

Climate and ecological reality: A blind spot in our practice?

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To cite this article:

Mowforth, S. (2023). Climate and ecological reality: A blind spot in our practice? *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 50, 1, 64-74. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5007>

Abstract

The climate and ecological emergency is widely acknowledged to be *the* defining issue of our time. Psychologists speak of a pervasive silence across many areas of society in relation to the unsettling realities of climate and ecological breakdown. In this article, I propose that reluctance to engage with stark implications of the crisis risks diminishing our capacity to practise inclusivity and core guidance principles for certain clients. To get a sense of the extent to which the career guidance profession is addressing the emergency, I undertook a survey of the published literature. The findings suggested limited explicit discourse around these issues. I conclude that research informed practice would benefit from increased attention to the implications of the stark realities of the crisis. We can begin to address this challenge through engaging in frank professional discourse around uncomfortable truths and their implications for career education, information, advice and guidance.

Key words: Climate change; environment; green guidance; career development

Introduction: Stark realities

There will be many clients of career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) services for whom the climate and ecological emergency (CEE) is not a pressing concern in relation to their career development. For others, a tacit understanding that the guidance intervention will not stray into the uncomfortable territory of the emergency will be reassuring. For others still, a failure to fully acknowledge implications of the present CEE trajectory may be experienced as a denial of their reality – a kind of *gaslighting*, albeit unintentional. Serving the latter group is the principal focus of this article. I stress that I am not proposing it is appropriate to indiscriminately raise unsettling dimensions of the CEE: the professional challenge demands skills of observation and discernment and – for willing practitioners – a personal engagement with uncomfortable realities. While it is

essential to help clients envisage a positive future and for them not to be overwhelmed by doomism, I propose that as the CEE progresses – to whatever extent the current trajectory is mitigated – it will become increasingly problematic to disregard its harsh realities.

The UN website spells out the scale and immediacy of the global emergency:

Climate Change is the defining issue of our time and we are at a defining moment. From shifting weather patterns that threaten food production, to rising sea levels that increase the risk of catastrophic flooding, the impacts of climate change are global in scope and unprecedented in scale.

(United Nations, n.d.)

In our communities of practice, trusted scientific opinion, along with voices of authoritative institutions and figures, can provide a basis for exploring the wide-reaching realities of climate change. Information about the scale and immediacy of the CEE and its effects on society is widely accessible today. CEIAG clients may struggle to make sense of that information and, in some instances, risk being drawn into extremes of denialism, fatalism (IPSOS, 2021), doomism or Pollyannaism. By engaging with difficult truths in a professional context we will be better placed to build rapport, display empathy, effect unconditional positive regard and include those who may be struggling with climate change related concerns but reticent to express them in a CEIAG context. We will also be better situated to help those clients make sense of sometimes conflicting opinion. Career guidance has traditionally been focused on career planning in a world that was comparatively predictable. Today, the profession must support clients to envision their future in the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world, where multiple – often interrelated – macro-level factors are at play (Mowforth, 2022).

Surveying the body of knowledge

Helping clients pursue a *green career* aside, the question I am asking is: to what extent is the sector engaging explicitly with the harsh realities of the crisis? Given that the CEE is considered the defining issue of our time, the expectation is that we would see implications for practice reflected widely in professional and academic literature. To gain insight into this question, I undertook a survey of the literature to identify instances where the CEE is addressed in the sense considered here. I set the start date to late 2018 on the rationale that it represents an inflection point when the reality of the CEE essentially began to enter public consciousness (e.g. news media reporting on Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion). This is also the time of the landmark International Panel on Climate Change Report (IPCC, 2018). I selected several CEIAG sector magazines and blogs (e.g. *CDI Career Matters*, *AGCAS Phoenix*, *Prospects Luminate* (articles), *Career Guidance for Social Justice* blog, *CERIC Careering*) and several academic journals (e.g. *Career Development International*, *Journal of Career Development*), and this Journal. For each I excluded those articles with titles that clearly were not pertinent to the research question, scanning the text of those which hinted at some relevance. A keyword search within the article was also performed where deemed to be useful. Of the approximately 3000 article/posting titles, from late

2018 until the end of 2022, surveyed across 20 CEIAG-related media, there were 50 titles I identified as green-related (those with a passing reference excluded). Of these, 24 were judged to contain – to varying degrees – matter directly connected to the present question, three of those titles reflecting ethical issues associated with the CEE. Inevitably the exercise was reliant on my own judgement, but it was intended only to provide a heuristic answer to my question.

