

# Solastalgia: An Empirical Exploration

## Introduction and Literature Review

As a term, 'solastalgia' was first created by Glenn Albrecht in a work titled *as such* (2007), in which Albrecht outlines how residents of Hunter Valley approached him about defending their home from environmental impacts. Influenced by this and other academic works (Rapport, 1999; Leopold, 1949; Mitchell, 1946), Albrecht sought a term to define these feelings, which he noted to be similar to the feelings of homesickness and nostalgia. With the obvious limitation that these people were not away from home, and thus could not be suffering from nostalgia, Albrecht (2007) coined the term solastalgia, which he stated was a pain "caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory" (2007). This research will clarify the extent to which solastalgia manifests under circumstances pertaining to contemporary life in the UK, providing much needed detail on this specific victimological concept (which is both empirically and theoretically underdeveloped) whilst also providing an insight into the extent to which solastalgia plays a role in environmental grievances and oppositional movements, which could potentially provide insight into more targeted strategies of remedy and redress.

Regarding the existing literature around solastalgia, research is limited. Much of the existing research focuses on the anxiety felt toward climate change and the effect climate change has on a 'sense of place' (i.e. the feeling of 'home'). For example in examining the link between a changing climate and farmers' mental wellbeing, especially in regards to their sense of place (Ellis and Albrecht, 2017) or in studying the link between the health of sea ice and Inuit sense of place (Durkalec et al, 2015) (in which way, solastalgia can be linked to the (specifically-indigenous) environmental victimisation 'cultural loss' (Heydon, 2019)). One scholar even made apparent links between PTSD syndrome and solastalgia. Other studies, whilst not referencing the term overtly, reference notions which bear significant similarity, such as 'environmental anxiety' (Beattie, 2003), the importance of place to positive mental health (Doroud et al, 2018) and the effect environmental issues have on mental wellbeing (Padhy et al, 2015).

## Methodology

To fulfil the abovementioned aims of the project, this study examined groups which provide open opposition to environmental grievances, and so, through purposive sampling, examined six public Facebook groups – Sheffield Tree Action Group, Save the Edgar Street Trees, Save Our Street Trees Northampton, Frack Free Lincolnshire, Sheffield Against Fracking and Frack Free Eckington.

Utilising public group forums in order to collect data may seem a somewhat unorthodox approach to data collection. However, in order to collect data about a concept, especially one so focused on emotional-reaction and personal feelings such as solastalgia, it stands to reason that one must go to the most likely setting to find such data. Moreover, the status of these groups as open and public allow for easy data collection, and so was practically an excellent choice to receive up-to-date data for the project. The selection of these groups through purposive sampling was also the most-suitable sampling technique for this project, as it has allowed for flexibility in choosing the groups from which data was collected in order to maximise the development theory (Jupp, 2006, p369). In this case, this is the theoretical and empirical understanding of solastalgia.

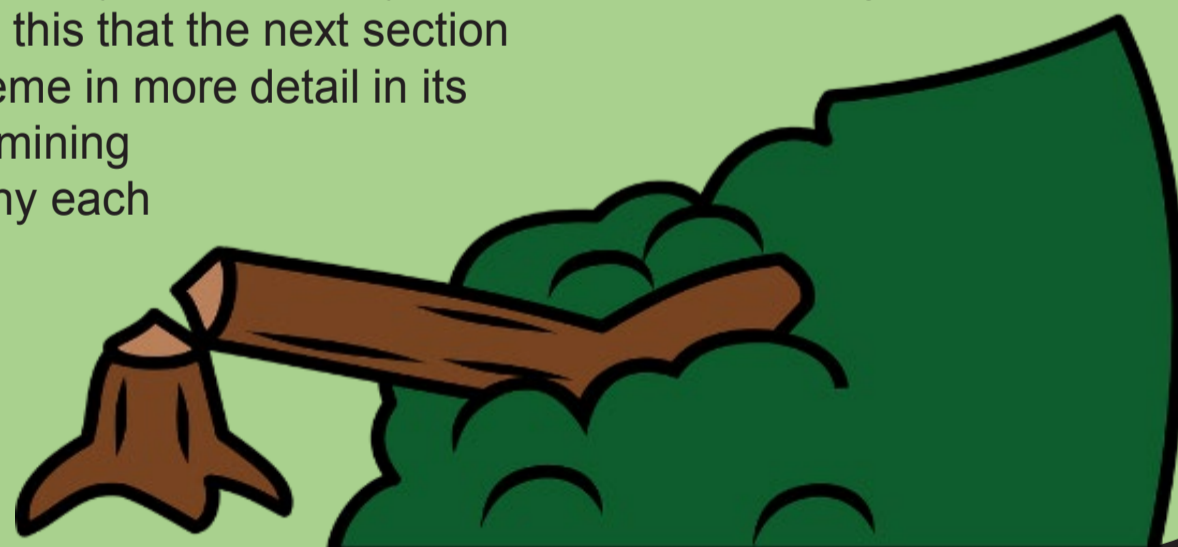
Utilising thematic analysis, the information gained from these groups was then separated into three key themes observed across the data set – themes both semantic (themes on a surface-level) and latent (themes on a deeper-level). This data then was analysed as to its links to solastalgia and in accordance with the existing literature. The use of thematic analysis allowed for, through its freedom theoretically, flexibility and detail in its analysis of data. This was extremely useful for the project, as, though its freedom in analysis is definitely its strength, the focused nature of the analysis on the groups and concept outlined allow for negating the potential for research to get out of hand in being 'too free' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p5). Thematic analysis also allowed the research to fulfil one of its main aims – to identify themes within data, in this case the various public groups, to evidence solastalgia in contemporary western civilisation (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## Findings

