Anxiety and Climate Change: A Validation of the Climate Anxiety Scale in a German-Speaking Quota Sample and an Investigation of Psychological Correlates

Marlis C. Wullenkord, Josephine Tröger, Karen R. S. Hamann, Laura S. Loy, & Gerhard Reese

Social, Environmental, and Economic Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Koblenz-Landau, Fortstraße 7, 76829 Landau, Germany

E-Mails: wullenkord@uni-landau.de troeger@uni-landau.de hamann@uni-landau.de loy@uni-landau.de reese@uni-landau.de

Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be sent to: Marlis Wullenkord, Department of Psychology, University Koblenz-Landau, Fortstraße 7, 76829 Landau, Germany
wullenkord@uni-landau.de

Other Information

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The climate crisis is an unprecedented existential threat that causes disturbing emotions, such as anxiety. However, relatively little is known about how people cope with climate anxiety, how it influences mental health and well-being, and whether it is relevant for climate (in)action. Recently, Clayton and Karazsia measured climate anxiety as a “clinically significant anxious response to climate change” (2020, p. 9) that may impair human well-being and functioning. To gain a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon from an empirical psychological perspective, we translated the Climate Anxiety Scale into German and assessed potential correlates in a large German-speaking quota sample ($N=1011$, stratified by age and gender). Overall, people reported low levels of climate anxiety. Climate anxiety correlated positively with anxiety and depressiveness, avoidance of climate change in everyday life, and the frustration of basic psychological needs. It correlated negatively with climate-relevant self-protective strategies and denial. While unrelated to ideological beliefs, stronger climate anxiety was associated with pro-environmental intentions and support for climate policies. We were not able to replicate the scale’s original factor structure. Thus, we encourage researchers to rework the scale and include an emotional factor in future research efforts.

Keywords: climate change; climate anxiety; denial; pro-environmental intentions; ideology; psychological needs

1. Introduction

The climate crisis represents an existential threat to human well-being and survival (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2018; Steffen et al., 2015). Its effects on (non)human ecosystems are tremendous and surpass previous predictions substantially (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2018). Given its existential nature, it is not surprising that people experience disturbing emotions in relation to the climate crisis (Albrecht, 2012; Böhm, 2003; Norgaard, 2006a). Nevertheless, empirical psychological research has only recently started to investigate climate anxiety as a specific emotional response to the climate crisis, its potential impacts on mental health and well-being, and its consequences for climate action (e.g., Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Stanley et al., 2021; Pikhala, 2020). With an expected increase in people reporting climate anxiety, “an urgent response is needed from clinicians, public health practitioners, families, researchers, educators, and policy makers” (Cunsolo et al., 2020, p. e261). But what could this response look like? How do we address climate anxiety from a psychological perspective? To contribute to the discourse about climate anxiety in our own discipline, we investigate climate anxiety in a large German-speaking quota sample, building on empirical psychological research by Clayton and Karazsia (2020; see Pikhala, 2020 for a review of research on climate anxiety in other disciplines). Our research has three goals: First, we validate a German translation of the *Climate Anxiety Scale* (CAS) by Clayton and Karazsia (2020). Second, going beyond previous research, we investigate relations of climate anxiety with climate-relevant denial and self-protection, political ideologies, basic psychological needs, and aspirations. Third, we test whether climate anxiety relates to pro-environmental indicators.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Climate Anxiety

Complex emotional responses to the climate crisis such as anxiety, fear, and worry (Böhm, 2003; Pikhala, 2020), grief (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018), guilt (Rees et al., 2015), hopelessness (Norgaard, 2006a), or melancholia (Lertzman, 2015) can be uncomfortable if not deeply disturbing. They have wide-ranging consequences for the sense of self, personal and place identity, and a sense of continuity and safety (Norgaard, 2011). *Climate anxiety* can be defined as “anxiety which is significantly related to anthropogenic climate change” (Pikhala, 2020, p. 3). Similarly, the broader term *eco-anxiety* can be defined as the apprehension and stress about anticipated threats to ecosystems (Cunsolo et al., 2020) or “the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse” (Albrecht, 2012, p. 250). Within empirical psychology, Clayton and Karazsia recently defined climate anxiety as a “clinically significant anxious response to climate change” (2020, p. 9) that may impair human well-being and functioning. If climate anxiety indeed required clinical attention, it would be necessary to develop means to assess its severity, which “allow for consistency in measurements and understandings” (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020, p. 3). To this end, Clayton and Karazsia (2020) developed the CAS to assess climate anxiety and its impacts in everyday life. In our study, we aim to replicate the scale’s structure and some of the study’s findings in a large German-speaking quota sample. Given that Clayton and Karazsia (2020) conceptualize climate anxiety as potentially “clinically significant”, we expect to replicate their finding:

Climate anxiety correlates positively with general anxiety and depressiveness (H1).

2.2 Potential Correlates of Climate Anxiety

Given its psychological significance, it is likely that various psychological factors relate to how much climate anxiety people actually report. In the following, we elaborate on potential correlates.

