

The Climate and I

How ecological thinking becomes ecological practice



Picture of Climate March, 19-06-2022, Rotterdam.
Concerning 'Klimaatplicht' [Climate Duty]

Master thesis

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“Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” – *Ruth Bader Ginsburg*



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Abstract

The Young Climate Movement [JKB] aims to reduce the impact of climate change and the ecological footprint of Dutch society. Since 2016, their membership has grown exponentially from a handful of young people to over seventy young volunteers. The working groups *On Tour* and *GROW* raise awareness for the JKB. Through their rights and duties as ecological citizens they inform, inspire and motivate other young people to fight against climate change. In this thesis, the personal and public ecological practices of ecological citizens acts as a catalyst for undergoing different stages of environmentalism before and during involvement in a social movement. This thesis argues that deciding which personal and public ecological practices fit into one's daily life triggers different processes of meaning-making. Social movement theories previously argued that belonging within a collective identity is the main reason for membership. This thesis claims that meaning-making processes of a new encountered narrative is at the foundation of all involvement in a social climate movement.

Key words: Ecological Citizenship, Social Movements, Rights and Duties, Meaning-Making, Environmentalism, Activism



Introduction

"And now? Now I am aware of all the things that can be done differently and I do want to do something. But I don't see myself becoming politically active, or joining the opposition as he advised. So what now?"¹

Eleste was skeptical. After attending a climate lecture with the JKB offshoot, *GROW*, she became vocally critical of the ideas proposed during the talk. In order to make the strongest impact on climate policy, she along with all her peers were advised to join opposition political parties and affect change from within. Although she was already an active volunteer of a social climate movement, she was always considering more ways in which she could contribute to a liveable future for our planet. But as shown here, not all actions are considered right to give meaning to her mission. The aim of this dissertation is to provide insight into how young people concerned with the climate try to shape their ecological practices and how this is given meaning to.

The goal of my research was to explore the public engagement of *On Tour* and *GROW*, two groups of the Dutch Young Climate Movement (JKB). I undertook three months of ethnographic research from the beginning of February till the end of April 2022. The JKB is a social climate movement, an umbrella organisation for its more than 70 volunteers and 60 affiliated youth groups². By contributing to each other's sustainable future, the JKB is trying to create a climate in which young people can share knowledge and learn together about sustainable practices. To achieve this the JKB employs several strategies divided into two subsections of the organisation, the *political lobby* and *broad awareness*. The latter focuses on the involvement and engagement of more young people in ecological practices. Whilst the former remains active politically by holding critical discussions, attending (inter)national political meetings and submitting their own transition proposals.

Before I started my fieldwork in February 2022, I was interested in exploring the possible discrepancy between the ideals and practices of the JKB members; are they truly practicing what they preach? But, as the vignette above shows, my interlocutors were not positioning themselves as preachers. Rather, their involvement in the JKB showed their

¹ Eleste, 20-04-2022, after *GROW*'s lecture

²

https://www.jongeklimaatbeweging.nl/?gclid=CjwKCAjwqauVBhBGEiwAXOepkbRHAHjqchHhHbLUZiFp7TaqiEIVoRKeFAYrYXAEh5Ma5GA3fSlcRRoCJL8QAvD_BwE
https://www.jongeklimaatbeweging.nl/?gclid=CjwKCAjwqauVBhBGEiwAXOepkbRHAHjqchHhHbLUZiFp7TaqiEIVoRKeFAYrYXAEh5Ma5GA3fSlcRRoCJL8QAvD_BwE



ongoing manner of integrating ecological practices into their lives. Trying to delineate where their environmental responsibilities lie, my interlocutors changed their everyday practices after understanding the importance of sustaining a liveable earth. Resulting in defining one's ecological practices as part of a larger attempt to adhere to their understanding of ecological citizenship. Rather than narrowing citizenship into a confined socio-political status with an attachment to a particular state, ecological citizenship entails the duties and rights people have towards the earth (Dash 2014). The state is no longer the sole sovereign power, but the earth is a new authority (May 2008). As the new authority needs to be sustained to let people live, ecological citizens are determined to obtain their rights and duties towards it.

After changing their own ecological practices, my interlocutors looked for ways to join a social climate movement. Changing your own ecological practices was not enough, according to my interlocutors joining a social climate movement had to be the next step. My interlocutors encountered various ecological practices during their years of university study, meeting people already engaged in ecological practices. Slowly but steadily, my interlocutors came to the understanding that they also needed to conduct themselves as ecological citizens, and began changing their diets, as well as purchasing less (new) clothing. Due to the vision that more people should engage in ecological practices, they became active in two of the working groups on the *broad awareness* side of the JKB.

The seven, and later nine, members of *On Tour* showed me how their involvement with the JKB reflects their desire to involve more young people in keeping the planet liveable. *On Tour* organises lessons to teach young people more about climate change and their own impact on the climate. These are referred to as *Klimaatlessen* [Climate lessons], lessons they teach in several of the bigger Dutch cities at various MBO schools [Secondary Vocational Education]. At the time of my research, which was the period of the municipality election in the Netherlands, the group mostly focused on delivering “*Klimaat en Politiek lessen*” [Climate and Politics lessons]. The aim of these lessons are to create awareness regarding climate change, show the link between politics and spark students to contribute to reducing climate change, both individually or in joint efforts. These hourly lessons are given by either one or two members of *On Tour* occasionally with the inclusion of a guest lecturer. The lessons always begins with an introduction of the JKB and what *On Tour* stands for, followed by discussing the various international, national and municipal elections that are relevant in (Dutch) society. They explain how political parties and policies are influenced by those who vote, thereby bringing the focus back to the students themselves and their voice. Explaining how voting influences the way municipalities make and implement climate policy, provides a



bridge to the main activity of the *On Tour* lessons. A group exercise in which the young people break up into groups to brainstorm on new climate policies for their own municipality. Finally, *On Tour* concludes their lessons with a roundup of how the students can make an impact through collective action in order to sustain a liveable earth.

The other group, *GROW*³, showed me how participation within a social climate movement contributes to desires of sharing knowledge and experiences regarding ecological practices. When I joined *GROW* it consisted of seven members, and like *On Tour*, grew to become a group of nine. *GROW* is a training programme with the aim of promoting youth participation in the field of climate change and providing young people with the tools they need to incorporate sustainability into their daily lives. They are trying to “achieve this goal by informing, inspiring and activating young people”⁴. They provide (free) trainings manifested in several themes, such as *Food*, *Climate Justice*, and *Power & Politics*. Each training focuses on the ecological practices relevant to each theme. The invitation to the training sessions are marketed to members of the JKB, and other youth organisations as well as those young people following the social media accounts of the JKB.

Both *On Tour* and *GROW* contribute with their work to the goal of the *broad awareness* side, by reaching out to and motivating young people who might not (yet) be engaged in ecological practices within a collective. My interlocutors helped me discover how changing one's own daily practices can start a process of assessing individual and public practices and the meanings attached to them.

This thesis aims to answer the question; “*How does the meaning-making process of ecological practices from voluntary social movement members affect their personal and public actions?*” This thesis gives an analysis of the meaning-making processes of ecological practices and relates them to periods before and during membership in a social climate movement. I argue that the adaption of ecological practices, both personal and public, is done through a process of meaning-making with bumps, side-roads, and obstacles. This thesis shows how becoming involved with a social movement is preceded by figuring out the meaning of integrating new practices, which entails the rethinking of the notion of citizenship and combining it with (climate) environmentalism.

³ Although *GROW* is written with capital letters, it is not meant as an acronym.

⁴ Section out of a *GROW* email, written in April 2022



Structure

The meaning-making process regarding ecological practices before and during becoming involved in a social climate movement has several stages. Firstly, the encounter of ecological practices and their integration of one's daily habits. My interlocutors learned about ecological practices either by studying abroad or in the Netherlands. This started a process of rethinking and reshaping their everyday practices. After a while, my interlocutors started to wonder whether they should not also engage in public ecological practices. The second stage entails the shaping of public actions that contribute to the social climate movement, the JKB. Contributing through motivating others to also engage in ecological practices, and calling upon the duties and rights regarding ecological citizenship. My interlocutors played a part in the way the JKB has become meaningful for young people. The third stage concerns the limitations of being a volunteer in a social movement. Critical comments about (un)fulfilled ambitions and whether the given possibilities to give meaning to both personal and public ecological practices come to the fore.

While using these three stages as the structure of my ethnographic chapters, I argue that becoming a member of a social movement is not just done to satisfy the need to belong to a collective identity. Obtaining a collective identity is seen as the primary reason why people tend to join social movements (Klandermans 2004; Polletta & Jasper 2001; Taylor & Rupp 1987). As I have discovered during my fieldwork, my interlocutors have joined the social movement to give (more) meaning to their ecological practices, both personal and collective ones. Becoming involved in a social (climate) movement is preceded by the process of meaning-making, a process that continues after becoming part of a social movement. The main reason to join a social movement is not obtaining a collective identity, instead at its base is the search for meaning.

Research position, methodology and ethics

In exploring the motives of young Dutch people to join a social climate movement, I undertook three months of ethnographic research amongst two working groups of the Dutch Young Climate Movement (JKB). During my time with *On Tour* and *GROW*, I became an active member of both groups as well as observing their behaviours and habits. I attended their weekly meetings, went along with *On Tour*'s lessons, attended *GROW*'s trainings, and joined the groups for various social events. I also began helping *GROW* by arranging formal



stuff, like locations and speakers for their events, as well as participating in *On Tour* evaluation meetings concerning their lessons and their concept. Becoming an engaged participant observant, allowed me to bridge between what my interlocutors told me and what I observed them doing (Snee et al. 2016), and to build extra rapport as not being seen as a complete outsider (O'Reilly 2012).