The data collection across all six groups found that there were three similarities in the posts found across each group. These posts, as required by thematic analysis, have been separated into key themes. These similarities and key themes can be categorised as follows:

- That posts tended to humanize nature
- That the environment was stated to be tied to happiness and their homes
- That harming nature should be criminalized

These three key themes in the data were key because they all evidenced solastalgia in some way, either semantically or latently. It is this that the next section will analyse, by examining each key theme in more detail in its relation to the public groups, whilst examining its links to solastalgia and explaining why each key theme is significant.



## Further Findings & Discussion/Analysis

Leading on from the findings section, and to restate, this section shall examine each key theme in more detail in relation to the public groups, whilst examining its links to solastalgia and explaining why each key theme is so significant.

### The Environment as Tied to Happiness and their Home

A number of posts from people in both STAG and Save Our Trees Northampton referenced the fact that trees made the people happier, and that seeing trees felled or other environmental degradation induced a feeling of sadness. This supports the hypothesis of scholars such as Doroud et al, (2018) who emphasise the importance of place in mental wellbeing. Furthermore, a number of posts from people in Save the Edgar Street Trees described the *destruction* of trees and of their area, which on a latent level shows that these trees play a much greater role in their lives than simply being objects. Exemplifying that solastalgia is exhibited here indeed as these trees clearly make up their home, not just their landscape. However, the most overwhelming empirical evidence of solastalgia in this theme comes from a number of posts from users in the Save the Edgar Street Trees group in which it is outlined that the tree lines on the road was the reason one poster bought their house, moreover, another post speaks of having to 'stop the earth from being plundered' and that Herefordshire is a 'rural...community that should not be turned into another urban...dominated sprawl'. This again indicates that the environment has become a part of their home, it is this posting and anger that demonstrates their feeling of solastalgia.

### The Humanization of Nature

A number of posts referenced the similarities between our own humanity and nature, with a number of posts from people in the STAG group stating that trees have souls, that they are alike to humans and that their 'deaths' are extremely similar to human deaths. One particular post displayed a 'funeral of trees'; tree fellers transporting logs in a barren landscape. Furthermore, people in the Eckington Against Fracking group referenced mother nature 'fighting back' against fracking in the form of earthquakes. Another post, from a user in the Frack Free Lincolnshire group, displayed an image likening oil to the use of heroin by the Earth (in terms of its self destructive properties). This shows a definite feeling of loss in the destruction of nature. Users in STAG for example, referenced trees having souls and likened trees being felled to human death. Furthermore, viewing fracking as a self destructive tendency for the Earth shows a high level of emotional connection.

### Harming the Environment as Criminal

Earlier in this section there was mention of the latent meaning beneath words and the significance of this when examining these feelings of solastalgia in these groups. Though this is key in this theme, as posts described fracking as an 'abomination' and described the destruction of nature, what was very common and pertinent was the return to the word 'criminal'. Across each group there were a number of posts referring to how this behaviour should be a 'crime', many using the term 'ecocide' and that fracking or tree-felling is criminal. This is very relevant to solastalgia as it implies such a closeness to nature that harming it is alike to criminal activity – like destroying one's home may be.

## Conclusion

This project concludes that there is reasonable empirical evidence to suggest the feeling of solastalgia does manifest under circumstances pertaining to contemporary life in the UK. Moreover, that resistance groups in such circumstances are indeed motivated by the feeling of solastalgia and that this project has exemplified this. Most notably, the feeling of solastalgia exemplifies itself in the feeling of closeness to nature as a home in the users of these groups, that nature is tied to users' happiness, and that nature itself is tied to humanity to some users in these groups – and thus exemplifies the feeling of closeness and loss key to solastalgia. Taken together, it can be stated that solastalgia not only exhibits itself in these conditions, but that it plays a key role in environmental grievances and oppositional movements. Moreover, that an argument can be made that to truly understand such movements and groups, and to potentially remedy and redress such grievances, that the feeling of solastalgia which they exhibit must be considered and understood.

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