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Article

Learning from Young People Engaged in Climate Activism: The Potential of Collectivizing Despair and Hope

YOUNG
27(5) 435–450, 2019
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in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india
DOI: 10.1177/1103308818817603
journals.sagepub.com/home/you

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Abstract

Hope takes on particular significance at this historical moment, which is defined by the prospect of a climate-altered future. Young people (aged 18–29) from climate action groups in New Zealand were interviewed about how they perceived the future. Deploying a unique combination of conceptual tools and in-depth analysis of a small set of interviews, I explore young New Zealanders' complex relationships with despair and hope. Paulo Freire claimed his despair as a young man 'educated' what emerged as hope. I extend Freire's concept in two ways by considering: (a) how hope might also 'educate' despair and (b) how hope and despair might operate at a collective level, drawing on Rosemary Randall's psychotherapeutic analysis of societal responses to climate change. Participants identified collective processes as generating hope. Collectivizing hope and despair is important so that young people do not feel climate change is only their burden to solve.

Keywords

Individualization, political participation, social movements, young people, hope, despair

Introduction

Hope takes on particular significance at this historical moment, which is distinguished by pervasive media discourses about a climate-altered world. Barack Obama's plea 'We are the last generation who can act on climate change' exemplifies these

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apocalyptic visions (front page of New Zealand's *Listener* magazine, 2015). The apocalypse is foretold everywhere in diverse media; *This Changes Everything* (Klein, 2014), *The Sixth Extinction* (Kolbert, 2014) and *Climate Wars* (Dyer, 2010) are a selection of book titles on this theme. Life is expected to change irrevocably and young people will live longest with the consequences (Eichler, 2015; Nordensvard, 2014; Ojala, 2012). Young people are therefore inheriting a troubled world. In what follows, I explore a small group of young New Zealanders' complex relationships with despair and hope. Education philosopher Paulo Freire claimed his despair as a young man 'educated' what emerged as hope, which provides a conceptual tool for analysing young people's talk about despair and hope. I extend Freire's concept in two ways by considering: (a) how hope might also 'educate' despair, and (b) how hope and despair might operate at a collective level, drawing on Rosemary Randall's (2005) psychotherapeutic analysis of societal responses to climate change.

Hope and despair are intimately interconnected, according to Freire (1994). Freire describes how in his early 20s, he was overcome with despair about the world but he treated his despair as an object of curiosity that he might learn from. In searching to understand his pain, he was 'educating' his hope. Rather than thinking about despair as an emotion to be avoided or minimized, Freire encourages us to imagine how despair might foster hope, which might seem counterintuitive. Freire outlines these ideas in his book *Pedagogy of Hope*, which provides a useful starting point for exploring young people's articulation of hope and despair about a future haunted by the prospect of climate change.

Max Harris' book *The New Zealand Project* represents an important discursive intervention (Cameron, 2001) in the pervasive discourses of 'doom and gloom' identified earlier in this article. Harris is 'twenty-something', a similar age to Freire, and is of the same generation as the participants in this study. Harris (2017, p. 269) believes 'we live in simultaneously troubling and exciting times. Change is in the air…' and his deliberate pairing of 'troubling and exciting' signals what I designate as his discursive intervention. Rebecca Solnit (2016) makes a similar discursive move in her book *Hope in the Dark,* promoting the idea that hope can emerge in what might seem like the darkest of times. Solnit argues that we 'need stories that don't gloss over the ugly damage but don't portray it as all there is either' (137; also refer to Pihkala, 2017). Both Harris and Solnit's acknowledgement of hope and change in spite of, and perhaps because of, 'end of world' discourses constitute an important discursive intervention in predominant discourses. I use 'hope' in its broadest sense to encompass aspirational emotions and visions for social change.

New Zealand's three decades of neoliberal government policy have also shaped the generation the participants in this study are part of (Dean, 2015; Godfery, 2016; Harris, 2017; Nairn, Higgins, & Sligo, 2012). Following the UK and USA, New Zealand embarked on neoliberal economic reforms in 1984 and earned the dubious accolade of being the country to pursue a neoliberal agenda more assiduously and rapidly than any other Western democracy at the time (Kelsey, 1995). A neoliberal agenda is recognizable, wherever 'the market' is privileged and the state's role diminished (Kelsey, 1995). Education and labour market policies, underpinned by neoliberal principles, tend to assume young people are only motivated by individual goals and economic imperatives, such as pursuing tertiary qualifications to secure well-paid employment, and if an individual does not succeed, it is their

responsibility (Dean, 2015; Nairn et al., 2012). Although the current generation of 'twenty-somethings' has grown up surrounded by neoliberal discourses, emphasizing narrow versions of individual economic 'success', these discourses do not determine young people's politics and ways of thinking about the world (Larner, 2003; Nairn et al., 2012; Nissen, 2017).