In doing so, I participated in “engaged anthropology”. The engaged anthropological researcher is not merely observing but actually engaging in the interlocutors’ activities (Low & Merry 2010; Susser 2010). Engaged which can be divided into several forms. These forms are ranging from basic commitment to our interlocutors, to supporting and sharing the communities we work with, to social criticism in both academic and public platforms, to more broadly understood forms of engagement as advocacy, collaboration and activism (Low & Merry 2010). Although Low and Merry (2010) put engaged anthropology as a different method, Susser (2010) states that it should be considered as one of the forms of participant observation. During my research I came to the same understanding as Susser (2010). Trying to gain insight in the reasons why my interlocutors joined a social movement, encouraged me to observe and participate in their personal (group) and public practices. My engagement with their practices has given me the opportunity to become a participant observer, one that observes, participates, talks and ask questions (O'Reilly 2012).

Practicing engaged anthropology, brings about ethical dilemmas. Dennis Rodgers (2007) shows this while he became part of a gang during his research in Nicaragua. Becoming a member meant that he had to go through several phases of initiation, where he was expected to use violence. As well as using violence after initiation, while protecting the gang’s neighbourhood. Rodgers (2007) was faced with making ethical decisions whether he would use violence or would not become part of the gang and had to end his research. While Rodgers (2007) ethical concerns are based on the use of violence, my ethical concerns are related to my political opinions.

My political opinions did shape the way I conducted myself as a researcher. Research is shaped through my personal interests, and circumstances based on my political, cultural and economic position in society (Ortner 2016). In my personal life I have strong opinions regarding the participation duties and rights people have in society. Also in regard to the practices people have in response to protecting the earth and maintaining it for humans, animals and plants. My political opinion mostly aligns with my interlocutors, as I discovered during our many talks and semi-structured interviews. Most of my interviews were conducted walking, as I was aware that it can provide a better understanding of my interlocutors



relationship with their environment and their perceptions on changing it (Arceño 2020; Evans & Jones 2011). During my interactions, I discovered that my interlocutors voted for green, left parties. This made me aware of my like mindedness with them, and I said to myself to not just take everything at face value. Although I did recognise their phases in becoming an ecological citizen, it did not make me less critical or analytical as this thesis will hopefully show. Rather, the way they dealt with their duties and rights to protect the planet allowed me to feel less concerned about everyday practices of others. I became less interested in changing their day to day practices and the persuasion of them becoming more ecological citizens. This reveals how ethnographic fieldwork influences the researcher's own meaning of practices (Robben 2020).

Conceptual debate

Young people's participation and environmentalism

The landscape of social movements and activism is hard to imagine without the efforts of young people (Magaña 2016). As the context of this thesis is the Netherlands and their Young Climate Movement (JKB), I adhere to the JKB's classification of young people between 16 and 32, despite the classification by the Dutch dictionary using 16-30 years⁵. The social category of young people is a flexible and contestable one, due to context-renewing and context-creating of societies (Bucholtz 2002). Youth upbringing varies through different contexts, and while growing up they start to grasp the different structures and systems within such contexts. Feeling that they have the abilities to challenge current structures and a long(er) future to do so, young people tend to participate and engage more in society than older generations to renew and change these contexts (Bucholtz 2002). Scholars have found that young people's participation has been changing form (Bennet 2008; Dalton 2015). Previously, young people used to show interest in politics, engaged with the news and became members of advocacy organisations (Mann, 1999; Wilkins, 2000). Nowadays, young people volunteer, protest and embed politics in their daily lives (Schlozman, Verba & Brady 2010; Shea & Harris 2006). Sociologists Earl, Maher and Elliot (2017) urge that additional research should be done on how young people shape their participation, through which the young people's agency should be addressed. Anthropologist Bucholtz (2002) agrees on this, by

⁵ [Gratis woordenboek | Van Dale](#)



stating that especially anthropology should focus more on the young people's agency in forming their participation. Adults need to control and manage young people's activism, a belief held by many. Anthropology should concentrate on bringing to light the framing of youth agency outside the relation to adult concerns. This thesis shines light on the agency in relation with their own concerns, and positions the subsequent participation within their understanding of environmentalism and their notion of ecological citizenship. The aim is to show how young people's participation in social movements is shaped through processes of meaning-making.

Youth express their dissent not solely through being politically active in a narrow sense, but also by incorporating practices of dissent in their everyday life. By conducting actions in different layers of society, young people are expressing their dissent (O'Brien, Selboe & Hayward 2018). Being politically active by going to marches or protests can be seen as one approach, while more personal practices such as flying less, consuming less, eating less meat makes people engaged with showing dissent. The expressing of dissent and thereby challenging the various structures and systems of society and politics, categorises people as *environmentalists*. Being an environmentalist is broadly seen as someone who is participating in society to solve physical and/or social environmental problems (Kitchell et al 2000; Klas et al 2019; Tesch and Kempton 2004). One way to participate as an environmentalist is young people's involvement with a social movement. However, the personal practices also adds up to the impact environmentalists make.

Anthropologists Tesch and Kempton (2004; see also Tripp 2018)) have developed a categorisation after researching the connotation environmentalists give to the term *environmentalist*. Tesch and Kempton (2004) conducted interviews with 156 members of various environmental groups in the Eastern United States. They discovered that the term environmentalist is perceived differently. People who conducted the same kind of environmental practices responded differently on the question whether they considered themselves an environmentalist. Whereas someone said 'everybody is an environmentalist, because everyone had some concern regarding human environmental actions', others would say that they were influenced by how other people looked at you when they knew you were an environmentalist. Therefore, Tesch and Kempton (2004) saw the need to make a distinction between the different connotations people maintained. They found that the identity 'environmentalist' is used to describe and identify four distinct types of people. Firstly, there are people who do not take public actions, but do care about the environment. Then there are those who take action through private actions regarding preserving local habitat, also called



conservationists. Thirdly, so called *activists*, act in the political or civic realm by calling upon representatives or attending hearings. Lastly *extremists*, act via civil disobedience, demonstrations, or ‘direct action’ such as the blocking of logging operations. Tesch and Kempton (2004) provide us with this categorisation, but seem to neglect the fluidity of identities and its connotations. As the framing of identities may vary when time passes, for example through its frequency (Eidson et al 2017), the connotations and giving meaning to it also varies over time. As I will show in the following chapters, Tesch and Kempton’s (2004) categorisations should be seen more as stages of identification which are fluid, rather than demarcated identities.

Processes of identification and meaning-making

Environmentalism is a general term covering a broad range of environmental practices, whereas *climate environmentalist* include more specific practices. Environmentalism involves practices as the calling upon government(s) to providing help when having to build up ones livelihood after a tsunami (Lauer 2012). More specific, climate environmentalists focus on specifically preserving the earth as a liveable place. Entailing practices such as planting fast-growing trees to hold carbon in reserve (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand 2006), conserving and improving forest carbon stocks (Nielsen 2013), or young people acting in climate movements (Elizalde et al 2020). While doing so, they try to give meaning to the climate change narrative and where it fits within their life and everyday (ecological) practices. Climate environmentalists form their own notion of citizenship in which the fluidity of environmentalism emerges.

Ecological citizenship is a form of belonging to and protecting of the planet, enabled by non-contractual and non-reciprocal obligations which transcend the nation state’s territorial boundaries. Anthropologist Shannon May (2008) defines ecological citizenship through her research on how China builds an internationally acclaimed prototype for rural urbanisation. Describing how both the USA and China are working together to design and build sustainable development, May (2008) states that both contribute to ‘protecting the planet’, and places them within ecological citizenship. A type of citizenship which goes further than the traditional definition of citizenship where citizens are legal members of a national political community, while having certain rights and responsibilities to that community (Ong et al. 1996). Citizenship has increasingly come to be seen as a process of self-making and being-made, as a result of negotiations, feeling of belongingness and



contested relations with the state (Lazar & Nuijten 2013; Ong et al. 1996). May (2008) argues that ecological citizenship is a form of citizenship wherein the state is no longer the authority to act upon a population to invoke. Rather, the planet is a new authority, in which each individual holds a vested interest. Through these new and changed emergences of authority, “everyday practices of living become subject to judgment, transformation and discipline by persons never met, with whom there is no formal system or shared governance, in the name of protecting the planet” (May 2008; 238). Ecological citizenship is thus seen as a form of citizenship in which the everyday practices of (organised) individuals, businesses and the state are accountable to each other, in order to keep the earth habitable. All of these different actors have to answer to the new authority, the planet.

Ecological citizenship practices are influenced by entitlements and obligations towards the planet. For example, citizens’ rights and responsibilities are seen in the securitisation done by citizens in South Africa. Private security officers are taking upon the tasks to secure the citizens of Durban, shaping the governance of security in the public realm (Diphoorn 2016). Securing people who fall outside their job description, these officers answer to the entitlements others ask of them. The citizens of Durban and the private security officers shape their own rights and duties in contrast to adhering to the ones they have in regard to their national community. Based on non-contractual and non-reciprocal rights and duties, ecological citizenship also transcends the nation state’s territorial boundaries, as well as the public and personal sphere (Dash 2014; May 2008). Having the *duty* and *right* to live a green life are reflected in the reasons to choose for ecological practices. According to anthropologist Dash (2014) ecological citizenship gives rise to choosing certain everyday practices due to the *right* of living a green life, while simultaneously others choose them due to the *duty* one has as an ecological citizen (Dash 2014). Dash situates himself in the debate between the ‘participatory rights approach’ and the ‘personal duty approach’. The rights-based approach assumes that people have certain rights within a community and that those in power will provide that what people are entitled to (Lazar 2004). Whereas the duty approach of citizenship assumes that individuals will do their duty to reduce their load on society and to build up their own individual capital (Ong et al. 1996). By stating that ecological citizenship practices come from either a right or duty approach, Dash (2014) neglects the interwovenness of these approaches. This is seen through motivating other people to participate in ecological practices, and using the argument of sustaining the planet for generations to come as a right to all and a duty for all.

