

Leveraging Affect in the Wake of Disaster: From “Hell or High Water” to Resilient Calgary

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This research took place on the unceded traditional territories of the ləkʷəŋən speaking peoples and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

01. Introduction

Affect and emotions are typically viewed as irrelevant factors within policymaking, with policy practitioners and theorists alike favouring the “rational model” of policymaking - an approach which aims to be highly “systematic, scientific, evidence-based, logical, and... focused on efficiency and effectiveness” (Pal et al. 2021, 21). As a consequence, hegemonic models of policymaking within Western academia and praxis heavily discount the role that affect plays within politics and policymaking. However, when the City of Calgary passed its **Resilient Calgary strategy in 2019** and, in doing so, heavily referenced the 2013 Southern Alberta flood - the then-costliest natural disaster in Canadian history, accumulating over \$1.9 billion in insured losses and displacing over 100,000 Albertans - affective policymaking was seemingly at play. This prompted me to ask the following questions:

Research Questions:

- What climate-derived affects were felt by Calgarians in the aftermath of the 2013 Southern Alberta flood, and;
- To what extent were the climate-derived affects felt by Calgarians in the aftermath of the 2013 Southern Alberta flood transposed into the City of Calgary’s Resilient Calgary strategy?

03. Methodology

Thematic Analysis Using a Deductive Coding Method & NVivo Qualitative Data Software

Thematic analysis - a qualitative research method in which a researcher attempts to derive themes and recognize patterns within a written data set, with said themes then “becom[ing] the categories for analysis” (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006, 82); a natural fit for studying affect, as affect is often implicit rather than explicit (Gould 2009, 21), requiring a researcher’s attuned eye to draw appropriate connections.

Deductive coding method - a qualitative coding method in which initial codes are developed from “theory and prior research” (Nowell et al. 2017, 8); in this case, theory, research, and non-fiction literature discussing affects and emotions attributed to climate change and extreme weather phenomena

Two key data sources:

a) **Media sample** - 536 articles were analyzed to identify prominent affects during the 2013 flood, most of which were published within one month after the flood (June 20th-July 20th, 2013)

Sources: Calgary Herald (Postmedia Network), The Globe and Mail, and The Canadian Press

b) **Document analysis** - the Resilient Calgary (2019) strategy was coded for affective language.

02. Approach

Interpretivism:

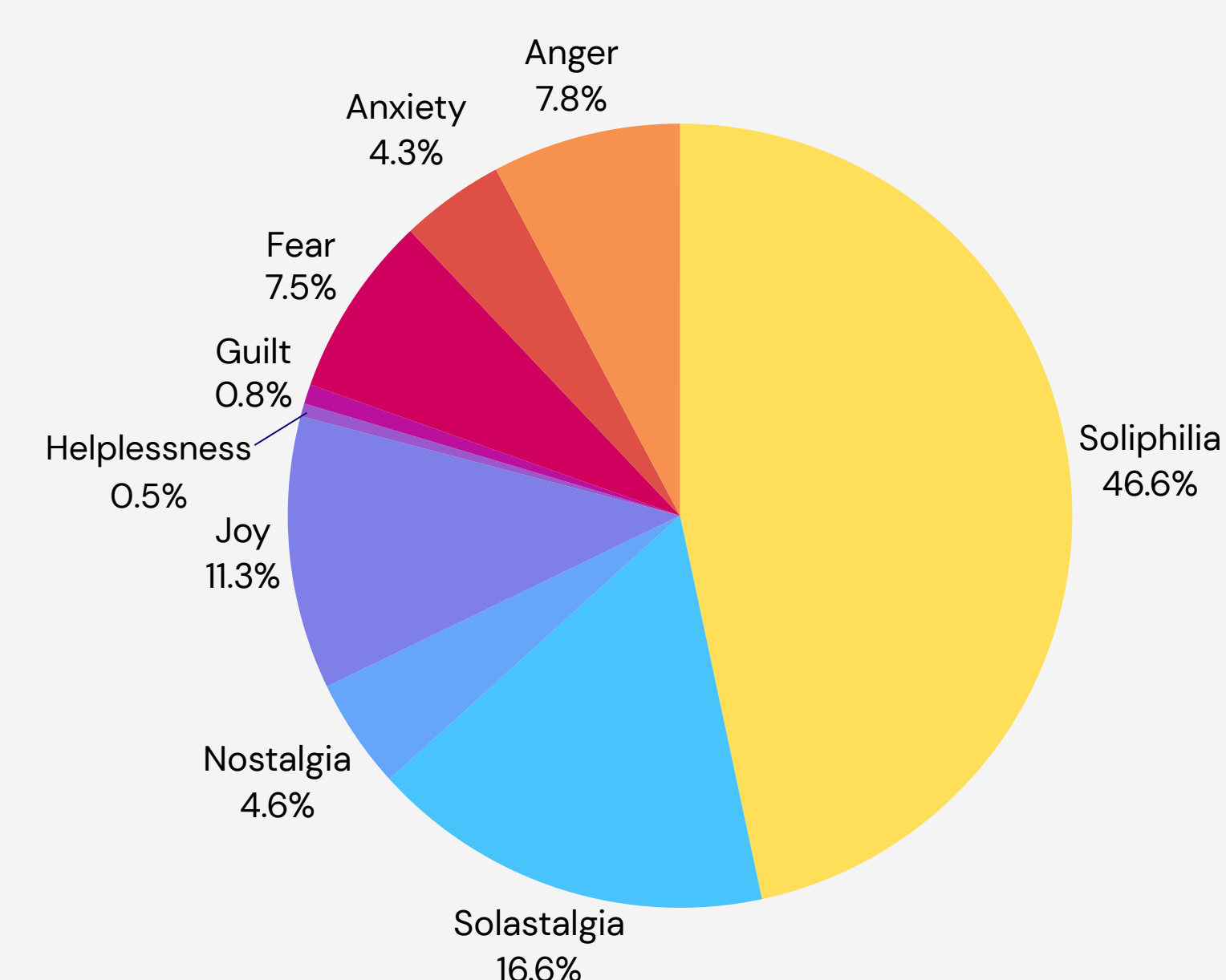
Given my personal ties to my research as a born-and-raised Albertan who assisted family friends in cleaning out their Bragg Creek home in the aftermath of the 2013 flood, I have taken an interpretivist approach, recognizing that “the scholarly self is irretrievably tied to the world” (Neumann & Neumann 2015, 800), and, thus, value-neutrality and impartiality may be simply impossible when undertaking research of this nature.

Affective Ontology:

As introduced within Deborah Gould’s *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (2009), an “affective ontology” is an ontological perspective that emphasizes the natural role that affect plays when making sense of the world (Gould 2009, 23).

