

“Find a Place Where You Can Be a Part of the Change”: A Thematic Analysis of the Conditions that Influence Direct, Collective Pro-Environmental Activism

Brittany C. Skov¹ & Anelyse M. Weiler², Ph. D.

¹Department of Psychology, Lakehead University

²Department of Sociology, University of Victoria

The harmful impacts of climate change are becoming increasingly apparent across many aspects of society, and pro-environmental collective activism may help slow its progression. While previous research underscores several factors that shape participation in pro-environmental collective activism, much of this research is informed by quantitative data. This study used qualitative methods to investigate the conditions that shape participation in collective pro-environmental activism. This study drew on four in-depth interviews with climate activists recently engaged in direct action. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes are presented: (a) Tangible and local instances of environmental and social injustices encourage people to act on existing environmental and political values; (b) Activists are motivated to participate in collective activism by a need to belong; (c) A sense of hopeful group efficacy counteracts negative affect about the climate crisis. These findings demonstrate the interactive nature of the conditions that support pro-environmental activism.

Keywords: pro-environmental collective activism, politicalized environmental identity, need to belong, intergroup conflict, hopeful group efficacy

Les effets néfastes du changement climatique sont de plus en plus apparents dans de nombreux aspects de la société, et l'activisme collectif en faveur de l'environnement pourrait contribuer à ralentir sa progression. Alors que des recherches antérieures soulignent plusieurs facteurs qui façonnent la participation à l'activisme collectif pro-environnemental, une grande partie de ces recherches s'appuient sur des données quantitatives. Cette étude a utilisé des méthodes qualitatives pour étudier les conditions qui façonnent la participation à l'activisme collectif pro-environnemental. Cette étude s'appuie sur quatre entretiens approfondis avec des militants pour le climat récemment engagés dans une action directe. Les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique réflexive. Trois thèmes sont présentés : (a) des exemples tangibles et locaux d'injustices environnementales et sociales encouragent les gens à agir en fonction des valeurs environnementales et politiques existantes ; (b) les militants sont motivés à participer à l'activisme collectif par un besoin d'appartenance ; (c) un sentiment d'espoir d'efficacité du groupe contrebalance les effets négatifs liés à la crise climatique. Ces résultats démontrent la nature interactive des conditions qui soutiennent l'activisme pro-environnemental.

Mots-clés : activisme collectif pro-environnemental, identité environnementale politisée, besoin d'appartenance, conflit intergroupe, espoir d'efficacité du groupe

In the final week of June 2021, the village of Lytton, British Columbia, reported the hottest temperatures recorded in Canada; later in the week, the town burned to the ground (Meissner, 2021). Canadians across widespread swaths of society are gaining firsthand experience of the devastating impacts of climate change. Yet many climate activists have argued that the

Canadian government's policy response, which has included new public investments in fossil fuel developments, remains remarkably incommensurate with the scale of the crisis (Carroll, 2021; Klein, 2020). National polling underscores that everyday people in Canada support systemic climate action far bolder than what governments have enacted (Klein, 2020). Although 81% of British Columbia residents practice pro-environmental behaviors such as recycling (Lee & Khan, 2020), researchers suggest individual-level lifestyle behaviors are insufficient to slow climate change (Schmitt et al., 2019). In contrast, researchers have documented how collective grassroots activism worldwide plays a powerful role in slowing or stopping environmentally harmful projects that undermine

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biodiversity and ecosystem services (Le Billon & Lujala, 2020; Scheidel et al., 2020). For example, Sovacool and Dunlap (2022) provide a comprehensive inventory of direct-action tactics (e.g., occupations, blockades) successfully used by social movements to successfully reconfigure power relations that undergird environmental devastation. However, participation in collective forms of pro-environmental action such as civil disobedience remains far less popular than lower stakes, non-confrontational individualized environmental practices such as signing an online petition (Lee et al., 2020). Knowing this, an important question to ask is: what are the conditions under which individuals engage in pro-environmental collective action?