In 2016, when the study reported here was conducted, the prospect of a climate-altered future occupied an increasingly central position in New Zealand's public discourse. Frustration with lack of action from central and local government over the previous decades sparked a range of responses locally and nationally. Young people were notable in leading the way with the establishment in 2012 of a nationwide movement called *Generation Zero* with a vision of a zero-carbon future; New Zealand branches of global climate action groups such as *350 Aotearoa* with the goal of reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide to 350 ppm; and local environmental groups in universities, polytechnics and high schools. While these and other groups, including New Zealand's political party *The Greens*, worked hard to convince New Zealand society of how urgent and serious climate change is, central governments of the past three decades all demonstrated reluctance to implement meaningful policies to reduce carbon emissions and prepare for a climate-altered future (Harris, 2017; Meduna, 2015). At the time of the research reported here, the New Zealand government's lack of meaningful action to reduce carbon emissions could be interpreted as one of many examples of societal denial of the urgency of climate change (Randall, 2005).

As the literature on what motivates young people to engage politically continues to expand (Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2014; Farthing, 2010; Nissen, 2017; Tawhai, 2015), it is timely to pay attention to how hope might operate as a political catalyst for young people's climate action while being careful not to romanticize this process (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015). The research on the threats of climate change for the current generation of young people is extensive (e.g., Eichler, 2015; Harris, 2017; Means, 2015; Nordensvard, 2014; Ulturgasheva, 2012). However, there is a relative paucity of research on how young people construct and enact hope to engage with these threats (Bishop & Willis, 2014; Bryant & Ellard, 2014; Ojala, 2012). When hope is discussed in the literature, it is often represented as an individual emotional response and as a positive, motivating and potentially politicizing force, which can sustain people in the face of overwhelming odds (Lueck, 2007; Rogstad & Vestel, 2011; Smith, 2013; Solnit, 2016; te Riele, 2010).

But it is also possible to conceptualize emotions such as hope and despair as collective responses. Randall's (2005) deployment of psychotherapeutic concepts for understanding emotional collective responses is particularly useful for understanding how societal processes can create conditions where climate activists are more susceptible to feelings of hopelessness and burnout. Randall identifies how collective denial of, and anxiety about, climate change creates conditions for activists to burn out. When the larger population avoids or denies guilt about environmental damage, there is an unconscious transference of guilt onto climate activists, which provides 'a handy peg on which to hang a split-off collective conscience' (Randall, 2005, p. 175). This unconscious transference of guilt onto climate activists might enable us to understand the scale of despair experienced by participants in this study as burnout, and their sense of responsibility for solving climate change as well as their own burnout.

The research reported here deploys a unique combination of conceptual tools and in-depth analysis of a small set of interviews, as one approach to understanding young people's relationship with hope and despair, when the media is saturated with discourses heralding 'the end of the world' (Brown, 2016). Young people often join a collective movement full of hope and idealism, yet end up disillusioned and burnt out. Randall (2005) provides tools for a deeper analysis of how individuals' experiences are shaped by broader collective processes, which are seldom identified and examined. Randall's analysis of the collective denial of the significance of climate change, drawing on the conceptual tools of psychotherapy, extends Freire's insights.

The article is organized into four main sections. First, I explore further how hope and despair are conceptualized within the broader social science literature. Second, I explain how I conducted the research reported here. The third section presents my argument and analysis. I begin with the research participants' 'end of world' discourses and then explore how it is possible to understand individuals' despair and burnout as the consequence of a broader collective process of societies' denial of climate change, drawing on Randall (2005). My analysis extends Freire's conceptual work in understanding his own despair to consider the potential for collectivizing despair and hope as we face a climate-altered future. The final section outlines the implications of the research. But first, in order to understand young people's capacity to hope, it is important to explore further how hope is conceptualized.

