

Future Projections in Uruguayan Adolescents: Navigating Climate Anxiety and Uncertainty

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Abstract

Adolescence is a key stage in the construction of identity and planning of a life project, when these processes unfold in contexts perceived as uncertain, embedded in global crisis, youths' capacities to envision future projections may be affected. This study is guided by the question: How do adolescents in Montevideo, Uruguay, from 15 to 19 years old, build their future projections in a context characterized by climate anxiety and a broader culture of crisis? Based on empirical data gathered through semistructured interviews and discussion groups conducted in Montevideo, Uruguay during 2023, the article analyzes: 1) how adolescents interpret environmental risks, 2) if they associate crisis and future in their narratives, 3) how these interpretations shape their planning of life projects.

Key findings of the discourse analysis applied in this article are: in their narratives, girls identify the concept of climate change/climate anxiety shapes their ability to project into the future more than boys; when trying to project into the future, adolescents use the educational system as an anchor to face uncertainty even though national statistics show

considerable rates of school absenteeism and abandonment at high school; adolescents express disapproval towards how climate change is addressed by governments and adults while, at the same time express feeling held responsible for its solution by said older generations. Intersectional studies about climate anxiety in different countries should be conducted to understand the ways in which it manifests and what strategies adolescents use to cope with it.

Key Words: Climate Anxiety, Future Projections, Risk Society, Adolescents and Youth, Crisis Culture.

Introduction

An emerging body of research has addressed climate anxiety in recent years, nonetheless it has been investigated – not exclusively but predominantly – within the fields of psychology and mental health, analysis from a sociological perspective of this phenomenon, and its effects on the ability of adolescents to project into the future, remains less explored. Adolescence is a key stage in the construction of identity and planning of a life project, when these processes unfold in contexts perceived as uncertain, embedded in a global crisis, youths' capacities to envision future projections may be affected. Understanding how adolescents recognize, grant meaning, and navigate these conditions becomes relevant in order to comprehend contemporary youth and adolescent experiences framed in *risk societies*.

The main objective of this article is to examine how awareness of the climate crisis and the experience of climate anxiety influence adolescents' capacity to build future projections. The researched population are adolescents living in Montevideo, Uruguay, with whom the study specifically explores: 1) how adolescents interpret environmental risks, 2) if

they associate crisis and future in their narratives, and 3) how these interpretations shape their planning for long-term life projects.

Guided by the following question: How do adolescents in Montevideo, Uruguay, from 15 to 19 years old, build their future projections in a context characterized by climate anxiety and a broader culture of crisis? In order to address it, the study adopts a qualitative methodology based in discourse analysis. Empirical data was collected during 2023 through eighteen semi-structured interviews and two discussion groups with a total of thirty participants, which allows for the appearance of both individual narratives and collectively negotiated meanings regarding climate change, risk, and future projections.

The structure of the article is as follows: A first section presents the theoretical framework, with sociological approaches to risk society and crisis culture, adolescence, future projections and the temporal horizon, the emotional dimension and climate anxiety. The second section explains the methodology of the study. The third section contains the discussion and results. The fourth and last section is for conclusions.

This study aims to contribute to the sociological field of risk and youth studies addressing climate anxiety not solely as a psychological pathology, but as a socially and culturally mediated phenomenon, embedded in the temporal structure of risk within the examined population.

Theoretical Framework

Risk Society and Crisis Culture

Both Beck's risk society (1996) and Dorothy Holland's struggle culture (2001) present a context where uncertainty is the only continuum that either enables or hinders future projections. Beck's (1996) conception of risk society is useful to describe modern societies from the perspective of "forecasting and controlling the future consequences of human action, the various unintended consequences of radicalized modernization. It is an (institutionalized) attempt to colonize the future" (Beck, p. 5, 1996). In parallel, Dorothy Holland's concept of struggle culture (2001), addresses the ideas of person in history and history in person; through which personal experience is reflected in history, and in turn, history affects and shapes personal experience. Struggle culture serves as a useful tool for understanding events such as the climate crisis or climate change, and how they shape the experiences of adolescents.

Globalization, modern societies hazards, and deinstitutionalization call for a profound reflexivity in individuals to manage even mundane activities (Beck, 1998). Most of the world populations are embedded in risk societies, however, adolescents are also inherently in a stage marked by identity reconfiguration, confusion and uncertainty, as explained by the Panamerican Health Organization, adolescence "implies reflexivity, autonomy-seeking, and redefinition of social positioning" (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2021, p.104). Which suggests that placed in the context of a risk society at a stage with such characteristics, their reflexivity, self-scrutiny and anxiety are amplified, explicitly linking their difficulty in envisioning long-term trajectories with the risk of climate crisis.