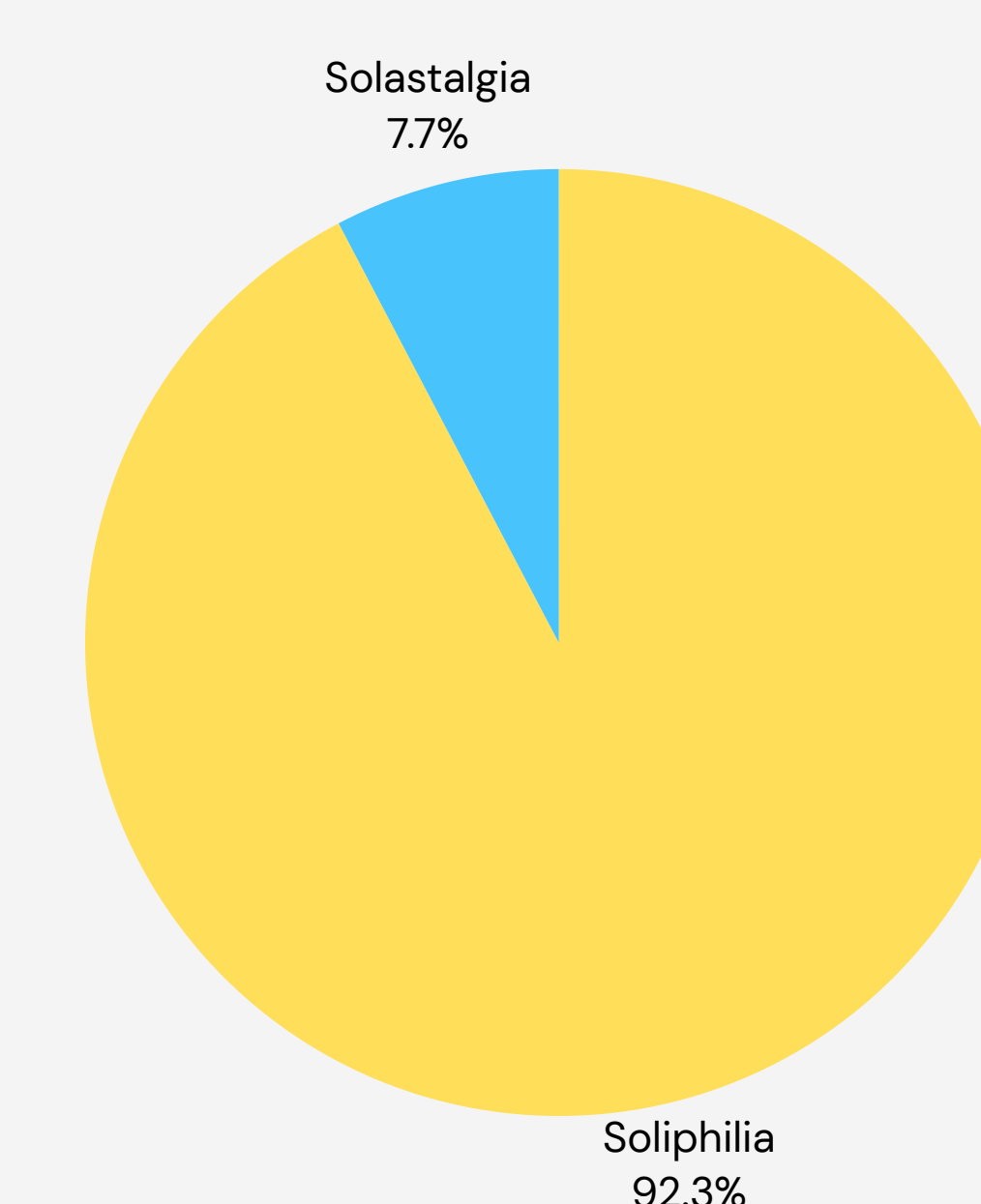
04. Findings – Deductive Coding

a) Climate-Derived Affects Among Calgarians During the 2013 Southern Alberta Flood