Conceptualizing Hope

Hope can act as a catalyst for individuals and collectives to pursue social change. Hope has been conceptualized as a potential catalyst for individual agency; for example, Bryant and Ellard (2014, p. 486) noted the importance of hope 'for something better' for marginalized young people facing uncertain futures (also refer to Freire, 1994; Smith, 2013). 'Within much of the critical literature, hope is assumed to be the engine of change and transformation' (Ahmed, 2013, p. 184; also refer Aronson, 2017; Braithwaite, 2004). Politically active collectives of young people demonstrate the importance of a shared sense of purpose and connections with others locally and globally, which might be negotiated via diverse media, including the internet (e.g., Feixa, Pereira, & Juris, 2009; Hunt, 2017; Winter, 2017). But unequal power relations among members of a collective, affecting whose vision to pursue, can undermine the transformative potential frequently attributed to hope (Braithwaite, 2004; Courville & Piper, 2004).

To hope can be a political, and collective, act: 'There is no change without a dream, as there is no dream without hope' (Freire, 1994, p. 91). Dreaming can also act as a catalyst to bring people together politically: one way to 'bind people together politically ... asks that people imagine a future, that they rise above present-day situations which are generally depressing, dream a new dream and set a new vision' (Smith, 1999, p. 152). Hope is necessary for meaningful politics, but hope can risk being vacuous if it is not accompanied by political purpose: 'politics without hope is impossible, and hope without politics is a reification of possibility' (Ahmed, 2013, p. 184). Hope can function in different ways, for example, as a response to injustice, a vision for the future, the translation of despair into knowledge; it can generate energy and open up the future (Ahmed, 2013).

Appeals to hope, including the rationale for the research reported here, can risk constructing hope only in positive terms (Lueck, 2007; Ojala, 2012; Rogstad & Vestel, 2011; Solnit, 2016; te Riele, 2010). Critiques of simplistic conceptualizations of hope are therefore important (e.g., Courville & Piper, 2004; Lear, 2006; Pihkala, 2017; Solnit, 2016) and I identify three critiques. First, 'If hope is to lead to social change, we must be clear about whose hopes we are examining and how different hopes are evaluated' (Courville & Piper, 2004, p. 41). Second, there can be a cruel side to optimism if the hopes and dreams we pursue negatively affect our well-being, according to Berlant (2011; also refer to Randall, 2005). Third, hope, like other resources, is unevenly distributed and the rise of neoliberalism has corresponded with the shrinking capacity of nation states to foster and distribute hope, according to Hage (2003). The young people in this study have grown up during New Zealand's neoliberal reforms, which emphasized individual success and responsibility. In what follows, I explore how engaging in climate action with the hope of averting a climate-altered future was not always a positive experience.

The Research

The goal of the small-scale, exploratory study reported here was to investigate how diverse young people living in New Zealand in 2016 imagined their futures when there was extensive media coverage of climate, economic and political uncertainties nationally and globally. Three groups were purposefully recruited to enhance the likelihood of collecting diverse young people's perspectives of how climate and economic uncertainties affected their imagined futures. One group of five young people were engaged in a variety of action to address climate change; and two groups were more focused on dealing with economic uncertainties in their present lives: five young mothers and five young Māori (New Zealand's indigenous people). Among the latter two groups, young parents faced the double layer of considering their children's future as well as their own. All participants were recruited via a snowballing method to include particular groups whose perspectives on the future we were theoretically interested in, so they are not 'representative' of the broader New Zealand population of young people. All participated in one in-depth interview in 2016. Although climate change was a priority for those engaged in climate action, it was not a priority for the young people dealing with economic marginalization in their daily lives. The climate action case study is the focus of this article and the other two case studies will be the focus of separate articles.

Five young people were involved in the climate action case study: two women (Louise, aged 26 at the time of the interview, and Naomi, aged 25, all names are code names) and three men (Tony, aged 26; Frank, aged 24; and Owen, aged 18). At the time of the interviews, two were engaged in tertiary study, two had completed tertiary qualifications, and one was at secondary school and planning to go onto tertiary study, which indicates the group's middle-class cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2004). Each participant was interviewed about what inspired them to join climate and environmental action groups, their experiences of being part of collective action and their hopes and aspirations for the future. The climate and environmental action groups are not named in this small-scale study because this information might identify participants. Although the climate action case study

is about a small group of participants, it is possible to contribute to the growing field of research about the role of hope in young people's lives by drawing on a unique combination of conceptual tools (Freire, 1994; Randall, 2005) and presenting an extended analysis of individuals' experiences not usually feasible within the word constraints of journal articles (e.g., Campbell's [2017] article in *Young* which reports data from four participants).

