

Parenting and Climate Change

Capabilities to prepare children for the future

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The nascent research on parenting and climate change has primarily emphasized parental responsibilities and provided advice for parents. However, so far, the parental perspective has been minimally studied and how parents themselves experience raising children in climate change times is yet to be explored.

The complex nature of climate change information and the prevailing uncertainty around global political decision-making processes are reflected in the experiences of parents as feelings of insufficiency and disempowerment.

Based on the findings of this exploratory research, it is argued that parents need to be cared for to be able to become caring parents for their children in times of climate change. In line with this argument, a caring research agenda has been formulated with both discovery-based and interventionist dimensions and a series of research questions have been proposed.

The urgency of climate change action

Living in times of climate change is very unsettling as we are increasingly experiencing the impacts in our daily lives. Thinking ahead and trying to imagine what to expect in

This study presents a preliminary understanding of the lived experiences of parents raising children in times of climate change. Following a descriptive phenomenological methodological approach, data was collected through open and conversational interviews with the participation of 12 parents.

Findings indicated that parents experience sadness, hopelessness and anxiety about the future of their children. The larger systems that parents are embedded in create limitations to the extent to which and ways through which parents can act.

Sometimes, their actions contradict what they perceive to be the right action creating a sense of compromised integrity and feelings of guilt towards their children.

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the coming decades is undeniably a burdensome cognitive endeavor, particularly given the current uncertainties associated with political processes and stagnating action. The burden of this cognitive endeavor is topped up by feelings of loss for an increasing number of us who observe and anticipate the environmental changes in near and far locations – climate change-induced grief is becoming part and parcel of our experience with the current status of the world [1].

Based on the current outlook, unfolding possible futures are bleak. In a recent special report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) discussed the impacts of a global average temperature rise of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels on natural and human systems. According to the report, human activities have already caused an approximately 1 °C temperature rise above pre-industrial levels and the increase is likely to reach 1.5 °C between 2030 and 2052 if the trend continues at the current rate.

Climate change and parenting

Given this current outlook, the children and youth of today will be exposed to significant risks during their lifetime. Three major reasons cause concern about their coping ability. [2] First, children are more vulnerable to the direct socio-economic, environmental and health impacts of climate change. Second, most young people know about climate change and are worried about its impacts on their lives. Third, they will grow up in a world going through dramatic changes (resulting from the locked-in effects of climate change), including the significant lifestyle changes associated with the required rapid transitions to low-carbon futures or, in the case of a failure in action, impacts that could render the planet largely uninhabitable in their lifetime. These concerns bring into focus societal actors with care responsibilities to children, particularly, and arguably primarily, the parents of today.

Parenting and climate change form a nascent research area. The existing limited empirical and theoretical literature focuses on, for example, the impact and implications of being a parent on climate change [3] the responsibility of parents in regards to urgently needed climate change action [4], advice on parental behavior and parenting models [5], the dilemmas faced by parents in managing health risks for children and undertaking pro-environmental behavior at home [6], quantified measures of parental-worry levels about climate change [7] and complex interrelationships between how changing parenting practices respond to the broader socio-cultural context and influence the climate change impacts of certain sectors, such as agriculture. [8]

Articulating parental responsibilities and prescribing parental advice on how parents can and should help their children are important contributions to parenting and climate change research. Similarly, quantitative research on the worry levels and risk perception

of parents provides a helpful backdrop for understanding parental psychology regarding climate change. Empirical work on macro-scale dynamics between parental practices and sectorial-level climate change impacts, deepen our understanding of the complexities associated with parenting and climate change. This body of work, therefore, also underlines the importance of adopting a systemic and multi-scale perspective in parenting and climate change research to be able to identify and intervene in multiple leverage points in policy and practice across several knowledge domains.

Understanding the experiences of parents

To make the best use of the findings from this emerging research and to expand its boundaries, understanding the experiences of parents raising children during times of climate change from the perspective of parents is also needed. This is because the capacity of parents to fulfill their parental responsibilities and to enact various advice on parenting while negotiating the dilemmas they encounter is contingent on how they experience raising children in times of climate change. The specifics of what parents actually worry about, how they live with and through these worries and the implications of these experiences on their parenting are yet to be studied.

Starting with this framing, this article contributes to the emerging research on parenting and climate change by presenting a preliminary understanding of the lived experiences of parents raising children in times of climate change. The research is explorative in its nature avoiding generalizations. The main aim is to provide some pointers for future research on understanding parental experiences related to climate change.

