The role of critical methodologies in climate psychology scholarship: themes, gaps, and futures

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Abstract
Climate change is a global problem caused by humans. Climate psychology scholarship aims to assist human beings in mitigating and adapting to this problem’s consequences. A brief scoping review was conducted first. The findings indicated that most of the literature was quantitative and theoretical in orientation, with only two qualitatively focused. A dearth of information exploring qualitative methodologies was found. The brief scoping review justified the need for this narrative review that explored the critical methodologies used by climate psychology scholars. The narrative review covered the period 2009–2022. Search terms included ‘climate psychology’ and ‘climate change and psychology’. A critical transformative paradigm informed the analysis. The narrative review found that climate psychology scholars in the selected articles actively addressed social justice and represented marginalised peoples’ voices through participatory action research, grounded theory, narrative theory, capabilities theory, discursive psychology, and strengths-based approaches. Three authors presented their positionality statements. Ten articles used a qualitative approach, while three used a quantitative approach. The use of interviews and thematic analysis was dominant. Researchers demonstrated an awareness of power and its influence on the research process. The methodology could be enhanced if they provided more detail on how they addressed power as a guide for future researchers. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to explore their perceptions of how critical methodologies can be more actively incorporated into climate psychology scholarship.

Keywords
Climate change, colonialism, critical methodologies, marginalised people, narrative review, social justice

The anthropogenic causes of climate change can no longer be denied (IPCC, 2021). Psychology has been called upon to address the human causes of climate change (American Psychological...
Association, 2009). Since 2009, there has been an increase in climate psychology scholarship to address the dearth of information. However, marginalised people’s voices in the global north and south are more often overlooked in the literature. I will argue that psychology has made great strides in beginning to dismantle coloniality; however, greater transformation is needed in research methodology. The root of research methodologies remains situated within colonial systems of knowledge production that exclude alternative realities and ways of being. One important aspect will be placing the voices of marginalised people at the centre of the debate on research methodologies. Through a critical transformative paradigm and social justice lens, marginalised people’s voices can be more actively included. This narrative review, therefore, explored what critical research methodologies have been used by climate psychology scholars.

**Research methodologies used in psychology**

Central to the changes in psychology has been the question of its relevance and the need to address concerns about its association with coloniality, which refers to the taken-for-granted everyday practices that perpetuate patterns of power and continue to oppress people who were colonised (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Coloniality stems from colonialism and refers to ‘the process where one nation subjugates another, politically and economically’ (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Through their research, climate psychology scholars are foregrounding social justice issues for marginalised people to addresses coloniality within international as well as South African psychology journals.

As historical and cultural practices change, so too has the field of psychology and research methodologies (‘how we do research’) (Barnes, 2018, pp. 380–381). These changes are referred to as paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962) or turns. Initially, positivism was the dominant paradigm and was replaced by post-positivism because researchers critiqued the value-free or neutral position that was advocated. Interpretivism, phenomenology, feminism, critical theory, and many more paradigms have since developed. Each paradigm has associated research approaches that are suitable for the research aim. For example, post-positivism tends to use a quantitative approach, while interpretivism, phenomenology, critical theory, and many other paradigms are more likely to use a qualitative approach. Each paradigm is further based on a particular ontology (ways of looking at the world) and epistemology (how knowledges are produced). The ontology and epistemology have important implications for the methodology that researchers use.

Researchers tend to develop research questions coherent with their ontological and epistemological position, which inform how they view the research methodology. Ray (2012) explains that research methodologies remain within their ontological and epistemological histories. Thus, research methodologies based on ontologies from the global north restrict the diversity of research methods and perpetuate the ideology that knowledge produced is universal and at the top of the hierarchy (Ray, 2012). Furthermore, the uncritical use of methodologies could potentially continue to exclude and perpetuate the use of colonial frameworks of research. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are rooted in global north ontologies and epistemologies (Brinkmann et al., 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Although qualitative research is associated with being soft, subjectifying, and considered implicitly good, the power dimension is hidden within the research process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). The choices made by researchers thus have a direct bearing on what problems are considered important and whose voices are listened to (Barnes, 2018).

