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ARTICLE

emotion review

Emotion Review
Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 2026) 3–14
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ISSN 1754-0739
DOI: 10.1177/17540739251379796
https://journals.sagepub.com/home/emr

Ecological Grief as a Shared Emotion

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Abstract

There is a growing interdisciplinary effort to understand the emotional dimensions of the climate crisis. A central focus in this line of research is ecological grief—the grief felt in relation to ecological losses. Ecological grief is frequently claimed to be a shared emotion. Here, we discuss whether, and in which way, ecological grief is a shared emotion. We argue that ecological grief is characteristically shared as a group-based emotion. The shared character of ecological grief comes down to the shared nature of place-based practices and place-based identity, and this is reflected in the intentional structure of ecological grief, which is about *our* possibilities that have been lost through the loss of place. Ecological grief is also, we argue, apt to take the form of a shared process due to the often ambiguous and ongoing nature of ecological losses.

Keywords

shared emotion, climate emotions, ecological grief, group emotions, collective emotion

Introduction

Among the impacts of environmental loss and change are our emotional responses to it, including, according to a growing number of discussions, grief. Such grief, it has been suggested, is an increasingly widespread experience, affecting activists, conservationists, those most directly impacted by natural disaster and degradation, as well as some in the wider population. If this is right, there are consequences for individuals tasked with understanding and managing their own and others' emotions, as well as for society at large, to the extent that societies seek to provide support for and to accommodate its members' states of well- (or ill-) being.

An overlooked feature of the emerging literature on the grief occasioned by environmental loss and change is whether it is a collective or shared emotion. This would mean that there is a marked difference between the paradigmatic case of grief—grief over a bereavement—and this grief caused by changes to our natural environment. For a while bereavement grief might sometimes be a shared emotion, it does not seem right to say that it is characteristically shared. Furthermore, grief occasioned by environmental change would be distinctive among emotions more generally if it were to characteristically take shared form. It is difficult to think of any other emotion kind that has been said to characteristically or even just usually occur as a shared emotion (although see the discussion of collective guilt in Gilbert, 2002). Hence, the claim that this variety of grief is characteristically shared deserves scrutiny, which we will provide in this article.

Assessing the claim that grief of this kind is characteristically shared is complicated because there are many different phenomena picked out by the terms "shared emotion" or "collective emotion" (we will for the most part use these terms interchangeably in this article). In other words, there are many different ways in which an emotion may be shared, and ecological grief may in principle be characteristically shared in all, some or none of these ways. In order to

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do some justice to the diversity of emotional sharing, without attempting to be comprehensive, we will discuss whether ecological grief is characteristically shared in five different ways. As will become clear, the truth and significance of the claim that ecological grief is characteristically shared depends very much on the mode of emotional sharing in question. In turn, by considering the nature of a (purportedly) characteristically shared emotion, we can advance existing debates about shared emotion in the philosophical literature.

In the first section, we clarify the phenomenon of ecological grief, and we introduce existing claims about it being a shared emotion. In the second section, we explore two ways in which we argue that it is not reasonable to emphasize ecological grief as a *characteristically* shared emotion (shared through communication, and being caused by another's emotion). In the rest of the article, we identify three ways in which ecological grief is shared and discuss their implications. In the third section, we argue that ecological grief is characteristically shared as a fellow feeling (feeling that many others are likely to be being emotionally affected in the same way as one is). In the fourth section, we argue that ecological grief is characteristically a group-based emotion, and that this connection comes down to the shared nature of place-based practices and place-based identity. We show that this is reflected in the intentional structure of ecological grief, which is about *our* possibilities that have been lost through the loss of place. Finally, in the fifth section, we argue that ecological grief is apt to take the form of a shared process, partly due to the ambiguous and ongoing nature of ecological loss.

Ecological Grief and Other Eco-Emotions

There is an increasing acknowledgment that the climate crisis is also a mental health crisis (Charlson et al., 2021; Cianconi et al., 2020; Palinkas & Wong, 2020). Rising temperatures, fires, heat waves, floods, and droughts have not only physical and economic but also psychological impacts. One of the ways in which researchers have explored this impact is through the lens of emotional experience. Academic studies have now explored a wide variety of emotional reactions to anthropogenic environmental degradation, including anxiety (Clayton, 2020; Crandon et al., 2022), guilt (e.g., Adams et al., 2020; Jensen, 2019), anger (e.g., du Bray et al., 2019; Gregersen et al., 2023; Kleres and Wettergren, 2017), pride (e.g., Bissing-Olson et al., 2016), and hope (e.g., Bury et al., 2020; Ojala, 2012, 2017; for a taxonomy, see Pihkala 2022). The study of ecological grief—the sense of loss that arises from environmental destruction—has unfolded within this larger context, and it encompasses a broad diversity of sites and of academic disciplines (Comtesse et al., 2021). Existing work has studied ecological grief as a response to forest fires in the Northwest Territories of Canada (Dodd et al., 2018), changes to the Ganga watershed in India (Drew, 2013), long-term drought in the Wheatbelt in Australia (Ellis & Albrecht, 2017), warming temperatures in northeastern Siberia (Crate, 2008), and melting sea ice in the Canadian arctic (Cunsolo et al., 2012).

