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Understanding New Zealand Public Opinion on  
Climate Change

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

This project explored how climate change is understood by members of the New Zealand public and how these understandings relate to their climate-related policy preferences and actions. Although climate change is regarded as one of the most serious threats facing humanity, there remains a gap between scientific findings and the political responses in New Zealand and the wider international community. Given that public opinion is a key driver to political action on the matter, it is important to understand its complexities, how it is constructed and shaped, and how it relates to behavioural preferences and practices. The research literature, however, reveals an emphasis on the polling of New Zealanders' opinions on climate change and a neglect of these dynamics. To address this lacuna, the study explored the climate change understandings and actions of six New Zealanders in rural and urban settings. In-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and the methodological approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis were used to gain rich insight into the lived experiences of climate change. The analysis of data revealed four key themes, which depicted climate change as a physical process; as a sociocultural story; as a personal story; and as a call to action. Despite a general understanding of the veracity of climate change and its human causation there is evidence of widespread conflation with other environmental phenomena, distrust of elites, and subtle forms of denial, which together hamper effective action. Shaped by various beliefs, values, and experiences, the heterogeneity of interpretations implies the need for disaggregated research into climate change public opinion, and for tailored strategies in designing climate policy, activating behavioural change, engendering policy support, and mobilising collective action.

**Keywords:** Climate change, Public opinion, New Zealand, Interpretative  
Phenomenological Analysis

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
List of Figures and Tables .....	ix
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1 Overview .....	1
1.2 New Zealand and Climate Change .....	3
1.3 Academic Significance .....	5
1.4 Personal Significance .....	6
1.5 Research Gaps .....	7
1.6 Research Methodology and Methods .....	8
1.7 Thesis Structure .....	10
1.8 Summary .....	11
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	13
2.1 The Public's Understandings and Actions on Climate Change .....	13
2.2 Literature Search Method .....	13
2.3 How New Zealanders and Other Publics Understand Climate Change .....	14
2.3.1 Awareness and knowledge about climate change .....	18
2.3.2 Concern about climate change .....	22
2.3.3 Understanding of the causes and consequences of climate change ...	27
2.3.4 Beliefs about addressing climate change .....	30
2.4 Summary .....	33
3. METHODOLOGY .....	35
3.1 Introduction .....	35

3.2 Research Design .....	35
3.2.1 Purpose and goals .....	35
3.2.2 Research questions .....	36
3.2.3 Philosophical and conceptual framework .....	36
3.2.4 Strategy of inquiry: Interpretative phenomenological analysis .....	40
3.2.5 Sample .....	42
3.2.6 Data collection and management .....	47
3.2.7 Data analysis .....	54
3.3 Ethical Considerations .....	57
3.4 Issues of Quality and Validity .....	59
3.5 Summary .....	62
4. FINDINGS .....	63
4.1 Introduction .....	63
4.2 Overview of Superordinate Themes and Subthemes .....	65
4.3 Superordinate Theme One: Climate Change as a Physical Process .....	66
4.3.1 Subordinate theme one: The science .....	66
4.3.2 Subordinate theme two: Personal experience and other sources .....	70
4.4 Superordinate Theme Two: Climate Change as a Sociocultural Story .....	74
4.4.1 Subordinate theme one: You can't trust them .....	74
4.4.2 Subordinate theme two: Human and systemic failings .....	78
4.5 Superordinate Theme Three: Climate Change as a Personal Story .....	82
4.5.1 Subordinate theme one: Negative emotions .....	83
4.5.2 Subordinate theme one: Denial.....	86
4.6 Superordinate Theme Four: Climate Change as a Call to Action .....	91

4.6.1 Subordinate theme one: Responsibility .....	91
4.6.2 Subordinate theme two: Policies and practices .....	93
4.6.3 Subordinate theme three: Barriers and motivations .....	96
5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....	102
5.1 Introduction .....	102
5.2 Thematic discussion .....	102
5.2.1 Climate change as a physical process .....	102
5.2.2 Climate change as a sociocultural story .....	104
5.2.3 Climate change as a personal story.....	105
5.2.4 Climate change as a call to action .....	108
5.3 Implications and Contributions .....	110
5.4 Limitations of the Study .....	114
5.4.1 IPA as an approach .....	114
5.2.2 Sample .....	116
5.2.3 Method of data collection .....	117
5.5 Suggestions for a Future Research Agenda .....	118
5.6 Concluding Remarks .....	122
References .....	126
Appendices .....	156
Appendix A: Literature Review Method .....	156
Appendix B: Information Sheet .....	158
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form .....	161
Appendix D: Participant Biographical Information Form .....	162
Appendix E: Interview Schedule and Visual Prompts .....	163

Appendix F: Example of Original Interview Transcript .....	170
Appendix G: Transcript Notations and Conventions .....	171
Appendix H: Example of Interview Transcript Analysed with IPA .....	173
Appendix I: Human Ethics Committee Approval .....	174
Appendix J: Quality and Validity Procedures .....	175
Appendix K: Table of Themes and Subthemes for Entire Sample .....	179
Appendix L: Themes and Subthemes with Full Excerpts for Entire Sample .	180

## **List of Figures**

Figure 4.1: Overview of themes and subthemes .....	6
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## **List of Tables**

Table 3.1: Participant demographics/psychographics .....	6
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