Practices of ecological citizens and the identification interconnect with being an



environmentalist. As ecological citizenship practices focus on sustaining a liveable earth, participating in society by joining a social climate movement makes young people step into the typology of Tesch and Kempton (2004). Joining a social movement fits within the practices of the latter two types of Tesch and Kempton (2004), *activists* and *extremists*. Social movement practices as blocking roads fit in the latter type, whereas *GROW*' and *On Tour* practices fit better in the former one. As environmentalists, ecological citizens who have joined a social climate movement are concerned with their physical environment and that of others. Therefore, adhering to the planet's authority which calls on its citizens to act in a way that the earth can sustain itself. Through the engagement of both ecological and environmental practices citizens engage in the identification with environmentalism and the notion of ecological citizenship.

Ecological environmental citizens who join a social climate movement are believed to create a collective identity. Through their involvement with a social climate movement, ecological citizens participate in collective action (Bobel 2007). Several social science scholars have been fascinated with the relationship between social movement participation and identity within the context of collective action (Klandermans 2004; Taylor & Rupp 1987). They argue that environmentalists modify not only how they see the world through engaging in a social movement, but also how sharing a collective identity is the reason to join a social movement. Sociologists Polletta and Jasper (2001, 285) define collective identity "as an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation". A status or relation that can be imagined, rather than directly experienced, and is separate from personal identities. A collective identity through collective action is thus based on an imagined connection that individuals feel with each other in a certain group. Within my research, I focused on both the individual and collective factors which contribute to the identification of ecological citizenship and environmentalism⁶.

Sharing and creating a collective identity is not at the basis of why social movements stay to exist. Social science scholars have argued that becoming involved with a social climate movement enhances the start of a personal transformation process (Klandermans 2004; Polletta & Jasper 2001; Taylor & Rupp 1987). This process is about claiming the identity of

⁶ From here on forward, I will use the term 'ecological practices' when I refer to both ecological and environmental practices. Both practices are focused on caring for the environment and are acted out in both personal and public settings. Additionally, ecological practices are conducted through adhering to the new authority, the planet.



activist. Bobel (2007) claims that such an identity is not crucial for participating in a movement. Chris Bobel (2007) conducted several forms of interviews with members, ‘activists’, of the Menstrual Activist movement. A movement that resists the contemporary framing of menstruation as shameful, dirty, and something best to hide. Bobel (2007) states that people within a social movement do not have to self-identify as *activist*. Activist being those who identify with actions in the political or civic realm (Tesch and Kempton 2004). Some do not identify themselves with *being an activist*, while *doing activism*, despite involvement in a social movement. The need for a correlation between personal identity and collective identity for the involvement in a social movement is not needed, according to Bobel (2007). Thus, ecological citizens who join a social climate movement are wrongly thought of having to share a collective identity, wherein each and everyone identifies themselves as an activist. But if collective identity is not at the basis of social movements, then what is?

Young people in the midst of meaning-making processes are at the basis of social climate movements. Anthropologist Kurzman (2008) defined *meaning-making* as the proposition of continuous seeking of understanding the world around them. Giving meaning to the world is an end in itself, a prompt for action, and a field of contestation. Meaning involves moral conceptions of good and bad, cognitive conceptions of true and false, perceptual conceptions of like and unlike, social conceptions of identification and differentiation, and any other conceptions we can think of (Kurzman 2008). In his book, Kurzman (2008) includes a number of essays that show such conceptions in meaning-making processes. For example, how committed intellectuals in social movements have started looking for knowledge-production outside of modern conceptual frameworks, such as regular education systems. Rather, they use the knowledge of indigenous people. Just as these intellectuals, young ecological citizens are trying to change their strategies to give meaning in their life regarding the subject matter of climate change. One of those strategies is joining a social climate movement, such as the Dutch Young Climate Movement, the UK Student Climate Movement, and Fridays for Future for the whole of Europe⁷. Meaning-making in social climate movements focuses on understanding how ecological practices fit in the lives of its members. The coming together of individual meaning and the meaning-making of the bigger collective makes a social movement a field of contestation.

Different processes come into play when talking about meaning-making. Anthropologists Creese and Blackledge (2012) have looked into the processes of meaning-

⁷ [Zo staat het met de klimaatbewegingen in Europa \(vice.com\)](https://www.vice.com/en/article/zo-staat-het-met-de-klimaatbewegingen-in-europa)



making in linguistics. Linguistic meaning-making processes are best understood through the position a receiving person has in relation to the person speaking (Creese & Backledge 2012). This position is influenced by the expression of ideas, identifications, biography, stance and nuance (Blommaert & Rampton 2011). Although the focus in this thesis does not lie upon the linguistic meaning-making processes, the importance of ‘relations and positioning’ is important. In the different stages of meaning-making, the position of actors and relations is different when implementing a new idea or concept.

Anthropologist Susan Wright (1998) has written about these contested processes and identified three stages of them. The first stage concerns overt efforts of identified actors to redefine key symbols that give a certain image of the world, of what people ought to be and behave like, and what ought to be perceived as the ‘reality’ of their society and history. In short, the first stage can be seen as redefining ideology and done by actors in high places. Secondly, a worldview becomes institutionalised and operates through non-aggressive power. Such institutional practices frame and shape values, perceptions, categories and behaviour. In this second stage, the actors are perceived to be involved in making state policies. The third stage is when a key concept that incorporates a new way of thinking penetrates other spheres, outside state activities. That new way of thinking then becomes a widespread and dominant way of thinking in everyday life (Wright 1998). For example, the origin of the term *sustainability*, is frequently pointed back to the 18th century (Seefried 2015). Hans Carl von Carlowitz, an inspector of mines, argued that foresters should only cut down as many trees as can be replaced naturally in the immediate period, in order to make the wood a long-term resource. In other words, creating a *sustainable* field, a term which became incorporated in several world languages (Seefried 2015). The relations and positions of actors in the various stages of meaning-making differ and determine the outcome of its process.

In what follows, I will use the above theoretical framework to argue that due to the rights and duties they feel as ecological citizens and the linked identities of environmentalist, young people’s participation in a social movement is about giving the climate change narrative a certain meaning in their life. Coming across the importance of reducing climate change, and its associated practices, makes people reconsider their previous practices, thoughts and understanding. This new phenomena, climate change, has become a widespread and dominant concept in various parts of everyday life, ensuring that people have to shape meaning around it. For example, in the Netherlands, the government advertises with their new campaign ‘Zet ook de knop om’ [also turn the switch] on the television that every household



should conduct in strategies to use less energy⁸. On the other hand, walking in the Dutch supermarkets Albert Heijn shows us how such companies motivate costumers to reduce their plastic waste⁹. And then there is the amount of lectures and trainings regarding ‘Climate and Biodiversity’¹⁰ or ‘Overpopulation and the Climate’¹¹. Such changes only occurred in the last few years, meaning young people suddenly have a new phenomenon in their life to which they have to provide meaning. Some will do that as the first type of environmentalist, caring but not acting. Others are activists who act in the public realm (Tesch and Kempton 2004) or despite refraining from that identity are doing activism (Bobel 2007) within a social climate movement.

The involvement in a social movement is preceded by changing one’s personal practices, and is followed by contributing through public actions to the bigger collective. Changing and extending practices is triggered by the process of giving meaning to a (new) phenomenon. To make this process clear, the first chapter focuses on the change of personal practices through the encounter of ecological practices and its integration in one’s own life. The second chapter elaborates on the public social movement practices, and how individuals contribute through them to the meaning-making of the social movement. The last chapter shows how the limitations and hierarchical issues in a movement forces its members to rethink whether their ambition in regard to meaning-making can be fulfilled through their membership.

⁸ [Kabinet start landelijke Energiebesparingscampagne en komt met Nationaal Isolatieprogramma om 2,5 miljoen woningen snel te isoleren | Nieuwsbericht | Rijksoverheid.nl](#)

⁹ [Geen gratis plastic zakjes meer bij groente- en fruitafdeling van Albert Heijn \(ah.nl\)](#)

¹⁰ [www.ivn.nl/afdeling/roermond-eo/activiteiten/lezing-klimaat-en-biodiversiteit](#)

¹¹ [21|11|01 Overbevolking en het klimaat | Lezing en gesprek met klimaatfilosoof Marc Davidson en sociaal filosoof Femke Takes - Radboud Reflects \(ru.nl\)](#)



Chapter 1: Embracing ecological practices

Motives for participation

In the final week of my fieldwork, Ziva came to my house for dinner. She is an active member in GROW's working group that organises training programs on climate change. A 19 years old woman, studying Global Sustainability Science with a focus on Government & Societal Transformation, she was the youngest member of GROW I came to know Ziva through our joint efforts to organise GROW activities, such as securing speakers for panel discussions or arranging training locations. That night, we discussed the kind of questions we planned to ask panel members for a panel discussion GROW was organising the next week. The panel discussion was part of the first theme of GROW in 2022, simply branded as *Food*. During the *Food* trainings, young people were given the opportunity to learn more about the effect of food industries on climate change, as well as how their own practices relate to that. The discussion would consist of three professionals who work in different sectors of the food industry, such as the chocolate and stock industry related to 'green farming'.

After the dinner, we agreed to have an interview outlining her experience as a JKB member. At the time, Ziva had been a member of the JKB for almost a year and a half. Before joining GROW, she was the chairwoman of a JKB workgroup setting up a new podcast, 'Later is alles beter – De klimaatpodcast voor realistische mensen' [Later, everything is better - The climate podcast for realists]. The podcast focused on exploring what can be gained from saving the climate and was meant to "raise broad awareness", an issue that the JKB pays utmost attention to. Generally, the JKB has two sides, the *political lobby side* and the *broad awareness side*. With choosing to work for the podcast and later on GROW, Ziva joined the '*broad awareness side*' of the JKB. This latter side participates in strategies to create broader awareness amongst young people, with initiatives such as GROW and On Tour.