Cokley and Awad (2013), however, propose that there are many concerns with ontologies from the global north, especially those within the quantitative approach. They and Barrett (2013) demonstrate how social justice can be infused into quantitative research. Cokley and Awad (2013) thus
argue that a quantitative approach can be used to address a social justice imperative that is highly complex.

One of the many ways that social justice is theorised is that it is linked to addressing concerns relating to systems of exploitation, inequality, and oppression while fighting for equality, rights, and liberties for marginalised people (Cokley & Awad, 2013). To address concerns relating to the research process, they propose that researchers need to be multiculturally competent and aware of how marginalised people are positioned. Cokley and Awad, Barnes (2018), Lipscombe et al. (2021), and Daszkiewicz et al. (2022) agree that there is a need for researchers to be respectful and aware of the multiple ways that power disparities and coloniality are reinscribed and should be addressed throughout the research process. Furthermore, to dismantle the unequal power division between the researcher and those who are researched, researchers need to interrogate their assumptions and how these assumptions could contribute to perpetuating inequality through the use of research methodology (Barnes, 2018).

A social justice agenda can thus be achieved when researchers reflect and use the outcomes of their research to positively and actively change marginalised people’s material circumstances to impact society beyond research (Cokley & Awad, 2013). They thus argue that the use of research methods determines the degree to which researchers can address a critical and socially just agenda.

A critical transformative paradigm and social justice orientation informed this review. A transformative paradigm was used because it seeks to address issues relating to injustice and inequality that contribute to the marginalisation of people. It acknowledges that multiple systems, such as discrimination and oppression, perpetuate and privilege particular epistemologies over others. Furthermore, the paradigm seeks to centre the need for transformation through the lens of social justice and disrupt the status quo (Mertens, 2007). Similarly, critical theory focuses on social justice while also emphasising the need to examine systems of power, empowerment, transformation, equality, rights, and participation, to identify a few characteristics (Adams, 2021; Levy & Patz, 2015). Critical theory is extremely diverse and multifaceted (Parker, 2015), representing a broad overarching system of theories, including but not limited to decolonising, indigenous, transformative, liberation, and feminist theories (Barnes, 2018). There is a multitude of associated methodologies, such as ‘photovoice, autoethnography, visual methods, storytelling, and participatory approaches’, to name a few (Barnes, 2018, p. 379). An aspect central to a critical transformative paradigm and social justice agenda is the need to take the voices of marginalised people more seriously.

**Centring marginalised people’s voices**

American psychological knowledge represents the voices of 5% of the world’s population (Bhatia, 2021). Inadvertently, the global north hegemony silences 95% of the world’s population. Psychological knowledge produced is presented as universal and influences climate psychology’s development.

Marginalised people experience the effects of climate change the worst. They represent women, children, the elderly, indigenous peoples, subsistence workers, and all groups at risk or vulnerable to climate change (Levy & Patz, 2015). Due to colonialism, factors such as history, location, culture, type of employment, unemployment, housing discrimination, and many other systemic factors contribute to their vulnerability and often represent people of colour. Their experiences are not sufficiently represented in the climate debate that tends to speak of sea-level rise and the amount of carbon in the atmosphere (Sanders, 2021). As a result, their lived experiences are thus not reflected in the discourses of climate change.
According to Sanders (2021), marginalised people reside within communities at high risk of extreme weather events (Sanders, 2021). Consequently, when they experience these disasters, they do not have the financial and other resources to be able to mitigate against the effects. In 2022, the Western Cape Province and KwaZulu Natal Province experienced flooding. Similarly, in 2012, 2013, and 2015, Limpopo provinces experienced flooding (Singo et al., 2016). The floods caused immense destruction and loss of life and livelihoods. However, marginalised communities in urban communities were more able to access relief and other support than communities located in deep rural communities. In 2022, marginalised communities in rural areas will continue to struggle with access to essential services, water, sanitation, infrastructure, and many other challenges. A related case was illustrated by Hurricane Katrina, where marginalised communities were situated in high-risk locations and received inadequate support and assistance (Sanders, 2021). There appears to be a rural–urban divide, with the needs of rural communities more often overlooked or not sufficiently represented.