Turning an everyday concept like hope into an analytic concept can be difficult because its meaning is often assumed to be self-evident (Bishop & Willis, 2014). Discourse analysis provides useful tools for working reflexively with 'seemingly' self-evident concepts such as hope and despair. Four key elements inform my approach to the discourse analysis reported here. First, I avoid rigid binaries and provide more than one interpretation wherever possible (Cameron, 2001; Sandretto, 2011). More specifically, I demonstrate how despair and hope work together in participants' talk about their experiences of being involved in climate action, rather than create a false dichotomy of despair versus hope, and include interpretations which take account of individual and collective processes. Second, I pay attention to how discourses at the micro-scale of individual perspectives about a climate-altered future are shaped by macro-scale discourses such as 'the end of the world' (Brown, 2016), which circulate nationally and globally (refer to Ainsworth & Hardy [2004] who link micro- and macro-scale discourses). Third, I prioritize analytical attention to those participants who described their experiences in emotionally weighted ways (Grace, 1998; Randall, 2005). Fourth, my analysis is intended as a discursive intervention to intersperse discourses of hope among the pervasive discourses of 'doom and gloom', which can paralyse action for change. The discursive intervention of including hope, while not denying despair, is modelled by Pihkala (2017, p. 109) who advocates for acknowledging 'hope in the midst of tragedy' (also refer to Solnit, 2016). The next section presents a deeper analysis of participants' despair and how it 'educated' their hopes in different kinds of ways.

Analysing the Emotional Terrain of Despair and Hope

All of the participants experienced a complex set of emotions about the predicted consequences of climate change, including despair and hope. Other emotions were present, such as anger and guilt; none of these emotions are mutually exclusive (Ahmed, 2013). Emotions were important catalysts, galvanizing people to take action in their own lives (e.g., reducing carbon by cycling and buying local produce) and to join groups such as environmental groups at their high school and climate activist groups. Emotions were also important catalysts for leaving these groups because intensive involvement led some participants to burnout (Randall, 2005). Three of the five participants in the study had taken a break from climate activism at the time of the interview. Two of the three took a break because they experienced what they described as burnout, which one participant explained as a 'total feeling of hopelessness' (Louise). While hope and aspiration for change motivated participants to join groups, burnout experienced as hopelessness and despair, prompted retreat, at least for a time. In what follows, I explore participants' complex relationships with despair and hope.

'End of the World' Discourses Already Haunted Some Young People in the Study

Participants in this study were critical of how neoliberalism and capitalism have produced the 'wicked problem' of climate change, and Louise succinctly articulated what is at stake: 'if we wanna address climate change, then we also have to address the politics that fuels it … then you get into capitalism and competition'. She went on to describe the looming spectre of climate change: 'discovering that the rest of your life was gonna be dominated by this giant … problem of climate change'. Ironically, she was also able to imagine how despite this sense of doom and gloom, she might also understand this moment in positive terms, looking back from a hypothetical future:

> it might be that we look at these days now and say those are really cool, like this was the last of the really good times or that was already a good time and we just don't know that it's the good part yet.

Louise's despair about the future seemed to occupy shifting ground, where she could not trust her perception of the end of the world. She was aware that the object of her despair—'these days'—might turn out to be 'the last of the really good times'. Implicit here was the possibility that Louise might be distracted by despair from appreciating the 'good times' until it was too late.

'The end of the world' discourse can also be understood as an 'end of life' discourse. The prospect of climate change influenced Louise's decision not to have children:

> [F]rom about the age of 21 ... I decided I didn't wanna have children because ... with more than 2 degrees of warming in the world, what kind of world are you giving to them because the problem is gonna be really unfixable by that stage ... would I want to give that life to someone ... that's something lots of people in my generation are concerned about ... if it's going to be really bad, what's my decision gonna be about that?

