn are stunning.' Yeah, but what's been washed up on Margate beach perhaps less so. (Mark, 435–8)

Mark is expressing frustration with his psychotherapy training course, which failed to engage students with the CEE. Whenever he did try and bring it in he felt silenced. The cynical remarks felt like a deflection from feeling angry with his training for not engaging with the chaos and distress the CEE is causing.

Discussion

In the foregoing Findings section, extracts from participants' interviews illustrate the key points from the three domains chosen: they link social inequality with the CEE, they identify the ecosystemic dimension of the CEE, and they highlight clinical and training issues that surface in relation to the CEE.

The data from the theme 'Power issues linked to colonialism and racism' strongly resonates with what participants consider to be the root causes of the CEE. A striking example relating to colonialism touches on the displacement from their land of Indigenous People in India by British colonisers. The link between material insecurity and the need to compensate by acquiring material possessions is a prime example of just how influential Western ideology is on Indigenous customs and values. The Indian entrepreneur Gautam Adani's founding of his coal empire in 1988 is an exemplar of exported Western ideology and business practices. Cassey (2020) reports how India's ancient tribes are fighting to save their forest homes from the Adani Group's expanding coal empire. Modern colonial practices are no longer just a White issue – they have become a global phenomenon.

Another significant finding from the theme 'Power issues linked to colonialism and racism' reveals feelings that People of Colour might have in relation to White people and the CEE. For example, White people stand accused of having plundered Earth's resources. This is fact, and supports William's (2021b) bid to have the CEE framed as racist. In relational terms, racism is marked by 'doer/done-to' dynamics as theorised by Benjamin (2018). Following Orange's dictum (2017, p. 37 – see introduction), these interpersonal dynamics of social injustice call for deep reparation if we are to stand a chance of preventing societal and climate collapse.

Racism, or indeed any social-justice issues that are played out in society, will inevitably come into the consulting room, and this is the point where normative unconscious processes are likely to be enacted between client and therapist, as Layton's (2020) numerous examples show. Power dynamics inherent in racism that are often hidden need to be openly acknowledged in the therapeutic relationship. It is challenging, for example, for White people to own their privileges. The sense of guilt about being White and privileged was reported by White participants as a distressing experience. Whilst the acknowledgement of race and privilege potentially opens up old wounds in the client or therapist, it creates a possibility to transform 'dirty' pain into 'clean' pain – a process described well by Menakeem (2017).

The theme 'Culture of therapy and therapy training' features strongly in the data. One of the findings in this theme comes as a surprise, and is a real wake-up call: one participant (who also teaches psychotherapy) observed that training institutions with spirituality in their curricula teach it from a human-centric perspective that is aligned with a consumption model that ignores the environment on which we depend.

The data from the themes 'Relationship with nature', 'Ecosystemic view' and 'Separation from the more-than-human world' convey how clients report feeling cut off from the natural world, and how they have dissociated from it. This is relevant to Searles' (1960, 1972) observation that this phenomenon is embedded in the counselling and psychotherapy culture, one in which our interdependence with nature is still largely unacknowledged. However, the last decade has witnessed real growth in eco-psychotherapy, which aims to reconnect people with nature and themselves. In relation to the theme 'Separation from the more-than-human world', participants report feeling disconnected from community and place and experiencing a sense of homelessness. Layton relates this phenomenon to the ideology of individualism, one example of which (as she puts it) is executives moving home when their employer needs them to. Layton points out that one side-effect is that 'it destroys community […] by creating individuals who defensively deny their connections to other people and the environment' (2020, p. 17).

The data based on the themes 'Difficulties in emotionally engaging with the CEE', 'Social justice issues and politics in the consulting room' and 'Culture of therapy and therapy training' reveal the climate distress that some clients bring to therapy. One participant speaks of a client whose self-harming is exacerbated by the environmental crisis: she does not allow herself hot water, heating or lights. Whilst the CEE requires us to limit our consumption to reduce

our carbon footprint, doing so can reinforce a kind of self-deprivation, which can in turn lead to an inability to enjoy guilt-free pleasure. Furthermore, climate distress can rob a person of feeling entitled to self-care, which Greenspun (2020) framed as a 'trauma within trauma' response.

Another pertinent clinical issue directly related to the CEE that participants talk about is the question of rearing children. The study by Hickman et al. (2021) reported that 39 per cent of young respondents feel hesitant about having children – a worrying trend.