In order to access and analyze the empirical data of the study, on how risks and climate anxiety influence adolescents' perspective of the future a discourse analysis perspective was employed. Discourse is a system for accessing reality (Van Dijk, 2001), through which language, construction of meaning, and signals take on different values in specific contexts. The meaning of discourse is socially negotiated and allows us to register how social aspects condition the potential of meaning (Foucault, 1991). "Discourses are ways of representing aspects of the world: the processes, relationships and structures of the material world, the "mental world" of thoughts and feelings, beliefs, etc. and the social world." (Fairclough, 2003, p.124). Discourse allows us to observe elements such as the emotions and beliefs of the participants of this study, and approach questions such as: What capacity do adolescents have to visualize future projections? What meanings are conferred to them? Does climate anxiety relate to their ability to visualize a future?

Analysis of the discussion groups and interviews with adolescents, considered the four fundamental dimensions of risk proposed by Ramos and Callejo (2023), which combine the realist and culturalist conceptions of the semantics of risk: 1) temporal dimension of risk which implies looking at an open and feasible future; 2) ontological dimension of risk which stems from the idea that the world is contingent; therefore, exposure to risk implies either losses or gains; 3) cognitive dimension of risk implies uncertainty that can, although not always, be reduced in probabilistic terms; 4) practical dimension of risk is linked to human action, the adoption of decisions whose consequences are located in the future, favorable/unfavorable they may be, and with a variable degree of uncertainty are crucial.

Adolescence

Adolescence, in this study, is understood as more than a biological evolution in a human, adolescence is also a socially constructed and contextually mediated phase of life. In its General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that “the present general comment does not seek, therefore, to define adolescence, but instead focuses on the period of childhood from 10 years until the 18th birthday to facilitate consistency in data collection” (UNCROC, 2016). Debates about age boundaries further reflect the fluidity of the concept: proposals to extend adolescence to ages 10–24 (Patton et al., 2018) have emerged, based on the current prolonged educational trajectories, delayed economic independence, and ongoing neurodevelopment. Such expanded framing challenges traditional chronological limits and reinforces the concept of adolescence as a socially negotiated category, as well as how diverse an experience adolescence may be, depicting it also as “a life stage characterized by growing opportunities, capacities, aspirations, energy and creativity, but also significant vulnerability” (UNCROC, 2016), later commenting on said stage as a critical period of transition and opportunity to improve life chances, which can be interpreted as crucial for future planning and life projects being imagined as well as set up: Identity formation constitutes a core element of adolescence, and in order to build and present said identity, contextual and cultural specificity are central.

In Uruguay, adolescence is understood as a delimiting subgroup within youth, however, “in Uruguay, being young does not always coincide between chronological and subjective age” (Filardo et al., 2009). Filardo (2009) argues that the perception of what it means to be young is influenced by lived experience and the particular characteristics and

subjectivities of individuals. In this search for autonomy, adolescents are confronted with a retrospective view of themselves, attempting to reconcile who they are becoming with who they have been. Therefore, during adolescence environmental, social and structural disruptions are crucial to shaping the identities and possibilities of young people's futures.

Future Projections and the Temporal Horizon

Based on the socially negotiated understanding of adolescence that we understand it is important to delve into how these adolescents, when faced with this struggle culture, deinstitutionalization (Dubet & Martuchelli, 2020) and climate change are able to see themselves in the future that is permeated by these unstable factors. The ability to imagine one's future, or plan for it, is a socially mediated cognitive achievement. Mische's (2009) conceptualization of projectivity allows to explore how individuals negotiate the tension between institutional expectations and personal inventiveness. Projectivity is understood as the imaginative extension of the self into time, seeing oneself in the future and is defined by three critical dimensions: 1) reach (distance into the horizon); 2) clarity (resolution of said future); and 3) volition (the subjective sense of agency). When found in a stable social order, these three dimensions facilitate the construction of a life project, which in turn serves as a normative road-map that organizes one's present towards long term goals (Sanhueza et al., 2025).

Holland's (2001) struggle culture intertwines with adolescence and acts as a temporal barrier shortcutting the reach of their capacity to project themselves: the future is no longer perceived as a predictable extension of the present but as a fog where the horizon of expectations is obscured by environmental and systemic collapse. This aligns with the

findings of Sanhueza et al. (2025) in Chile who states that, when the future lacks clarity the motivation to invest in a life project dissolves, leaving the subject in a state of temporal paralysis.

Furthermore, Mische (2009) argues that projectivity is the engine of social change: it is because one can reach back from the future that transformation in current social structures becomes possible, making an interesting parallel with Holland's (2001) history in person. When the capacity to project oneself is damaged, the adolescents' ability to conceive themselves as agents of social and personal change is hindered. In order to comprehend the etiology of this projective fracture it is imperative we analyze the qualitative nature of future horizons presented to contemporary adolescents. The current historical era is informed by the "unprecedented technological and environmental risks" (Currie & Ó hÉigearthaigh, 2018), for example, the climate crisis. These risks represent a break in history where previous survival tactics are no longer valid nor indicators of future continuity: for adolescents today, it has been reshaped and its temporal factor has made it become more imminent.