Ziva chose to become part of the JKB because she felt passionate about the possibility of education people more about sustainability and climate change. "I noticed that many people know very little about sustainability, including young people," Ziva explained, her eyes opening widely as she slightly raised her voice, "although it concerns our future". She complained about her friends who refrain from being involved with sustainability practices or educating themselves on the subject of climate change, because of their attributed connotations to the practices and subject. Additionally, they were wary of the sense of guilt



that climate change and sustainability discussions impose on them. Ziva does not agree that sustainability and climate change should impose guilt on the everyday practices of young people. Instead, Ziva argues that young people should have a safe and comfortable environment, one where they do not feel this guilt. And whereby they can learn more about sustainability and climate change, in relation to their own practices, to better see the importance of sustaining a liveable earth.

Ziva further stated that it besides the consumer who has to change, the producers and the government also have to change. Ziva shared her thoughts on this shared responsibility; “If people who feel the urgency [to do something to reduce climate change], could learn in a low-key way and develop skills to do their own research and also recognise misinformation and do good research.” Ziva’s concern is how young people are being influenced by not only peers, but also by the things they read or hear from sources such as government, news organisations and other companies. Ziva expresses that young people should have a safe environment to learn about climate change, as well as arguing that young people should be able to develop skills to act against those in power.

In addition to helping young people learn and act more on ecological practices, Ziva also gave a more egocentric reason for joining the JKB. Not noticing much change in society after her involvement in the JKB, I remarked; “Even though you see a lot of issues regarding climate justice and feel like the road is very long, you are nevertheless committed to make a difference regarding climate and sustainability issues.” “Yeah,” Ziva sighed, “but that is also because I want to have children later in my life, without feeling guilty. I don’t want them born into a world with wars over water shortages.” Ziva’s involvement in the JKB is caused by her drive to help others gain a safe place to learn more about sustainability and ecological practices, challenging authorities and standing up for her own entitlements. Revealing that her involvement in the JKB is framed by both rights and duties regarding herself and others.

The reasons for joining the JKB, a social climate movement, have various origins that can be traced back to the concepts of environmentalists and ecological citizenship. At the beginning of my research, I was motivated to explore whether the voluntary members of both GROW and On Tour ‘practiced what they preached.’ Yet, after having had several conversations with my interlocutors, including Ziva, I shifted my perspective. Instead of focusing on the supposed discrepancy between practice and preach, I have explored their ways of identifying environmentalism and ecological citizenship practices. As Ziva’s story illustrates, one can have several (personal, public or political) motives to join a social



movement. This chapter explores these reasons and motives, and shows how they invite us to rethink concepts of ecological citizenship, environmentalism, and social movements.

Right and duties

Calling upon the rights and duties of others in order to sustain a liveable earth lies at the foundation of ecological citizenship. My interlocutors kept telling me that it was important to give other young people the right to a safe and comfortable place, where they could explore their relationship to sustainability and ecological practice. While also expressing that other young people should feel the duty humans have to sustain a liveable earth. Anthropologist Dash has labelled this as the *participatory rights approach* and the *personal duty approach* within ecological citizenship. To explain these concepts, I will first elaborate the notion of ecological citizenship, before expanding on the two different approaches in relation to my ethnographic data.

Ecological citizenship is a form of belonging to and protecting of the planet, enabled by non-contractual and non-reciprocal obligations that transcend the nation state's territorial boundaries. As explained in the introduction, ecological citizenship suggests the new form of authority given to the planet. In the name of protecting the planet, everyday practices of living are being judged, transformed and disciplined by people never met or people from outside their shared political community (May 2008). Within the notion of ecological citizenship, the traditional idea that citizenship is only shaped by the relationship between state and citizen is therefore rejected. In recent years, several anthropologists and other social science scholars have argued for us not to treat nature as a passive medium on which politics act (Anand 2011; Bennet 2010; Mitchell 2003; Vayda & Walter 1999). Politics does not just shape the planet, but the planet is an authority that also makes its own ruling, fighting back when being attacked. For example, anthropologist Anand (2011) shows us that social and political relations are transformed through the access of water that the planet gives residents in Mumbai. The accessibility of water in Mumbai for residents is not just shaped through the city's water system, i.e. pipes, pumps etc. It is also shaped by how the planet provides us with water, how topography and the effect of pollution, for example, influences accessibility. Although politics can be considered the main driver, determining whether certain districts get a higher water accessibility than others. The planet has the highest authority on deciding to grant us the water, making it necessary to protect the planet and ensuring that humans still belong on this planet.



Ecological citizenship naturally moves away from only having a rights-based approach to citizenship. Rights-based approaches of citizenship explain that citizenship is about the rights a person has, because of their legal status as a member of a political national community (Lazar & Nuijten 2013). These rights are otherwise seen as claiming better citizenship, by claiming paid treatment from the state for a certain disease for example (Nguyen 2005). Therefore, citizenship should not just merely be seen as a political belonging with a legal status and rights. Rather, citizenship brings about duties as well (Lazar & Nuijten 2013). To come back to the example of Mumbai, the duties for inhabitants was to pay to the local government for their water supply. Certain duties and rights are also found in ecological citizenship. Everyone has obligations which are planetary in nature, regarding moral responsibility for fellow citizens, the planet and everything that lives on it, and future generations. These obligations are translated into everyday practices (Holemans 2010). Practices which are chosen because of the rights and duties people feel regarding the planet.

Ecological citizenship gives rise to choosing certain everyday practices due to the *right* of living a green and sustainable life, while others rather feel the *duty* of choosing for ecological everyday practices to protect the planet. The distinction between these two ideas is labelled as the *participatory rights approach* and the *personal duty approach* within ecological citizenship (Dash 2014). I argue that both approaches are represented and interwoven in why young people choose to become part of a social climate movement. But through what kind of personal and everyday ecological discourses and practices do people involve in a social climate movement? How do those discourses and practices become part of the everyday life of young people? Are there any noticeable similarities in how the process of integrating ecological practices went?

Environmentalism in daily life

Young people's involvement in a social climate movement is preceded by the adaption of ecological practices in their everyday life. My interlocutors usually have changed their everyday practices, after they encountered 'the climate change narrative', that is, the urgency to stop the negative effects of polluted rivers and soil, emissions in the air, weather patterns and shifts in temperature. Even though a Dutch article already linked climate change to polluting human practices as early as 1951, the climate debate only erupted in 2006 through the climate documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. But just as it had been happening sparsely since 1951, now a larger number of people, including scientist, were spreading fallacies. In



discussion panels, politicians opposed to stricter regulation for the sake of the climate dominated. Nevertheless, the popularity of climate actions grew, as other stages were often set for less sceptical people concerning change throughout society¹². Against this popularisation of climate change, my interlocutors looked for ways to give the climate change narrative a place in their lives. This process of ‘figuring out’, I argue, where and how to integrate the narrative is where I place the *meaning-making* process.

Confronted with the climate change narrative made my interlocutors reshape their everyday practices. Eleste, the chair of the On Tour working group had started a degree in Educational Science. When she was in Sweden for a study-abroad, she met people involved in sustainability and ecological practices. For instance, there were garbage bins in her dorm to separate seven different types of waste, and everyone there adhered to separating the garbage as such. Eleste even had a vegan friend, this was something she never had before. On one occasion, Eleste was invited to her house where she ate a vegan savoury pie. She was shocked, “I only know that with a lot of dairy and eggs.” This encounter encouraged Eleste to experiment with new cooking techniques for vegan dishes and pastries, integrating that experience into her social life. “It became a fun challenge and something I could do with friends,” Eleste remarked with a smile. She resented how common ecological practices were in Sweden, especially compared to the Netherlands, such as the prohibition against pre-packaged fruit and vegetables, or take-aways wrapped in plastic. Everything was fresh and the fruit and vegetable prices fluctuated due to changing seasons and availability. Eleste’s cooking habits were not the only areas being redeveloped after her first encounter with such practices. Eleste began buying less clothes, and as an extension only buying second hand.

Like Eleste, Jada, a member of On Tour, was also fascinated with the ecological practices she observed abroad. As an MA student of Forestry and Nature Conservation, she went to France in 2020 for a student exchange program, just before the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe. She began to hang out with students who were part of the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement. XR is a movement concerned with the climate and ecological crisis. They organise creative, peaceful and sometimes disruptive actions to pressure governments to take necessary actions to sustain the planet as liveable for everyone and everything¹³. Jada’s peers in France were part of XR, this was where she found out the importance of fighting for climate justice. Although she had to come back to the Netherlands through the COVID-19 situation, Jada continued to engage with ecological practices on a regular basis. She changed

¹² <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/we-hadden-dit-eerder-serieuzer-moeten-nemen>

¹³ <https://extinctionrebellion.nl/over-ons/>



her shopping and consumer behaviour accordingly, informing friends about her wish to not shop in (fast fashion) clothing shops anymore. She then asked her friends and family if they could give her the opportunity to have a look at their clothes whenever they decided they wanted to throw them out. In this way, she involved her friends and family in her ecological practices and ensured that she did not have to buy new clothes. Similar to Eleste, Jada also tried to eat less meat. The illustrations of both Eleste and Jada's first encounters with the climate change narrative and its associated practices, show that they both experienced a process of rethinking and reshaping their practices. Figuring out which sustainability and ecological practices fit them best as they try to care for the planet.

Bringing ecological practices back to the Netherlands as *conversationists*, the second stage of environmentalism, meant that my interlocutors give others the *right* and *duty* to know more about certain practices and the associated climate change issues. Both Eleste and Jada involved their personal circle into their own ecological practices, ensuring that their personal circle became aware of these practices. Being confronted with climate change issues and the possibilities of doing something about it, is often followed by a process of meaning-making. Although they do not try to convince the other person to change, but rather they show how things can be done differently and how 'fun' that change actually can be. In doing so, they do influence others to rethink the *rights* and *duties* everyone has in order to protect the planet (Dash 2014). Also 'unconsciously' spreading the word and actions in order to create a society for themselves wherein they can act more upon ecological practices. As bottom-up actions from citizens can also shape society (Lazar & Nuijten 2013). Influencing others to make meaning out of such encounters, means that Eleste and Jada are giving others and themselves tools for claiming ecological citizenship.