In an influential review, Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) characterize ecological grief as "grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change" (p. 275). The scope of ecological grief is rather broad, and this is reflected in Cunsolo and Ellis' definition. On the one hand, ecological losses are quite broad, and, on the other hand, species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes, are a rather heterogeneous set. The concept of place can help us clarify this dynamic: environmental changes result in tangible alterations to the landscape, as well as in disturbances to place-attachment, place-based activities (hunting, foraging, etc.), place-based identities (such as being "reindeer people" or "people of the ice") and sense of place (Cunsolo et al., 2012). Place connects with self-identity, sense of community and cultural practices, and helps us understand how ecological loss (*qua* loss of place) results in a particular form of grief (Fernandez Velasco, 2025).

Discussing the study of emotions in climate change research, Kałwak and Weihgold (2022) differentiate between the emotional experience of people who suffer environmental degradation directly (e.g., extreme weather events) and the emotional experience linked to awareness and concern about the climate crisis by populations who have not been dramatically affected yet. Regarding the latter, it is possible that one feels grief about the existential threat of the climate crisis as a whole in a more wide-ranging way, but this phenomenon is not the focus in the study of ecological grief. Rather, ecological grief concerns the loss of particular, meaningful places. The subjects in existing studies of ecological grief are directly, and strongly, affected by particular forms of environmental change, whether acute (e.g., a forest fire) or chronic (e.g., desertification). The reason that ecological grief is often anticipatory is not because it is abstracted, but because the climate crisis creates a temporal horizon of expanding ecological loss. People who grieve over the changing of sea ice melting patterns are quite aware that these patterns are increasingly disrupted every year. As a result, people might be grieving at once currently experienced, and anticipated, ecological losses.

Note that ecological grief is closely connected to climate change, and in a lot of the existing studies, the ecological loss in question (e.g., forest fires) is caused by climate change. Nevertheless, ecological grief does not need to be the result of climate change. It could be the result of, for instance, extractive practices that deeply damage the existing ecosystem. There is also a difference between local and global forms of grief and these show different dynamics,

especially in relation to recurrent themes in ecological grief such as disenfranchisement, ambiguity, and intangible loss (Pihkala, 2024). Here, we are focusing on local forms of ecological grief.

One recurrent theme in many reports of ecological grief is its collective dimension. In many testimonies (a few of which we will analyze in detail in the fourth section), the subject of the grief is the plural "we" rather than the singular "I," and several researchers have highlighted this "shared" aspect of ecological grief: Frantzen (2021) goes as far as claiming that ecological grief is not reducible to the individual. Tschakert et al. (2019) conceptualize the diminishing sense of place induced by environmental change in their fieldwork in Ghana as a collective emotion. Likewise, Cunsolo, a leading researcher in ecological grief, highlights that the loss of place resulting from climate change "not only affects individuals but also expands into a larger collective emotion, impacting a sense of community cohesion and community health and well-being" (Cunsolo et al., 2012, p. 543). And in a recent piece, Pihkala (2022) argues that people experience ecological grief both as individuals and as part of collectivities. This fits within a broader effort to conceptualize climate emotions as shared emotions (Gillespie, 2019; Kałwak & Weihgold, 2022), and it raises important philosophical questions. Most centrally, in which sense, if at all, is ecological grief a shared emotion?

Two Ways in Which Ecological Grief is Not Characteristically Shared

In order to ask whether ecological grief is characteristically shared, we need, first, to consider what shared emotion is in general. However, as John Michael has pointed out, "the expression 'shared emotion' is […] used to refer to a motley of phenomena that do not make up a single natural kind" (Michael, 2016, p. 1). In other words, there are many forms of emotional sharing and so many ways in which ecological grief could, potentially, be shared. In this section, we identify two forms of emotional sharing that can apply to ecological grief, but not distinctly enough to make the case for emphasizing ecological grief as characteristically shared: sharing as communicating, and sharing as being causally affected by another's emotion.

Firstly, some have called "shared emotion" the simple phenomenon of one subject expressing an emotion, verbally or nonverbally, and that expression being perceived by another (Michael, 2016). My happiness about buying a new bicycle is a shared emotion, in this very minimal sense, if I tell you about it and you, on that basis, come to know how I feel. That ecological grief can be shared in the weakest sense of one subject expressing ecological grief and another subject perceiving the emotion or its expression is hardly controversial. A moving example comes from Cunsolo. She recounts an episode in Labrador in 2010, in which she is talking with an Inuit woman about the changes in the weather and the ecosystem. Cunsolo asked how she felt about the changes, and the woman paused, looked at her, and began to cry. Cunsolo felt this wave of ecological grief and started crying too: "sharing our emotions in a way that I had not done before with another person. We were bereft. And while the roots of our ecological grief and experiences were different, and while we were isolated in our personal response, we came together, however momentarily, to share in a loss that was far beyond the human" (Cunsolo in Cunsolo & Landman 2017, p. xv). It is a powerful instance of emotion sharing, and one that, according to Cunsolo, ignited her life-long pursuit in understanding ecological grief (for a discussion of environmental researchers affected by vicarious traumatization, see Pihkala, 2019).