Within this high-risk environment, the social imaginary is dominated by what Callego Gallego and Ramos Torre (2023) call the catastrophist discourse, which presents the future not as an open field of contingency and possibility (Mische, 2009), but as a deterministic dead end. This highlights the importance of specifically analyzing adolescent discourse, for the participants in this study catastrophism is the primary lens through which the future is filtered, creating a pervasive struggle culture (Holland, 2001) where the continuity of the social world is no longer a given. This current social outlook creates a cognitive dissonance: while traditional institutions like the educational system demand that adolescents plan for a

linear, stable future (Eckert, 2000; Duvet & Martucceli, 2020), the dominant catastrophist discourse depicts future as an illusion.

This lash generates a state of deep uncertainty (Ramos et al., 2024) where the variables for long-term decision-making are volatile, and traditional rational choice models fail to address this crisis culture. Currie & Ó Éigeartaigh (2018) note that inability to mitigate these slow-motion collapses of eco-social systems, lead to a unique form of existential vulnerability where particularly adolescents experience this not as a single event but as a chronic atmospheric pressure. The idea of human progress is replaced by an idea of decay, where this once assured future is now solely dependent on the individual's will, or ability, to project which is now colonized by fear. The result is a sociology of the no-future, where the adolescent temporal horizon is populated by fragments of collapse rather than cohesive plans for development. Society functions based on what is to come, we are now because we can be in the future (Valdés, 2011). This raises important questions about how adolescents attribute meaning to the present when future horizons appear unstable.

The Emotional Dimension and Climate anxiety

Previous studies by Ariza and Gazzano (2018) reveal that Uruguayan adolescents possess high climate concerns as well as a desire to actively participate in decision making and social change regarding the climate. The sheer scale of existential risk creates a paralysis of agency where the individuals, particularly adolescents, are too informed but also, too overwhelmed in this case, to be able to project a concrete and long-term future.

In order to mitigate the resulting psychic tension, many adolescents retreat into what we identify as the educational anchor (Eckert, 2000). In order to satiate the need to create a

future projection, many rely on a preexisting a predefined institution which also offers a clear path forward and serves as an aid to the existential fog. Adolescents appear shackled to the certainty that the educational system provides (Eckert, 2000), while there is an interesting paradox created in the context of Uruguay when this is coupled with the high school absenteeism rate (46,8%). This retreat towards the education system (Eckert, 2000) is an emotional defense mechanism against this culture of crisis and subsequent climate anxiety.

Parting from this culture of crisis, emotions appear as windows into the current adolescent state, regarding the climate crisis and how they perceive this relates to their immediate future. The need to create a future projection is accompanied by an emotional process which is amplified during adolescence.

Stressors emerge from the risks and effects of climate change, as well as the decisions of adults and governments to address it. In the case of this study, adolescents' show emotional and rational responses, contextually shaped by a global crisis. Starting in the early 2000s, studies have shown that climate change has negative effects, not only on the environment but also on adolescents and people's mental health, and, in turn, it has shown relevance in adolescents' ability to project their futures. According to the 2021 UNICEF global survey on climate anxiety in children and young people, more than 45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning, and 75% said they think the future is frightening. These widespread effects produce what is known as climate anxiety, which the American Psychological Association defines as "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (Clayton et al., 2017, p.68 [Glossary]).

Climate anxiety is shaped not only by the environmental state of the planet, but also

by narratives about collective responsibility and institutional failure. As expressed in the responses of the young people in the aforementioned survey: they feel as though they have no future, governments are failing to respond adequately to climate change, and they state feeling abandoned and betrayed by both adults and governments (Hickman et al., 2021).

These structural dynamics expose systemic inequalities concerning vulnerable groups, among which are children and adolescents, who have witnessed or are currently experiencing firsthand the impacts of climate change, leading them to “worries about the future, along with feelings of helplessness and distress” (Albrecht et al., 2007; Clayton et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, as mentioned by Corvalan et al (2022), emotional responses to climate change must not be pathologized, they are socially negotiated within a certain cultural context.

Adolescents appear disproportionately more vulnerable seeing as: “They have their whole life ahead of them – any deprivation as a result of climate and environmental degradation at a young age can result in a lifetime of lost opportunity” (UNICEF, 2021, p.9). Therefore, climate anxiety is not seen here as an individual and isolated disorder, but as a response to an ongoing global crisis with environmental, social, political and structural dynamics, which compromise the wellbeing of adolescents as well as the capacity to imagine their futures.

Method

This study employs a qualitative, hermeneutic design in order to explore the discursive construction of the future among adolescents in Montevideo, Uruguay, through semi-structured interviews and discussion groups. The methodology is structured to capture the intersection between individual emotion and structural social processes as observed through discourse analysis. The question that guides this research is as follows: How do adolescents in Montevideo, Uruguay, aged 15 to 19 years old, develop their future projections in a context of crisis culture?