At the time of the interview, Louise was 26 and her expectations that the world might be 'unfixable' due to 'more than 2 degrees of warming' meant she could not imagine bringing new life into that world. She acknowledged how 'lots of people in my generation' are questioning whether to have children.

Louise's perception of a grim future was shared by others in the study, including Tony who referred to the 'apocalypse' and explained what it might look like:

> I imagine that it would be set off by some sort of global event … perhaps a really, really bad weather event … the sea level's way up anyway and then there's all of these people who are totally water logged and have nowhere to go and before you know it, a whole lot of crime starts happening and then the government can't control that and then I would imagine that the government would kind of just dissolve within a very short period ….

Although these apocalyptic imaginings sound depressing, Tony acknowledged how he was fascinated by 'survivalist' discourses, so his quote cannot simply be interpreted as an articulation of despair and/or fear of the worst-case scenario. Indeed, an

apocalyptic discourse prompts survivalist kinds of thinking, which could be interpreted as a form of hope in spite of overwhelming odds. Tony also reflexively analyzed his discourse:

> [T]he idea of an apocalypse is essentially just an interpretation … of all of the information that I've received over … however long I can remember, that pertains to what could happen in the future … but I think it's also like … a bit of a sadistic manifestation (chuckles) … that I've come up with as like a worst case scenario ….

Tony was aware of condensing diverse discourses from the media and conversations with his peers into his construction of 'the apocalypse'. Tony and other participants reproduced dominant discourses of 'doom and gloom' (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004) and often conveyed their feelings about a climate-altered future, drawing on emotionally weighted discourses (Grace, 1998), such as Louise's decision not to bring new life into this world and Tony's apocalyptic imaginings. I turn now to my analysis of the relationship between the emotionally weighted discourses of despair and hope.

How Might Despair 'Educate' Hope? And Hope 'Educate' Despair?

Hope for change was a powerful motivating force for participants to join climate action groups but hope was not always a positive force. Louise and Naomi both reported significant consequences for their health and well-being of intensive involvement in climate activism and their respective analyses are instructive conceptually. In Louise's case, there was evidence of Freire's (1994) claim that despair can educate a tempered form of hope that was no longer 'blindly optimistic'. In Naomi's case, there was evidence of a two-way process of despair educating hope and hope educating despair. In Naomi's explanation of how irrational hope and misplaced optimism persisted despite her despair, it was possible to imagine that hope, however 'irrational' and 'misplaced', was also 'educating' her despair.

Louise questioned her assumption that 'optimism about the future' was enough, during her interview. Louise was not alone in her assumption that hope and optimism should provide the main impetus for generating change; hope and similar aspirations are portrayed as the engine for generating social transformation in the research literature (Ahmed, 2013; Aronson, 2017; Braithwaite, 2004; Smith, 2013). But in hindsight, Louise pondered how useful her hopefulness and optimism proved to be.

> Well for a really long time, I guess I assumed that you had to have some kind of optimism about the future, that is, the ability for us to create a situation where climate change wouldn't ruin the world … but I had a friend who is incredibly cynical and pessimistic, actually a couple of them, both involved in [climate activist group] and both of them not burnt out, surprisingly which I find quite interesting … I'm just thinking about how I could've not burnt out and if I hadn't been so blindly optimistic, maybe I would've been able to temper my engagement in things so I didn't just go all out and try and do as much as I could and just realizing what's actually a bit more realistic ….

Louise's despair and burnout prompted her to look at the role of optimism and hope afresh. Instead, Louise wondered if cynicism might have been more useful

because she noticed how two 'incredibly cynical' activists, in the group she was part of, did not burnout. She remembered how their cynical assessments of the group's proposed actions, often called a 'pre-mortem', proved to be a useful 'reality check' although she found such pre-mortems frustrating. But in hindsight, her experience of despair and burnout 'educated' her hope (Freire, 1994), tempering her hope to be more 'realistic'.

Naomi described the tug between frustration, despair and hope as akin to two competing 'visions of the world' during her interview. She was frustrated because 'obvious' steps to mitigate climate change were not happening, yet she still felt 'a deep sense of hope' that something could be done:

> the accumulation of frustration of knowing enough about the issue to see very clearly what we could be doing about it and feeling a deep sense of hope that we can do something about it … [but] seeing us not doing that or seeing some of it, enough of it happening that you still have hope but just seeing so much stuff that just seems blatantly obvious not happening.