Social scientists provide an array of explanations for why people engage in environmental activism and why there is often a gap between their pro-environmental beliefs and behaviors (Kennedy et al., 2009b). Psychological and situational variables predict engagement in pro-environmental collective activism, including a connection to nature (Carmona-Moya et al., 2021), politicization and perception of threats (Schmitt et al., 2019), situational constraints (Corraliza & Berenguer, 2000), self-efficacy (Frantz & Mayer, 2009), moral convictions, and negative affect (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). In addition, researchers have underscored how a person's pro-environmental actions are shaped by social factors such as gender, class, rural or urban residency, and political polarization (Kennedy et al., 2009a; Kennedy & Givens, 2019; Kennedy & Muzzerall, 2021; Tindall et al., 2003). Questions remain as to how these dynamics interact, conflict, or encourage participation in environmental activism.

The Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) provides a valuable framework for integrating the complex dynamics that help explain why people may engage in environmental activism. As proposed by Van Zomeren et al. (2008), SIMCA includes three key predictors of collective action: subjective injustice (e.g., people's perception of inequality or discrimination), identity (e.g., people's subjective sense of being a group member), and efficacy (e.g., people's belief that they will be more likely to achieve their goals if they engage in collective action). Specifically, Van Zomeren et al. (2008) argue that social identity is fundamental to collective action such as mass protests "because it directly motivates collective action and simultaneously bridges the injustice and efficacy explanations of collective action" (p. 505). They define social identity as the shared, consensually held idea of what it means to be a group member, which includes a sense of belonging and group-based emotions and actions. Researchers have shown the applicability of SIMCA to a broad range of environmental collective action, such as recent research on pro-environmental action in Iran

(Keshavarzi et al., 2021). However, except for more recent studies (Haugestad et al., 2021), much of this research is informed by quantitative data. By drawing on qualitative data, the current study provides a valuable contribution to the understanding of collective environmental action, shedding light on participants' lived experiences, meanings, and subjective perceptions of social identity.

The Current Study

This study explores the conditions under which people put their values into practice through direct environmental activism by interviewing four participants who have recently participated in multi-day pro-environmental protests and blockades. From a scholarly perspective, this research contributes to the literature on the psychology of collective action by identifying the conditions in which individuals engage in collective action, and by adding further qualitative contributions to SIMCA. From an applied perspective, these empirical and theoretical insights can help foster collective change to address the global climate crisis. The climate crisis is an increasingly complex and dire worldwide challenge that necessitates systemic change (Stuart et al., 2022). As Barth et al. (2021) aptly stated, "as the crisis at hand is the result of collective behavior, it must be solved on the collective level as well" (p. 1). While individual pro-environmental behavior (e.g., recycling) can contribute to reducing environmental harm, widespread collective action can help to motivate and influence the systemic change required to address society-wide environmental problems like climate change.

Literature Review

Social psychologists have drawn extensively on SIMCA (Van Zomeren et al., 2008) to help explain collective pro-environmental behavior while providing additional specification and theoretical nuance. The following section reviews several core concepts that are relevant to SIMCA's integrative framework, specifically: politicized environmental identity; the need to belong, in-group and intergroup conflict; and negative affect and hopeful group efficacy.

Politicized Environmental Identity

Environmental identity and politicization reliably predict participation in pro-environmental collective action (Schmitt et al., 2019). An environmental identity is defined as a sense of unity, interdependence, and affective connection with the environment (Clayton, 2012). This suggests that environmental identities are collective social identities (Schmitt et al., 2019). Indeed, individuals with a meta-personal self-construal are more likely to engage in environmental protective behaviors, such as conservation efforts (Arnocky et al.,

CONDITIONS THAT INFLUENCE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

2007). Self-construal describes the extent to which an individual's self-concept is defined independently or interdependently. For instance, an interdependent self-construal reflects the inclusion of other human beings into the sense of self (e.g., collectivism). A meta-personal self-construal reflects the inclusion of nature in the sense of self (Arnocky et al., 2007). Moreover, the Environmental Identity Model of Environmental Collective Action suggests that environmental identity predicts engagement in collective activism (Carmona-Moya et al., 2021). However, identification with a collective group, like the natural world (e.g., plant and animal systems), does not solely predict activism (Simon et al., 1998). Instead, constructing a politicized identity is more likely to promote direct action (Stürmer & Simon, 2004). A politicized identity occurs when "individuals integrate their group identity with the group's political and structural position in society" (Haugestad et al., 2021, p. 2). For example, Schmitt et al. (2019) found that identification with a politicized group helped mediate the association between connection to nature and pro-environmental activism. However, it remains unclear what motivates the politicization of an environmental identity because not everyone with an environmental identity becomes an activist (Schmitt et al., 2019); the current study seeks to shed light on this question.