The following is a selection of the articles identified making explicit reference to the CEE. Hooley (2022) considers that much more needs to be done in terms of environmental change in the *social justice in career guidance* movement and states: 'it is not meaningful to talk to people about their careers without recognising the changing context of environmental change'. In a slideshow entitled 'Green Guidance' (Hooley, n.d.) linked to from the same blog posting, the author points to considerations like rising global temperature, impacts on food supplies, and corporate interests, all within a social justice perspective. In a video Hooley (2020) describes why climate change matters for career, a perspective echoed by Guy (2019). Sultana, in Abbas (2022), questions whether the sector is doing enough to understand implications for the field. The approach of career counsellor and environmentalist Lehmann (2022) is to help people make sense of their career in the context of the CEE. Hutchison & Lehmann (n.d.) point to a gap between the climate threat and individual and collective response, as well as uncertainty about the future being common ground between the CEE and career. The authors identify the aspect of uncertainty within some modern approaches to career guidance (such as *chaos, narrative career, career construction* and *planned happenstance*) as useful in the empowerment of clients. During a podcast of the Asia Pacific Career Development Journal (Hutchison, 2022) a speaker suggests that career professionals need to educate themselves and be prepared to bring climate change into career development. CERIC *Careering Magazine* devoted a special issue (Purchase, 2019) to climate change and careers in a Canadian context. Six of the items in that issue, including the editor's note, made explicit reference to CEE realities: an example being an article by Maggi (2019) which opens with acknowledgement of the stark realities of the crisis and points to the potential vulnerabilities of young people. Plant (2020) cites a passage from Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*, describing the scale and immediacy of the crisis.

Beyond the present survey, Barham (2021), considers the possible impact of environmental movements on the career choices of young activists and refers to solastalgia (a neologism approximating to environmental grief and frequently found in climate psychology discourse). Contributors featured in a NICEC (2021) webinar highlight in varying levels of detail: climate psychology and emotions; professionals' self-education; narrow focus on CEE in contrast to its ubiquitous reality; sharply rising temperature data; a need for more discussion within the CEIAG sector; along with a mention of climate anxiety. Robertson (2021) highlights the reality of climate change in a careers context in relation to UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) and points to Plant's green guidance concept as a 'deep change'. Bedi et al. (2023) also discuss green guidance in terms of SDGs. The goals were also a theme of the 2022 Career Development Institute (CDI) conference (Morgan, 2021). There will of course exist many other sources relevant to the present topic.

My initial expectation had been that whilst there would be sparse explicit consideration of the CEE in the CEIAG body of knowledge, I would encounter an abundance of articles addressing green jobs and careers in a general sense. Surprisingly, the latter expectation

was not born out on closer scrutiny. Nonetheless, green career fairs and green career education, do seem to have become commonplace in CEIAG practice.

While there are indications that CEE realities may be becoming more central to CEIAG discourse, those explicit references remain relatively few, considering the scale of the emergency and given the total number of titles surveyed. From this I conclude that, within the CEIAG body of knowledge – and by extension CEIAG practice – there is reason to expand consideration of the explicit implications of the CEE for careers, and this assumption frames the remainder of the article.

A socially constructed silence?

Climate and ecological awareness will be partially shaped through exposure to news media, social media and interpersonal communication. Some scholars point to a socially constructed silence with regard to the harsh realities of the CEE, which is said to pervade virtually all aspects of society – at least in those parts of the world thus far distanced from its physical effects. Commentators frequently cite sociologist Zerubavel's (2008) book *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*. The author explores the idea that conspiracies of silence, which can be found across all areas of society, may function as a collective defence mechanism against uncomfortable or inconvenient realities. The environmentalist Marshall (2014) devotes a chapter to the theme of socially constructed silence. Heald (2017) describes how the phenomenon has a *reinforcing spiral* effect. Hogget & Randall (2016) focus on how the constructed silence can serve to protect policymakers from facing uncomfortable truths. Norgaard (2006) expounds the concept of socially organised denial, in the context of an ethnographic study.