Naomi's reflexive puzzling over how she (and others around her) could feel both cynical and optimistic provided a glimpse of how seemingly oppositional emotions might be intertwined: one informing the other. She deployed 'cynicism' and 'optimism', rather than 'despair' and 'hope', to articulate what she felt, and noted how these bifurcated feelings were shared by others around her:

> I think probably just that my sense of, like the people around me is that we all sort of hold these like weird two visions of the world … [1] like realists' kind of cynical possible trajectory of the world [which] is like climate chaos … and like conflict and refugees and like shit hitting the fan and [2] just like a general sort of almost like misplaced optimism and, no I shouldn't say misplaced, just like an optimism and hope that … it seems kind of unbelievable … and kind of irrational but it's still there. (Naomi)

In Naomi's account of her 'weird two visions of the world', it was possible to discern how despair and cynicism 'educate' a cautious optimism, although she acknowledged doubts about whether there was any reason to be optimistic. For Naomi, optimism survived despite a cynical realist interpretation of what was likely to happen. Naomi puzzled over how such 'irrational' hope could persist, initially naming it as 'misplaced optimism'. In her reflexive process, Naomi demonstrated how despair (and frustration) 'educated' her hope, *and* how hope ('irrational' and 'misplaced'), was also 'educating' her despair.

Despair and Burnout as More than an Individual's Problem

Burnout might seem like the ultimate expression of disappointment and despair. Certainly, there was a sense of the consequences for participants personally, and for climate activism more broadly, due to attrition: 'We lost a lot bunch of people … who were very talented because they put a lot of effort into it and saw negative results' (Frank). Burnout seemed to follow intensive periods of work, often during the lead up to central and local government elections as climate activists worked hard to

convince voters of the urgency of electing politicians and local government councillors committed to taking action to mitigate climate change. While participants felt they had made progress in putting climate change more firmly on the political agenda, there were also disappointment and despair that the issue was not taken seriously enough. A double burden was evident: these participants felt responsible for solving climate change and for resolving their burnout.

Young people's determination to address climate change and 'the politics that fuels it' (Louise) can set them up to take on society's collective anxiety and guilt about climate change and environmental damage, according to Randall (2005). In particular, Randall (2005, p. 175) describes how young people's 'enthusiasm and idealism give way to exhaustion and disillusion', a scenario common to political movements. Participants framed their experiences of burnout as though they were somehow responsible for 'burning out'. They were either unable to find the right balance: 'if we all had like just a little bit more balance in our ways of doing things' (Louise), or were too naïve and idealistic: 'you kind of just have to say, you can't win everything otherwise you'd just get, otherwise that's how you get burnt out' (Frank). Participants' disillusionment and burnout could be understood as part of a process of despair 'educating' a more pragmatic sense of hope (Freire, 1994). Louise and Naomi's extended discussion of how burnout impacted their sense of well-being was also evidence of what Berlant (2011) describes as 'cruel optimism'. But it is important to understand despair as produced within a broader collective context and to consider how climate activists might be carrying a greater burden of despair if the society in which they live is not seriously addressing climate change.

Climate change is an all-consuming problem, with limitless demands; there is 'always too much to do and it seems impossible to say "no"' (Randall, 2005, pp. 175–176). The all-consuming problem of climate change and its limitless demands were encapsulated by Naomi as a 'weird assumption that [she] was working under … you know it was like if I just work all the time to fix all of these things, then at some unknown point in the future, things will be good'. Naomi was aware of the consequences: 'I got to a point … where I felt like I was really like suffering, like quite exhausted and frustrated.' The group she was part of gave her 'permission to actually put myself first and to be able to acknowledge the fact that I was like placing my, or like making my happiness dependent on these impossible outcomes' of 'fixing' climate change. Louise identified a dawning realization among her peers: 'we started to get a sense that either the nature of the work or the way that we were doing it was unsustainable at a personal level but also that maybe that's what happens when you try and deal with something like climate change'. Although Louise and Naomi noticed that others shared their experience of burnout, they spoke as though their own burnout was their problem to solve.

