

BEING A CLIMATE VOLUNTEER IN TURKEY: TURNING ECO-ANXIETY INTO ACTION

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Abstract

The repercussions of climate change pose a threat not only to physical health but also to psychological well-being. Specifically, an awareness of climate change and its consequences can lead individuals to experience eco-anxiety. Given the current state of climate change and its potential future outcomes, it is normal to feel anxious about it, as this anxiety can serve as a driving force for pro-environmental actions. However, when eco-anxiety becomes overwhelming and people lack effective coping strategies, it can lead to a state of paralysis. In particular, individuals actively involved in climate-related efforts may be more prone to experiencing eco-anxiety due to their heightened awareness of the climate crisis. The objective of this study was to explore the perceptions, emotions, and experiences of individuals engaged as climate volunteers concerning climate change. Data for the research were gathered through semi-structured interviews with seven female climate volunteer participants aged 21-30, residing in different cities in Turkey, and having 6 months to 2 years of climate volunteering experience. The analysis, carried out using phenomenological analysis, revealed that climate volunteers perceive climate change as a human-induced, critical, and inadequately acknowledged crisis in contemporary society. They believe that collective and fair efforts by all individuals can mitigate this crisis. Participants frequently expressed emotions of fear, anxiety, anger, and pessimism related to climate change, although some held onto a sense of hope. Regarding the experience of being a climate volunteer, it was evident that the desire to take meaningful actions against the climate crisis and a positive view of civil society organizations played pivotal roles in motivating participants to engage in voluntary work. Sustaining their voluntary efforts appeared to be closely linked to feelings of accomplishment and belonging to a community with shared values. Taking meaningful actions, preserving hope, and seeking support from the volunteer group were deemed crucial for safeguarding participants' psychological well-being in the face of the climate crisis. In conclusion, eco-anxiety and a favorable perception of civil society can serve as motivating factors for climate volunteer activities. Engaging in actions with a like-minded group may also serve as a purposeful coping strategy in addressing anxiety, thus contributing to individuals' mental well-being.

Keywords: *Climate change, eco-anxiety, climate volunteers.*

1. Introduction

Global warming is rapidly increasing, and climate change is affecting human life in various ways. The recognition of climate change as a global threat and the consequent rise in global temperatures due to this climate crisis have led to increasingly prominent consequences such as the escalation of extreme weather events, depletion of resources (clean water sources, food, etc.), and forced migrations caused by climate change. These emerging consequences have a significant impact on individuals' mental health.

It is acknowledged that climate change directly and/or indirectly affects mental health (Berry et al., 2008; Fritze et al., 2008). These effects can result in both acute stress related to disasters and longer-term mental health issues associated with indirect impacts (such as water and food shortages, extreme climate events, etc.), including anxiety disorders, depression, substance use, and an increase in suicidal tendencies (Clayton et al., 2017; Cianconi, Betr & Janiri, 2020).

Furthermore, the adverse impact of the climate crisis on mental health can indirectly occur based on awareness of the crisis (Fritze et al., 2008). Even without encountering the consequences of the threats to our world due to climate change, general awareness of these impending threats can evoke emotional reactions like anxiety, fear, concern, and despair (Fritze et al., 2008). These emotional reactions to climate change are termed eco-anxiety and defined as 'increased emotional, mental, or physical distress in

response to dangerous changes in the environment' (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2022, p.25). The American Psychological Association (APA) defines it as a 'chronic fear of environmental doom' (Clayton et al., 2017).

The uncertain, unpredictable, and uncontrollable nature of the climate crisis is seen as a significant factor influencing eco-anxiety (Pihkala, 2020). While paralyzing forms of eco-anxiety pose a problem, the view that eco-anxiety is a natural response to the climate crisis and encourages environmentally protective behaviors is gaining traction (Barlow, Durand, & Hofmann, 2019; Clayton, 2020; Kurth & Pihkala, 2022; Pihkala, 2020; Wullenkord et al., 2021). Additionally, due to the complexity of information acquired about the climate crisis and the perceived difficulty in solving the problem, individuals might choose to deny or avoid thinking about it as a coping mechanism. This attitude could lead to emotional and mental responses such as indifference, despair, mockery, skepticism, or fatigue with the issue (Fritze et al., 2008). Research findings have indicated that increasing awareness and knowledge about the climate crisis affect anxiety levels (Milfont, 2012; Yılmaz, Can, & Şen, 2018).

Coping with eco-anxiety can involve engaging in voluntary activities aimed at combating climate change. Individuals who recognize the effects of climate change and experience emotions such as anxiety, concern, and anger in response to these changes may actively cope with these changes. Research findings indicate that such voluntary activities can reduce the detrimental effects of eco-anxiety on mental health and support individuals' well-being (Verplanken & Roy, 2013). However, research on the relationship between eco-anxiety and voluntary activities has been conducted in individualistic cultures where awareness of climate change is higher, and voluntary efforts are supported (Coffey et al., 2021). Limited research exists in Turkey, where the expected impact of climate change is moderate. Existing studies suggest that as knowledge about the climate crisis increases, anxiety also increases (Yılmaz, Can, & Şen, 2018), and climate volunteers experience higher levels of eco-anxiety (Ediz & Yanık, 2023).

2. Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to identify the thoughts and experiences of individuals serving as climate volunteers regarding climate change. Specifically, the aim was to determine the perceptions and experiences of climate volunteers concerning climate change. Additionally, the study sought to bring to light the emotions they undergo in response to climate change. The relationship between these thoughts and emotions and the act of volunteering as climate advocates was explored, aiming to understand the motivations behind individuals' voluntary efforts and how these activities impact them.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This research was conducted using descriptive phenomenological design, which is a method that allows in-depth determination of the perceptions and experiences of individuals working as climate volunteers about the climate crisis.

3.2. Participants

The research participants are seven female climate volunteer participants aged 21-30, residing in different cities in Turkey, and having 6 months to 2 years of climate volunteering experience.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data for the research were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out in June 2023 and July 2023 via online meetings that lasted about 30 minutes. The data were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative approaches.

4. Findings

4.1. Perceptions about climate changes

When examining the responses of the participants, it is evident that they attribute the climate crisis to human activities, particularly identifying excessive production and consumption as the root cause. Furthermore, participants believe that the climate crisis is currently at a serious level and anticipate it worsening over time. They express concerns that disadvantaged groups will be more prominently affected, envisioning a future threatened by climate-induced migrations, scarcity, floods, and other adverse events. Despite recognizing the severity of the crisis, participants feel that the awareness within

their communities is notably low, and they perceive existing policies as inadequate to address the crisis effectively. While all participants emphasize the importance of individual efforts, they also share the belief in the necessity of collective action, asserting that a joint endeavor can potentially slow down the progression of the climate crisis.

4.2. Emotions about climate changes

Participants commonly described their emotional responses to the climate crisis as anxiety, fear, and concern. Additionally, they mentioned experiencing anger and pessimism in the face of this crisis. However, some participants also expressed feelings of hope.

4.3. Experiences with climate emotions

When examining participants' experiences related to their emotions about the climate crisis, two main themes emerged: experiences that increase eco-anxiety and those that decrease it. Experiences that heightened eco-anxiety included encounters with climate insensitivity and the perceived inadequacy of policies. Expressions devaluing the efforts of individuals in the community were identified as significant contributors to increased pessimism. Experiencing the consequences of the climate crisis was also recognized as a crucial factor in elevating anxiety and sadness levels. On the other hand, experiences that reduced eco-anxiety were associated with observing the effects of voluntary activities, learning about the efforts of others coping with the climate crisis, and engaging in climate protection actions in both professional and personal lives. Discussing concerns with volunteer groups and social circles also proved effective in alleviating participants' anxieties.

4.4. Experience of being a climate volunteer

Findings related to the experience of being a climate volunteer were categorized into two main themes: motivations for becoming a climate volunteer and the consequences of being one. Participants indicated that the desire to take meaningful actions in response to the impacts of the climate crisis was a significant motivation for their participation in volunteer activities. Positive attitudes towards civic engagement, growing up in an environmentally conscious environment, and receiving education about climate change were identified as important factors contributing to participants becoming climate volunteers. The sense of accomplishment derived from the feeling that they were doing something beneficial and the sense of belonging to a group with similar values were described as crucial factors in sustaining their involvement in climate volunteer activities.

5. Discussion

Participants believe that human production and consumption habits are the main contributors to the climate crisis. They emphasize observing the current impacts of the climate crisis directly and anticipate its effects intensifying soon. Participants hold beliefs about the future of the climate crisis that could be described as catastrophic. These views align with research findings conducted in both the same culture (Azizoğlu et al., 2023) and different cultures. These findings suggest that volunteers are confronting the reality of the climate crisis and are not in denial. The majority of participants having received education on the climate crisis during their educational experiences and within the scope of volunteering may have influenced these views.

Most volunteer participants believe that the climate crisis can be slowed down through collective human effort. This belief may drive their engagement in volunteer activities. This finding could be interpreted as evidence of the importance of developing a belief that the climate crisis can be slowed down in the fight against it. There seems to be a need for both experimental and predictive research on the impact of beliefs and behaviors related to the climate crisis.

The emotions of climate volunteer participants intensely encompass feelings of anxiety and fear, as categorized in Pihkala's (2022) climate emotions taxonomy under the dimension of 'Fear, Worry, Anxiety, Powerlessness, Dread.' These emotions are explained by the threat to individuals' security (Pihkala, 2022). Additionally, participants express feelings of anger and hopelessness regarding societal indifference and the inadequacy of policies. While these intense emotions can be paralyzing, they are also seen as motivating individuals to take action in the face of the climate crisis. This research also indicates that anxiety and fears related to the climate crisis motivate individuals to become climate volunteers. The belief among participants that they can slow down the climate crisis through collective human effort may have played a role in directing individuals toward action based on these beliefs about anxiety and fear.

Expressions indicating that taking action both individually and as part of a group reduces eco-anxieties support the importance of activism in coping with eco-anxieties. Furthermore, the statements about reducing eco-anxiety through discussions about the climate crisis both within the involved volunteer group and the social environment support the positive effects of emotion-focused coping.

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