To be or not to be a parent

Perhaps one of the first questions that comes to mind in regard to parenting and climate change relates to the very decision people make about becoming a parent. There, in fact, exist heated debates about whether people should even have children in the first place if they care about climate change. [9] This discussion is multi-faceted and highly complex, requiring in-depth and critical analysis of the rights and responsibilities of individuals, and private and public organizations, as well as those of governments, considering the ethical, legal and practical dimensions; it is not likely to be settled soon or easily.

Although this article focuses on people who are already parents, it is important to acknowledge that deliberating whether or not to have children is now perhaps more complex than ever and arguably requires considerations above and beyond individuals' abilities to meet basic parenting responsibilities. An older study found that the decision to remain childfree was only marginally affected by environmental concerns. [10] This may

change as the impacts of climate change become more widely experienced by people in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, most people become parents, and this is unlikely to change in the near future. In addition, those people who are already parents are implicated by climate change in multiple ways. It is therefore important to emphasize understanding the multiple ways in which being a parent and parenting relate to climate change.

First and foremost, having children is associated with the significant 'carbon legacies' of individuals, ranging across several generations. [11] However, this is only from the perspective of population increase – the impact of becoming a parent; once a child is born, that child becomes an emitter. There is also another side of the coin that relates to how being a parent influences individuals' emissions. On this, a recent study in the Swedish context has found that parents emit significantly more greenhouse gas emissions than those adults who are not parents. [12] The increased emissions were mainly tied to increased transportation and changed food consumption. Also, regardless of gender, becoming a parent increases individuals' worry about impacts on the climate. [13] However, some implied that such increased worry does not automatically translate into becoming a greener person; on the contrary, the evidence suggests that becoming a parent increases individuals' emissions. Therefore, the conclusion from this paragraph is that by becoming a parent, an individual becomes a source of increased emissions, both in the short term and in the long term.

This brings into focus the topic of the responsibilities of parents in regard to climate change. Whether parents can be held directly responsible for increased emissions that relate to child raising and intergenerational carbon legacies, and if so, to what extent, is a politically and ethically delicate discussion. Although this discussion cannot be held at length here without losing the focus of the article, a note is necessary to highlight that the emissions generated by individuals are a systemic result. Shifting the responsibility for reducing or eliminating the emissions that can be directly attributed to becoming a parent solely onto individuals disregards the fact that in their choices, those individuals are, to a large extent, bound by the actions and decisions of politicians and businesses; they do not necessarily have the power to choose between alternatives as to the alternatives either do not exist (e.g. an energy system that is fully based on renewable energy) or are not accessible to all (e.g. about three billion people rely on traditional fuels for cooking).

Do parents then have a responsibility to influence political and societal decision-making and institutional changes? Indeed, Cripps (2017) argued that, from a philosophical point of view, the parents of today have a special shared duty to their children and their indirect descendants by having caused their children to exist in a state of vulnerability to certain harms in the first place and, by bringing children into the world, they have caused the prospect of a whole line of

descendants who will also be vulnerable. She highlighted that the parents of today have more direct and primary responsibility for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the case of climate change, as they may be the only generation who can act upon timely mitigation.

Besides this 'action responsibility', parents are also responsible to influence the behavior of their children in a pro-environmental direction, at least to alleviate some of the indirect emissions attributable to their carbon legacy. In support of this, there is early empirical evidence that suggests that family-based discussions on climate change, regardless of parents' disposition and concern levels, predict more climate change-mitigating behavior among children. [14] Similarly, parental perceptions of climate change risk and individual agency to influence mitigation are correlated with adolescents' risk and efficacy perception, as well as with information-seeking behavior about climate change. [15] Another study argued that parents should adopt an authoritative (eco-) parenting model in order to affect their children's ability to protect the environment, and mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts [16]. Other researchers focused on parental advice and guidance like a series of tips for parents to help their children in developing strategies to cope with climate change. [17]

While current parents have significant responsibility for influencing political action to address climate change and educating their children as pro-environmental individuals, these responsibilities cannot be fulfilled in isolation from all systemic influencers of parental experience and behavior. In addition, there is currently very little understanding of how such complexities influence the experiences and behavior of parents. In fact, there are quite complex decisions parents have to navigate in household management that relate to emissions that they can control to a certain extent. For example, health policies about infant care during extremely hot weather and policies on energy saving are at odds in the Australian context, and there is a need for integrated, cross-sectorial policymaking in order to provide consistent advice and guidelines for parents on more adaptive practices at home [18].