While this notable experience illustrates how ecological grief can indeed be shared in the sense of communicated between people, it is unlikely that this is the sense that researchers have in mind when they claim that ecological grief is shared. Many—probably all—emotions can be shared through communication, so there is nothing about ecological grief that makes it a characteristically shared emotion in this sense. Furthermore, far from being characteristically shared in this way, ecological grief has often been hard to articulate and communicate. This is something that transpires in many of the reports of ecological grief, in which subjects struggle to find words for their emotions. For instance, one subject in one of Cunsolo's studies says: "You know, you're losin' your traditional practices that we've had, and it is emotional. It's kinda hard to explain, I guess" (in Cunsolo et al., 2020, p. 45). It could be argued that to the extent that ecological grief, and grief over non-death losses more generally is less socially recognized than bereavement grief, even by its sufferers, it is a kind of disenfranchized grief: grief over a loss for which a person "has no socially accorded right to grieve" (Doka 2022, p. 7). (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018; Doka 1999; Pihkala, 2024). And even with the Cunsolo example, it could be understood as a form of emotional communication, but it could also be understood as a form of emotional contagion.

This suggests, in addition, that it is a contingent matter that ecological grief is currently not always—and perhaps infrequently—shared in this first way. As the idea of ecological grief gains currency and becomes more widely recognized, it is more likely to be communicated to others and understood by them (Cooke et al., 2024). If this happens (so that ecological grief does come to be shared in this first way more often), the experience of ecological grief may change: once ecological grief is more widely recognized the experience of ecological grief might then change via the clarifying effect of being put into words (Colombetti, 2009). More specifically, "sharing" one's ecological grief by having it recognized by another has the potential to alter

those aspects of the grief experience related to disenfranchisement. For example, disenfranchisement can intensify a grieving persons "feelings of anger, guilt, or powerlessness" (Doka, 2022, p. 17).

Secondly, "shared emotion" or "collective emotion" is sometimes used to describe phenomena in which *one subject's emotion is causally affected by another subject's emotion*. Whilst such phenomena do not require emotions to be anything other than states of individuals, they do, unlike the other phenomena thus far enumerated, necessitate interaction between multiple feeling subjects. Hence, this second form of shared emotion is not, unlike the first, a solitary phenomenon. One more specific form this kind of emotional sharing can take emotional contagion, which can be underpinned by mechanisms such as motor mimicry (Hatfield et al., 2014). There are instances of emotion contagion in ecological grief. In Nunatsiavut, an autonomous Inuit department in Canada, one subject reports, that "once it starts affecting one family it will start with the rest… it just happens to be those are the first ones to be affected, and then affect reaches out, right? So, I think if more and more people can't be going to the cabin and can't be hunting and can't be dependently going on the land that they just start to see a community shifting" (in Cunsolo et al., 2012, p. 544). In this case, the emotion might have an underlying common cause (environmental degradation), but the way that the participant describes it, the "affect reaches out," which points to a dynamic of contagion in response to loss.

One subject's emotions being causally affected by another's can also take forms other than emotional contagion, as when, for instance, your emotional evaluation of a situation is affected by how it seems to you that others are emotionally evaluating that situation (Bruder et al., 2014). Although this kind of "social referencing" is not usually understood as a causal mechanism of sharing, we include it alongside emotional contagion as a ways in which one subject's emotion can be (in part) causally affected by the numerically distinct emotion of a different subject. Social dynamics can also have manifold impacts on how people regulate their emotions (for a review, see Porat et al., 2020).

There is value in understanding that ecological grief can be shared in these "causal" ways, in particular, for understanding how it arises. Most generally, it is worth recognizing that ecological grief may not always be a direct response to environmental loss but may, instead, be caused in part or in whole by the emotional responses of others with whom we come into contact. A more specific possibility is that as ecological grief becomes more common, and we read more first-person testimonies of this experience, we may—roughly—use these testimonies in determining how to feel ourselves, deferring, in our emotional evaluation of ecological change, partly to the evaluations of others. Nevertheless, the forms of emotion sharing that we have discussed in this section (sharing as communicating, and forms of sharing where one person's emotion is partly caused by another person's emotion) do not mark out a way in which ecological grief takes a shared form that contrasts with bereavement grief. Hence, we have not yet found a way in which ecological grief is characteristically shared in comparison to other forms of grief.

Shared Ecological Grief: Grief With Fellow Feeling

Let us now move on to identify a third phenomenon that might be called "shared emotion" and which, in comparison to the first two, does seem to characterize ecological grief. Often, what is meant by "shared emotion" is some phenomenon picked out by talk of how "we" feel. One situation in which we might talk about how "we" feel—and thus share an emotion in some sense—is a situation in which it seems to a subject that many others are likely to be being emotionally affected in the same way as she is. For example, as has been observed elsewhere, the belief that many were experiencing similar losses may have made a phenomenological difference to the nonbereavement grief experienced by some during the COVID-19 pandemic (Richardson & Millar, 2023, p.1096). When someone grieves the death of a loved one, her grief can include a puzzling sense of alienation or distance from all those who carry on, unaffected by this loss (Hughes, 2023). If, in contrast, one grieves as a result of change or disruption that one knows or believes is likely to have affected many others too, this may, plausibly, impact on this sense of alienation or distance. One may even feel a sense of camaraderie or fellow-feeling, believing that one is grieving that for which many others also grieve.