The Need to Belong, In-Group and Intergroup Conflict

People have a fundamental need to belong that motivates their behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The belongingness hypothesis specifies that this need to belong is satisfied within frequently affectively pleasant relationships that demonstrate reciprocal care and concern. In comparison, the need to belong is thwarted in unsupportive and indifferent relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need to belong may help to form in-groups based on common values and beliefs (Renstrom et al., 2021). Indeed, the need to belong helps to predict involvement in protest activities (Renstrom et al., 2021). Further, among socially excluded groups, individuals with a high need to belong are more likely to participate in activism (Bock et al., 2015). While the need to belong may motivate involvement in activism, the need can also be heightened in communal adversity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Further, the presence of an outgroup increases the anticipation of conflict and may motivate individuals to form groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This suggests a synergetic effect, such that individuals form groups to satisfy a need, which becomes more salient when the group is in conflict and opposition to an out-group. It is plausible that the need to belong helps to form in-groups, which, in the presence of an out-group, may promote intergroup conflict, increasing the saliency of the need.

Negative Affect and Hopeful Group Efficacy

Emotions help explain engagement in goal-directed behavior like collective activism (Wlodarczyk et al., 2017). For example, previous research suggests that eco-anger (e.g., feelings of anger and frustration when thinking about climate change) predicts involvement in pro-environmental activism more than eco-depression (e.g., feelings of sadness or misery when reflecting on climate change). In contrast, eco-anxiety (e.g., feelings of anxiety and fear when thinking about climate change) predicts less involvement in pro-environmental collective action (Stanley et al., 2021). This suggests that eco-anger may be an adaptive form of coping, which promotes behavior to improve mood (Stanley et al., 2021). Indeed, anger, joy, and pride predict activism engagement through their association with optimism and self-efficacy whereas fear, sadness, and shame are associated with pessimism, low beliefs in change likelihood, and a low sense of control (Pearlman, 2013).

Hope and efficacy can also foster engagement in pro-environmental collective activism. The Environmental Identity Model of Environmental Collective Action suggests that pro-environmental collective activism is associated with high hope and high efficacy (Carmona-Moya et al., 2021). Group efficacy is the belief that a group can achieve its goals of social change, whereas hope is the belief that social change is possible (Cohen-Chen & Van Zomeren, 2018). This suggests that collective activism engagement is influenced by the degree of hope and group efficacy observed by existing collective activism groups.

There are several factors that help to describe the conditions under which individuals engage in pro-environmental activism, but how these variables interact remains unclear. For example, Schmitt et al. (2019) emphasized that we do not know how an environmental identity develops into a politicized identity. Moreover, there is limited research that investigates how the need to belong with other like-minded individuals, who may share similar pro-environmental values, can encourage participation in pro-environmental collective activism, and if these components encourage politicization. Lastly, although previous research has suggested that eco-anger predicts pro-environmental collective action better than eco-anxiety or eco-depression, it is unclear why particular individuals experience anger over anxiety and depression when confronted with the climate crisis. In what instances do individuals experience eco-anger, which is proposed as an adaptive way of coping with the climate crisis (Stanley et al., 2021), instead of eco-depression or eco-anxiety? The current research seeks to clarify these gaps in the literature and further our understanding of the conditions in which individuals put their values into practice through direct pro-

environmental collective activism.

Methodology

The research methodology used is a qualitative design, which helped to provide a detailed descriptive analysis of social processes and the emergence of new insights (Ostrom et al., 2013). Specifically, the lead author conducted semi-structured interviews, which combine a pre-determined set of guiding questions with unplanned follow-up and probing questions. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of interview participants' perceptions and experiences and provides an opportunity for participants themselves to guide the direction of the interview based on issues they identify as significant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A social constructivism theoretical approach was followed, such that this study acknowledged multiple truths that are shaped and mediated by the researchers' position, biases, and values (Willig, 2013). Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis approach was used to analyze and interpret the interview transcripts, which involves examining patterns of meaning in qualitative data.

Reflexivity

Researchers who assume they alone can objectively measure the social world risk missing the plurality of ways that meaning can be interpreted beyond their own lens (Harding, 1992). On the contrary, research is an endeavor of co-constructed knowledge towards a truth grounded in subjective realities. We come to know reality through engaging in relationships with others and knowledge itself. As such, the positionality of the authors—including values, motivations, and assumptions—forms the foundation of this research and is intricately woven into it (Trainor & Bundon, 2020). This social constructivist understanding grounds our approach to this research. As the lead author led this research, a single positionality statement is provided.

