

Midyear Update, Francis Fellowship, Center for Environmental Justice and Sustainability
Annie Dwyer, MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling (Expected 2024)

Progress to Date

During fall of 2022, I immersed myself in the scholarship around climate disasters and mental health, and also built a foundation in climate psychology, which will inform my qualitative research and serve as the basis for my literature review. I also submitted my Institutional Review Board proposal, which was a more extensive and time-consuming process that I had anticipated (a useful learning experience), but which helpfully required me to clarify several aspects of my project. I received IRB approval in January, and I have begun to reach out to individuals I have previously contacted through the Whatcom County Community Response Network to schedule interviews.

Timeline

My research plan for the remainder of the 2022-2023 academic year is as follows:

February-March

I will focus these months on scheduling and conducting interviews with both survivors and responders to the 2021 flooding in Whatcom County. I will also be wrapping up any remaining reading of scholarship on climate-related natural disaster and climate psychology.

April-May

After finishing the interviews, I will dedicate time these months to coding the interviews. I will also draft the literature review portion of my paper, and use this literature review as well as my incipient findings from the interviews as the basis for the public presentation of my work (assuming it will fall sometime in May).

June-July

I will draft the remainder of my paper, discussing the results of the interviews. I will then revise my work and aim to submit it for publication in late July or early August.

Materials for Discussion

I welcome feedback on the timeline as well as other aspects of the project. The following excerpts from my IRB proposal/materials may provide useful fodder for discussion during our meeting on February 13:

- Review of Research Objectives
- Interview Questions for Survivors
- Interview Questions for Responders
- Critical Conversations in Climate Psychology
- Potential Future Applications of Research

Review of Research Objectives

This project aims to investigate the mental health impacts of climate-related natural disasters through a case study of communities in Whatcom County that were impacted by the November 2021 atmospheric rivers and subsequent flooding. Through excavating insights about the impacts of climate-related natural disaster, this study ultimately aims to advance climate-aware disaster

preparedness and response protocols that might better serve frontline communities affected by climate change.

- 1) How did the flooding in Whatcom County affect community members psychologically as well as materially? How were community members differentially affected across social identities and given particular vulnerabilities?
- 2) To what extent do survivors and responders experience climate grief, ecoanxiety, or other climate-related emotions as part and parcel of the psychological impacts of the November 2021 flooding?
- 3) How might crisis response protocols as well as existing mental health infrastructure better prepare for and respond to the specific impacts of climate-related natural disasters?

Interview Questions for Survivors

- 1) Tell me about your relationship to this place before the flooding. What are some memories that you can share with me? How were your work, play, and other aspects of everyday life connected to or dependent upon both natural and built environments?
- 2) In your experience, how did this place change during and after the flooding? How were both natural and built environments impacted?
- 3) How were you directly impacted by the flooding?
 - a. What were/are some of the material impacts (upon housing, employment, etc.)
 - b. What were/are some of the relational impacts (upon family, friends, and wider community)?
 - c. What were/are some of the emotional impacts or consequences for your mental health?
- 4) What were/are some of the ways in which your relationship to this place changed during and after the flooding? In other words, are there aspects of your work, play, and everyday life that were impacted by changes to natural or built environments--that you haven't yet mentioned in answering the questions above?
- 5) What feelings come up for you when you consider these changes?
- 6) How do you think your identities or social location shaped your experiences during and after the flooding? Did your social identities/location entail unique challenges?
- 7) If you had to identify the most significant challenge you have personally faced during/after the flooding, what would it be?
- 8) How do you think the challenges you faced or experiences you underwent during and after the flooding could better be addressed through relief and recovery efforts?
- 9) What has been helpful in surviving the flooding? What material resources, forms of coping, or sources of resilience have you used to get through this period?
- 10) How do you think those sources of resilience could be strengthened/bolstered by relief and recovery efforts?

Interview Questions for Responders

- 1) Briefly describe what your role has been in relief and recovery efforts.
- 2) In your experience, how did this place change during and after the flooding? How were both natural and built environments impacted?
- 3) In your relief and recovery work, what were some of the most significant impacts you observed in the community?

- a. What were/are some of the most significant material impacts (upon housing, employment, etc.)
 - b. What were/are some of the most significant relational impacts (upon families, friend circles, and the wider community)?
 - c. What were/are some of most significant the emotional or mental health impacts that you observed?
- 4) How do you think Whatcom County residents' relationships to this place changed during and after the flooding? In other words, are there aspects of work, play, and everyday life that were impacted by changes to natural or built environments--that you haven't yet mentioned in answering the questions above?
 - 5) How do you think residents' identities or social locations shaped their experiences during and after the flooding? Did certain social identities/locations entail unique challenges?
 - 6) How do you think the challenges residents faced or the experiences they underwent during and after the flooding could better be addressed through relief and recovery efforts?
 - 7) What has helped people survive the flooding? What material resources, forms of coping, or sources of resilience have seemed to be most effective in helping people move through this period?
 - 8) How do you think those sources of resilience could be strengthened/bolstered by different approaches relief and recovery efforts?
 - 9) How have you personally been impacted by your relief and recovery work? What have been the central challenges?
 - 10) What organizational and systemic changes would be needed to better support relief and recovery efforts and the people who undertake them?

Critical Conversations in Climate Psychology

I thought I'd highlight in this section some of the reading I've done that's shaped my thinking to date. Leslie Davenport's *Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change* (2017) is a useful introduction to some tangible therapeutic interventions for dealing with anxiety, grief, trauma, and other mental health conditions resulting from environmental disaster and degradation. Bob Doppelt, in his book *Transformational Resilience* (2016), has further highlighted the urgency of approaching the mental health impacts of climate change from a public health lens, building resilience through community-based interventions and socio-structural change. I've drawn methodological inspiration from scholars such as Leslie Davenport, whose *Environmental Melancholia* (2015) provides a sophisticated model of qualitative research that might excavate climate-related emotions beneath common defenses. And Sally Weintrobe's most recent book, *The Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis* (2021), has prompted me to consider how neoliberal cultures of uncare currently shape the lived experience of climate-related natural disasters—and of course, has prompted me to consider how we might counter this culture. Of course, there are countless additional qualitative and quantitative studies on the mental health impacts of climate-related natural disaster that will also inform my literature review, but the work listed above has proved especially useful in terms of the theoretical conceptualization and articulation of the stakes of my project.

Potential Applications of Research

While I know that I am still in the very early stages of my project, I am trying to be aware of potential applications of this research. During the current legislative session, I am participating on the 350 Washington Civic Action Team, which basically advocates for just and equitable climate policy in Olympia. I hope that following this session I might use the relationships I've built with other activists and legislators to begin advocating for legislation that might better support preparation and recovery efforts in communities across Washington state. I will also have an opportunity to share this research while teaching a series of sessions on Climate Change and the Spirit of Resilience at Holden Village, an ecumenical retreat center in the Northern Cascades, in the summer of 2023. Finally, in my work as a member of the Climate Psychology Alliance Education Committee, I think there may be opportunities to apply this research in outreach to other mental health professionals.