The data from the theme 'Social justice issues and politics in the consulting room' asks whether it is within the remit of a psychotherapist to disclose their personal views on the CEE – or anything else, come to that. As Weintrobe (2021) argues, the CEE is the result of the neoliberal politics of 'uncare'. Participants talk in different ways about their and their clients' concerns about life on the planet being threatened by land, sea and air pollution. Is it within the remit of a therapist to question a client's high-carbon lifestyle? This is a moral and ethical issue that is worth reflecting on. Given that an individual's high-carbon lifestyle contributes to the warming of the planet, perhaps it is justified to flag it up.

At what point will 'cultural memes' (Rees, 2010) change sufficiently to make people think twice about the kind of life they lead? The data that correlates with the theme 'Culture of therapy and therapy training' picks up on the question whether, or to what extent, it is helpful for a therapist to adopt a proactive stance in helping clients share their feelings about the CEE or their relationship with nature. A therapist's ability to work with climate distress is very much dependent on their engagement with the topic as well as on their theoretical model. Adrian Tait, one of the founding members of the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) (Tait, 2021, p. 120), states that 'people who are assiduously trained to challenge the individual's projection outwards of internal issues will struggle to accept as valid a person's distress at a collective destruction of the more-than-human world'.

On the theme of therapy training, most of the participants remarked on the paucity of teaching about mental health issues caused by the CEE. Tait (2021, p. 120) notes that the professional counselling and psychotherapy bodies are lagging behind others in the healthcare field.

Evaluation of the Study

As the researcher, I was aware that my personal values, experiences, interests and prejudices with regard to counselling and psychotherapy, and my interest in the CEE and climate psychology, influenced the formulation of the research questions and their subsequent analysis. I was deeply affected by what participants shared, and I feel both terrified by and passionate about the topic. My personal orientation is Integrative Psychotherapy, which may have influenced the wording and selection of the themes and domains. All these factors contributed to the manner in which I interpreted the data, as a result of which it must be considered as 'tentative and limited' (Macran et al., 1999, p. 430). The participants are not representative of the CPA or any counselling and psychotherapy organisation or particular psychotherapeutic model.

Conclusions – Future Research

This paper discusses the CEE as a social-justice issue of domination and oppression – what Benjamin (2018) refers to as 'doer/done-to' dynamics – and how it links to our history of colonialism, racism (Orange, 2017; Williams, 2021a, b), the industrial revolution, capitalism, exceptionalism and neoliberalism (Klein, 2014; Weintrobe, 2021). The psychological work starts with us. We need to see the oppressor in ourselves, take back our projections (Totton, 2021, p. 41) and connect with our personal and collective vulnerability to allow 'thirdness' (Benjamin, 2018) to emerge.

First, the overall conclusion from the three domains of the study is that counselling and psychotherapy approaches should shift from a human-centric to an eco-systemic approach, in which we extend intersubjective relational theories (Benjamin, 2018) to our interrelationship with the more-than-human

world. This step is of great importance because, as Totton points out, the split between humans and everything else is at the heart of our ecological crisis (2021, p. 43).

Secondly, the data reveal, anecdotally at least, how few counselling and psychotherapy organisations explore social-justice issues directly linked to the CEE. There is an urgent need for counselling and psychotherapy regulating bodies to adopt climate change and sustainability policies. Counselling and psychotherapy organisations need to implement awareness of our interdependence with the natural world into their curricula. They need to address the Western bias in the theory and culture of counselling and psychotherapy and how this is impacting social-justice issues, in particular racism and neo-colonialism, that are linked to the CEE.

Thirdly, the data draws attention to the mental health issues caused by worries about the CEE. Climate-related distress needs to be treated as trauma.

Why relatively few clients talk about their climate-related emotions and concerns is an area that would be interesting to research. I hope that this paper will prompt discussion amongst mental health practitioners, indeed anyone concerned about the fate of our planet. Humanity is heading towards an uncertain future, which demands that we 'face difficult truths' – a strapline from the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA/UK). Above all, as many mental health organisations are predicting, more and more people will be needing psychological support to process their climate trauma (Woodbury, 2019) triggered by the impacts of the CEE. In a politicised climate and 'culture of uncare' (Weintrobe, 2021), we need to become more caring towards each other and consciously reduce our consumption and carbon footprint as we attempt to transition to an ecosystemic way of life.

Note

1 The term 'meme' was first introduced by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976). It is a unit of cultural information that, like a gene, can be passed between generations and that influences the 'phenotype' – the outward appearance or expression – of the society concerned. Memes are the basis of cultural inheritance and include persistent beliefs, entrenched assumptions and prevailing values, as well as scientific concepts and working technologies (Rees, 2010, p. 17).

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