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The sample consists of 30 adolescents, from 15 to 19 years of age, living in Montevideo Uruguay. Interviews and discussion groups took place between March and October 2023, using Tonon de Toscano's et al (2013) semi structured interviews. A purposive snowball strategy was used to ensure variation in gender and socioeconomic background. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, particularly regarding representations of the future and climate anxiety. Starting from personal contacts and connections with different adolescents primarily through extracurricular activity centers, which allowed diversity in regards to gender and socio-economic status. Gender is understood as the gender identity provided by the participant. Socio-economic status was defined according to the criteria set by the Continuous Household Survey (2023) by the National Statistics Institute of Uruguay, in accordance with the participants' place/ neighborhood of origin and their current residence. This stratification allowed for an analysis of class distinctions, specifically regarding access to elaborated versus restricted linguistic

codes (Bernstein, 2010), and the impact of socioeconomic status on the ability to articulate future projections and manage anxiety.

Data Collection

Narrative and Collective Meaning (Data was triangulated through two primary qualitative techniques):

Semi-Structured Interviews (n=18): These focused on "biographical projectivity," asking participants to navigate their personal timelines. Key prompts included the conceptualization of "crisis" and the visualization of the "self" in a ten-year horizon. The participants were composed of the following: 9 girls, 9 boys, 10 participants of low - middle socioeconomic class and 8 of middle-high socioeconomic status.

Discussion Groups (n=2): These sessions were critical for observing the "social negotiation of fear." They allowed us to see how "Future-phobia" is reinforced through peer interaction and shared cultural symbols. There were two total groups composed of 6 participants each (3 girls, 3 boys) carried out based on Ibanez's (1996) understanding of a discussion group and they were separated by socioeconomic status: one group of upper-middle class status and one group from lower-middle class.

Table 1

Individual Semi-structured Interview Profiles

Gender	Age	Socioeconomic background	Enrolled in School
F	17	LM	Yes
F	15	LM	Yes
F	18	LM	Yes
F	18	LM	Yes
F	16	LM	Yes
F	19	UM	Yes
F	17	UM	Yes
F	18	UM	Yes
F	16	UM	Yes
M	16	UM	Yes
M	16	UM	Yes
M	17	UM	Yes
M	16	UM	Yes

M	18	UM	Yes
M	17	LM	Yes
M	17	LM	Yes
M	16	LM	Yes
M	17	LM	Yes

Legend: F: Female, M: Male; LM: Lower-middle class, UM: Upper-middle class

Table 2

Discussion Group Profiles

Gender	Age	Socioeconomic background	Enrolled in School
F	15	UM	Yes
F	16	UM	Yes
F	15	UM	Yes
F	15	LM	Yes
F	16	LM	Yes
F	18	LM	No

M	15	UM	Yes
M	16	UM	Yes
M	15	UM	Yes
M	16	LM	Yes
M	17	LM	No
M	15	LM	No

Data Analysis

Discourse Analysis

The analysis was conducted using a multi-phase coding process. We based the analysis on the idea of critical discourse analysis presented by Van Dijk (2021) who understands discourse analysis as a tool to assess the reality of the speaker, through which they seek to understand the adolescence reality in relation to climate anxiety.

Thematic Network Analysis

We moved from "Open Coding" (identifying raw emotions like *Fear* or *Uncertainty*) to "Axial Coding" (mapping the relationship between the *Climate Crisis* and the *Educational Anchor*), as observed in Table 3.

Word Frequency and Lexical Density

To provide empirical weight to the "Catastrophist" discourse, we performed a frequency analysis of key terms. We compared the density of "anxiety-laden" terms (e.g., *collapse, fog, end*) against "projective" terms (e.g., *career, dream, family*). Based on the concepts presented in the theoretical framework.

Table 3

Frequency of use of terms in interviews and discussion groups: grouped by themes and synonyms in usage regarding: emotions, future or money.