I (Skov) am an Anishinaabekwe and mixed European, and a member of the Mississauga's of the Credit First Nation. My last name, Skov, translates to forest in Danish and so my connection to nature is like a self-fulfilling prophecy. I have felt harmoniously connected to the natural world for my entire life. The land has been a refuge and a place of self-exploration and growth. I have been involved in various acts of climate work in my personal and professional life such as environmental work committees and initiatives, community clean-ups, and protests.

Participants

Four participants were recruited using purposive sampling using Facebook, Instagram, and word of

mouth. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants on the basis of specific criteria and is appropriate for a small-scale qualitative research project. Indeed, information-rich cases will provide data relevant to the research question, aiming to deepen rather than broaden understanding (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). Participants identified as female, aged 24 to 46, and had first engaged in pro-environmental collective activism less than a year, two years, four years, and over twenty years ago. All participants had recently engaged in pro-environmental direct activism, such as attending a blockade, for at least three consecutive days in the last year. Participation was voluntary and not remunerated. Participants met the criteria for minimal risk research as per Tri-Council Policy. Ethical approval was provided by the Human Ethics Board at the University of Victoria.

Data Collection

Interested participants were contacted to arrange an in-person or online in-depth semi-structured interview about their experiences in pro-environmental collective activism. Interviews were conducted from October to November 2021. Participants received information about the study and provided written consent. Interviews ranged from 35 to 50 minutes and were recorded using an iPhone. Participants were asked guiding questions about their experiences with pro-environmental activism (e.g., *Can you tell me the story about how you first became involved in environmental activism?; What do you wish people knew about engaging in environmental activism?; Can you tell me the story of how you came to decide to go to the protest?*). At the end of the interview, participants were provided time to share any information they felt was relevant but not discussed during the interview. Interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription, and identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Transcripts were e-mailed to participants for approval, and minor requested amendments were made. Transcripts were stored in a password-protected computer. Pseudonyms were used and approved by participants. Participants received copies of the data analysis and were asked if they would like to make any changes. Participants had the right to withdraw their participation at any time (e.g., interview, transcription, analysis, dissemination of results).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the process of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which was appropriate for this study given the small number of participants and the richness of the data. Thematic analysis is a process of identifying, analyzing, and

CONDITIONS THAT INFLUENCE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

reporting patterns within qualitative data, and results in a set of themes that best describe the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis began with data familiarization through transcription and re-reading of transcripts. Next, broad codes were applied to segments of data, using the research question and literature to develop the codes. To engage in initial exploration, mind maps were used, which are diagrams designed to visualize relationships between codes and connect potentially related codes (Ali et al., 2022). After an iterative comparison of the codes, more complex themes were identified. Subsequently, these initial themes were compared against the entire data set for validity, and added further excerpts related to the themes. The themes were interpreted by comparing them to the insights from existing research. To practice reflexivity, throughout the analysis process, an audit trail was used, which involved writing memos to document and justify the analytical inferences (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). An audit trail helps improve the reliability and dependability of findings in qualitative research (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). Finally, member checking or respondent validation took place. This process involved giving participants a copy of the data and analysis to question or support their validity (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004).

Results and Discussion

Drawing on participants' reflections on their experiences with collective action, three broad themes relating to the conditions under which people engage in pro-environmental collective action were identified: (a) Tangible and local instances of environmental and social injustices encourage people to act on existing environmental and political values; (b) Activists are motivated to participate in collective activism by a psychological need to belong; (c) A sense of hopeful group efficacy can counteract individualized negative affect about the climate crisis. While SIMCA provides a framework to help explain why these themes motivate pro-environmental collective action, this study provides additional nuance and specificity to the significance of factors such as opportunities for local environmental action.

A. Tangible and local instances of environmental and social injustices encourage people to act on existing environmental and political values

All participants described themselves as within non-hierarchical relationships with nature and felt a lifelong connection with nature. Natasha, who is involved with several climate organizations and attended a blockade for old-growth forests this year, described her connection to forests as such:

It's something along the lines of forgetting self—or just not feeling—it's definitely not an intellectual

feeling. For me, it's just an awe and connectedness. And the feeling of not being any more important than anything else. That human thing of, "We're the most important thing", that's fake, and you feel that in the forest.