Environmental disturbances alter the place in which a whole community dwells, and it has distinct impacts on place-based activities, be it hunting, farming, fishing, or different festivities and rituals. Accordingly, many subjects report an awareness that other people in their community are also emotionally affected in a similar way to them. In Nunatsiavut, one subject complains in the following way about the changes in the weather and the resulting inability to get onto the land:

> It certainly disrupts your lifestyle. Not only us, everybody. I mean you are stuck here on this point of land in the community and you want to get out and you cannot go. People get bored and people turn to drinking and drugging and social problems and stuff like that. I mean people, day after day after day look out the window and it's this old depressing fog and rain and windy. I mean it got to play on people's minds. (in Cunsolo et al., 2012, p. 543)

And in the context of caribou decline, subjects report talking about this openly. For instance, one subject reports "everybody you talk to is wishing they would come back and wishing that they could go for a hunt, everybody I talk to just waiting. That's all we're doing is just waiting." (in

Cunsolo et al., 2020, p. 47). This camaraderie in ecological grief happens also outside indigenous communities. In the Wheatbelt in Australia, farmers often report a concern for how the drought and soil erosion is impacting others in the community: “It’s terrible to know that the soil has been there forever, since the beginning of the Earth, and your greed and mismanagement makes it blow. It’s a really horrible thing to see, and I hate seeing it on other people’s farm”. And in another report: “Farmers just hate seeing their farm lift; it somehow says to them ‘I’m a bad farmer’. And I think all farmers are good farmers. They all try their hardest to be. They all love their land” (in Ellis & Albrecht, 2017, p. 165).

So, it does seem right to say that ecological grief will often be shared in this third way, since the cause of ecological grief is large-scale change or disruption that will manifestly affect others in one’s community. Hence, someone undergoing ecological grief is more likely than a subject of bereavement grief to feel that many others are affected similarly and so to have an associated feeling of camaraderie or fellow-feeling. Thus, we have found one way in which ecological grief might be said to be “a shared emotion,” or at least, often a shared emotion. While we are focusing on forms of local ecological grief here, fellow-feeling likely applies also to youth around the world who grieve shattered dreams because of the climate crisis (for a discussion of “shattered dreams” in global forms of ecological grief, see Pihkala, 2024).

It is, however, worth observing that many other emotions can be shared in this way in certain circumstances, namely, whenever a token (i.e., an instance) of that emotion is caused (as ecological grief is) by some large-scale situation that manifestly affects people other than oneself. Consider for example the happiness one feels on waking to good weather or the anxiety or anger generated by hearing news of a terrorist attack. So, if this were the only way in which ecological grief is characteristically shared then we would not have identified something particularly distinctive. Furthermore, when philosophers have turned their attention to shared emotion, they have often been interested in forms of emotional sharing in which aspects of the intentional structure of relevant emotions take shared form: for example, emotions involving a shared object, or a plural subject, or an evaluation that in some way belongs to more than one individual (see e.g., Gilbert, 2002; Schmid, 2014; Thonhauser, 2022).

In light of these observations, it seems worth pursuing further the question of ecological grief’s putative shared nature to see if there are any other ways in which it might be characteristically shared. In the next two sections, we will argue that due to the distinctive role of place in ecological grief, and the way in which places structure the lives not just of individuals but of collectives, ecological grief is characteristically shared in two further ways. In exploring these two further forms of emotional sharing we will see that ecological grief has a distinctively shared character: sharing or collectivity is built into the intentional structure of ecological grief in a unique way.

Group-Based Ecological Grief

A fourth form of shared emotions are “group-based” emotions (see e.g., Menges & Kilduff, 2015). A group-based emotion is an emotion that is felt by an individual—or by multiple individuals, separately—in virtue of their membership of a group. One more specific form of group-based emotion is an emotion, had by an individual, in which the emotional evaluation is “for” or “on behalf of” a group of which one is a member. For example, my fear that *we, the staff in my department, are going to lose our jobs*, is group-based fear, in contrast to my fear that *the snarling dog will bite me*. Group-based grief would then be grief over *a loss to the group*, and group-based ecological grief would be grief over *our ecological loss.* Group-based ecological grief is distinct from the kind of shared ecological grief identified in the third section: that phenomenon was an experience of ecological grief with an associated sense or belief that others were feeling similarly which need not be grief over any shared ecological loss. Group-based grief, in contrast, is grief over a shared ecological loss and need involve no sense or belief that others feel similarly. While group-based ecological grief (like any group-based emotion) can be had by a single subject, in isolation, there can also be “parallel” group-based grief, in which several subjects grieve over the same loss to the group. Note that the group itself could be heterogeneous, with some members occupying very different roles in the group. Members could even undergo different experiences of group-based loss that correspond to their position in the group. Moreover, there are some cases (e.g., people moving out of the region, or deeply engaged researchers such as the previous example involving Cunsolo) in which there may be no fully determinate answer as to who counts as part of the group.