Climate justice questions why climate change disproportionately affects marginalised people (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2018). Similar to social justice, the arguments are complex, and the inadequate responses by people in power and governments are referred to as climate apartheid, racism, and discrimination (Sanders, 2021). Marginalised people experience multiple intersecting injustices while emitting the lowest carbon footprint. In contrast, the people who have contributed more to climate change can mitigate against the effects. The unequal distribution of consequences and lack of support and assistance nationally and internationally is climate injustice.

Overview of climate psychology scholarship

Research in climate psychology scholarship has been increasing since the American Psychological Association 2009 report served as an impetus for this change. A review by Clayton and Manning (2018) demonstrated an increase in scholarship between 1987 and 2016. The trend continued over the past 3 years (2020–2022) with six special issue journal publications (Community Psychology in Global Perspective [one], Clinical Psychology Forum [two], Current Opinion in Psychology [one], and Psychology in Society [two]). In this section, I will discuss the current state of methodologies used in climate psychology scholarship.

The researcher did a brief scoping review (Khalil & Tricco, 2022) on 6 July 2021 using the search terms climate change for 2009–2021. The purpose of the brief scoping review was to ascertain if a gap in the literature existed. It explored the question what research methodologies were used by climate psychology researchers. One hundred thirty-seven articles were identified on the Ebsco Host Web American Psychological Association database. Articles that were included had to address climate change. Sixty-two articles were included because they linked to the central search terms. The review found: two editorials, two using qualitative methodologies, two using mixed methodologies, three presidential addresses, 23 theoretically based, and 30 using quantitative methodologies. Based on the brief scoping review, the more common publication formats were review papers, publications using a quantitative methodology, and theoretical papers. Given the relative dearth of information on qualitative and critical methodologies used by climate psychology scholars, it justified the need for this narrative review.

Tam et al.’s (2021) systematic review argue that though the field has grown, there appears to be a predominance of studies situated within a quantitative approach. Of the 130 articles reviewed, by Tam et al. (2021), only nine were qualitative in orientation. The majority of the articles were published from institutions based within the global north, with the United States accounting for 36.25% of the authors. Most of the authors in the review were educated, industrialised, rich, and lived
within democratic countries. Furthermore, the participants reflected a similar demographic to that of the authors that conducted the research and were predominantly students, Amazon MTurk\(^1\) or young samples. Nielsen et al. (2021) and Tam et al. (2021) concur that more studies from the global south, which are relatively absent, should be conducted with an acknowledgement of the sociocultural context.

Literature on climate change appears to focus on a deficit discourse (Lertzman, 2015) by presenting individuals as unwilling to change, ignorant, having insufficient information, and/or being distrusting (Nielsen et al., 2021). Sanders (2021) argues that when marginalised people are included in climate change literature, they are often blamed for the problem (climate racism) or overlooked (climate apartheid). Climate racism and apartheid are entrenched in interconnected systems of power that contribute to marginalised communities disproportionately experiencing the effects of climate change.

### Method

This narrative review was conducted in between December 2021 and May 2022. The search terms for the narrative review were: climate psychology, climate change, and psychology for the period 2009–2022. The 2009 publication by the APA task force emphasised the importance of psychology engaging in the field of climate change and facilitated the increase in scholarship. Articles selected for this review had to be empirical (qualitative, qualitative, or mixed-method) and have a critical orientation in the theoretical framework or research methodologies used. Theoretical, conference proceedings, and review articles were excluded.