2.2.1 Denial and Self-Protection

One way to cope with debilitating emotional experiences related to the climate crisis is to use defensive, self-protective strategies that serve to suppress, deny, or avoid uncomfortable emotions and thereby protect the self from pain and loss (see Jonas et al., 2014; Weintrobe, 2013). If these strategies are successful, uncomfortable emotions like anxiety may not be (consciously) felt and/or reported (e.g., in questionnaire studies, Lertzman, 2015). Following Cohen's work on the denial of human rights violations (2001), climate-relevant defensive, self-protective strategies can be classified into literal denial (i.e., denial of hard facts), interpretive denial (i.e., distortion of facts or emotional distancing), and implicatory denial (i.e., recognition of facts but denial of their psychological, political, or moral implications). These strategies can be more or less successful in numbing the emotional response. For example, one pre-requisite for reporting climate anxiety is the recognition that climate change is a threat with vast consequences for human existence (Weintrobe, 2013). Denying the existence of climate change (literal denial) or reinterpreting its implications (interpretive denial) should reduce the reported anxiety more than rationalizing one's own contribution to the climate crisis or merely avoiding information about it in everyday life (implicatory denial). This does not mean that the underlying anxiety disappears. The denial may simply be a repressed manifestation of underlying anxiety, masking it, and breeding more anxiety in the long run (see Weintrobe, 2013 on the "vicious cycle of anxiety and denial"). In the case of avoidance, feelings of anxiety remain but are pushed away by avoiding its triggers in everyday life (Salander & Windahl, 1999). In a recent study, Kapeller and Jäger (2020) simulated complex interactions of climate anxiety and literal denial and generally found them to be negatively related. Based on the findings reviewed above, we hypothesized:

Climate anxiety correlates negatively with climate denial (H2).

2.2.2 Ideological Beliefs

Previous research shows that people with certain ideological beliefs use denial to protect what the climate crisis threatens, such as the safety and privileges the status quo affords them (Feygina et al., 2010; Jylhä et al., 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). Ideologies are sets of attitudes comprising more or less coherent belief systems that fundamentally shape people's perceptions and interpretations regarding important topics (Jost et al., 2008), such as climate change and environmental degradation (McCright et al., 2016; Zhou, 2016). *System justification*, the tendency to justify and defend the status quo, is one important ideological driver of resistance to climate change information. System justifiers often hold conservative ideologies, resist social change, accept social inequalities (Friesen et al., 2019), and do not support climate protective policies (Feygina et al., 2010). The dual-process model of ideology (Duckitt, 2001) describes *social dominance orientation* (SDO, Pratto et al., 1994) and *right-wing authoritarianism* (RWA, Altemeyer, 1981) as key ideological beliefs. People high on SDO typically endorse hierarchical structures and legitimize inequalities, while people high on RWA are typically resistant to change and motivated to maintain the status quo. Both RWA and SDO are strong negative predictors of various socio-political outcomes such as willingness to act against global inequality, appreciating attitudes towards outgroups, or support of human rights measures (Bizer et al., 2012; Ekehammar et al., 2004; McFarland, 2010; Reese et al., 2014). They typically correlate negatively with pro-environmental attitudes and intentions (Stanley & Wilson, 2019). *Human dominance over nature* captures the belief that humans are superior to nature (Milfont et al., 2013). It is associated with striving to maintain the status quo and climate denial (Jylhä et al., 2020; Jylhä & Akrami, 2015). If people with high scores on system justification, SDO, RWA, and human dominance over nature tend to deny climate change, they may not report climate anxiety because that would in turn mean they would acknowledge the existence of climate change or its emotional consequences on the self. Correspondingly, one could expect similar relations for people with a right-wing rather than left-wing political orientation, given that the former deny climate

change more than the latter (e.g., Häkkinen & Akrami, 2014). Based on the empirical findings on ideological beliefs and climate denial and the negative proposed relationship between climate anxiety and climate denial, we expected:

Climate anxiety correlates negatively with ideological beliefs (i.e. system justification, SDO, RWA, human dominance over nature, and right-wing political orientation; H3).

2.2.3 Needs and Aspirations

Further potential correlates of climate anxiety are basic psychological needs, as basic psychological need frustration is often associated with anxiety and various forms of ill-being. Self-determination theory (Deci & R.M. Ryan, 2000; R.M. Ryan & Deci, 2017) is a humanistic, organismic-dialectical theory of human motivation. It proposes that the universal, innate basic psychological needs for relatedness (belonging), competence (efficacy), and autonomy (self-determination) have to be satisfied to experience mental health and well-being, and to cope with stressors and threat proactively. People whose basic psychological needs are satisfied are more likely to act pro-environmentally (see Wullenkord, 2020 for an overview). Need frustration is, in contrast, associated with inner conflicts, reduced human functioning, ill-being, and defensiveness (Benita et al., 2019; Heissel et al., 2018; Hodgins et al., 2006; R.M. Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste & R.M. Ryan, 2013). For example, first findings in the climate context suggest that basic psychological need frustration is associated with the denial of climate change and corresponding self-protective strategies (Wullenkord, 2019). Severe and ongoing need frustration can lead to non-optimal human functioning and psychopathology (Deci & R.M. Ryan, 2000). For example, need frustration is associated with depressive symptoms (Chen et al., 2015; Heissel et al., 2018) and anxiety among adolescents (Kearns, 2017), in dental patients (Halvari et al., 2019), and in many other populations (Deci & R.M. Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste & R.M. Ryan, 2013). In particular, *satisfied autonomy* needs predicted lower general anxiety for rheumatoid arthritis patients (S. Ryan & McGuire,

2016), while *frustrated autonomy* needs predicted worry and sleep disruption in times of uncertainty (Howell & Sweeny, 2019). Furthermore, helplessness and powerlessness are typical anxious experiences that represent diminished efficacy and control beliefs (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013), in other words, thwarted needs for competence. Brenning et al. (2021) found need frustration to partially mediate the relationship between dysfunctional emotion regulation and internalizing problems in a sample of adolescents. Based on these empirical findings and theoretical considerations, we expected:

Climate anxiety correlates positively with need frustration and negatively with need satisfaction (H4).¹

Closely related to basic psychological needs are aspirations, namely, life goals. Goal contents theory (Kasser & R.M. Ryan, 1996; R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2017), a sub-theory of self-determination theory, classifies people's aspirations into intrinsic aspirations (pursuit of personal growth, meaningful relationships, and contribution) and extrinsic aspirations (financial success, popularity, and image). Extrinsic aspirations are less likely to satisfy basic psychological needs than intrinsic aspirations. R.M. Ryan et al. (1996) showed that extrinsic aspirations were related to anxiety and depressive symptoms. Based on these findings, we expected:

Climate anxiety correlates negatively with extrinsic aspirations and positively with intrinsic aspirations (H5).