This comment illustrates an environmental identity evidenced by a connection to nature. Natasha further described this connection as an "understanding that you're connected to this place just as the bird is connected." This idea exemplifies a sense of oneness and relatedness with nature, which is also characteristic of an environmental identity. In addition, Jennifer, who also attended a blockade for old-growth forests for several days, described an ongoing "unsettledness" with the dominant society's perspective of "mind versus nature as opposed to being a part of it". This illustrates a meta-personal self-construal that encompasses the inclusion of nature in the self. This construal is a characteristic of environmental identities.

All participants described dissatisfaction with the response to environmental concerns by dominant powers in a settler-colonial capitalist society. For example, Zoe, who spent several months living at a blockade protesting old-growth logging, described how "governments and corporations" are only "concerned about the economy, capitalism and making money and are essentially willing to just throw everybody under the bus". Moreover, current power structures such as capitalism and colonialism were often described as damaging to people and places. For example, Zoe stated that individuals need to:

Be getting away from these larger systems of corporate capitalism and colonialism because that is what is affecting everything, and when people look at it as this one small environmental factor and they're not looking at the racism, homelessness, wealth disparity, and all these things, they're not recognizing that all of these things coincide and interact together and it's all because of the same thing.

Zoe's apparent frustration with capitalism and colonialism illustrates a sense of injustice caused by power structures, which is characteristic of politicized identities (Schmitt et al., 2019). In these findings, a politicized environmental identity was particularly salient because these local forms of action simultaneously addressed what they perceived as environmental, social, and political forms of injustice such as Indigenous sovereignty. In response to power structures, participants described a moral obligation and responsibility to defend people and the land. For example, Rebecca, who is involved with several climate justice groups, and spent several days at a blockade protesting old-growth logging, described a feeling of responsibility for the land where she lives because of "cultural" and "biological reasons". She also emphasized the "importance of addressing

government policy that don't [sic] serve the interest of either of those things". Jennifer echoed this sense of personal responsibility while adding the role of urgency in participating in collective actions:

I didn't want to be on the other end of it when all the intact forest are gone, when we don't have any good oxygen left, when our salmon runs are gone, when all the things that come along with the destruction of intact forests. I didn't want to be on the other side of it saying I didn't do anything to try to stop it.

Jennifer's comment illustrates the presence of a moral obligation and sense of personal responsibility to protect the natural environment. Moreover, it illustrates a sense of urgency to protect the environment by describing that she envisions having to explain to others within her lifetime the reasons that these elements of the natural world have disappeared. Jennifer's comment also illustrates the specificity of her concerns about the environment as she specifically speaks about old-growth forests and the relationship with salmon runs. This suggests that personal responsibilities, moral obligation, and urgency are connected to a sense of local environmental destruction.

Localized instances of environmental destruction were also described as a tangible opportunity to act on existing environmental, political, and social values. For example, Rebecca described the old-growth logging blockade as a place where activists, with various motivations could connect towards a mutual goal:

[The blockade is] a flashpoint. It's something tangible to so many other things that seem too big to touch. Whether it's environmental degradation, it's breaching Indigenous rights and Indigenous land and stewardship, it's talking about food sources and resources that we all need and how are we going to address that going forward. It's talking about individual vs. government responsibility. It's talking about direct action and how you need direct action. It's talking about the [police] and who do the [police] serve [...], all of these pieces went into a blender and went ka-boom when [the destruction of a local old-growth forest] happened.

Rebecca's comment illustrates how her climate activism addresses social, political, and environmental harms, while also describing how these types of harm can coalesce in instances of local environmental destruction. Moreover, these issues can become more tangible within a local context. Similarly, Natasha described the role that local instances of environmental violations have in focusing their efforts and initiatives:

With climate action, you probably find it's like where do I focus? Because there are so many problems everywhere you look. And actually, it was nice to have such an obvious place to focus. Here's this incredible act of civil disobedience and

it's two hours away, so clearly that's where we're going to focus.

Rebecca and Natasha's comments illustrate that a tangible and local instance of social and eco-injustice can serve as an opportunity and motivation to act on existing environmental and political values.