Thirteen articles were selected using purposive maximum variation sampling (MVS) (Etikan et al., 2016) for this narrative review. MVS was relevant because it is more flexible and allowed that all articles that used a critical theory in formulating the research question, theoretical framework, research approach, research design, sampling, data collection, or data analysis could be selected. The articles selected thus had one of the following aspects that qualified for it to be included: an orientation to acknowledging the disenfranchisement of marginalised people, empowerment, participation, power, coloniality/decoloniality, transformation, or flexibility in methodologies used. The articles were analysed using qualitative content analysis by Schreier (2012). The analysis sought to explore climate psychology scholars use of critical methodologies.

### Results and discussion

#### Changes in climate psychology scholarship

Over the past 3 years, there has been an uptake of social justice, the representation of marginalised people’s voices, and the use of critical methodologies. To address the needs of marginalised people, scholars have pushed the boundaries to innovate their use of research methodology in climate psychology scholarship. The increased use of critical methodologies demonstrates an awareness of the complexities when working with marginalised people through a social justice lens. The following section will discuss the major reflections based on the analysis for this narrative review.

The researcher determines the types of questions asked. The questions posed by the researchers in the selected articles were orientated to exploring the experiences from the participants’ perspectives within their context. For example, Barnwell et al. (2020) asked the question: What are mine-affected community members’ psychological reactions and community responses to land and environmental injustices in the mining community of Rustenburg, South Africa? The research question posed demonstrates an orientation to listening to the voices of marginalised communities and was pronounced in all the articles reviewed.
The research questions were linked to the choice of theoretical framework. For example, Barnwell et al. (2020 and 2021) and Cidade et al. (2020) used a capabilities approach. They located marginalised peoples’ lived experiences from their sociohistorical context and a strengths-based perspective. Similarly, Unanue et al. (2020) used a strengths based approach. The use of a strengths-based approach is useful to acknowledge the power dimension and the need to work from a respectful position. A similar trend was noted where research questions and theoretical frameworks were chosen to situate the research within a critical paradigm. Two of the thirteen articles chosen did not explicitly state their theoretical framework. The research design was identified in nine articles, and an exploratory purpose was identified in three articles. The design specified by Bryant and Sonn (2022) is of note because they specified and used an intersection of personal narratives, power and society that differed from the other twelve articles.

Positionality statements were included in three articles, namely Culley and Angelique (2011), Bryant and Sonn (2022), as well as Marais-Potgieter and Faraday (2022). In their positionality statements, they explained who they were and their research question, which linked to their chosen theoretical framework. The positionality statement’s explication might not be common in psychological publications because of the positivist legacy or due to journal publication standards. When working with marginalised communities, researchers should strive to be self-reflexive and critical of their positionality to avoid perpetuating injustices, as highlighted by Lipscombe et al. (2021) and Smith (2021). Barnes (2018) furthermore emphasises that researchers must guard against reifying, essentialising, and perpetuating sexist, racist, and classist representations of marginalised people. The articles selected for this review represent researchers who appeared to have worked towards respectfully engaging with their participants.

Ten articles in the review were associated with a qualitatively linked approach, such as participatory action research, grounded theory, narrative theory, and discursive theory. These approaches tend to view problems from the participants’ perspective and are contextual and inductive in orientation. Participants are thus placed at the centre of the research process. Moreover, three articles were situated within a quantitative approach, namely Freedman and Bess (2011), Quimby and Angelique (2011) and Marais-Potgieter and Faraday (2022). Their theoretical orientations are linked to critical theory and include social justice, participation, personal empowerment, and participatory injustice. These articles contribute to Cokley and Awad’s (2013) position that social justice can be achieved when using a quantitative approach.

The population that was sampled was diverse. For example, Trott et al. (2020) focused on children, Bryant and Sonn (2022) worked with non-indigenous climate activists, Culley and Angelique (2010, 2011) worked with local activists, while Freedman and Bess (2011) focused on residents within the community. The voices of vulnerable groups, such as indigenous people or children, are seldom included in the research because they need special protection and consideration (Lipscombe et al., 2021). As a result, researchers are less likely to work with vulnerable people and inadvertently exclude certain marginalised groups. Including vulnerable groups in climate change research could expand understanding of the problem. Not all populations included in the publications selected for this review are considered marginalised; however, because of how the articles utilised critical theory, the articles were relevant for the review.