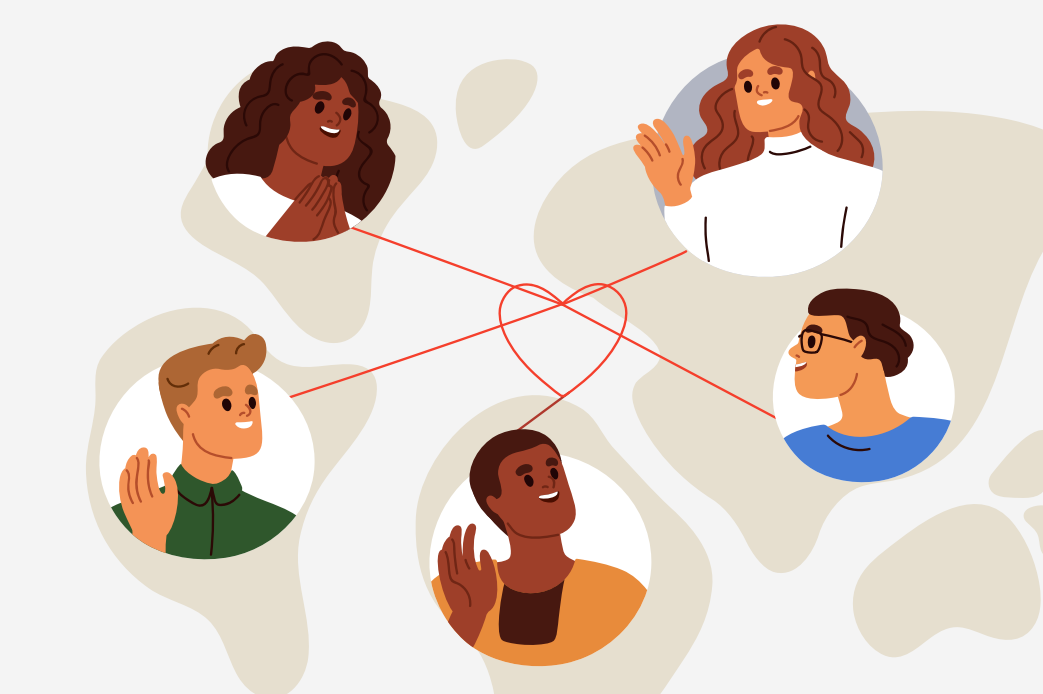


376 instances of affective language were coded, with soliphilia being the most prominent affect within media coverage surrounding the 2013 Southern Alberta flood. Additionally, there were more positive climate-derived affects (i.e., soliphilia, joy) than negative climate-derived affects (i.e., anger, anxiety, fear, guilt, helplessness, nostalgia, solostalgia).

b) Climate-Derived Affects Within the Resilient Calgary Strategy (2019)



Out of 26 instances of affective language being coded, solostalgia and soliphilia were the only two climate-derived affects which were identified. Further, soliphilia was the most prominent affect within the Resilient Calgary strategy, with the strategy employing soliphilic language 24 times.



Soliphilia, or place-based love, was the most prominent climate-derived affect within the media sample, being mentioned more than any other affect by a factor of 2.5 times.



Source: Resilient Calgary (2019)

Soliphilia was also the most prominent affect within the Resilient Calgary strategy.

05. Discussion

The climate-derived affect of soliphilia - the most prominent affect within the aftermath of the 2013 Southern Alberta flood amongst Calgarians - was heavily leveraged within the Resilient Calgary strategy. This is highly attributable to the fact that feelings of soliphilia were seen as endemic to a unique, altruistic ‘community spirit’ which came to the fore during the immediate flood response, prompting politicians and citizens alike to coin Calgarians as a ‘resilient’ people for their fortitude, altruism, and solidarity when faced with disaster. However, **the intent behind the use of this soliphilic language within the Resilient Calgary strategy remains up for debate.** **On the one hand,** soliphilic language may have been employed to make the strategy’s climate mitigation reforms more palatable for a significant portion of the population who is either ambivalent towards or overtly in denial about the existence of climate change (Haney 2022, 13). **On the other hand,** soliphilic language could have been used to obfuscate resilience strategies’ overall prerogative of maintaining the status quo over achieving transformative change (Brown 2014, 110; Fitzgibbons and Mitchell 2019, 649; Sharma 2023, 2), prolonging the existing and highly-destructive neoliberal and settler-colonial order. Thus, **though Resilient Calgary was embellished with love, the use of soliphilia may have forged an impasse** (Berlant 2011, 4) **rather than an evolution.**

06. Conclusion

1. Contrary to the hegemonic status of the rational model within contemporary public policy theorization and praxis, **affect is profoundly political**, and it remains so within the Canadian context;
2. **Affect can be leveraged in order to achieve a political objective**, making it a particularly influential tool within political communities facing collective and highly emotional disasters, such as that of the 2013 flood;
3. **Affect can become embedded within climate-oriented policymaking**, including climate resilience strategies formulated at the municipal level; and
4. Though **affect can be employed to further multi-faceted responses to climate change** at the local level, **affect may also be wielded to maintain dominant relational or systemic dynamics** which effectively hinder or overtly discourage the transformative policymaking necessary to overcome climate change.

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This research was supported by the **Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards**, University of Victoria, and conducted within the Department of Political Science.