2.2.4 Pro-Environmental Indicators

Instead of a self-protective response, people can also acknowledge their emotions in the context of climate change (Reser et al., 2012). A so called “practical anxiety” can trigger information-seeking tendencies and coping with the threat (Kurth, 2018). Accordingly, the

¹ This hypothesis differs from our pre-registration. Originally, we assumed an interaction between climate anxiety and basic psychological needs to predict pro-environmental indicators. However, in this paper we focus on the basic correlation assumption. We report on the interaction hypothesis in Supplementary Material S1.

perception of threat and worry about climate change can motivate support of climate action and policies (Leiserowitz, 2006; Mayer et al., 2017; Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014), through an increase in perceived personal responsibility (Bouman et al., 2020). Furthermore, being a bystander to severe collective climate damage could intensify anger and motivate people to take personal responsibility (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Stanley et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, Clayton and Karazsia (2020) found climate anxiety and pro-environmental indicators to be unrelated. Kapeller and Jäger (2020) showed that more anxiety is not necessarily associated with more pro-environmental behavior. In fact, relations between reported anxiety and pro-environmental indicators may not be straightforward. Perceiving severe threat and fear can be overwhelming and lead to apathy, especially when one feels incapable to deal with the threat (Kapeller & Jäger, 2020; Miller et al., 2009). General emotion management also depends on people's cultural backgrounds and socio-material contexts. For instance, Kleres and Wettergren argue that people in the Global North “embrace” feelings of fear internally but reject them externally because “a general fear culture in the north voids the mobilizing power of fear” (2017, p. 11). This likely influences our study because we analyze individuals living in a northern liberal culture. Furthermore, if people are able to resolve their anxiety by acting pro-environmentally (Kapeller & Jäger, 2020), they may as a consequence experience more hope and report less anxiety (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Ojala, 2012). Given these mixed findings on the relationship between fear, worry, anxiety, and pro-environmental indicators, and the finding by Clayton and Karazsia (2020) upon which we built our study, we expected:

Climate anxiety is uncorrelated with pro-environmental indicators (H6).

3. Method

The current study was part of a larger project initially designed to study the interrelations of climate-relevant self-protection, basic psychological needs, and ideology. Here, we use the complete data to contribute to a better understanding of climate anxiety by validating the CAS (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020) in a German-speaking quota sample and assessing potential correlates of climate anxiety.

3.1 Sample and Procedure

We collected 1134 complete data sets of German-speaking participants through the online-access panel provider Respondi AG. The study was hosted on the platform SoSci-Survey (Leiner, 2020). Participants gave their informed consent and then answered questions about their climate anxiety and potential correlates. As an incentive, participants received *mingle points*, which they could exchange for money, shopping vouchers, or donations to several organizations. This study was approved by the local ethics committee (293_2020) and was in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. We pre-registered our hypotheses². After outlier detection³, the final sample consisted of $N=1011$ participants. The sample was stratified for age ($M=43.91$, $SD=13.97$, range: 18-69) and gender (51.14% female), based on 2011 census data retrieved from the European Statistical System (2020). We also assessed education (26.31% had university entrance qualification and 29.48% had a university degree) and monthly income (on average, people earned between 1500 and 2500€).

3.2 Measures

² <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=js5pc4>

³ We excluded speeders ($RSI \geq 2$, $N=32$, Leiner, 2019), straightliners ($N=19$, Kim et al., 2019), those with inconsistent answers on several item pairs ($N=61$), and multivariate outliers ($N=11$, Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Please find more detailed information in Supplementary Material S1.

If not otherwise indicated, participants responded to all measures on 7-point Likert scales from 1 (*strongly disagree/does not apply at all*) to 7 (*strongly agree/applies completely*). Psychometric properties are summarized in Table 1.

Climate anxiety. We used the *CAS* (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). Two authors independently translated the original English items into German and resolved disagreement in discussion. The German items were then back-translated into English by two other researchers, who were not aware of the original scale. Afterwards, we determined the final wording of the German items (e.g., “Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to concentrate”; see Supplementary Material S3, $\alpha=.89$).

Anxiety and depressiveness. We used the *PHQ-4* (Kroenke et al., 2009, $\alpha=.88$) that screens for anxiety and depressiveness (e.g., “feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge”) within the past two weeks on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*nearly every day*).

Climate denial and self-protection. We used the *Climate Self-Protection Scale* (Wullenkord & Reese, 2020), consisting of five subscales for interpretive (3, 4) and implicatory denial (1, 2, 5): (1) rationalization (e.g., “How I behave toward the environment has minimal impact on climate change”, $\alpha=.92$), (2) avoidance (e.g., “I try to avoid negative thoughts about climate change in my everyday life”, $\alpha=.89$), (3) denial of personal outcome severity (e.g., “I expect climate change to affect other regions but not to burden me”, $\alpha=.87$), (4) denial of global outcome severity (e.g., “I believe that climate change won’t be as severe as expected in the future”, $\alpha=.91$), and (5) denial of guilt (e.g., “I don’t need to make climate change a matter of conscience”, $\alpha=.83$). We added four items on 6) literal climate denial (two own items; two taken from Jylhä et al., 2016, own translation; $\alpha=.94$).