What Generated Hope: The Significance of 'the Collective'

Instead, I argue that burnout is not an individual 'failing' but part of the broader collective process identified by Randall (2005). Just as the process that produces burnout is a collective one, the way out is also collective. Randall (2005, p. 177) explains how once climate change is taken more seriously by the majority of the population,

> [T]he projections onto activists are reduced and a bigger space is created for sanity and creativity. Although conscious levels of collective anxiety may be raised in the short term, if real action follows then there is a chance that both this and the collective guilt can be relieved.

When I asked participants about what generated hope, they all identified collective processes.

Participants in the study identified four collective processes, which generated hope for them: first, naming climate change as a collective problem. Louise echoed Randall's analysis (2005) in acknowledging the importance of climate change as a collective responsibility and how being part of a climate action group was reassuring, ameliorating the sense of carrying the burden alone:

> When you're a climate change activist for lack of a better word, [knowing] that you're not alone in this problem and that when you fail, it's not your fault that climate change happens, it's actually a collective issue that you, lots of people have to work on … like the ability to talk about the stuff in a group of people where you know a) you're not alone and; b) you're not crazy for having to think about these things is really nice … I think it's the sense of community that you have around.

Other participants shared Louise's view of the importance of shared responsibility and being part of a community who cared about climate change.

Second, being part of collective action. All the participants were inspired to join collectives to address climate change, ranging from school environmental groups to nationwide organizations. Some participants were active in building 'a youth movement for climate action', explaining the significance of their goals and their collective size:

> using that giant grouping of young people to say young people have this capacity and we really want New Zealand to do something about climate change ... [we were] organizing all of this stuff which the government hasn't done ever and it was the first time something like that in New Zealand had ever happened. (Louise)

Other participants were invited to represent young people at climate marches: 'the three of us were to kind of harness the youth voice in climate change' (Owen). While others explained their involvement in more pragmatic terms: 'I'm not gonna get put off by the uncertainty of [climate change] … if it is gonna happen, it is gonna happen but not without me at least trying to help' (Frank). For these participants, being part of events such as marches and collective action generated some hope (Solnit, 2016).

Third, connecting to the global climate movement. For Naomi, connecting to the global climate movement generated a sense of hope when she was disillusioned with what was happening in New Zealand: 'Well I try and stay in touch with the sort of global climate movement, not sort of person to person but just really like blogs and social media and it's definitely, I would say that which gives me a lot of hope' (Naomi). The significance of global and transnational connections has been emphasized by other researchers working with youth activists (e.g., Feixa et al., 2009; Hunt, 2017).

Fourth, reaching the point where climate change is taken for granted as part of everyday discourse by the majority of the population. Participants realized their

participation in local government was contributing to this process: 'you do policy submissions, you're slowly shaping the language that's being used in policy documents by the Council' (Frank). For Frank, what generated hope was the thought of a future where 'the most amazing thing that I think I could do … is shifting it so that every discussion is held with [climate change] in consideration', so that taking account of climate change becomes a dominant discourse (Randall, 2005).

Participation in these interconnected collective processes all generated hope for the participants (also refer to Aronson, 2017). When responsibility for climate change is shared locally, nationally and globally, then responses to climate change can 'be managed in more creative ways. This only becomes possible when the issues become truly mainstream and the possibility of reparative action on an appropriate scale starts to seem realistic' (Randall, 2005, p. 176). Collective processes were implicated in generating despair but also hope; participants in this study identified collective processes for sharing, and addressing, the burden of climate change.

Collectivizing Despair and Hope: Concluding Remarks

Young people from climate and environmental action groups in New Zealand articulated 'end of world' discourses found in studies from other parts of the world (e.g., Eichler, 2015; Nordensvard, 2014; Ojala, 2012; Pihkala, 2017; Ulturgasheva, 2012). Participants' imagined outcomes of climate change echoed dire predictions from diverse quarters, including media commentators and scientists (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). The depth of feeling about the prospect of a climate-altered future was profound for the young people in this study (Grace, 1998; Randall, 2005). The research therefore raises important questions about the emotional consequences for young people growing up among discourses of 'doom and gloom' but also represents a discursive intervention (Cameron, 2001) in this pervasive narrative to consider what generates and sustains hope for creating change.