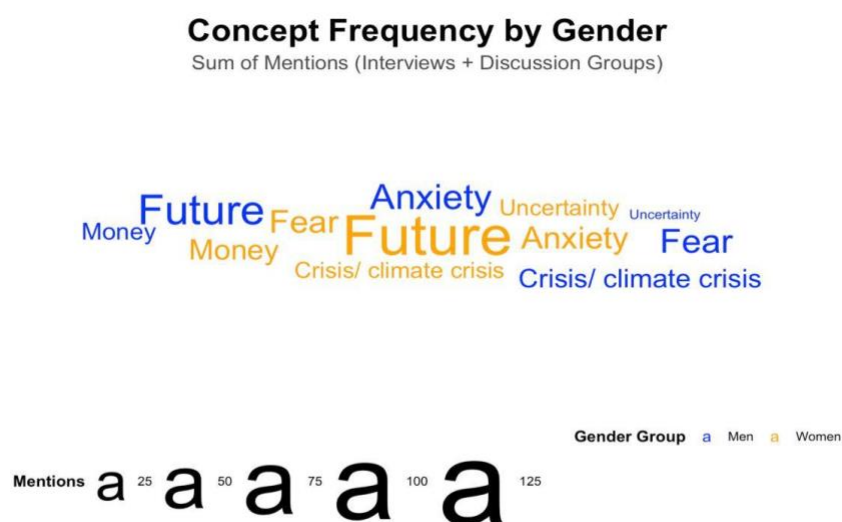
Concept	Related words	Interviews			Discussion groups			
		Mentions	Mentions	Total	% of	Mentions	Ment	Total
		by girls	by boys		interviews with mentions	by boys	ions by Girls	
Future	Futuro,	117	55	172	Boys:	16	10	26
	Proyecciones,				100%			
	Porvenir				Girls:			
					100%			
Crisis/	Crisis, Medio	56	68	124	Boys:	15	6	21
climate	ambiente,				88.88%			
crisis	Cambio				Girls:			

	climático				100%			
	(contextual)							
Anxiety	Ansiedad,	43	48	91	Boys:	12	4	16
	Ansiosa,				77.77%			
	Preocupación,				Girls:			
	Preocupada,				88.88%			
	Malestar,							
	Angustia							
Fear	Miedo,	17	9	26	Boys:	25	14	39
	Temor,				55.55%			
	"Cagaso"				Girls:			
	(jerga para				55.55%			
	miedo en los							
	textos)							
Uncertainty	Incertidumbre	30	3	33	Boys:	10	7	17
	, Inseguridad,				33.33%			
	Duda				Girls:			
					44.44%			
Money	Guita, Plata,	15	12	27	Boys:	14	23	37
	Dinero				44.44%			
					Girls:			
					33.33%			

Visual Representation (Word Clouds): The results of the frequency analysis are presented in Word Clouds elaborated using the coding of term frequency, the larger the term appears the more it, or its synonyms, were mentioned. These are visual guides that represent the comparison in use of words in frequency of use by gender and how crisis-related vocabulary appears predominantly in the participants' discourse, as seen in Figure 1. The dominance of terms like uncertainty over professionalism in the cloud provides a measurable proxy for the "contraction of the future" argued in our theoretical framework.

Figure 1

How Frequently the Central Concepts Were Mentioned in Interviews and Discussion Groups



Discussion of Empirical Results

The "Fog" of the Future: Temporality of Risk and the Short-Term Horizon

The discursive analysis carried out suggests that for Uruguayan adolescents, the future is fundamentally restructured by the climate crisis. The future is no longer a site of potentiality but it has transformed into what we define as a temporal barrier, the climate crisis emerges not only as an agent that restructures future perceptions for adolescents but it also reconceptualizes social time. In Mische's (2009) framework of projectivity, we observe a disruption in the cognitive ability of subjects, Uruguayan adolescents, to anchor their present actions in a projected future. As a female¹ participant (F16, UM, individual interview) states, there is “already a fear of the future, an anxiety about what might happen, uncertainty because I don’t know what is going to happen ... insecurity.” This insecurity manifests as a fog that obscures the life course, making the act of projection an exercise in managing fear rather than building aspirations.

The future seems to be overwhelmingly conceptualized by our participants as an irreversible void, as Fede (M16, UM, individual interview)² articulates, the future is

“Well maybe like a fog because, well you know there’s something there (...) but you can't see clearly, exactly what's there, it’s like you enter a fog, you don’t know where you are. You have an idea of the direction, but no, no you don’t know exactly what you’re going to be faced with”.

¹ All names used to reference participants are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of the participants of this study.

² F refers to female gender, 16 to the age of the participant and UM to Upper-middle class. The logic of these codes can be found on Tables 1 and 2 in their corresponding notes.

By both participants introducing firsthand accounts into the academic discussion, we can argue that adolescent climate anxiety is not a symptom of this crisis culture (Holland, 2001) but a profound sociological restructuring of projectivity, where navigating the future becomes an exercise in risk management. The future becomes a source of present-day precarity. The fog participants of this investigation reference, speaks not only to a lack of information but an ontological insecurity that renders the construction of social identity rarely possible (Filardo, 2009). In absence of a clear destination, the traditional life becoming, are viewed with skepticism or profound fatigue, a reach for the imagination is forced to contract into a defensive short-term survivalism.