Ideological beliefs. We used the *System Justification Scale* (Kay & Jost, 2003; German adaptation by Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007; e.g., “Most political decisions serve the benefit of all people.”, $\alpha=.83$), the *SDO₇₍₈₎ scale* (Ho et al., 2015; own translation; e.g., “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.”, $\alpha=.80$), the *RWA³D scale* (Funke, 2003; “The

true key for the ‘good life’ are obedience, discipline, and virtue.”, $\alpha=.82$), and as a measure of human dominance over nature subscale nine of the *Environmental Attitudes Inventory* (Milfont & Duckitt, 2010; German translation by Markey, 2013, items 5-8 own translation; e.g., “Humans were meant to rule over the rest of nature.”, $\alpha=.89$). Additionally, we assessed political orientation using a slider bar ranging from 1 (*left-wing*) to 101 (*right-wing*).

Basic psychological needs. We used the *Balanced Measure of Basic Psychological Needs Scale* (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012, German translation by Neubauer & Voss, 2016) to assess both satisfaction and frustration of autonomy (e.g., “I was free to do things my own way”, $\alpha_{\text{sat}}=.79$, $\alpha_{\text{frus}}=.75$), competence (e.g., “I took on and mastered hard challenges”, $\alpha_{\text{sat}}=.78$, $\alpha_{\text{frus}}=.77$), and relatedness (e.g., “I felt close and connected with other people who are important to me”, $\alpha_{\text{sat}}=.84$, $\alpha_{\text{frus}}=.80$) during the last month.

Aspirations. We assessed importance and likelihood of intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations using a short version of the *Aspiration Index* (Grouzet et al., 2005; German translation by Matthey & Kasser, 2013; e.g., “In the future, I will have a job that pays well.”). We then calculated a relative intrinsic vs. extrinsic value orientation score for both importance and likelihood (recommendations by Kasser, 2019), with negative scores indicating relative intrinsic value orientation (max -6) and positive scores indicating relative extrinsic value orientation (max 6).

Pro-environmental intentions. We used three items based on Wullenkord et al. (2020) to assess participants’ pro-environmental intentions with respect to political and activist engagement (“I plan to become involved in *politics/activism* in the future to limit the consequences of climate change”), and changes in everyday life (“I plan to act in an environmentally protective way in my *everyday life* in the future to limit the consequences of climate change”; $\alpha=.74$).

Policy support. Inspired by the European Election Studies (Schmitt et al., 2016), participants indicated their personal views on investments in climate protection measures and taxes on slider bars ranging from 1 to 101.

4. Results

We used the statistical environment R, version 4.0.3 (R Core Team, 2020). Supplementary Material S1 contains detailed results of all analyses. In Supplementary Material S2, we explicate exclusion criteria, data analyses using the entire dataset without exclusions, and analyses without covariates. We display descriptive statistics of the main study variables in Table 1, and Spearman correlations between the main variables in Table 2. On average, participants reported low climate anxiety ($M=1.81$). They reported low levels of general anxiety and depressiveness, medium-low levels of self-protection and denial, medium levels of ideological beliefs, medium-high levels of basic psychological need satisfaction, relatively intrinsic value orientations, high policy support, and medium pro-environmental intentions.

4.1 Validating the Climate Anxiety Scale

To validate the original CAS, we explored its structure and relations with socio-demographic variables.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of study variables

Variable	items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	min	max	Skewness	Kurtosis	α [95%CI]
Climate anxiety	13	1.81	.82	1	5.42	1.22	1.16	.89 [.87, .90]
Anxiety and depressiveness	4	1.67	.72	1	4	1.29	1.27	.88 [.87, .89]
Self-protection	30	2.97	1.06	1	6.40	.55	-.17	.95 [.95, .96]
Rationalization	7	3.18	1.46	1	7	.54	-.20	.92 [.92, .93]
Avoidance	8	3.04	1.18	1	6.75	.09	-.57	.89 [.88, .90]
Denial of personal outcome severity	4	2.35	1.21	1	7	.85	.29	.87 [.86, .89]
Denial of global outcome severity	3	2.58	1.59	1	7	1.00	.22	.91 [.90, .92]
Denial of guilt	4	3.92	1.39	1	7	.38	-.46	.83 [.82, .85]
Literal denial	4	2.45	1.55	1	7	1.14	.61	.94 [.93, .95]
Ideological beliefs								
System justification	8	3.94	1.09	1	7	-.25	-.13	.83 [.82, .85]
Social dominance orientation	8	2.93	1.03	1	6.62	.35	.22	.80 [.78, .82]
Human dominance over nature	10	2.51	1.14	1	7	.63	-.03	.89 [.88, .90]
Right-wing authoritarianism	12	3.53	1.03	1	6.50	-.13	-.47	.82 [.82, .84]
Political orientation	1	44.59	18.8	1	101	-.02	.18	
Basic psychological needs								
Relatedness satisfaction	3	5.39	1.17	1	7	-.83	.83	.84 [.82, .85]
Relatedness frustration	3	2.63	1.43	1	7	.69	-.27	.80 [.78, .82]
Competence satisfaction	3	4.37	1.3	1	7	-.25	-.24	.78 [.76, .81]
Competence frustration	3	2.66	1.34	1	7	.56	-.55	.77 [.74, .79]
Autonomy satisfaction	3	5.01	1.1	1	7	-.51	.07	.79 [.77, .81]
Autonomy frustration	3	3.12	1.43	1	7	.29	-.69	.75 [.72, .77]
Aspirations – importance	18	-2.09	1.09	-5.38	1.15	-.07	-.24	.81 [.79, .83]
Aspirations – likelihood	18	-1.26	0.96	-4.10	1.85	-.32	-.04	.87 [.86, .88]
Pro-environmentalism								
Policy support	2	71.35	20.88	1	101	-.86	.83	.67 ^a [.63, .74]
Intentions	3	3.49	1.26	1	7	.26	-.26	.74 [.71, .77]
Age	1	43.91	13.97	18	69	-.07	-1.10	