Despair at the thought of a climate-altered future, and the desire to intervene in and change predicted trajectories, galvanized participants to take action in their individual daily lives and as part of collectives. 'End of the world' discourses were not simply paralyzing; young people in this study were motivated to intervene in, and try to change, the outcomes these discourses predict. Despair and hope, and other emotions, were evident in participants' talk. It was possible to discern how despair 'educated' hope (Freire, 1994), especially in participants' acknowledgment that a level of cynicism might be useful in countering 'blind optimism' and also possible to discern how hope 'educated' despair, even when hope seemed irrational. Understanding how hope and despair (and other emotions) work together is important (Ahmed, 2013; Freire, 1994), in order to counter simplistic understandings of what might motivate young people to take action to create social change.

But intervening to create change in societies which seem to ignore, underestimate and/or deny climate change can be exhausting work (Randall, 2005). Two of the five participants in this study reported serious consequences of burnout for their health and well-being, and others commented on attrition among their peers due to burnout (also refer to Berlant [2011]). Although peers were supportive of those experiencing burnout, it was notable that participants spoke of burnout as though it was their individual problem to resolve because they had not found the right balance or were

too idealistic and hopeful. It is therefore important to understand individuals' despair and burnout as the consequence of a broader collective process of denial of climate change, rather than as an individual's problem. Randall (2005) offers psychotherapeutic tools for conceptualizing how such an invisible process might occur and its far-reaching consequences for climate, and other, activists.

Collective processes were implicated in generating despair (Randall, 2005) but also generated hope. When participants in this study were asked what generated hope, they identified collective processes for sharing the burden of climate change and taking action to create change. Connecting with others was central to their activism and collective processes such as marches, campaigns and preparation of local government submissions seemed to inspire hope. Given New Zealand's neoliberal rhetoric of the primacy of the individual (Dean, 2015; Godfery, 2016; Nairn et al., 2012), it was significant that these young people saw collective social action as such a powerful tool. To summarize, despair seemed to play a part in educating hope but tended to be experienced as an individual burden, while hope was generated by the prospect of sharing the burden and collectively creating action to draw attention to climate change. This analysis extends Freire's (1994) conceptual work in understanding how despair and hope might be a collective, as well as an individual, process.

As a result of conducting this research, I propose that we talk more explicitly about hope and despair with young people, including the impact of 'ecological grief' (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018), whenever the opportunity presents in education and across diverse activist initiatives (also refer to Lueck, 2007; Pihkala, 2017). It is important to acknowledge despair and cultivate hope. Acknowledging despair is important, especially the process of how an unfair burden of despair might be transferred to young climate activists. Collectivizing, rather than individualizing, despair might avoid negative consequences for activists and temper hope in productive ways. In thinking about how to cultivate collective forms of responsibility for climate change and collective forms of hope, it is important to acknowledge uneven power relations which can shift an unfair sense of responsibility for solving climate change onto young people and privilege particular groups of young people's hopes and dreams over others' (Courville & Piper, 2004; Hage, 2003). Sharing despair and hope represent an important counter-discourse to the pervasive individualization of responsibility that neoliberal government policies have promoted over three decades in New Zealand. These discourses have not determined young people's approach to social change; indeed, the collective commitments among the participants were testament to how collective motivations exist in spite of, or perhaps because of, the individualizing impetus of neoliberalism and capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Hage, 2003; Nairn et al., 2012).

Recognition of the emotional work that activism entails is important so that young people do not carry the double burden of feeling 'individually' responsible for solving climate change and for resolving their experiences of burnout (Randall, 2005). Instead, participants attributed feeling more hopeful to collective processes, including the importance of not feeling alone in facing a climate-altered future, joining others to take action and linking with global climate justice movements. Freire's (1994) concept of how despair 'educates' hope can be theoretically extended to conceptualizing how despair and hope operate as broader collective processes (Aronson, 2017; Randall, 2005). It is important that everyone shares the responsibility of averting climate change rather than leaving it to young people to solve.

In New Zealand, a turning point in this process began in 2017 after this study was conducted, when 'youth adjacent' (close in age) politician Jacinda Ardern articulated 'climate change is my generation's nuclear-free moment' in the lead-up to her election as Prime Minister and leader of a coalition government. In effect, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is doing what Randall (2005) advocates; in recalling New Zealand's historic decision to be nuclear free in 1987, Jacinda Ardern is emphasizing the seriousness of climate change for younger generations and invoking what we can achieve nationally, and globally, if we act together to address climate change.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author is grateful for the support of internal funding from the University of Otago to conduct the research reported in this article.

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