Caring for the environment and acting upon this through certain practices is ascribed to environmentalists. As discussed before, the term environmentalist is used to describe a person who is participating in society through different environmentalist types to solve physical or social environmental problems (Tesch & Kempton 2004; Tripp 2018). Contemporary environmentalists express strong scepticism regarding both socialist and capitalist systems (Harper 2006). They do this by criticising social and economic inequalities, the limited access to political participation, and the increase of environmental hazards through global consumerism. But the actions that environmentalists criticise differ.

Putting all actions from environmentalists together in one category, neglects the differentiation in actions and reasons why people act like environmentalists. The work of both anthropologists Pearson (2009) and Fisher (1994) show the distinctions between



environmental actions. Pearson (2009) tells us how Costa Rican environmentalists are involved in a campaign to ensure that companies pay for the clean-up of the environment they are contaminating. As well as compensation to people who need treatments resulting from exposure to the contamination. These environmentalists act in the public realm by periodically monitoring the biosafety activities of companies. When they find something suspect they address the biosafety authorities. Fisher (1994), on the other hand, focuses on the construction of environmentalism in the context of the resistance to hydroelectric dams along the Xingy River in Brazil. In this context, the environmentalists are disruptively protesting, making an appearance on national, international media, and other (inter)national events in efforts to mobilise public opinion. The actions between both groups differ. Although both environmentalist groups are acting in the public realm, the environmentalists in Fisher's (1994) call also upon others to practice environmental actions.

Environmentalism should not be seen as one term that fits all, but rather as a typology within which different types are present. Both Tesch & Kempton (2004) and Tripp (2018) have made an effort to make a typology regarding the identification and associated practices of environmentalists. In this chapter, I use the four environmental types of Tesch and Kempton (2004). The first type is *those who care, but do not take public or personal actions*. Followed by *conversationists*, those who take action through personal actions regarding the protection of a liveable planet. Thirdly, there are those who act in the civic or political realm through their public actions, so called *activists*. The last type is *extremists*, which is used to describe those who act via protests, demonstrations or "direct action", such as blockading logging operations. Using the term 'extremist' does not aid identification with the corresponding actions. As I will show later in this chapter, in the Dutch context there is already a negative connotation with the term activist, let alone extremist.

Moving from one environmental type to another, my interlocutors show that they are exploring for themselves what kind of actions or practices fit into their lives. Eleste's and Jada's narratives are a prime example of such a fluid process. After their first encounter with the climate change narrative and the ecological practices of other peers around them, Eleste and Jada started to care about climate issues. This manifests in exploring what kind of personal actions they could take in order to protect the planet. Thus going from being someone who cares but does not take action yet, to becoming a conversationist.

The 25-year-old student Communication Science and chair of GROW, Fre shows a similar path. During her studies she became aware of climate change issues and started to inform herself. Primarily by researching and engaging with topics on climate change, climate



justice and sustainability. She started following people on YouTube who would explain their sustainability ecological practices and choose study courses concerning sustainability. This made her think about her own actions and how they could be changed, with regard to climate justice and sustainability. After that phase she started advocating for the conservation of natural resources. By informing colleagues of the impact of eating meat every day for our ecological environment, or motivating them to change the restaurant's the team would eat at after a work day. These are merely examples of Fre's actions, which exhibit characteristics of both the first two types of environmentalism. Before becoming a conservationist, Fre showed that she became concerned with climate change actions, and started to inform herself about the subject matter. After seeing how others changed their action and practices, she started to indulge in the actions associated with the *conversationist* type. This shows that she moved through the environmentalist types as presented by Tesch and Kempton (2004) as if they were phases.

The typology of Tesch and Kempton (2004) suggests that these types are delimited concepts, whereas they rather appear as phases. Tesch and Kempton's (2004) typology is very helpful when ascribing certain actions to types. But they seem to neglect that people can indulge in actions which fit within more than one categories, or even going from one type to another as through phases. Fre's actions show that she went from the first phase to the next. In contrast, Eleste joined the Young Climate Movement (JKB) and conducted herself in public practices with On Tour which are more affiliated with the type of *activist*. However, she still continued her 'fun search' to integrate more sustainable ecological practices with friends. These latter actions are ascribed to being an *conversationists*, as here she does not act in the public realm. Eleste thus shows that it is possible to fit into more than one type. The actions and terms regarding the identity of environmentalist should rather be seen as a 'floating signifier' (Littlewood & Reynolds 2020; Samet 2019). Filling up the gap between the signifier and signified, the identity of environmentalist is used as floating signifier in a range of various values and meaning attached to it. This floating of the identity is better understood through the following comprehension of *activism*.

A narrow understanding of *activism*

Before discussing how my interlocutors stepped into the *activist* phase, I would like to take a moment here to explore the limited understanding my interlocutors have of the term *activist*. Acting in the civic realm with their public ecological actions, made them reflecting on the



association they have with activism. Most of my interlocutors would not call themselves an *activist*. Additionally, when they do call themselves activists, it is almost reluctantly as if they don't want the label. For a time, Eleste thought it was a fierce, and negative term and would ascribe it to people who are part of Extinction Rebellion. And Daphne, a member of On Tour, did not want to appear too activist, because she felt that she would antagonise people. Also Jelke, a member of GROW, expressed that she did not see herself as an activist, as she would not lay naked somewhere to form a blockade or would not glue herself to the window of a fast fashion store. Their understanding of the people who are seen as *activists* seems almost as a different environmental phase. They attribute the actions and practices of an environmental *extremist* to that of an environmental *activist*. As extremists have actions ascribed to them such as creating a blockade etc.

The negative connotation with the term *activist*, comes partly from how activists are portrayed in the Dutch media. In recent years, young climate activists were portrayed through the Dutch news channels as climate truants¹⁴. Furthermore, the articles use the terms climate activists and truants interchangeable which means that the negative connotation the Dutch have with truants is compelled to the term activist. The Dutch education is namely focused on the creation of productive employees and good obedient citizens (Duyverman, Hoffman & Zuurmond 2021). Therefore, Dutch citizens should follow and fit in these rigid systems and institutions. Stepping out of line, by becoming a climate activist during educational hours, means one is almost asking to be criticised. As the Dutch educational system, and thus Dutch society, nurtures you to adhere to the rigid systems and institutions. It is then no wonder that addressing a young person as an activist, while using interchangeable truant, has led to a negative connotation towards the term *activist*. The role of the media and public discourses are thus important when making a personal image of 'activist' image.

Although some of my interlocutors want to distance themselves from this public activist image, others have underlined the embracing of the term *activist*. Thomas, who does an internship at a debate centre and is part of the On Tour group, uses *activist* as a 'geuzennaam'. 'Geuzennaam' defines in the Dutch language a (nick)name of honour that someone gives to themselves precisely because others use it as a name of insult, shame or ridicule. Using the connotation of 'geuzennaam' for the term activist, ensures that Thomas feels proud when others call him an activist. However, he did agree with the others regarding the way activists within Extinction Rebellion portray themselves. He said they are indeed

¹⁴ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2276104-klimaatspijbelars-wereldwijd-de-straat-op>
<https://www.nu.nl/klimaat/5705847/wat-willen-de-klimaatspijbelars-bereiken.html>



more radical, like in the phase of *extremists*, but without calling them this. “They are more radical activists, sort of the last and most extreme layer of being an activist”, he explained with a thinking frown on his face. Whereas Thomas sees different layers in being an activist, Tesch and Kempton (2004) would call this the different layers of being an environmentalist.

Acting as an environmental *activist* is important for my interlocutors to achieve their goal of making an impact or contributing to the society. In order to call upon others to change their practices into more sustainable and ecological ones, my interlocutors expressed the need to step into the phase of *activist*. The aim of this is to bring about change in the general thinking about preserving a liveable planet, and in doing so, change general practices. To achieve this, Thomas explained that there were several activistic ‘layers’, as he called them, that someone has to go through. The first is talking about climate change issues and ecological practices with others. Thereby trying to motivate them to ‘open their eyes’ and see that they also need to change, instead of only the bigger companies and government policies. “You also create it [society, and social values and norms] actively or at least the people who do it. I think a lot of people have the idea that they can't do anything... like, because everything is so big and I'm almost nothing in it..”, Thomas expressed with a passionate voice. This extract of a conversation I had with Thomas shows how he adheres to the bottom-up strategies citizens can act in to shape society, instead of society only being shaped by the state (Ong et al. 1996). Therefore, taking the right as an ecological citizen to act in the public realm and challenge the way society is run. The second layer, according to Thomas, is to change your own practices after being informed about the need to change. The third layer is to join a social movement, in order to gain credibility whenever trying to motivate others to change their practices. Thomas recited the thoughts he had before becoming an *activist environmentalist*, “And then... I was like, I'm always very idealistic and in favour of changing things [and saying that others need to change as well], but I don't actually do anything. So how much credibility do I have?”, For Thomas it was about credibility, yet the reasons of the others did differ from his as well as those of the other interlocutors. So why was it so important to become a voluntary participant within the JKB?

Collective identity vs meaning-making

“I am changing all these things in my own life, but can't I do more?”, Eleste asked herself before coming a volunteer of the JKB. She felt that it was not enough to educate the people around herself to make a real difference in a society, so she became of member of the JKB.



Eleste has gone through several stages of environmentalism in her quest of integrating various ecological practices, in which she tried to motivate others to do the same.