Note.^aSpearman's rho

1 Table 2

2 *Spearman correlations of study variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
1	-																					
2	.25**	-																				
3	-.17**	-.10**	-																			
4	.17**	.07*	.44**	-																		
5	-.05 [†]	-.11**	.61**	.45**	-																	
6	-.15**	-.13**	.65**	.42**	.72**	-																
7	-.37**	-.19**	.57**	.10	.46**	.57**	-															
8	-.13**	-.14**	.61**	.37**	.63**	.83**	.53**	-														
9	.04	-.15**	-.18**	-.06 [†]	-.02	-.14**	-.20**	-.18**	-													
10	-.03	-.12**	.34**	.22**	.34**	.35**	.25**	.34**	.06 [†]	-												
11	.00	-.10**	.34**	.27**	.31**	.39**	.33**	.40**	-.18**	.45**	-											
12	.08*	-.06*	.34**	.25**	.38**	.37**	.22**	.34**	.07*	.34**	.31**	-										
13	-.11*	-.09	.34**	.14**	.29**	.36**	.32**	.34**	-.04	.41**	.46**	.23**	-									
14	-.10**	-.30**	-.16**	-.13*	-.13**	-.10	-.02	-.09**	.12**	-.08*	-.05	-.05 [†]	-.03	-								
15	.27**	.45**	.03	.19**	.10	.07*	-.10 [†]	.07*	-.11**	.06 [†]	.04	.04	-.01	-.41**	-							
16	.01	-.21**	-.05 [†]	-.08 [†]	.01	.04	.05	.01	.10**	.05 [†]	.04	.04	.01	.28**	-.02	-						
17	.29**	.55**	.00	.16**	.02	.00	-.18**	.00	-.07*	-.03	-.07*	.05	-.09 [†]	-.32**	.65**	-.12**	-					
18	-.14**	-.35**	-.06 [†]	-.12**	-.06*	-.05	.06 [†]	-.05	.07*	-.04	.04	-.04	.01	.44**	-.34**	.29**	-.38**	-				
19	.20**	.47**	.06 [†]	.13**	.04	.07*	-.06 [†]	.06*	-.15**	.05	-.01	.04	-.01	-.28**	.63**	.03	.61**	-.48**	-			
20	.13**	.03	.16**	.25**	.23**	.22**	.02	.18**	.05	.28**	.26**	.29**	.12**	-.15**	.20**	.11**	.15**	-.14**	.14**	-		
21	.09**	.13**	.19**	.21**	.19**	.14**	.02	.12**	-.06 [†]	.22**	.18**	.18**	.10**	-.20**	.22**	.02	.20**	-.20**	.22**	.59**	-	
22	.17**	.12*	-.42**	-.27**	-.46**	-.56**	-.40**	-.54**	.04	-.33**	-.30**	-.38**	-.36**	.05 [†]	-.03	-.04	.04	.06 [†]	-.02	-.21**	-.12**	-
23	.44**	.13*	-.49**	-.27**	-.38**	-.44**	-.40**	-.39**	.07	-.27**	-.26**	-.17**	-.33**	.06 [†]	.11**	.13**	.15**	.02	.06 [†]	-.05 [†]	-.10 [†]	.40**

3 *Note.* 1=Climate anxiety, 2=general anxiety and depressiveness, 3=rationalization, 4=avoidance, 5=denial of global outcome severity, 6=denial of personal
4 outcome severity, 7=denial of guilt, 8=literal denial, 9=system justification, 10=social-dominance orientation, 11=right-wing authoritarianism, 12=human
5 dominance over nature, 13=political orientation, 14=relatedness satisfaction, 15=relatedness frustration, 16=competence satisfaction, 17=competence frustration,

6 18=autonomy satisfaction, 19=autonomy frustration, 20=importance of aspirations, 21=likelihood of aspirations, 22=policy support, 23=pro-environmental
7 intentions. $N=1011$, except for correlation with policy support ($n=973$). $^{\dagger}p<.10$, $*p<.05$, $**p<.01$

4.1.1 Structure of the Climate Anxiety Scale

We first ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to investigate whether the 2-factorial structure of the CAS with the subscales *cognitive-emotional impairment* and *functional impairment* could be replicated in our sample, using the R-package *lavaan*, version 0.6-7 (Rosseel, 2012). The data set contained no missing data. The 13 items of the CAS were not normally distributed but displayed significant floor effects (see Figure 1) and multivariate non-normality, as revealed by histograms, Q-Q-plots, skewness, kurtosis, and the Doornik-Hansen test ($E(26)=2144.40, p<.001$). We used robust maximum likelihood estimation with Satorra-Bentler correction (Finney & DiStefano, 2013) to account for multivariate non-normality. We constrained latent factors with a mean of 0 and variance of 1. The data set was sufficiently large to ensure high statistical power ($N:q$ ratio was 37:1). A graphical representation of the model including (un)standardized parameter estimates, standardized residuals, squared multiple correlation coefficients, and empirical and model-implicated variance-covariance-matrices can be found in Supplementary Material S1.