I speculate that in educational and employment settings the prevailing organisational culture will dictate how comfortable individuals feel communicating their thoughts and feelings about the future in frank, open terms. I propose that socially constructed silence along with other defences, such as pluralistic ignorance Nickerson (2022) and disavowal (Randall, 2015), risks shaping CEIAG communities of practice such that we may find ourselves unintentionally participating in collective silences. I am not claiming that tacitly agreed silence is the only explanation for the apparent mismatch between the reality and our collective response to it. There will undoubtedly be other interpretations, beyond the scope of this paper.

Eco-anxiety and higher purpose

Eco-anxiety, also known as climate anxiety, is increasingly becoming a topic of academic enquiry (Clayton, 2020; Goldman, 2022; Verlie, 2022). The CPA Handbook (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2022 p.22) describes eco-anxiety as: 'heightened emotional, mental or somatic distress in response to dangerous changes in the climate system'. A large-scale international survey of climate anxiety in children and young people (Hickman et al., 2021) identified high levels of eco-anxiety (59% extremely or very worried, 84% at least moderately worried). A large proportion expressed fear for the future (75%) and this of course is pertinent to the future oriented nature of careers work. In addition, the study identified a sense of moral injury in the perception of inadequate government response, and related feelings of betrayal. In that regard, failure to acknowledge – as appropriate – the difficult truths of the CEE may be experienced by some clients as a denial of their

reality. Eco-anxiety has been identified as a concern in higher education, especially so in relation to environmental courses and research (Pihkala, 2020; Wallace et al., 2020), with obvious relevance for CEIAG practitioners who work with those kinds of clients. While research identifies high levels of eco-anxiety across populations, and in particular with regard to younger people, this form of anxiety, as typically experienced, is said by many eco-aware professionals to be not a psychological disorder but rather a normal response to extraordinary conditions (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2022; Kurth & Pihkala, 2022; Whybrow et al., 2022).

For some, personal responses to the CEE translate into a sense of higher purpose and agency. Surveys have identified evidence of higher purpose orientation within younger generational cohorts (Deloitte, 2021; EY, 2021; Farrell et al., 2021) often related to sustainability. Some – and perhaps as the CEE progresses an increasing number of – CEIAG clients may engage in some form of climate-related activism: from lobbying to public demonstration to nonviolent civil disobedience. This raises questions around how we support these clients in marketing transferable experience gained through those activities, as well as employers' potential responses (positive or negative) to more controversial kinds of actions. For activists already in employment, concern may be around bringing their whole self to work. These are potentially matters of consideration for CEIAG communities of practice. I propose that to be fully client-centred we may benefit from knowledge and understanding of the issues. Environmental concern may motivate some individuals to adopt a pro-active, higher purpose outlook in their career development (Lashbrook, 2021; Satwik MV & Harikumar, 2021; Smith, 2022). I speculate that in other cases, however, troublesome thoughts and feelings associated with the future of the planet could engender a kind of future-orientated experiential avoidance (Niederjohn, 2019) or anticipatory grief (Goldman, 2022) to the detriment of career planning.

Helping professions

By way of comparison with CEIAG, it is useful to consider to what extent other helping professions are engaging with the CEE. Whitcombe (2021) reports that: 'Many psychologists say they feel unequipped to handle a growing number of patients despairing over the state of the planet'. She considers how a client's presentation of eco-anxiety may evoke troublesome feelings in the therapist who is new to that kind of work. In referring to a master's thesis (Seaman, 2016), Whitcombe highlights that over 50 percent of the therapists interviewed considered their training had not adequately prepared them to help clients with climate crisis related issues, with some participants reporting their clients' responses as inappropriate. The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2020) report that 57% of child and adolescent psychiatrists in England are seeing CEE-related distress in their clients. Aspey (2021) reports that when she asks counsellors, coach-therapists and psychotherapists about their levels of climate concern, most say that they are very concerned but they are not really talking about it, and neither are their clients. Within their vision statement, the Climate Coaching Alliance (n.d.) state that: 'We influence the global professional coaching community to bring in the deep and difficult questions of climate and ecological emergency into coaching conversations'.