Purposive sampling was the dominant sampling method used, with one using snowball sampling. Interviews were the preferred data collection method. However, photovoice, participant observation field notes, secondary data, and surveys were also used. Most of the data were analysed using thematic analysis with grounded theory, conversational analysis, and narrative analysis. From a methodological vantage point, climate psychology scholars have actively used and integrated critical theory into the diverse use of methods, as illustrated in the following publications. Trott et al. (2020) used a combination of arts and science-based interventions with
photovoice and interviews. Farias and Pinheiro (2020) combined ethnography with life stories and descriptive observations. These studies illustrate innovative methods that can be used to engage more respectfully and collaboratively while empowering marginalised people. Furthermore, these publications demonstrate how researchers can begin to decentre the research focus from the researcher’s construction of the problem to marginalised people’s voices.

**Interconnected systems of power**

Broader systems of power, such as capitalism, racism, patriarchy, class, and poverty that contribute to coloniality, are not often easily associated with climate change but are receiving more attention. These systems form part of the overall structural violence that marginalised community’s experience. Structural violence is not deliberate; however, it privileges those in power and perpetuates the discrimination experienced by marginalised people. Structural violence tends to function at a more macro level, while harm is experienced at a much more individual or micro-level (Williams, 2021).

Studies conducted by Culley and Angelique (2011), Cidade et al. (2020), and Rafaely and Barnes (2020) highlight how macro systems reinforce discrimination against marginalised communities. Culley and Angelique (2011) studied activists’ experiences participating in the negotiations to establish a nuclear power plant. They mention how various forms of power are used to silence, disempower, and reduce the participation of people in nuclear power deliberations. They used social power and environmental justice as a theoretical framework that facilitated their ability to identify how systems are set up to maintain the status quo. Furthermore, they used naturally occurring text from meetings and field and observational notes to reflect on the systems that contribute to marginalised people continuously experiencing environmental injustice.

Cidade et al. (2020) explain how capitalism and poverty function at multiple levels to worsen socioeconomic inequalities. People already living in precarious conditions linked to housing, income, educational opportunities, and health are more vulnerable to extreme weather events because of coloniality. To address the question ‘how does climate change impact rural poverty dimensions of residents of communities in the backlands of Northeast and South Brazil?’ (p. 125), the researchers used a qualitative approach with focus group interviews. The combination of these methodologies highlighted the intersection of climate justice with poverty and mental health.

The third article by Rafaely and Barnes (2020) discussed racism in climate change activism. Their article argues that racism is a systemic problem and that the media has an influential role in shaping the climate change debate. They situated their research within discursive psychology and conversational analysis. Interview material present within the media was used in their research. These three articles demonstrate how power, social justice, structural violence, and systematic oppression function at a macro systemic level and exacerbate the vulnerability and strength of climate activists.

The research methods used in the above-examined articles were adaptive, sensitive, and inclusive of marginalised people’s voices. The researchers have tried to demonstrate how climate change is linked to macro-systems such as capitalism, poverty, racism, and many others. The researchers’ positions are influenced by their ethical or axiological considerations.