Furthermore, the adolescents' discourse illustrates that this fog triggers a radical shortening of the temporal horizon. Participants repeatedly limit their life projections to a highly unstable and short-term window. Nicolas (M15, UM, Discussion Group) starkly exemplifies this temporal contraction: "I have accepted that maybe I'll make it to 80, maybe I'll make it to 25". This finding provides a lived experience and tangible example of deep uncertainty (Ramos Torre et al., 2024) where the climate crisis acts as a cognitive all preventing the formulation of a middle-ground biographical narrative. Nadia (F18, UM, individual interview) further reinforces this idea stating "I had no idea so yeah, honestly it did affect me a lot especially in how I projected myself". In this context, the future is already compromised before it is even reached, highlighting how crisis culture forces a short-termism that inhibits long-term social and professional planning. This suggests that the nothing in between described by participants is a relational response to a global system that offers no stability. This short-terminism observed in today' youth is not a developmental deficit but a highly rational defense mechanism.

Gendered Emotions

The discursive analysis highlights a distinct gendered dimension to climate anxiety within future projections. Young women experience a specific illusion of agency mediated by gendered fears regarding their official and existential safety. Emilia (F17, LM, Discussion group) captures this intersecting vulnerability vividly:

"You live scared, all the time. Me for example, I don't want to go to the bus stop at i don't know like 6pm in the afternoon and knowing I have to stay there to wait for the bus alone and I don't feel comfortable, where I know there's no street lights, for example, I don't like going alone."

For the young women participants, navigating a compromised future is inseparable from the immediate search for physical and emotional safety, therefore it must be interrogated with sociological rigor. The intersectional study of climate anxiety demonstrates that the female participants of this study seemed to be the most enlightened regarding the climate risks, they also bear a disproportionate emotional load as they are frequently expected to serve as the moral guide for their immediate circles, and on a larger scale referencing previous studies (Hochschild, 2008) women are often overloaded with "care work" in its many shapes and forms, this being one of them. It is interesting for further studies if this care work is comparable to the need for young adolescent women to serve as moral guardians of their generation, whether this is an extension of traditional domestic care on a planetary scale.

The feminist framework offers a temporary space of solidarity, but it cannot structurally resolve the underlying deep uncertainty. Therefore, we argue that the anxiety felt by young women is a compounded sociological effect of both environmental precarity and

enduring patriarchal structures, transforming their climate activism into an urgent plea for an ontological security that society continually fails to provide.

The Educational Anchor as a Coping Mechanism for Climate Anxiety

In the absence of a stable and long-term life course our research identifies an educational anchor. The educational system arises as a paramount coping mechanism utilized by adolescents to navigate through the fog of the future (Eckert, 2000). It is necessary to highlight an exception of the Uruguayan context from which the participants of this study originate, Uruguay harbors a unique case of high school abandonment cases, seeing as only 46.8% of students graduate at the age, they are supposed to according to the Institute for educational evaluation of Uruguay (INEEd, 2023). This educational anchor is cast into a sea of structural inequality.

As observed in the previously mentioned context and in the interviews and discussion groups, secondary school provides a predictable step by step normative sequence that acts as a shelter against overwhelming existential risk. The impossibility to project a long-term future given the climate crisis and crisis culture (Holland, 2001) that permeates. As observed through critical discourse analysis, the educational structure offers a “clear and effective trajectory beyond high school” (Eckert, 2000, p. 49). Even when participants express frustration with this system, they universally acknowledge its necessity. Anita (Female, 19, individual interview) points out regarding the pressure to conform to this educational structure: “when you finish high school you have to start university because if you don’t start university, you get comments from people like if he’s taking a gap year, he’s never going to study again”. Our empirical findings reinforce the idea that education functions less as a

vehicle for guaranteed professional mobility or ascense, but as a stabilizing agent that staves off the paralysis of climate anxiety. The school system appears as a legitimizing agent that allows them to re-enter a socially recognized path.

Contextualized within Uruguay's educational reality, our study contributes to the academic debate by highlighting that adolescents engage in a pseudo-operationalization of the future; they use the discourse of the educational institution to maintain a grip on reality (Eckert, 2000). Students who were currently enrolled in high school and students who were disengaged from the system, be it temporarily, or had already completely abandoned the education system presented a use of the educational anchor as a legitimizing agent: whether it was to reinforce the choices that were being made or to recognize their socially disapproved shortcoming. Even when the institution itself frequently fails to deliver long-term socioeconomic security, for the participants of this study maintaining enrollment is an act of institutional faith that temporarily postpones the need to confront a collapsing global horizon. Ultimately, this fragile reliance underscores the profound existential stakes of their projections, echoing Julia's (F16, LM individual interview) poignant conclusion: "If you don't want to have a future, you don't want to have a present".

Both during discussion groups and interviews, expressed doubt about the possibility of the future, itself, arriving. In their projections, the adolescents' discourse depicted common concepts such as uncertainty, anxiety, insecurity, fear, and being unable to visualize either a medium or long-term future. The ability to imagine their older selves stop when they reach a visualization of their 30-year-old self, that is the maximum timeframe, this uncertainty is clearly linked, amongst other topics, to climate change, as expressed in the following

conversation: “N: I've really internalized that maybe none of us will make it. Like until 30, I don't know, this generation reaches 30 [years old] and there comes a point when it's 65 degrees and the body can't take it anymore.” (M15, UM, Discussion group).