There is ample evidence of ecological grief being shared in the sense of it being a group-based emotion. That is, an emotion that is felt by an individual in virtue of their belonging to a group. This is a prominent theme in ecological grief. In many studies of ecological grief, subjects report a group-based emotion about the impact of ecological losses on their community. A victim of a wildfire in Australia laments how “it totally changed everything about our place, not just the inside, not just the house, not just our stuff, but all our history” (in Proudley, 2013, p. 13). In Ghana, discussing the loss of place-based knowledge as a result of deforestation, a farmer reports: “we are doomed as a community, and this knowledge might just end with my generation. We will be that generation who let knowledge ‘die’” (in Amoak et al., 2023, p. 131). This communal loss of place-based knowledge is a common aspect of the shared grief resulting from environmental degradation. In the Torres Strait, one subject reports “we used to read the landscape. But now it changes, you have to guess now” (McNamara & Westoby, 2011, p. 235). In Siberia, one Sakha respondent

describes a similar sense of a shared loss of place-based knowledge: "From long ago we could read the weather and know what weather would come according to our "Sier-Tuom" [Sakha sacred belief system]. But we can't do that anymore. […] It used to explain everything for us but now it can't tell anything" (in Crate, 2008, p. 578).

The above reports reflect how many communal practices and shared knowledge are grounded on particular places and disrupted as a result of environmental changes. Furthermore, for many people, their group identity is tied to those places (Peng et al., 2020). The following example comes from the Ganga basin in the Himalayas:

> We live in a sacred place [in the Himalayas]. And we are connected to our religious traditions. For twenty-four hours a day, we are in the lap of Mother Ganga. And if that Mother disappears, I believe that our entire identity (pehchaan) will also disappear. For this reason, we've been working all year to prevent that from happening. [We say], 'Let this river's constant flow run free'. (in Drew, 2013, p. 28)

This connection between land and identity is also very present in Inuit communities in Canada: "Inuit are people of the sea ice. If there is no more sea ice, how can we be people of the sea ice?" (in Ellis & Cunsolo, 2018, p. 277). In a separate study, another Inuit respondent shares a similar view: "The land defines who we are [as Inuit]. It's part of us. It's just something that we've always went there, we always did things. I don't know, we have this connection to the land that makes you feel good. It makes you, you." (Cunsolo et al., 2012). Collective place identity operates at the level of a large group (e.g., Inuit) but also at a level of smaller groups, such as family units: "Myself and my family ate caribou just about every day, twelve months of the year. We had it, we dried it, we roasted it. We celebrated it. We shared it. It was a part of who we were. The food, the clothing, the hides, the antlers, the hooves" (in Cunsolo et al., 2020, p. 542).

When one goes over a corpus of ecological grief reports, it is remarkable how many subjects phrase their responses in the first person plural. One way to make sense of this is by considering what is the object of ecological grief. In a recent contribution, Ratcliffe et al. (2023) argue that the object of grief (paradigmatically bereavement grief) is a loss of life possibilities. The idea is that the structure of our lives depends on a coherent arrangement of significant possibilities (e.g., projects and routines), and that the people we love are integral to maintaining that structure. Grief engages and accommodates the implications of a loss to this life structure, so that the object of grief is a loss of life possibilities. Importantly, in the case of bereavement grief, this loss of life possibilities can be not just those of the grieving person but those of the deceased, and even shared possibilities (e.g., about *our* life together). This is a way in which we can make sense of ecological grief as a group-based emotion: its object corresponds to *our* possibilities, rather than just mine.

This move, however, opens the door to the following objection. Isn't this precisely the case with any form of grief, not just ecological grief, at least in principle? In some cases, the deceased structured the life possibilities not just of an individual, but of a group. Take the case of a beloved teacher, a preacher, or a community organizer who is central to the life of a group. Their death is likely to be experienced by members of the group as a loss of possibilities for the group. Of course, the way in which a deceased person sustains the structure of significance of each person in a group will tend to be quite individualized, so group-based grief will be more common for ecological than for bereavement grief. But if it all comes down to ecological grief tending to follow such a group-based pattern more often than bereavement grief, we wouldn't have established a philosophically meaningful connection between ecological grief and shared emotion. Moreover, the *prevalence* of ecological grief being shared (when compared with bereavement grief) is an empirical, not a philosophical question.

We would argue that, in fact, the object of ecological grief is *primarily* shared life possibilities, and that the reason for this can be traced to the way in which *place* structures the life possibilities of a group. This is devastatingly clear in this report from a woman facing drought in Iran: "I have gone to the farm and I'll stay there for hours and cry loudly. I'll cry for my son's woes, my daughter's destiny, my husband's hopelessness and my family's poverty" (in Keshavarz et al., 2013, p. 125). The places we dwell in structure our shared patterns of sense-making (our structure of life possibilities, in the terms of Ratcliffe, Richardson, and Millar). Therefore, when we have to recognize and accommodate the loss resulting from ecological destruction, we are faced with a loss that is not just "mine" but "ours." It is our place, our land, that we are losing. And with it, there is a loss of place-based routines, and of place-based knowledge that is also "ours" rather than "mine." While bereavement grief is just sometimes shared, ecological grief is characteristically shared, because places structure our shared life possibilities, and the object of ecological grief is the loss of those shared possibilities. It's not just incidental that ecological grief is characteristically shared in this way. Rather, there is a strong connection: it is in the nature of places and the way in which we humans live in them that grievable place-related losses will be shared. That is why the object of ecological grief will characteristically be a shared object.