The period preceding their public engagement with the JKB, is partly influenced by the desire to find like-minded people. Expressing their wish to engage in a social movement, is let through their expectation of finding like-mindedness amongst other members. “I was searching for people om de schouders eronder te zetten [to work together to achieve change].”, Eleste said. My interlocutors expected that finding such like-minded people would ensure a feeling of fulfilment, as if their integration of ecological practices was over. Another interlocutor, Emma from *GROW*, was consequently not engaging with sustainability in her professional life working for the Dutch government and became a member of On Tour. She expressed that she “started looking for a group of people who are also actively working on it [sustainability, climate, and the social aspects of it]... to do something about it together”. The desire to be a part of a collective, where individuals work together, and the expectation to find this within the JKB, was thus part of the reason why my interlocutors became active members.

Participating in a collective movement and in particular the search for a collective identity, is described to be the reason why people join social movements (Klandermans 2004; Polletta & Jasper 2001; Taylor & Rupp 1987). Collective identity is a shared status or relation through a feeling of connection based on cognitive, emotional, and moral perceptions within a group of people (Polletta & Jasper 2001). Although collective identity is something that my interlocutors have expressed to seek, it is not the primary reason why they join a collective movement. Rather, they join through their meaning-making process of the climate change narrative. People are constantly trying to make sense of the world around them, and the making sense of the world is an end in itself, a spur to action, and a place of contestation (Kurzman 2008). I argue that meaning-making is the process which underlines the reasons young people join a social movement.

Integrating the climate change narrative and the search for what kind of environmental practices fit in their lives, ensured that my interlocutors conducted themselves into strategies of meaning-making. Eleste has called this integration a ‘fun search’, wherein she has tried and is still trying out various ecological practices. After making sense of the first two phases of environmentalist, entering the phase of *activist* meant that they could make more and better meaning of the climate change narrative. “I am in fact the perfect target group for the training courses we set up with *GROW*, as I wanted to know more about ecological practices and what I can do to challenge the policies regarding climate change”, is what both Jada and Fre said to



me. Both are members of GROW, a trainings program with the aim of promoting youth participation in the field of climate change and providing young people with the tools they need to incorporate sustainability into their daily lives. What Jada and Fre show here is that next to their public actions with GROW, they are still trying to make sense of their own involvement in ecological practices. Alongside their journey's through the various phases of environmentalist, and giving others the *rights* and *duties* regarding ecological citizenship, they still express that they are themselves in need to go through with their 'figuring ecological practices out'.

How do the public ecological practices of my interlocutors through their involvement with the JKB relate to the notion of ecological citizenship? And how do these public actions relate to both their own meaning-making process and the meaning-process of the larger ambition? The next chapter will address these questions by focusing on how individuals work together to attribute to the meaning of the bigger collective, while simultaneously ascribing to their own meaning-making.



Chapter 2: Contribution to a larger ambition

“I don’t know if what I do within the Young Climate Movement [JKB] makes a lot of impact, but I believe in planting seeds”¹⁵

Involvement in a social climate movement means that ecological practices are no longer only individual. Before starting my research, I had to officially become a member of the Young Climate Movement (JKB) by signing a voluntary contract and receiving a general introductory document for volunteers. In this document several items were addressed. One of which was my behaviour, the document outlined how a member of the JKB should behave if acting publicly with the organisation. For example, before speaking publicly at an event outside JKB matters, I should first consult with the JKB to discuss what I am going to say. But also what I am especially not going to say, such as internal matters. Acting publicly with *GROW* and *On Tour* involved the majority of their activities outside of private JKB circles. During such moments it was certainly not just about my own opinion, I had to remember that I was representing of the JKB. I was representing the collective voice of young people, as the JKB documentation reminded me. The JKB states that they represent the collective voices of young people in the climate debate, thereby influencing, climate and sustainability policies. They specifically focus on young people as the movement believes that young people deserve a voice to form and shape their own sustainable future. Both *GROW* and *On Tour* contribute to JKB’s way of giving meaning to itself.

As a social movement, the JKB tries to achieve social change by creating cooperation between young people. The JKB has grown from a handful of people in 2015, to more than 70 volunteers in 2022. 70 voluntary members does not seem much, but bear in mind that they have a broad constituency amongst youth organisations. The JKB and these organisations cooperate together to create social change, through such events as a climate festival provided by organisations such as Climate Talks¹⁶. Where you can talk about your personal climate transition, learn how to involve friends and family in choosing climate-friendly choices on a non-pressive way. Giving the floor to such an organisation means appealing to the responsibility of the festival-goers. Responsibility that is nourished by contemporary neoliberalism, in which the state has taken less of a nurturing role (Trnka & Trundle 2014). Instead, it is up to the citizens and society themselves to provide what they need together, and

¹⁵ Recorded interview with Eleste (11-03-2022)

¹⁶ <https://www.foodlog.nl/artikel/klimatefestival-we-are-tomorrow/>



through collective caring for the climate such a climate festival came about. Even a group of medical students is present to tell visitors about the connection between climate, nutrition and (mental) health. This is all to establish some kind of change in the behaviour and thought process of visitors. Social movements reflect the collective action and collaborative behaviour orientated in achieving social transformation (Susser 2010). To achieve such transformation, the JKB focuses on political lobbying in the Netherlands, and creating more awareness among young people about the urgency of reducing climate change.

GROW and *On Tour* are two projects that are located in the *broad awareness side* of the JKB. Broad awareness focuses on reaching and activating more young people. Whereas the political lobby side focuses on Dutch politics and business, in order to cause a systematic institutional change within Dutch society. By doing so, the JKB addresses the two types of goals Linneman (1999) ascribes to social movements. The first type is achieving more power for a certain group (i.e. lobbying). The JKB does this by creating greater power for a particular group in society, namely the young people, and to achieve change in government policies regarding climate change. This first goal can therefore be seen as achieving change for specific objectives, such as ensuring a safer environment by striving for cleaner soil. Consequently, members of social movements are also called environmentalists, as they strive to solve physical and social environmental problems (Kitchell et al 2000; Klas et al 2019; Tesch and Kempton 2004). The second goal is striving for change among the population in general. This will be done through changes in behaviour or ideology, and can therefore be considered broader in nature.

The JKB tries to achieve both goals described by Linneman (1999) by using strategies to mobilise young people who are not yet part of a social climate movement. According to anthropologist Burdick (1995) most of the people who rank as potential supporters of collective action, i.e. a social movement, remain not mobilised. The JKB is participating in several initiatives to reach more young people, *On Tour* and *GROW* being two of these initiatives. These initiatives concern reaching those who are not (yet) mobilised, but could be (persuaded), therefore contributing to the second goal of social movements (Linneman 1999). The following sections will elaborate on *On Tour* and *GROW*, while focusing on how my interlocutors have settled themselves in the realm of public actions. I will illustrate how my interlocutors have participated in the meaning-making process of the JKB through their public *On Tour* and *GROW* actions. Becoming a member of a social movement means that someone not only contributes to the personal meaning-making process, but that the social movement also ensures that individuals contribute to the movement's meaning-making process.



On Tour

On Tour goes to MBO schools to give lessons where they contribute to the three formulated goals [of the broad awareness side of the JKB]: inform, absorb and activate. *On Tour* informs young people about Dutch climate policy, collects opinions on climate change and sustainability, and activates young people to take action themselves. I joined *On Tour* just before the municipality elections in the Netherlands, which was consequently their busiest period since the new year. I attended the weekly meetings of *On Tour*, went to their lessons on MBO schools, attended evaluation meetings with guest lecturers, and joined several interviews regarding potential new guest lecturers. Unfortunately, I could not be present at their guest lecturer training, but this was fortunately recorded for guest lecturers who were also unable to attend.

The members of *On Tour* put time and effort into their voluntary work, partly because they enjoy openly discussing topics about climate change. Every week they have a meeting on Tuesday from 19:30 till around 20:30, in addition to their individual assignments. For example, Eleste (the chair of *On Tour*), was working on the content of the lessons next to her contact with the chairs from other groups. She was also enthusiastic to give lessons every once in a while. It's fair to say that she was putting in more than her eight hours a week. But, as she told me after a lesson, "I feel like I do something important, seeking out connections and dialogues during the lessons, rather than just teaching facts and creating a pressing discussion. Expressing concerns together and connecting through that is what I feel is important." She later added that although it might feel like she did not create immediate behavioural change, she thought that she did establish awareness. And as a consequence could influence people to make personal changes in the long term. My *On Tour* interlocutors all believe that what they do is 'zaadjes planten' [planting seeds], which translates as having the belief that sharing concerns, knowledge and how young people can contribute to reduce climate change will at some point establish some form of change. During their lessons they raise questions concerning the climate, and challenge the MBO-students to see the objections surrounding these concerns. For example, one student said that she had heard that meat substitutes also use soya, just like the meat industry does. "So what difference does it make if you eat meat replacements?". Eleste responded by explaining that only a small part of the soy production goes to meat substitutes, the vast majority goes to the meat industry. "In addition," she said, "the soya for that industry comes from places where rainforests have been cut down,



while for the replacements it comes from sustainable European forests.” By showing an alternative view on, in this case, the meat industry, *On Tour* stimulates the MBO-students to re-think established meanings.

Challenging others to change and rethink meanings that are taken for granted, is the biggest goal of all social movements. Meaning-making is actively done by social movements, by raising questions about possible alternative world-views, and provoking their participants and audience to reconsider self-evident meanings (Kurzman 2008). My *On Tour* interlocutors try to influence the climate change narrative of MBO-students by giving lessons and having conversations with them. During the lessons, they are also trying to steer these students to participate in some kind of ecological practices themselves. The lessons are divided into several sections. Firstly, what kind of influence an individual can have when (not) conducting ecological practices. After which the influence of companies is addressed, finally they touch upon the influence of the political system on reducing climate change. The students are asked to come up with an innovation for their own town, neighbourhood or school and what is needed to succeed it. Covering all roofs with solar panels, and letting grass and bushes grow on all roof plates to create more biodiversity are examples which students give. “What is needed for such green roofs?”, Daphne asked. Some students react somewhat sheepishly, but others are more serious and think that they have to go to the municipality to apply for a subsidy and a permit before they can contact a company to arrange this for them.