The hypothesized model was identified but did not have satisfactory fit (Hair et al., 2019; Hu & Bentler, 1999), Satorra-Bentler $\chi^2(64, N=1011)=321.34, p<.001$, Robust Comparative Fit Index (CFI)=.91, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)=38004.51, Robust Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)=.084, 90% CI[.075, .093]. While Robust CFI was acceptable, the $\chi^2:df$ ratio was >3 indicating bad fit (see van Zomeren et al., 2013). The original factor structure could thus not be replicated.

Figure 1. Diverging stacked bar chart of responses to the Climate Anxiety Scale. This figure shows the distribution of participant responses to the individual items of the Climate Anxiety Scale and the scale as a whole. Red signifies disagreement and blue agreement with the items.

Next, we ran an exploratory main axis factor analysis with oblique rotation to explore whether individual items clustered into interpretable subscales in our sample. Items were well-suited for factor analysis ($KMO=.93$). No items needed to be excluded because of high inter-item correlations ($r>.80$, recommendations by Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). According to Horn's (1965) parallel analysis, items distributed over four factors (Eigenvalues=.14–5.23, 51% cumulative explained variance). After inspection of the scree plot with an elbow point after two factors and due to difficulty in meaningfully interpreting four factors, we enforced a two factor solution (Eigenvalues=.44–5.23). One item ("I go away by myself and think about why I feel this way about climate change.") both had a very low factor loading ($<.3$) and low commonality ($h^2=.21$). Given that it was an outlier when inspecting correlations of single

items with study outcomes and did not directly assess anxiety in our interpretation, we re-analyzed the scale without it. The 12-item measure was well-suited for factor analysis (KMO=.93). Again, items distributed over four factors (Eigenvalues=.14-5.01, 53% cumulative explained variance) but we enforced a two-factor solution (Eigenvalues=.44-5.01) based on inspection of the scree plot (see Supplementary Material S1 for item statistics, factor loadings after oblique rotation, communalities, Eigenvalues, and explained variance of the factors). The two-factor solution explained 47% of sample variance. All items loaded exclusively on their target factor with factor loadings $>.30$, except for one item with factor loadings $<.30$. Communalities were acceptable with $h^2 >.30$, except for one item with $h^2=.29$. We interpreted the resulting factors as follows: *behavioral symptoms* (9 items on sleep, concentration, and emotional expression etc., e.g., “I find myself crying because of climate change.”) and *cognitive consequences* of climate anxiety (3 items, e.g., “I think, ‘why do I react to climate change this way?’”). Given that the second factor had an Eigenvalue <1 and that a one factor-model (Satorra-Bentler $\chi^2[54, N=1011]=260.35, p<.001$; Robust CFI=.92; AIC=34185.63; Robust RMSEA=.085, 90% CI [.074, .095]) had better model fit than the original two factor-model ($\chi^2[10, n=1011]=69.81, p<.001$), we decided to use a single score of climate anxiety in the following analyses.

4.1.2 Climate Anxiety and Socio-Demographics

An inspection of scatter plots and correlations revealed climate anxiety not to differ with age. A Welch two sample t -test revealed people identifying as female to report significantly more climate anxiety than people identifying as male, $t(1009)=-2.96, p=.003$, $d=.19$, 95% CI of group difference $(-.25, -.05)$, $M(SD)_{\text{female}}=1.88(.83)$, $M(SD)_{\text{male}}=1.73(.80)$. A Kruskal-Wallis test indicated no differences in climate anxiety between levels of education, $H(7)=8.93, p=.258$. Climate anxiety was unrelated to income in our sample.

4.2 Potential Correlates of Climate Anxiety

If not otherwise indicated, all correlation coefficients and p -values are displayed in Table 2. To ease interpretation, we also report correlation coefficients in writing.

Supporting H1, climate anxiety was weakly related to general anxiety and depressiveness in our sample ($r=.25$). One individual item (“I write down my thoughts about climate change and analyze them.”) did not correlate with general anxiety and depressiveness, while the other items displayed only weak positive correlations (r 's(1009)=.07-.22, $p<.001$ -.03).

Supporting H2, climate anxiety was negatively correlated with most types of climate denial and self-protective strategies. People reporting higher climate anxiety reported less literal climate denial, denied global consequences of climate change less, rationalized climate change less, and reported less denial of guilt for climate change (r 's=-.37 to -.13). However, they reported more avoidance of climate change in their everyday lives ($r=.17$). Denial of personal outcome severity was not correlated with climate anxiety.

Contrary to H3, climate anxiety was unrelated to the examined ideological beliefs of system justification, SDO, and RWA, and correlated slightly positively with human dominance over nature ($r=.08$). In line with H3, we found a weak negative correlation with political orientation ($r=-.11$), such that people reporting a more left-wing political orientation reported more climate anxiety.

Mostly supporting H4, climate anxiety correlated negatively with the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for relatedness ($r=-.10$) and autonomy ($r=-.14$) but not competence, and positively with frustration of relatedness ($r=.27$), autonomy ($r=.20$), and competence ($r=.29$).

Contrary to H5, climate anxiety was weakly related with the importance ($r=.13$) and the likelihood ($r=.09$) of aspirations in an unexpected direction: The more important people rated extrinsic relative to intrinsic aspirations, the more climate anxiety they reported.