In that the object of ecological grief is characteristically a shared one (a loss to the group rather than to an individual), there is a shared element in the intentional structure of ecological grief. As we said in the previous section, emotions that are shared in that way—where sharing characterizes the emotion's intentional structure—have been of most interest to philosophers. Expanding upon this, observe that the

sense of identity that is implicated in ecological grief, in contrast to bereavement grief, is also, primarily, a shared one. A sense of identity is implicated in grief in general in that the losses of possibility that we grieve are those that undermine or erode our sense of identity (Ratcliffe & Byrne, 2022). Only those losses—in contrast to minor losses such as the loss of a pen or scarf—are significant enough for grief. The people whose deaths we grieve over are ones who sustained for us possibilities upon which our sense of identity depended. Now, applying this to ecological grief we can say that the losses of possibility that are grieved are ones that threaten a *shared* sense of identity—a sense not of who *I* am but of who *we* are. Hence, a shared phenomenon (a shared sense of identity) characteristically enters into the very conditions that make ecological grief count as a form of grief at all.

Ecological Grief as a Shared Process

So far, we have shown that in assessing the claim that ecological grief is a shared emotion, it matters a great deal what model or form of shared emotion one has in mind. There are some ways in which it is important to recognize that ecological grief is *not* characteristically shared. For example, ecological grief is not characteristically shared in the sense of being communicated to others, although that might change as ecological grief comes to be more widely recognized. And, while someone's ecological grief can be shared in the sense of being partly caused by another subject's ecological grief, this does not mark out anything characteristic of ecological as opposed to other forms of grief. We have also argued that ecological grief *is* characteristically shared in two ways. First, it is characteristically shared in that it is occasioned by a large-scale change that subjects will sense or believe is likely to affect other people in ways that are similar to how they themselves are affected. Second, it is characteristically a "group-based" emotion in that its object is a loss to the group and not merely to the individual who grieves. Does this exhaust the ways in which ecological grief is a shared emotion? One reason for asking this question is that in the philosophical literature on shared emotion there has been a particular interest in forms of emotional sharing that challenge the idea that emotions are had only by individuals. On the strongest "token-identity" accounts of shared emotion, there can be single tokens (i.e., particular occurrences or instances) of emotion types (tokens of, say, fear or joy, or anger) had or undergone by a plurality of subjects: a single token of fear, for example, had or undergone by Anna and Bella and Caleb together, rather than by Anna alone (e.g., Gatyas 2023; Krueger 2015; Schmid 2014).[1]

The two ways in which we have so far argued that ecological grief *is* characteristically shared do not entail that there are shared tokens of grief in this sense. Neither sensing nor believing that others feel as I do about an ecological loss, nor grieving for an ecological loss to a group to which I belong entail that I am having or undergoing a token of grief that is not just my own but also has other subjects. Furthermore, token-identity accounts have been subject to significant critique (e.g., León et al., 2019; Zahavi, 2015), leading some to think that we should abandon the idea of shared token emotions in favor of partaking in a shared emotional complex of some kind (Szanto, 2015).[2] In this section we will nevertheless argue that are shared tokens of ecological grief. We do not want to go so far as to say that this is a third way in which ecological grief is *characteristically* shared. The connection between the intentional structure of ecological grief and its being shared in this third way is not as strong as the connection we saw there was in the case of group-based grief. Instead, we will suggest that ecological grief is *particularly apt* to take the form of shared tokens due to the fact that its object is often ambiguous and ongoing.

To begin with, let us sketch a token identity account of shared grief that has been developed and defended in detail elsewhere (Richardson, 2024). To avoid some criticisms to which token identity accounts of shared emotion have been subject, it is important to emphasize that it is grief's characteristic features that allow it to be shared in the relevant way, on Richardson's account. We are not here committed to the claim that tokens of other kinds of emotions can be shared by multiple subjects in the very same way that grief can be shared on this account.[3] One of grief's characteristic features is that, as we have already said, its object can be understood as a loss of significant (i.e., identity relevant) possibilities. We have also already said that in an individual subject, grief is the process of recognizing and accommodating this object[4]: grief's processual nature is another of its characteristic features. Furthermore, grief is not only a process but a lengthy and heterogenous one. Grief is a lengthy process in that recognizing each of the many possibilities that have been lost and accommodating their loss (e.g., developing new habits and expectations to replace those that are no longer sustainable) takes time. Grief is a heterogenous process in that it is composed of various mental items such as episodes of other emotion types, memories, and imaginings (Goldie, 2012).

In the previous section, we argued that in group-based grief, what is recognised and accommodated in grief is a shared object: a loss of *our* identity-relevant possibilities. According to Richardson, the process of recognition and accommodation itself can sometimes be shared. That is, on occasion, the process of recognizing and accommodating our identity-relevant possibilities is a process in which more than one subject partakes. For example, sometimes a family undergoes a process of recognizing and accommodating possibilities that are lost to them as a family when a family member dies, possibilities that were central to their identity as a family. In such a case there is a process

whereby *we* recognize and accommodate *our* loss of identity relevant possibilities. Since a process of recognizing and accommodating lost identity relevant possibilities just *is* grief, it follows that there can be and sometimes are tokens of shared grief. As Richardson, 2024 argues, it is in large part because grief is a heterogenous process that tokens of grief can be shared in this specific way: diverse mental items in different subjects can constitute elements of a shared process of recognizing and accommodating loss, in much the same way as diverse mental items in a single subject can constitute elements of one subject's process of recognizing and accommodating their own loss. Hence, to reiterate, this token identity account of shared grief probably won't apply to other emotions, or at least not to emotions that are not processes, or that are processes but not heterogenous ones.