On Tour asks the students to actively think about the influences that the individual, the companies and politicians can have on each other, calling it the triangular influence circle. *On Tour* thinks that this circle is still insufficiently dealt with in the current MBO teaching materials. They therefore seek to address this and end their lessons with the question “where in the circle can you participate and help reduce climate change?”. My interlocutors do not only provide others with the option to learn more about climate change, they also provide participatory tools, such as presenting an overview of which climate collectives are available especially for MBO students. They are trying to stimulate behavioural change and light bulb moments in other young people. As a result, they motivate others to rethink meanings regarding their own personal or public involvement with climate change.

The use of one's own climate and sustainability knowledge is also at the basis for participating through teaching. Elina travelled from Rotterdam to Leeuwarden on a Wednesday night, a train ride that lasts almost 3 hours. Elina who is in her mid-twenties, works for the government, and joined the JKB in September 2021. During her train ride, she joined *On Tour*'s weekly meeting online. After the meeting, Elina arrived at her hotel in



Leeuwarden and sent us a picture of her room. She kept us in the loop of her experiences, as well as the next day at the school. It astonished me that Elina was putting so much effort, time and money into ‘just’ educating MBO students. Later on she told me that “at work, everything was going smoothly and I had time left for voluntary work. And I just miss the engagement in content [sustainability and climate change issues], which I was often engaged in at Wageningen.” It was as if she had this bundle of energy and knowledge inside of her that needed to come out. Her professional life was not giving her the fulfilment of working with her acquired knowledge. In her search for an avenue through which she could do this, she found a collective where she was able to motivate others to reconsider meanings.

On Tour showed me that their thoughts and practices fit in the definition of environmental activist. Activists are those, who act in the civic realm, and who call on other young people to do the same (Tesch and Kempton 2004). In the lessons *On Tour* gives, they always end with a few minutes to elaborate on what the MBO students themselves can do with regard to climate change in the civic or political realm. They give examples of MBO climate associations or movements, locally located political movements or of the JKB itself. Although they can be considered activists according to Tesch and Kempton’s (2004) typology, not all my interlocutors feel comfortable with that term. Daphne and Eleste expressed that they did not see themselves as an activist. The issue of *defining oneself as an activist* is something I will come back to later.

GROW

“*GROW* is a training programme with the aim of promoting youth participation in the field of climate change and providing young people with the tools they need to incorporate sustainability into their daily lives. *GROW* wants to achieve this goal by informing, inspiring and activating young people. Our aim is to create a new generation of talents that will also inspire other people.” This is what *GROW*, and myself, used to write in emails whenever we reached out to organisations or individuals. During my research I became more involved with *GROW* and started to assist the team in their activities. My tasks were to either secure the locations for trainings or book certain individuals to speak.

Similar to *On Tour*, *GROW* is interested in giving others more knowledge and tools to influence people around them. *GROW* has several themes that they touch upon, such as Climate Justice, Individual, and Politics & Power. Every theme has either two or three activities. The first activity is always the largest, booking a speaker with the most notoriety and therefore drawing the largest audience. For example, the Politics & Power theme’s first



activity was a lecture in April 2022. The speaker was the climate envoy for the Netherlands at that moment, a public figure in the Netherlands through his connection with the royal family. For this event, 100 people were expected to attend, with 85 attendees being the realised turnout. The speaker talked about his role, and how he works along with other climate envoys to change politics, creating policies to reduce climate change. The attendees asked questions at the end of this lecture. "You have now shown us in which sector the need for change is highest, but what can we do together and I as an individual?", someone asked. Such questions concerning follow-up actions were asked more often. Each time the speaker gave more or less the same answer, which boiled down to making the voice of young people heard through the collective character of the JKB. Those outside the JKB were advised to make their voices heard within, for example, political parties that were still doing too little to bring about change.

GROW also tries to establish some kind of collective identity. Participating in a social movement is understood to be caused by the search for a collective identity (Klandermans 2004; Polletta & Jasper 2001; Taylor & Rupp 1987). Such a collective identity is based on having a shared status or connection based on cognitive, emotional and moral perceptions (Polletta & Jasper 2001). In the case of the JKB these shared perceptions involve the subject of climate change (issues). Coming together for trainings, implied that all the attendees were open to learn more about such issues. To make the collective feeling even stronger, *GROW* hands out notebooks with the *GROW* logo on them. "If you hear something interesting for later or have a question for the end of the training, you can write it down.", is what we said when handing them out. Thereby, underlining that every attendee was there to learn more and think further with each other. Many people did indeed use the booklet during training sessions. Whereas *GROW*'s first goal is to train people, handing out such booklets can lead to the perception of a shared status. The booklets were distributed with the message that it could be used as a diary to write down questions for either during or after the event. This encouraged everyone to be open to listening, learning and thinking critically. *GROW* created a space in which the attendees knew that everyone shared the same idea on how to perceive the lecture.

Sharing their worries and curiosities about climate change, makes the attendees feel like they have a sense of belongingness and belief. Ziva questioned the speaker during the Politics and Power session when saying that young people needed to make themselves heard more. "Why does it always come down to raising our voice even more, why do we have to work the hardest to be heard?", she frustratedly asked. After the lecture, I overheard another



attendee saying to her that she shared the same frustrations. Other young people I spoke with before and after the lecture were first discussing how they came to know about this event. Although they all had different backgrounds, everyone attended because they had concerns about what Dutch and international politics were doing to reduce climate change. As they were already involved in some kind of ecological practices themselves, they are in circles where the JKB is a known group. After establishing that other young people were feeling the same struggles and belief about changing politics, they went on with their conversations. Elina, from *On Tour*, was also there, standing with four other attendees. At the beginning, they were looking for a common denominator, which they found in the topic of climate change. Recognition was given to each other when someone had experienced or felt the same. “I also sometimes struggle with my uncle who drives me crazy with his half-truths about climate change.”, someone said. They had found their collective identity.

While searching for a collective sub-factor, it is also important to recognise that someone has an identity of their own. Just as a social movement can (re)define and (re)form itself in relation to its environment, this also happens for the individuals in the movement. The recognition for an individual within a movement to distinguish itself from others has to be given, as identities are shaped through systems of relations (Melucci 1995). The conversation I had with Elina and others, shows that after having established a collective identity, it was time to discover our differences to also recognise our own identity. As we moved on to discussing religion, we found out that we differ in our opinions regarding it. One person always prays before eating and believes there is a God. Another said he considered it beautiful when people draw hope from religion, but that this was not the case for him. Collective identity is thus kept in relation by internal agreements, but should also allow for the preservation of one's own identity (Melucci 1995).

Organising such events show how *GROW* works on the goals ascribed to social movements. By giving others the opportunity to learn more about climate change and how politics are involved, *GROW* adheres to two types of goals of social movements (Lindemann 1999). Respectively, achieving more power for a certain group, and striving for change among the population in general. Learning more about related issues and what practices young individuals and groups can participate in, gives young people more power. *GROW* philosophy is that the knowledge and skills gained through their trainings, allows young people to improve the capabilities in achieving change in their own lives and society. The trainings are initiatives by Dutch young citizens who oppose the state's education system, and give knowledge to reassess actions against further climate change. Deploying discourses of



rethinking normalised meanings regarding participation end up fostering mechanisms of change (Bhan & Trisal 2017). Encouraging and informing people how to join a political party that does not match their political opinions to counter the parties ideas, is an example through which young people are given power and possibilities to achieve change among the general population. Therefore, contributing to the goals of social movements (Linneman 1999). The acquisition of more knowledge and skills, gives young people more power to exert pressure to change their environment.

GROW expands the initial scope of the JKB, wherein the focus lays on reaching young people affiliated with young (climate) organisations. *GROW* also invites other young people to attend their training. The attendees were all from different positions in society, such as student associations, youth organisations cooperating with the JKB and others from *GROW* members' own network. I spoke with someone who worked at the Department of Public Works, and an attendee working in care for the disabled, both not affiliated with a youth organisation. *GROW* gives young people outside the scope of the JKB the tools to make changes within their own reach. Tools such as knowing how to express a contrary opinion within a political party, or climate talk techniques through another training. People both affiliated and non-affiliated with youth organisations are provided with the guidelines to bring about change in their own field. This shows how *GROW* expands the initial scope of the JKB, which only want to reach young people who are involved in youth organisation.

Changing the meaning of the JKB is related to the meaning-making process within a social movement. Ideologies of social movements can be conceived as fields of meaning, which different subgroups appropriate, interpret and reshape in their own ways (Burdick 1995). New frames of meaning are being made through this contestation over meaning, as seen through *GROW*'s expansion on the JKB's initial frame of meaning. The formation of meaning is done by both individuals and groups through conscious and unconscious actions, hoping to understand the world and persuade others of their interpretations' validity (Rubin 2004). Individuals and groups are critically evaluating which elements have to stay to achieve a certain meaning. In the case of *GROW*, they deliberately choose to offer their training courses to all young people, as everyone has the right to learn about climate change and what to do about it. While unconsciously not adhering anymore to the actual target group of the JKB. They have had to back up their choice for doing this, thereby convincing the board to rethink their interpretation of JKB's meaning to young people. No conflicts arose from this, as the board preferred to fill the empty spaces in the training sessions rather than keep them empty. Even though the primary focus of a social movement seems fixed and immutable at



the time of participation, it is precisely when more people join the movement that the meaning of the social movement is constantly challenged. Every individual adds something, consciously or unconsciously, that could force the social movement to change.