As mentioned in the previous section, one of the few things young people are able to envision for themselves during these years is being part of the education system, studying for a bachelor's degree. This stems from a stabilizing element known and validated by their parents' generation, from whom they learned education is a basic requirement for an individual's validation in society: “C: I swear I'd love to drop out of UTU [trade school] and just go to hell and do nothing. T: My mother tells me that to be someone I have to finish studying. S: Whatever you do, you always have to graduate high school, always” (Female 16 [C] F15, [T] M17, [S] M16, LM Discussion Group).

Nonetheless, a significant number of discussion group participants referred to high numbers of missing classes, which captures the school absenteeism reality amongst Uruguayan adolescents: according to the Uruguayan Educational Trajectory Protection System (SPTE), in 2023 more than 61,000 alerts from the attendance module were registered, involving more than 40,000 students from public schools, about 40% of those enrolled in secondary education. UNICEF Uruguay longitudinal study shows that adolescents who were absent in early years of secondary education face substantially higher risks of dropping out of school without completing their studies and, therefore, have significantly lower chances of completing their educational path (UNICEF Uruguay, 2025), data confirms only 53% of young people graduate high school (CERES, 2025).

Circumstances around interrupting educational trajectories are linked to the lack of economic resources, participants in this study confirmed it in their discourses, stating that money would be their instrument to access a future. Specifically, young participants from lower class (categorized as MB in this study) discussion groups, place money at the same level of importance as family support and personal effort: "Money, money is everything" (Toro, M17, LM Discussion group) Furthermore, 44% of boys mentioned words associated with money during their interviews (see Table 2), a recurring and shared goal among them was achieving high economic status in the long term:

“A goal that sounds ambitious or greedy, but I don’t mean it with that mentality, is to have a lot of money, yes, because unfortunately money runs this world, and with a lot of money, I could do several things that would benefit not only me but other people as well” (Manu, M16, LM interview).

Individualism is a key feature of risk societies, in which participants of this study are part of; however, glimpses of solidarity are identified in the adolescents’ discourses, for example in the previous verbatim, when he stated “it would benefit not only me but other people as well”.

The Paradox of Responsibilization

A central finding of this research lies in the contradiction of responsibilization, participants frequently express a perceived lack of meaningful political agency in relation to climate decision-making. This dynamic aligns with the deontic dimension of climate asceticism (Ramos Torre & Callejo Gallego, 2023) where the moral weight of environmental collapse is internalized by those who hold the least historical responsibility, in this case the

adolescents that were interviewed. Participants expressed feeling “held responsible for mistakes left behind by a previous generation” (M15, UM Discussion Group). Our interviews reveal the presence in adolescent discourse regarding a resentment toward this imposed burden. As a participant (F18, LM, individual interview) expressed: “If you don't save yourself, no one will save you”. The discourse analysis suggests that the anxiety reported by the adolescent participants of this study may be associated with subliminal political frustration. They are forced to perform an ascetic, vigilant and self-sacrificing behaviours, which possess the institutional power to require systemic change.

As participants (F15, UM; and M16, UM, discussion group) suggest, adolescents are treated as citizens in waiting rather than active participants:

“[F15, UM] I don’t know, to me, these older generations are running everything, and until their all gone [M16, UM] Until their all gone, these generations of older people that are in charge, that are managing of the world and the important stuff in the world like money and that stuff [F15, UM] Yeah, until their gone and there aren’t new relationships, new people like [M16, UM] A new mindset”.

The State and the court of public opinion seem to celebrate youth-enlightenment only when it remains contained within the educational sphere. This creates what we identify, through the adolescents’ discourse, as an epistemic closure: adults validate the adolescent's knowledge of the crisis at hand but inhibit their access to tangible policy making, after all, they will be the inhabitants of this climate changed future we reference. There is a begging, by some adolescents for a new mindset and for those who are in charge to not only care about the effects their decisions leave behind but also their voices. Their discourse indicates that

they perceive to be burdened with the need to resolve yet they are stripped of influence, leading to a state of exhausted responsibility where their participation is ultimately hollowed out by the very institutions demanding their engagement.

As the adolescents' awareness and age expand, so do the responsibilities that society bestows on them: as described by Beck (1996) in his theory of risk society, individualization extends to risks, meaning people are made responsible for managing risks that were previously the responsibility of, in this case, institutions. Young people have grown witnessing -and increasingly participating- in the distrust towards institutions and their inability to solve problems for which they were once direct and legitimate sources of response. The relevance of Beck's theory (1996) in these adolescents' discourse is evident when they present climate change as a relevant element of the fog that replaces their future, granting it the title of a crisis poorly handled. More so, the idea of failed authoritarian institutions may well be extended to the figure that adults represent for the young people in the study. As Beck (1996) highlights how societies question their governments and withdraw their trust in them, the same logic is embedded in the discourses of adolescents when referring to governments and older generations:

“The people who run the world are stubborn and don't want to change it, we're going to hell, and it's a crisis that we're living through, and that's... they don't want to solve it” (M17, LM, interview).