At the same time, there are similar mismatches between different policy instruments in the USA, New Zealand and Germany that leave parents confused and disoriented in balancing the provision of optimal care for young children during extreme weather events, reducing energy consumption and managing energy-related household expenses [19]. They also argued that there is a need for systemic policy measures and behavioral advice that support parents across multiple vulnerabilities, such as energy poverty, the added stress of care responsibilities and isolation. The matter requires going beyond investing in cooling measures and putting effort into building social infrastructures for support and tapping into public facilities which can operate as 'cool hubs' for multiple households at the same time.

In addition to such micro-level complexities that

parents face, there are also macro-level complexities that influence the relationship between parenting and climate change. Parenting practices are not temporally or spatially static; they dynamically change in response to changes that take place in the broader societal context. The question of how changes in the broader social context influence the challenges and responsibilities of parents regarding climate change is significantly understudied but arguably central to discussions on the extent to which parents are directly responsible and can act upon their relevant responsibilities.

Based on this overview, it can be inferred that the questions about parenting and climate change cannot be easily reduced to quantified accounts of the emissions caused by becoming a parent and raising children. Additionally, the responsibilities parents have about climate change are varied, and meeting these responsibilities involves significant complexities. Although there is some emerging and important work on these complexities, research so far seems to have focused on observable, measurable and external factors. This article contributes to the emerging literature on this with its focus on how parents experience raising children during times of climate change.

Conclusions

The mitigation of future climate change and adaptation to locked-in climate change requires urgent action across all levels of society, by all actors in society. The climate has already warmed by 1 °C compared to pre-industrial levels. Currently, we are on track for higher degrees of warming; according to current estimates, the temperature rise will reach 1.5 °C between 2030 and 2052. At the moment, it is uncertain whether human society will be able to limit the temperature rise to this level; however, achieving this target will require significant lifestyle changes. If human society fails to meet this target, then the scale of required adaptation will multiply and the risks of systemic collapse increase. More so than us, the children

and youth of today will be exposed to these challenges (along with the currently unborn near-future generations).

The nascent research area of parenting and climate change has so far discussed the responsibilities of parents to care for and educate their children, generating some solid advice. It has been argued that the parents of today have a shared special responsibility towards not only their children but also to their descendants due to the possibility of being the only generation who can take action towards the timely mitigation of climate change. Starting from the position that, for parents to be able to fulfill their responsibilities and act upon advice, it is important to understand how parents experience parenting under the special circumstances of a changing climate, this article presented the findings of an explorative phenomenological study of twelve parents.

The findings indicated that parents who are concerned about the implications of climate change on their children experience sadness, hopelessness and anxiety about their children's future. They feel guilt and that their integrity is compromised because they believe that they cannot model the right behavior. The parents feel insufficient and disempowered because they do not think that they have the necessary resources and capabilities to prepare their children for the future.

Based on the findings of this exploratory research, it is clear that parents need informational and psychological support to be able to implement the parental advice provided in earlier research concerning their special responsibilities to their children, their indirect descendants and the current and future society regarding acting on climate change and preparing their children for the impacts and implications of a changing climate. Given that research on parenting and climate change is a nascent research area, there are multiple directions that both discovery-based and interventionist research can take to understand the experiences of parents and to develop solutions to support parents.

- [1] Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018; Doherty and Clayton, 2011.
- [2] Sanson et al., 2018.
- [3] Murtaugh and Schlax, 2009.
- [4] Cripps, 2017.
- [5] Sanson et al., 2018; Nche et al., 2019.
- [6] O'Sullivan and Chisholm, 2020.
- [7] Ekholm and Olofsson, 2017.
- [8] Burton and Farstad, 2020.
- [9] Hendrixson and Gies, 2015.
- [10] Langdridge et al., 2005.

- [11] Murtaugh and Schlax, 2009
- [12] Nordström et al., 2020.
- [13] Ekholm, 2020.
- [14] Lawson et al., 2019.
- [15] Mead et al., 2012.
- [16] Nche et al., 2019.
- [17] Sanson et al., 2018.
- [18] Nicholls and Strengers, 2018.
- [19] O'Sullivan and Chisholm, 2020.