In addition, all participants strongly identified themselves as life-long environmentalists and held political ideologies that aligned with their environmental values. Participants described a sense of moral obligation, urgency, and personal responsibility for addressing the climate crisis. These components are characteristic of politicized environmental identities (Schmitt et al., 2019), and support Schmitt et al. (2019)'s finding that politicization mediates the association between an environmental identity and involvement in pro-environmental collective activism. While SIMCA underscores the importance of efficacy as a predictor of collective environmental action, participants noted that it was often difficult to put their values into practice. Indeed, structural and cultural constraints in mainstream society can make it difficult to practice environmentalism (e.g., Kennedy & Givens, 2019). Elites have drawn on their power to reconfigure social norms and beliefs in ways that block people from taking meaningful climate action (Schmitt et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, participants in this study described the sense of satisfaction they drew from intervening in a time-sensitive action on the lands where they resided, and where they could personally witness the fruits of their collective activist labor. This suggests that there is an important role of local instances of environmental destruction in promoting pro-environmental collective activism. From an applied perspective on promoting pro-environmental behavior, these results underscore the importance of creating social environments (e.g., community collectives) that foster the expression of individuals' pro-environmental values, along with local opportunities for collective environmental action.

B. Activists are Motivated to Participate in Collective Activism by a Psychological Need to Belong

The second theme underscored how a social identity motivated activists' participation in collective activism. Shared experiences of high-stakes and confrontational direct action forged a powerful sense of trust and in-group belonging, as did shared experiences of vulnerability. These collective stories of acting in solidarity contrasted with participants' experiences as environmentalists outside the group. Participants expressed that their personal values of environmentalism were incongruent with the dominant society's worldviews, making them often feel lonely, exhausted, and alienated. For example, Jennifer described how she felt that the current dominant

CONDITIONS THAT INFLUENCE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

society forced her to “train” herself to be “disconnected from nature”. She also described that to live successfully “there are so many things that we have to be disconnected from for that to work”. Natasha added:

The [blockade] is a good example because it’s a controversial thing because a lot of people don’t look very deep into what’s actually going on there, and they just listen to what they hear, and not, and they don’t read further about it. So, there’s always a lot of explaining to people. And what comes back is often disinterest, which you just get used to it. But when you’re there, everybody’s in their rain gear, everybody’s throwing down.

These comments underscore the idea that environmentalists may struggle with moral dissonance while participating in mainstream society. However, joining a group of like-minded people undertaking collective action fosters a sense of freedom and fulfillment as it provides an opportunity to align behavior with values.

Ongoing involvement in pro-environmental collective activism also appeared to foster a sense of community and oneness, helping to fulfill the participants’ need to belong. For example, while speaking on the freedom to be oneself within pro-environmental collective activism communities, Natasha stated: “There’s something wonderful about being with a group of other people who care [about the environment] because you don’t have to explain anything to anyone [because] you’re with a group of people who already get it”. She shared a story where she voluntarily chained herself to a bridge with a group of women activists to deter logging trucks. She explained how a fellow activist helped her so she could relieve her bladder. Even though she was surrounded by other activists and lacked privacy for this private activity, she described how “it didn’t matter” because “we’re immediately part of this quite close community” and “you don’t have to explain yourself, which is such a relief”. Natasha’s comments highlight how participating in collective action can foster a sense of belonging, moral alignment, and community environmentalists, which they may miss out on while going about their everyday lives in the dominant society.

Communities also provided encouragement to continue protesting after distress. For instance, Jennifer described how the activism community at the blockade she attended helped her cope after a challenging experience with the forestry industry:

I think community there as well [helps to recharge after distress], cause it’s kind of a shared experience with everybody, everyone is seeing the same things, everyone’s kind of a part of the same thing and I think, kind of relying on that community was a huge part of [coping].

This suggests that the activism community can be an important source of support. In addition, Natasha shared an event at the old-growth forest blockade where police officers were attempting to remove an activist from the top of a 15-foot-high structure and had the rest of the activists behind an exclusion line. In the process, the activist fell out of the structure. Natasha described how, upon witnessing this, the group of activists instinctively acted in unspoken solidarity: “No one said, ‘Let’s storm the line.’ We just all pushed forward.” Altogether, this illustrates that people are motivated to continue engaging in collective action not only because of a sense of belonging, but also because of the group’s shared experience of struggling together in high-stakes conflicts against a shared opponent.

This sense of connection and belonging may also encourage enduring involvement in pro-environmental activism. For example, Jennifer shared that witnessing violence against fellow activists made her “want to go back even more” for them. Therefore, activists may return or maintain their involvement because of this connection to the community, in addition to their desire to protect the environment.