This verbatim concurs with the majority of the interviewees and discussion group participants. It also reflects the tendency found in the global survey *Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change*

(2021), where 83% of participants said people have failed to take care of the planet, 63% agreed that governments were not protecting them, the planet, and/or future generations (Hickman et al, 2021). The following verbatim quotes describe emotions the climate crisis evokes in the daily lives of Uruguayan adolescents: “I don’t think about it because I start crying, because it terrifies me. Because it scares me. I suppose the water crisis is happening right now, and I suppose you have to do something, but climate change terrifies me.” (F15, UM, discussion group)

When participants managed to visualize their future at first, this exercise was overshadowed by global and structural conditions, paralyzing their sense of possibility:

“I have two ways of looking at the future... first, I see what I want to do individually, which is, for example, I want to study something I like, I want to be able to work in that field, I want to have my own house, my own car, live peacefully... and then I have the other way of seeing it, which is the future of the world in general, and then global warming comes up again, and I think, ‘When I reach the age of, for example, my parents, my grandparents, the world is going to be quite different. We’ll still be here, but it will be more complicated. But how will things change because of this?’”
(M, 17, LM, interview)

Climate change/climate crisis appears explicitly and formally (using the words) as a limiting factor when young people are asked about their future, specifically 100% of the girls interviewed mentioned the term as well as 88% of boys (see Table 2). As described by Ramos and Gallego, if the future is presented as a horizon of the present, identified by adolescents as a crises cluster, the glimpse of the envisioned future will be "perceived as a

crisis and, along with the crisis, as worry, fear, insecurity, uncertainty, and openness to unexpected misfortunes—that is, what we can conceptualize as risk" (Ramos and Gallego, 2018, p. 244).

Adolescents' perceptions regarding the risks of climate crisis, located in the space-time dimension, is contiguous to themselves: participants identify the effects in the inhabited territory as the water crisis and the heat waves experienced, participants are informed from the global and scientific perspectives around said issue, which is internalized and assumed as a hindrance to the planning of future objectives, even to exercises of visualization in the medium term.

Towards agency and shared futures

In the specific case of Uruguay, in 2023 the National Association of NGOs Oriented to Development (NANOD) presented a report addressing the children's agenda in the country, including the state of children and youth participation. One of the first findings is the scarcity of statistical information on the subject, however, according to the National Youth Institute (NYI), only 16.5% of adolescents and young people up to 29 years of age participate in decision-making related activities. The report presents the results of workshops conducted with adolescents, where "participants ask to be heard more and for their opinions to be valued" (NYI, 2023). Therefore, it can be interpreted that while spaces for participation are limited, children and adolescents are formally understood as recipients of public policies and services: their agency capacities are not fully recognized, nor are there meaningful State mechanisms enabled, where their opinions and proposals are heard and supported.

As stated by Slovik, “recognizing interested and affected citizens as legitimate partners in the exercise of risk assessment is no short-term panacea for the problems of risk management. It won’t be easy and it isn’t guaranteed. But serious attention to participation and process issues may, in the long run, lead to more satisfying and successful ways to manage risk” (Slovik, 1999, p.700). Participants also expressed the importance of values such as community, embodying mutual support, intelligible in the following verbatim: “For me, when it is a future, a country, (...) you have the need for the other to support you in your future” (M, 15, UM, Discussion Group) It is crucial to not overlook the necessity, and potential, of public spaces that promote children and adolescent active participation in their communities. Their exercise of citizenship can build bridges for stronger intergenerational social networks, as well as possibilities for shared futures based on common good.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that Uruguayan adolescents recognize the inability to project a future due to a context of multiple risks and uncertainty, associated directly in their discourses to climate change, and leading them to experience climate anxiety. Key findings in this article are: girls identify and express the concept of climate change/climate anxiety as shaping their ability to project into the future more than boys ; when trying to project into the future, adolescents use the educational system as an anchor to face uncertainty even though national statistics show considerable rates of school absenteeism and abandonment at high school; adolescents express disapproval towards how climate change is addressed by governments and adults while, at the same time express feeling held responsible for its solution by said older generations. In addition, the research highlights the importance of

incorporating specific spaces for the adolescent population to access tools and guidance on the development of a life project.

Intersectional studies about climate anxiety in different countries should be conducted to understand the ways in which it manifests and what strategies adolescents use to cope with it. Even though youth activism is a relevant source of participation for young people worldwide, this study suggests an interest from adolescents on engaging as participants in institutional decision-making processes regarding climate change policies, shining a light on the importance of designing and operating mechanisms of formal participation that include people affected by current risks.

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