Having described this "token identity" account of shared grief it remains to see how it may apply to ecological grief. We think that there are reasons to believe that ecological grief is a particularly apt to be shared in this way, more so than bereavement grief.

One reason for this is that at least some of what is lost in ecological grief cannot be fully recognized and accommodated by an individual, but only by the group (partly, because what is lost is a shared lifeworld, Pihkala, 2024). A particularly clear example of this is how from the Torres Straits to Sibera, study participants lament that they are no longer able to "read the landscape," due to environmental change. The very legibility of the landscape is based on communal practice. Hence, an isolated individual is going to be unable to recognize and accommodate the loss that results from environmental damage in this situation. Recognition and accommodation of the loss will instead have to be a collective endeavor, and, as we have said, recognition and accommodation of loss are integral to the grief process. So, if this loss is going to be recognized and accommodated at all, then it will be so collectively. That is what we mean when we say that tokens ecological grief are particularly "apt" to take shared form.

Furthermore, though we do not want to deny that tokens of bereavement grief can also take shared form, this does not undercut the proposal that ecological grief is more apt to do so, since this is due, again, to the role of place in ecological grief. We have already seen that ecological grief takes a shared object because of the way in which places structure shared life-possibilities: something which does not typify bereavement grief. It is for related reasons that processes of recognizing these shared objects of ecological grief will need to be shared ones: in the specific case under discussion, the possibility of engaging in a place-based practice is lost, and the loss of that place-based practice can only be recognized collectively due to the shared or collective way in which we make our lives in places.

Another reason for thinking that tokens of ecological grief are particularly apt to be shared rooted in the ambiguity of much ecological loss. Paradigmatic forms of ambiguous loss, in bereavement grief, involve uncertainty around whether the person has really "gone," either because it is open that they may return (e.g., in kidnaping) or because it is not clear that the person is present at all (e.g., in advanced dementia) (Boss, 2010). More generally, a loss is ambiguous when there is unclarity around what it is that is lost. Ecological loss is often ambiguous in this sense. This is partly because ecological loss is often ongoing, as mentioned in the first section. Take for example the Inuit people's place-based loss, occasioned by the melting of sea ice. The loss the Inuit people face is partly a matter of what has already gone (the ice that has already melted and the consequences of this) but also a matter of what continues to be and will be lost: more ice will melt, with further consequences. The ongoing and future losses lend the overall loss of the Inuit people some ambiguity: to the extent that it is uncertain what is still being and will be lost, their loss is an ambiguous one (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Gleizer & Fernandez Velasco, 2024; Pihkala, 2024). This is characteristic of the ecological loss occasioned by climate change, since it often unfolds gradually over a long period of time.

There is another aspect of the ambiguity of ecological loss, which can be described synchronically rather than diachronically. In the face of environmental destruction or change many things that were possible for a group become no longer possible. We have said that a shared object of ecological grief is the loss of a set of place-based, identity-relevant possibilities for a group. This raises the question: which of the things that are no longer possible for the group in the face of environmental destruction or change are the relevant identity-relevant possibilities? The loss of ecological grief is ambiguous. In many cases, it will be difficult to tell, or there might be no fact of the matter about which lost possibilities constitute the object of ecological grief.

It is because the losses of ecological grief are ambiguous in these ways that they can call for a process of recognition and accommodation that is shared (see Randall, 2009 and Pihkala, 2024 for a discussion of the processual aspects of ecological grief). If recognition and accommodation is to occur at all in such cases, it will require some resolution of these kinds of ambiguity: of what, exactly, has been lost over time, and at any particular time. To give a hypothetical and no doubt oversimplified example: whether the continued melting of the sea ice eventually leads to the loss of the Inuit identity altogether will depend not just on whether and how quickly the ice continues to melt but on the collective practices of the Inuit people—whether they manage to find some other way to sustain this group identity or abandon it entirely. This isn't something that will be up to any individual but will instead depend on the contributions of more than one member of the group.

To summarize the argument of this section so far, we have argued that in addition to the forms of emotional sharing

characteristic of ecological grief and explored in the third and fourth sections, ecological grief is particularly apt to take the form of shared tokens. This, as we said, has been a form of emotional sharing that has captured philosophical interest. At this point, it might however be objected that we have omitted to say anything about the *most* interesting and challenging features of such emotional sharing—the involvement of a (perhaps irreducibly) plural subject (e.g., Schmid, 2014), and/or shared phenomenal character (e.g., Krueger 2015). In fact, these are features of emotional sharing that appear in other, nontoken-identity accounts of shared emotion (Biglietti, 2025; Salmela, 2012; Szanto, 2015; Zahavi, 2015). The token identity account of shared grief that we have outlined in this section and applied to ecological grief does not make any use of the ideas of plural subjecthood or of shared phenomenal character. This is a salient omission because, or so it might be argued, these phenomena are the source of the philosophical interest of shared emotions.