Contrary to H6, we found a weak positive correlation between climate anxiety and policy support ($r=.17$) and a medium positive correlation between climate anxiety and pro-environmental intentions ($r=.44$).

Additionally, we examined the relative explanatory value of all potential correlates of climate anxiety in an exploratory regression model. We controlled for gender, age, and income. Our sample was sufficiently large (required sample size to detect a small effect of $f^2=.03$ with $\alpha=.05$ and $1-\beta=.90$ was $N=965$, G*Power 3, Faul et al., 2007). We found no evidence for multicollinearity and singularity ($VIF<10$). Because climate anxiety was not normally distributed, we used log-transformed data where appropriate. The model explained 40% of the variance in climate anxiety ($F[25, 947]=25.62, p<.001, R^2=.40, R^2_{adjusted}=.39$), with anxiety and depressiveness ($\beta=.10, p=.004, 95\%CI[.03, .17]$), avoidance ($\beta=.21, p<.001, 95\%CI[.19, .23]$), human dominance over nature ($\beta=.11, p<.001, 95\%CI[.09, .13]$), political orientation ($\beta=.06, p=.049, 95\%CI[.06, .06]$), competence frustration ($\beta=.09, p=.026, 95\%CI[.06, .11]$), pro-environmental intentions ($\beta=.43, p<.001, 95\%CI[.41, .45]$), and age ($\beta=.15, p<.001, 95\%CI[.15, .15]$) each positively and denial of global outcome severity of climate change ($\beta=.08, p=.041, 95\%CI[.02, .14]$) and denial of guilt ($\beta=-.26, p<.001, 95\%CI[-.34, -.18]$) each negatively predicting climate anxiety. There were trends for competence satisfaction ($\beta=.05, p=.093, 95\%CI[.03, .07]$) and relative importance of extrinsic aspirations ($\beta=.06, p=.087, 95\%CI[.03, .08]$) to predict climate anxiety.

5. Discussion

Understanding people's emotional responses to the climate crisis and its devastating consequences is vital. This is the first study to investigate climate anxiety in a well-powered German-speaking quota sample. It shows that overall, people only report low levels of climate anxiety. Those who report higher levels of climate anxiety, however, report more general anxiety and depressiveness (supporting H1), use some climate-relevant self-protective

strategies to a smaller extent (supporting parts of H2), tend to have left-wing political convictions (supporting parts of H3), and experience lower basic psychological need satisfaction (supporting H4). They express stronger pro-environmental intentions, and support climate-relevant policies more than those scoring low on climate anxiety (contradicting H6). Less intuitively, climate anxiety in this sample is slightly positively related to beliefs in human dominance over nature and unrelated to system justification, SDO, and RWA (contradicting parts of H3). The more climate anxiety people report, the more they support extrinsic values (contradicting H5). Furthermore, we found no evidence for the factor structure of the original CAS (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020) that differentiates the factors *cognitive-emotional* and *functional impairment*.

In the following, we discuss our initial evidence of correlates of climate anxiety in relation to previous findings. Then, we critically review the CAS as an instrument and reflect on our own learning process whilst conducting the study. We finish with limitations and recommendations for future research.

5.1 Initial Evidence of Correlates of Climate Anxiety

Our results both confirm and contradict existing research. Similar to findings in the USA (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020), high levels of climate anxiety are not very common in our German-speaking quota sample. On average, people reported low levels of climate anxiety and there were significant floor effects. Replicating literature that generally finds women and younger people to experience more climate-related anxiety and worry (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Searle & Gow, 2010), age significantly predicted climate anxiety in our sample and women reported more climate anxiety.

As predicted, the more climate anxiety people experienced, the fewer climate-relevant self-protective strategies they used. This confirms findings by Kapeller and Jäger (2020) who

showed climate anxiety and denial to be negatively related in a simulation study. One exception in our study is avoidance: People with climate anxiety tend to avoid engaging with climate change information in their everyday lives. This is in line with findings by Epstein (1972) showing that people who feel anxious often feel overwhelmed and tend to avoid engaging with the subject matter of their anxiety.

People with higher climate anxiety reported a slightly more left-wing political orientation. However, contrary to our predictions, climate anxiety was unrelated to most ideological beliefs in our sample that usually correlate with a left-wing political orientation and slightly positively related to beliefs of human dominance over nature. Given that risk perception and coping with climate change are also socially constructed (Lamb et al., 2020; Norgaard, 2006b), ideological beliefs are only one factor to influence how likely people are to acknowledge and report climate anxiety (see Lertzman, 2015). Regardless of ideological beliefs, one may feel deeply troubled in the face of climate change. This may explain the absence of respective relations in our study.

Supporting our hypothesis, the less satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness people experienced, the more climate anxiety they reported. Our result is in line with the theoretical underpinnings of self-determination theory (Deci & R.M. Ryan, 2000) and replicates previous findings on need frustration and anxiety (Halvari et al., 2019; S. Ryan & McGuire, 2016), worry (Howell & Sweeny, 2019), and depressiveness (Chen et al., 2015; Heissel et al., 2018). Contrary to our expectations, people who indicated that extrinsic values were relatively more important for them reported higher climate anxiety. They may feel more threatened because climate change impairs the pursuit of extrinsic aspirations.