While participants felt disconnected from their values when participating in everyday life as part of the dominant society, their experiences of collective action fostered validation, understanding, and connection. Their comments echo the findings of researchers such as Baumeister and Leary (1995), who posited that human beings have an innate drive to form interpersonal relationships based on positive interactions of care and concern and that this need can motivate behavior. For example, humans form groups with others who are familiar, cooperative, and care for their welfare during distress and/or threat (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Moreover, the need to belong may encourage environmentalists to perceive themselves as part of an in-group after long-term involvement in collective action, especially when contrasted against an identifiable outgroup representing a dominant powerholder (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). These insights enhance existing literature by showing that while individuals may attend a blockade or protest initially to feel a sense of belonging, the formation of a salient and tight-knit in-group may help explain ongoing participation. Indeed, all participants expressed a desire to return because of the activist community.

C. A sense of hopeful group efficacy can counteract individualized negative affect about the climate crisis

The third theme underscored that participants were inspired to engage in environmental activism because they believed that together, their actions might make a meaningful difference. The group shared that this belief

stemmed from a sense of hope. This also relates to the SIMCA framework of efficacy as a motivator for collective action. A sense of shared hope also acted as a counterpoint to uncomfortable emotions regarding environmental devastation, which might otherwise have presented a barrier to efficacy and collective action.

When reflecting on their perceptions of environmental injustice, participants described having negative affect including frustration, helplessness, and powerlessness. For example, Jennifer described a desire to engage in activism, but without an existing community she felt a sense of “powerlessness”. Moreover, Zoe was frustrated by “past generations” and “governments and corporations” that she described as prioritizing capital accumulation over the environment. In addition, when her daughter learned about the effects of climate change on animals, Natasha recalled feeling a sense of helplessness as a mother:

I had never before as a mom — there was nothing I could offer her. I couldn't say it's going to be okay because it's probably not true. It was horrible. So, then it was, okay I need to do everything I can. I cannot be a mom and look my children in the eyes unless I try. A lot harder. That's what started this latest round of work.

Here, Natasha's distress at being unable to alleviate her daughter's climate anxieties triggered her desire to participate in collective environmental activism.

In turn, participants described how collective activism inspired hopeful group efficacy and that individuals can foster change when they come together. For example, Zoe explained the moment when her theory of social change shifted:

I think I had let a lot of pessimism get into me. I didn't think that a small group of people could make a difference or stop corporations. I was very much still in the 'We need to go through government, lobbying and laws because that's how you make change.' And then when I saw a group of 12 people stand in a road and shut down this entire thing. It was sort of a wake-up call of you can make small individual change.

This sentiment was echoed by all participants and illustrates how initial negative affect can be eradicated through observing others successfully realizing changes to protect the natural world. Rebecca further described how her involvement provides hope and efficacy:

Through community, I've seen things change and that is kind of a lifeline to me these days when, like so many people, you see insurmountable challenges at your doorstep and no idea how to address them yourself. So, you seek the fetal position in the cozy corner of your home, or you step out into the world and try to find a place

where you can be a part of the change.

For Rebecca, becoming engaged in collective environmental activism helped her resist widespread feelings of inertia in the face of large-scale environmental crises while cultivating a belief that her group's actions could make a positive difference.

Participants described feeling frustrated, powerless, and hopeless when faced with the challenge of climate change. However, seeing others like themselves engaging in collective activism and successfully stopping environmental destruction in real-time, inspired hope and action. Previous research specifies the relationship between emotion, hope, efficacy, and goal-directed behavior. For example, uncertainty as to how to respond to threats may cause denial or anxiety resulting in inaction (Frantz & Mayer, 2009). Moreover, drawing on mood freeze research, the feedback model of emotion specifies that individuals engage in behaviors to rectify emotions if they anticipate that the behavior will relieve their mood (Baumeister et al., 2007). In addition, Carmona-Moya et al. (2021) found that high group efficacy predicts collective activism when coupled with high hope. Collectively, this highlights the role of negative affect, hope, and self-efficacy in promoting collective activism.

These findings build on the SIMCA framework by underscoring the importance of group emotions in relation to collective environmental action. Specifically, these results emphasize how community-level collectives foster belonging, bonding, and connection to help address climate-change related distress. As climate-related distress can be found across the globe (Tam et al., 2023), it has become an increasingly important public health threat. This research suggests that facilitating community-based environments for individuals to build connections and hope and inspire change may help to address climate-related distress, while also facilitating systemic change.