Some implications of the CEE for CEIAG practice

The primary aim of this article is to generate discussion within CEIAG communities. I will nevertheless consider some implications for practice, but with a caution against responsiblising practitioners, as highlighted by Hooley (Abbas 2022).

Career development is intrinsically a future orientated activity. While there is acknowledgement that detailed career planning can be problematic in the VUCA world, CEIAG professionals encourage clients to look to the future. For some career makers, envisioning a medium to long term future in the CEE era may prove an arduous or troubling task, as suggested in a non-career context by Ray (2020), Marshall (2014), and Kelsey (2020). There appears to be relatively little research into this dimension of the CEE. In the extreme, clients' perception of the crisis may be shaped by fatalistic news media or denialist pseudoscience. As in relation to other career topics, the CEIAG function includes helping the client to make sense of the world and to adopt a realistic outlook framed in a positive, motivational light. Willing practitioners may benefit from developing their own insight into the present topic; at the same time being sensitive to their own and colleagues' possible eco-anxieties. Ideally, practitioners would be formally supported in this regard. I propose that within our communities of practice there would be value in exploring ways to expand the safe CEIAG space, so as to communicate that CEE-related career concerns are legitimate and welcome topics.

One-to-one career guidance work is grounded in core principles found across many of the helping professions: person-centredness, unconditional positive regard, empathy, congruence and rapport-building (Ali & Graham, 1996). I suggest that the inclusive nature of these qualities could be diminished where there lacks a basic awareness with regard to issues that certain climate-conscious clients might present. I am not suggesting that career development practitioners (CDPs) as individuals need necessarily engage with the topic at any deep level. Roe (2020) raises the issue of practitioners' personal viewpoints regarding the environment. It may be useful to reflect on how CDPs might respond (internally and outwardly) to a client who is finding it difficult to envision their future (Ray, 2020); or one whose eco-anxiety evokes an avoidance of future orientated matters; or another who expresses frustration at political inaction; or the climate-aware client who has acquired valuable transferrable skills through radical activism. This is with an acknowledgment that practitioners are trained to be aware of their internal biases. I propose nonetheless that the CEE is distinct in that it presents specific challenges in communicating shared understanding, since ultimately everyone on the planet is a stakeholder in the crisis.

I posit that in CEIAG practice we are inclined to focus on green careers narrowly in the sense of green jobs and role functions. This is of course essential information which underpins advice and guidance work. My point is that, similarly to a default sustainability-as-usual outlook encountered across organisations (Godalnik, 2021), a narrow emphasis on green jobs and careers may mask an 'elephant in the room' and thus exclude those clients who need to take climate reality issues (cognitive or practical) into account in their career planning. CEE and broader green career issues are increasingly likely to intersect during guidance conversations.

In the helping professions there is a concept of creating a 'safe space' (Jenkin, 2021; Linnekaste, 2021; Robertson, 2019; Savickas, 2005) where the client can feel at ease

talking expansively about their concerns. It may be that unintentionally, whether through systems in which we operate or implicit communication, we place tacit boundaries around what is 'acceptable' or appropriate to bring into that space, perhaps amplified by socially constructed silence around the CEE (for client and CDP alike). While we want to help clients make sense of the CEE in a careers context, we probably need to guard against unintentionally dismissing their concerns through well-meaning efforts to reassure. I propose that observation and discernment will help gauge whether and to what extent it is appropriate to expand the safe space in the CEE direction. Tactfully allaying fears of social judgement by the CDP may prove useful, especially when working with activist clients. The contractual elements of the intervention may be opportunities for the CDP to communicate that it is valid to explore matters tangentially career related, including but not limited to the CEE. Going forward, it could be insightful for researchers to canvas CDPs as to engagement with the CEE in their work. There may also be value in exploring best practice in other helping professions. It may be that the existing CEE-related literature is already informing guidance practice. To reiterate, the primary aim of this piece is to promote discussion within CEIAG communities of practice, which I expect would generate additional ideas and questions.



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