5.2 Validity and Reflections on the Climate Anxiety Scale

We were not able to replicate the original factor structure of the CAS in our sample. We interpreted the factors emerging from an exploratory factor analysis in our sample as *behavioral symptoms* and *cognitive consequences* of engaging with climate change. However, rather than recommending the use of the scale and interpretation of these factors, we raise a general discussion of the CAS, specifically with regard to the content and the clinical significance of climate anxiety as assessed in this scale.

5.2.1 What Does the Climate Anxiety Scale Measure?

Studying the scale and its constituent items more closely when analyzing the data, we became skeptical as to whether the scale actually captures the emotional core of climate anxiety that would differentiate it from other emotions. Many of its items are based on a measure of rumination, which is a typical symptom of depression (see Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). It may thus be misleading to talk about climate anxiety in this case. A more accurate term could be climate-related *emotional impairment* as a consequence of climate-related distress. We consider the CAS as a measure that summarizes different possible impairments resulting from the climate crisis rather than capturing the emotional experience of anxiety. Based on our findings and interpretation, we suggest to rework the scale by 1) including an emotional factor that assesses a range of anxiety-related feelings, such as worry, fear, and anxiety; 2) including “classic ingredients in anxiety” such as “difficult feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncontrollability” that climate change produces (Pikhala, 2020, p. 2); and 3) extending the cognitive factor to better grasp the definition of climate anxiety as “the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse” (Albrecht, 2012, p. 250).

5.2.2 Is Climate Anxiety Clinically Relevant?

While we understand climate anxiety to be an adaptive response to the existential threat of climate change, we see value in discussing whether it may indeed require clinical

support. In fact, some authors (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Cunsolo et al., 2020) argue that this may potentially be the case, especially for people with underlying symptoms of anxiety, depression, or stress (Searle & Gow, 2010). In our sample, the correlations of climate anxiety with general anxiety and depressiveness were significant but low. Clayton and Karazsia (2020) report higher correlations, indicating that the reported climate anxiety may be more clinically significant in their US sample than in our German-speaking sample.

Furthermore, our study shows that people reporting higher climate anxiety avoid information about climate change in their everyday lives, perhaps to protect themselves from experiencing even more troubling emotions. This might be a relatively adaptive self-protective response to anxiety, as it avoids stimulating the anxiety in everyday life and thereby avoiding its potentially debilitating effects.

In the case of pathological anxiety, people likely are unable to act (Barlow, 2002). Contradicting the findings of the original study (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020), people in our study with higher climate anxiety reported more pro-environmental outcomes. Our results seem to be more in line with former results who showed *climate change distress* (i.e., anxiety, sorrow, loss) to be a predictor of pro-environmentalism (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Reser et al., 2012). This is a further indicator that the reported climate anxiety is not pathological but adaptive (Verplanken et al., 2020). It may be a practical anxiety (Kurth, 2018) – an activating emotion that moves people to remove the threat and behave pro-environmentally when the anxiety does not become too overwhelming. Overall, we interpret our study in line with Pikhala's (2020) summary of a multitude of disciplines that describe *eco-anxiety* as a non-pathological phenomenon.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Our study has two strengths that set it apart from other studies in the field. First, it is the first empirical psychological study investigating climate anxiety in a well-powered German-speaking quota sample, stratified for age and gender. Second, it provides a theoretically sound analysis of potential psychological correlates of climate anxiety. Nevertheless, we cannot draw conclusions representative for the German population, as this would have required a random sampling procedure. Moreover, one needs to be cautious in terms of generalizing the current findings to other contexts. Different emotional responses to the climate crisis are normative in and contingent on different cultures (see Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Norgaard, 2011). Germany represents a different cultural context than the US, where the original measure was developed, even though both are industrialized Western nations.

Most people in our study reported low climate anxiety and none reported high levels of climate anxiety. However, it is reasonable to expect climate anxiety to increase in the future (e.g., Cunsolo et al., 2020). Thus, future research should recruit “extreme group” samples that report higher levels of climate anxiety already today to understand the genesis and functionality of climate anxiety. This examination of extreme groups would allow uncovering potential antecedents and correlates of higher levels of climate anxiety.

Furthermore, we used self-report measures. Besides common difficulties inherent in self-report measures (e.g., Kormos & Gifford, 2014), something as complex, sensitive, and deeply contextualized as climate anxiety may simply not be fully captured using a self-report measure (Lertzman, 2015). This research is thus inherently limited to the conscious perception and explicit acknowledgment of climate anxiety. Finally, our study is limited by its cross-sectional design. Processes underlying climate anxiety, for instance different coping strategies people use to reduce their anxiety over time, cannot be uncovered in cross-sectional designs. Future studies should thus employ mixed-methods, longitudinal approaches to capture the development, complexity, contradictions, salience, and unconsciousness of

climate anxiety. One approach may be to create and investigate protected spaces, in which people can fully express, acknowledge, and work through their climate-related emotions in a supportive group (perhaps similar to death cafés, e.g., Miles & Corr, 2017, or work on grief and active hope, Macy & Johnstone, 2012). Another could be to combine in-depth interviews about the climate crisis with psycho-physiological measurements.

5.4 Conclusion

This study is the first to systematically investigate correlates of climate anxiety in a German-speaking quota sample. We found that basic psychological need frustration, left-wing political orientation, and absence of climate denial are related to climate anxiety. Given that we could not satisfactorily replicate the original factor structure of the CAS, we recommend to rework the scale by including the emotional core of the anxious experience, and use this extended measure in creative, mixed-methods approaches. This would aid not only our understanding of climate anxiety but also contribute to productive ways of working with this anxiety in a world that faces the climate crisis and is in dire need of a socio-ecological transformation to ensure a livable planet.

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