Conclusion

Climate change is becoming a larger threat to humanity, and pro-environmental collective activism can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions to slow climate change (Scheidel, 2020). Therefore, it is important to investigate the conditions under which individuals put their values into practice through pro-environmental collective activism. In-depth interviews with environmental activists shed light on this question through the following qualitative themes, all of which add further nuance to existing insights from SIMCA's three-part model predicting collective action: subjective injustice, identity, and efficacy (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). In particular, findings underscore the importance of localized opportunities to

CONDITIONS THAT INFLUENCE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

act on multiple forms of subjective injustice, building a sense of trust, belonging, and social identity through shared experiences of high-stakes actions, and hopeful group-level efficacy as an antidote to difficult emotions about climate change.

First, this study found that individuals put their longstanding environmental values and political ideologies into practice in response to localized and tangible instances of environmental destruction. Participants described these opportunities for local action as giving them a manageable opportunity to effectively try to combat climate change. Because individuals may be intimidated by the sheer magnitude of the climate crisis, the current research highlights the importance of focusing collective activism on local instances of environmental distress and destruction. However, future research should investigate the conditions under which individuals with existing pro-environmental and political ideologies do not participate in pro-environmental activism even in the presence of a local and tangible instance of environmental destruction. In addition, other research suggests that individuals are more likely to defend the environment within places of personal significance (Mannarini et al., 2009). Thus, place attachment may also help to explain the importance of localized instances of environmental destruction in promoting pro-environmental collective activism. Future research should investigate the extent to which non-local and less tangible forms of environmental activism similarly motivate collective action.

Second, this study indicates that the need to belong may encourage initial and ongoing participation in pro-environmental collective activism. For example, participants described a sense of incongruency within the dominant society and a sense of belonging with like-minded individuals within the activist community. In addition, participants described returning to the blockade specifically for the activist community to provide support and protection against police and natural resource workers. This suggests the presence of a dominant in-group and out-group who experienced intergroup conflict at the blockade. Accordingly, increased threat and conflict from an outgroup can increase the saliency of the need to belong (Baumeister et al., 1995). Thus, this research demonstrates that individuals seek out belonging, prompting the formation of an in-group, which encourages future involvement. Future longitudinal research should investigate how the need to belong promotes initial and ongoing involvement in pro-environmental activism and its potential role in politicization, particularly as activists age.

Third, this study shows that there is a potential role of hopeful group efficacy in promoting involvement in

collective environmental activism. For instance, participants underscored the important role that witnessing others like themselves effectively addressing climate change had in addressing pessimism, frustration, and hopelessness. This supports the Environmental Identity Model of Environmental Collective Action, which also suggests that individuals engage in pro-environmental behavior under the perception of high hope and high group efficacy (Carmona-Moya et al., 2021). These results also emphasize the important role of building community and describing the positive effects of community on addressing the climate crisis, to encourage others to join collective activism movements. However, it would be valuable to understand why former environmentalists may choose to cease participation in collective environmental activism, even in the presence of a sense of belonging and hopeful group efficacy.

There are several limitations to the present study. First, due to the limited number of participants as per research ethics approval, theoretical saturation was not met, meaning that interviewing a larger number of participants would likely have provided further thematic insights. Secondly, all participants identified as female. Previous research suggests gender-based differences in the participation in pro-environmental collective action among youth, which may be related to gender-based differences in collective guilt (Haugestad et al., 2021). Consequently, our results may only reflect the experiences of women engaged in pro-environmental collective action. Future research should aim for a gender diverse sample (e.g., men, transgender, Two-Spirit), or further investigate the reasons for such gender differences. Third, participants had a wide range of years of experience in activism, and types of pro-environmental collective action. Previous research has found that previous experiences in pro-environmental collective action (e.g., protests) influence future engagement. Consequently, the experiences of individuals who are newer to pro-environmental collective action may differ. Future longitudinal studies should investigate if and how the factors that influence involvement in pro-environmental collective action shift from initial to ongoing involvement. Finally, from an applied social movement perspective, insights from this study suggest that community-based organizations wishing to foster or encourage pro-environmental activism should emphasize locality, tangibility, and a sense of belonging.

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