We offer two responses to this objection, one more concessive than the other. First, and more concessively, while it is not necessary for the kind of shared grief we have been exploring in this section that it has a plural subject or shared phenomenal character, it is nevertheless consistent with Richardson's (2024) account that it does have one or both of these features (p. 113). Hence, if it really is the case that in order to count as (an interesting form of) shared emotion a shared process of recognizing and accommodating significant loss must have shared phenomenal character and/or a plural subject, our objector should be reassured that we have not ruled this out.

The second response is less concessive. As this article has highlighted, "shared emotion" is not a univocal expression. Many different phenomena can be and have been called shared emotion, only some of which involve a plural subject and/or shared phenomenal character. Hence, we might well resist the idea that omitting or sidelining these features detracts from the interest of an account of shared emotion, or of shared grief more specifically. Furthermore, the account of shared ecological grief offered in this section is of specific philosophical interest in that it takes a form—that of a token identity account—that has been controversial. Finally, we have not found any first-person testimonies of ecological grief that seem to demand appeal to shared phenomenal character or a plural subject. Thus an alternative conclusion to our objector's would be that in this context at least, the most challenging forms or features of shared emotion are not, after all, what matter most, or at least not for an account of ecological grief as a shared process.

Conclusion

It is commonplace for researchers in environmental science and environmental psychology to claim that ecological grief is a shared or collective emotion. Here, we set out to clarify whether this was the case, and if so, in which way ecological grief can be said to be characteristically shared. We found that it is important to recognize the diversity in what is meant by "shared emotion", and also that we must acknowledge ways in which ecological grief is *not* characteristically shared for a full understanding of this climate emotion. We identified two ways in which ecological grief is not characteristically shared.

However, we also explored three further forms of emotional sharing that are more closely connected to ecological grief. First, ecological grief characteristically involves a sense of fellow feeling, because it originates from a large-scale disruption that affects many people in the community. Second and more interestingly ecological grief is also characteristically a group-based emotion. The loss of a shared place entails a loss of shared place-based culture and identity. Hence, this way in which ecological grief is shared can be traced back to the ways in which place is shared. The fact that ecological grief is characteristically a group-based emotion is reflected in its intentional structure: the primary object of ecological grief is the shared (*our*, not just *mine*) life possibilities sustained by place. Third, due to its ambiguous and ongoing nature, ecological loss is apt to occasion shared tokens of ecological grief, which is to say, shared, heterogeneous processes of recognizing and accommodating loss.

A question that remains open is the composition of the group undergoing ecological grief. Different members of the group will have different social roles and will accordingly play different parts in the heterogenous, shared process that is ecological grief. Interestingly, in many indigenous cultures, they might consider a very broad collective when it comes to shared ecological grief. Participants often refer to the grief of both past and future generations (Crate, 2008; Furberg et al., 2011). Discussing temperature increase in Sweden, a Sami reindeer herder discusses an instance in which their emotional evaluation of a situation develops by conversing with others: "And then we realized that so as not to destroy our winter grazing lands we had to leave, although it was only the end of March. And then we said that our father would turn in his grave if he knew that we were on the mountains at this time of year, it would be unthinkable!" (in Furberg et al., 2011, p. 6; for recent research on ecological grief among the Sami, see Markkula et al., 2024). Sometimes, ecological grief even extends to the loss of life possibilities of nonhuman animals: "The first word that comes to my mind is sad. Not only sad for us, but sad for the caribou. [...] They're getting killed off, or being starved, or whatever it is that's happening to them. It's sad that they could possibly get wiped out. Which is really bad, and sad for the caribou themselves" (in Cunsolo et al., 2020, p. 44; see Otjen et al., 2023 for a discussion of multispecies grief). Understanding who participates in shared ecological grief, and how, is a question that warrants further research both conceptually and empirically.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Mind and Reason group at the University of York for their feedback.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

Funding

PFV's work was funded by the British Academy (PFSS23\230053) and the Leverhulme Trust (LIP-2023-002). LR's work was funded by the AHRC (AH/T000066/1).

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Notes

1. A token of an emotion is a particular occurrence or instance of an emotion of some type or kind, such as the instance of fear that Anna felt yesterday when she heard the barking dog, or Bella's ongoing grief over her mother's death. A token emotion is to be distinguished from an emotion type or kind of emotion, such as fear or grief. If Bella grieves over her mother's death and then also grieves over the loss of her beloved home then she undergoes two tokens of one type of emotion (i.e., of grief).
2. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for this helpful form of words.
3. For example, León et al. (2019) observe that a problem for token identity accounts has been that either they must insist, *per impossibile*, that the subjects of a shared emotion feel precisely the same (p. 4853), or they fall into what they call the "jigsaw puzzle approach" (p. 4855) which, they argue, commits one to an implausible view of the relation between an emotion and the way it feels to one. Richardson's token identity view of shared *grief*, specifically, avoids this difficulty in that the heterogenous elements of a shared grief process hang together as a singular token of grief across subjects in much the same way as the heterogenous elements of an individual's grief also hang together within a single subject. Again, see Richardson (2024) for full details.
4. We follow Ratcliffe et al. (2023) in describing grief as a process of recognition and accommodation and, like Ratcliffe, do not intend this form of words to obscure the transformative character that grief can have. For instance, subjects often accommodate significant loss partly by transforming their sense of identity. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us to clarify this point.

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