Axiology relates to ‘how researchers’ values, worldviews and ethics contribute to their research’ (Barnes, 2019, p. 304). Thus far, I have argued that the choice of research methodologies is not neutral. It directly influences whose worldviews, experiences, and suffering is privileged. Using a social justice lens in the articles selected for this narrative review speaks to questions about marginalised people’s inclusion, voice, power, equity, and vulnerability. Including marginalised peoples’ voices is encouraging and would benefit climate psychology’s development.
A second aspect that would need to support the reorientation of climate psychology scholars is addressing systems within universities that perpetuate the stagnant use of research methodologies. Funders and ethical review boards within higher education institutions need to adapt and include research methodologies that include social justice and marginalised peoples’ voices. Critical methodologies seek to dismantle power disparities and the inferiorisation of marginalised people to prevent the reproduction of unequal power relationships. The knowledge and awareness of critical methodologies and aspects of power and privilege cannot be escaped (Denzin et al., 2017). However, researchers can orientate towards being more sensitive and ethical when considering the axiological dimension of research. Researchers should actively try to work respectfully, sensitively, and reflexively, and this will require university systems to adapt to changes within the field. Barnes (2018) interrogates the role of university ethical review boards and highlights the need for transformation.

**Gaps in the research on climate change scholarship: discussion**

Research methodologies have transformed in the field of climate psychology, becoming more inclusive and representing the voices of marginalised people. However, what is missing, are researchers’ reflections of the degree to which they consciously and reflexively engaged with the concepts of power, positionality, and social justice because only three articles provided their positionality statements. It has been argued that researchers’ ontological and epistemological position influences their choices in the research process. Thus, how researchers grappled with the nuances of applying these concepts in climate psychology with marginalised communities would illustrate useful learning tools for future researchers.

Researchers preferred using a qualitative research approach, and this is inclusive of participatory approaches. It would be beneficial for researchers to elaborate on the process they used to engage with participants to make the research more inclusive. Three publications were quantitatively situated, while none in this review used mixed methodologies. Further exploration is needed on research methodologies used in climate psychology scholarship. In addition, researchers are engaging and developing new ways of applying research methodologies using critical theory and social justice. However, there was minimal elaboration on how these were applied to the multiple formats of interviews and thematic analysis.

Thus far, information from the researcher’s perspective has been presented; however, participants’ perspectives and experiences of the research process, power, voice, and empowerment need greater exploration. How do participants view how the researchers used critical methodologies? What are their experiences of being included in the research process and the sharing of power? Ethically, going back to participants to explore these would be a challenge because researchers promise confidentiality and anonymity. However, how do researchers know that what they intended was experienced by participants?

The use of critical methodologies will thus require engagement with ethical review boards. Exploring how researchers engaged with the ethical review boards to use critical methodologies would provide insight into how processes could be amended for future research.

**Possible futures for critical methodologies in climate psychology**

The changes in the use of research methodologies are encouraging. Moving forward, increasing the use of critical research methodologies, such as photovoice and appreciative enquiry, based on social justice could transform how researchers engage with participants in climate psychology and general psychology. Evaluating participants’ experiences of empowerment, participation, and the
sharing of power could further highlight how research methodologies can be improved. Furthermore, this could encourage the development of new critical methodologies that represent the voices and realities of marginalised people and bring awareness to the nuances of climate change and research methodologies.

Researchers need to increase investigations on coloniality, climate racism, and climate apartheid and how these influence research methodology at the individual and macro levels. The interconnected systems of power more often impede mitigation and adaptation for marginalised communities, and sharing their perspectives is needed. The increased use of critical research methodologies and social justice could facilitate using a transformative paradigm while possibly also improving and developing new research paradigms to address the concerns of marginalised communities.

Conclusion

Climate change scholarship is becoming more transformative, and research from the global south and north addressing marginalised people’s needs is increasing. Although this review is limited in scope, it highlights some valuable aspects for the future use of critical methodologies in climate psychology scholarship.

Research methodology is not neutral, and how researchers engage with marginalised communities needs to be critically evaluated. The concepts of power and disempowerment because of coloniality need to be addressed throughout the research process. Using research methodologies that are transformative, critical, and socially just could begin to bridge the gaps in climate psychology scholarship. However, the use of critical theory, the transformative paradigm, and social justice are still in their infancy, and there are lot more work that researchers can do, provided there is constant reflection throughout the research process.

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Note

1. Amazon MTurk is an online crowdsourcing platform that researchers use to complete surveys predominantly in the United States and Canada.

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