Doing Activism or being an activist

Doing activism or being an activist are two concepts that differ from each other, as my interlocutors have shown me. Seeing or not seeing themselves as an activist was mentioned several times during the interviews I conducted. From these discussions I became curious if there is a change in how they perceived their activist actions and the associated identity of *activist*. Some groups will not embrace the identity attached to their work. For example, trash collectors dissociate themselves from their 'dirty work' due to the lack of prestige attached to that identity. But in the case of the identity *activist*, Bobel (2007) states that its general connotation ranks it high in the participation hierarchy, labelling it as out of reach for many. Bobel (2007, 156) has done research regarding people engaged in the emerging Menstrual Activism movement, and has found that being an activist was seen as the idea of "constant, relentless dedication obviously sets an incredibly high standard, a standard of constancy and commitment that few even self-described activists could satisfy". Especially those engaged in publishing, teaching and any other kind of movement work that defies the dominant notion of 'in your face' and 'on the street' activism (Bobel 2007). In other words, the identity *activist* created (self)imposed expectations about the quantity of dedication to the goal of a social movement. During my research I have not found this, rather they saw the activist identity was acclaimed with more radical actions than they were practicing as shown in the previous discussion part on this subject.

By doing activism or being an activist, the members of social movements contribute not only to their own meaning-making, but also to the meaning-making process of the social movement. Social movements reflect the collective action and collaborative behaviour orientated in achieving social transformation (Susser 2010). The *broad awareness side* of the JKB, participates in strategies aimed at motivating others to think about the climate change narrative. As I have shown above, *On Tour* and *GROW* use their group actions to achieve social change. As my interlocutors placed themselves on the *broad awareness side* and carry out the tasks attributed to it, they delve into the meaning-making of the JKB. By pursuing the goals that the JKB has set for the two working groups, my interlocutors try to create meaning for the JKB as a larger ambition.



As some of my interlocutors would not consider themselves as activist, and others do, the way they try to adhere to the meaning of the JKB differs. Thomas, for example, considers himself as an activist and sees the JKB as an activist movement. During my only talk with him, he had a very strong opinion regarding the meaning of the JKB in broader society. Thomas was only present during one of the meetings I had with *On Tour*. When I asked him, whether we could meet to talk about his involvement with the JKB, he expressed that it might be interesting for me to hear how he felt about it. During our walk, he expressed that he would have liked a more activist approach within the JKB, and the *On Tour* working group. He didn't join the movement, just to talk about the content of the lessons of *On Tour*. He joined because he wanted to talk about how the social movement could change politics and get a real opportunity to achieve that change. In his eyes, the JKB could do more to achieve social change and he is not getting the opportunity to do what he thinks should be done. In other words, he feels restricted. Whereas on the other hand, Jelke expressed that it is quite 'chill' to be involved in a movement where you don't have to think about what kind of tasks or opportunities there are. "Then you can just...sort of... be part of something that makes impact, without having to make it all up yourself... where I can still think of things and do my own thing... and nice to just follow, but still be engaged with the important themes". This is in stark contrast to Thomas, who would have preferred more involvement to change the strategies through which the JKB is making meaning, Jelke is content with not having to contribute to the way the JKB shapes those strategies.

Critical citizenship

Becoming part of a social movement sets a few issues in motion. First, individuals have to consider where in the social movement they want to contribute. This is done by considering their own meaning-making process. In the first chapter, this came down to the rights and duties related to ecological citizenship, and the different types of environmentalists. Secondly, while assuming their tasks and roles within the social movement, members contribute to the meaning-making of the collective. In this chapter, this argument was central.

By contributing to the JKB through motivating, informing, activating, and teaching critical thinking about climate change issues, my interlocutors are not only trying to teach their audience ecological citizenship. By using the education system to speak out critically on how it has failed them, my interlocutors engage in what Lazar (2010) calls critical citizenship with the focus on critical pedagogy. Critical citizenship is a social construction through which



citizens are encouraged and capable of critically questioning the production of knowledge and ideology, a key aspect of an individual's potential ability to detect and then criticise hegemonies and consequently transform society (Dyrness & Aby El-Hai 2020; Lazar 2010). The notion of "critical citizenship" embedded in the various visions of critical pedagogy allows for an analysis of how certain educational methods function in practice to encourage or suppress the ability of students to critique both the social and political contexts they find themselves (Lazar 2010). Lazar (2010) discusses how schools are sites where agency and citizenship are constructed in both active and passive forms. Students in the city of El Alto, Bolivia, were taught how to claim their rights and entitlements, while also being constrained when they would claim these regarding their education. Lazar (2010) found that the pupils did not solely become passive citizens. Rather, they would find their own strategies to claim these rights and entitlements. Such as taking a free hand in how they integrated information from outside the school's curriculum during a play.

My interlocutors practice critical citizenship with the emphasis on critical pedagogy by creating their own trainings and lessons, and providing these to other young people. The concepts of *On Tour* and *GROW* are aimed at imparting knowledge and skills to young people, which they will not learn through the regular education system. By using the claims and entitlements regarding ecological citizenship, my interlocutors create a space wherein young people can learn and are given the tools to act as a critical citizen. Therefore, they are hoping to strengthen the motivation and ability of young people to stand up against current structures. Although all my interlocutors conduct such strategies, being part of a collective movement does not mean that members of a movement think the same way about the meaning-making of those strategies. Whether my interlocutors see the JKB as the best avenue through which they give meaning to themselves and the larger movement will be the focus of the next chapter.



Chapter 3: Fulfilled or Unrealised Expectations?

Limitations and political issues

My interlocutors joined the Young Climate Movement with certain expectations. Some joined after already gaining clarity over their own ecological practices whilst others were still in the process of defining this for themselves. The JKB presents goals which were clearly attractive to my interlocutors, but the methods in which these goals were achieved could vary from year to year. The methods vary as members are often active for a maximum of two years, and the yearly changing of the whole board. Through these changes in constituency, the JKB working groups change their direction often. For instance, *GROW's* concept included a coaching trajectory of several months in the year of 2021, while in 2022 the concept was more based on loose themes. The movement's structure is therefore not always clearly established, and as a newcomer you don't necessarily enter a fixed routine. In an avenue where young people are looking for fulfilment of their contribution, changing interests and limitations make the process of meaning-making a rocky road with several side-paths.

During my fieldwork, I soon noticed the use of the word 'bubbles'. In personal and group interactions, people spoke of the JKB as the 'climate bubble', 'university/higher education bubble', 'generation bubble', 'sustainability bubble', and 'our bubble'. I soon realised that there was a duality to naming the JKB as a bubble. On the one hand, people felt safe in the JKB bubble, but contrary to this, it also caused further isolation from all the 'bubbles' outside the JKB bubble.

Eleste made me realise this duality and the limitations of staying in one's own bubbles. In March 2022, I took the train with her to and from a school where she was going to teach. During the interview I conducted with her after the lessons, Eleste told me with a smile on her face that "the JKB feels like a safe climate bubble. When you get anxious and depressed about climate change and the slow developments, it's nice to know that there are people who are working hard and committed." Later during the focus group, she gave a different take on this. My interlocutors did not talk about what they thought about the JKB, and their participation in it, at least not in my presence. I decided to organise a focus group to discover this. "It's not just peace and quiet and satisfaction. I also become much more aware of the seriousness of the problems [through my membership in the JKB]." At another point, Eleste told me that the JKB has a general WhatsApp group. In the group, articles, documentaries and so forth are



shared concerning climate change issues. Most items shared are about the slowness of developments, and how this reflects on reducing climate change. “Sometimes I put the group app on silent for a month, because then those messages affect my state of mind in a negative way.”, Eleste continued, after saying that she sometimes needed a rest after seeing such news. Being active in the JKB provides Eleste with the comfort that there are people working to keep the earth habitable. At the same time, it caused her to need more rest and time for herself outside of movement.

Others provided additional arguments for why the JKB is a bubble, one that is generally elite, exclusive and fragmented. While I was taking a walk with Thomas through Amelisweerd, a nature reserve close to the Utrecht Science Park, he said with a slight irritation that he has the idea that "they [the board] are all sitting around trying to figure out what the standpoints are and then present it to the constituency [via questionnaires]." By standpoints, Thomas means the points that the JKB gives priority to in its talks with politicians for a certain period of time. “The constituency is influenced by what the JKB puts forward as standpoints, because the constituency assumes that the JKB has worked out those standpoints. Since the constituency hasn't done that themselves, they take that almost blindly.” Thomas was implying that the JKB is steering from a top-down perspective. He would like to see more of a democratic decision-making process within the JKB, instead of the board having 'ultimate power'. In which the JKB as an entity can decide which agenda items are discussed with ministers, or which projects the JKB commissions. In conclusion, the JKB promises it's prospective members that they can contribute where they feel is important and that they are provided the space to do that, in reality this promise is not always kept.

As the JKB maintains a hierarchical structure, the board tends to have little real contact with its members. The same can be said for the contact between workgroups with some of my interviewees not always feeling connected to the other side of the JKB, the political lobbying side. This became more clear to me during another conversation I had with Ziva. Prior to her active participation at GROW, Ziva was president of the JKB podcast. I had overheard Ziva talking at a meeting about her previous work group and the resulting negativity toward the board. The next time we met at my place to work on something for GROW, I asked her why she said this. She told me that when she started in late April 2021, the Podcast Working Group had only 3 or 4 months to develop and record all the podcast topics. It was a stressful time, working with her team to set up a new work system, new format, consultations and guest speakers from outside the JKB. Not to forget, preparing the podcast episodes, recording and distributing them online. After releasing the podcast, she was



contacted by a Projects Board member that the listening figures were good, as were the reactions to the podcast. And that consequently they should start working on the following season. Sometime after this, Ziva received a call from another board member, informing her that the podcast will stop. Contrary to her prior conversation the board had clearly decided otherwise. "That was that, no thank you, nothing", indignation could be read on Ziva's face. "Downright rude and discourteous," she said. Like GROW and On Tour, it reaches young people outside their bubble or youth organisations. But while these groups are allowed to continue, no more time was allowed to be put into the podcast. The focus of the podcast was supposed to be to reach members of youth organisations, but this could not be verified.

Being so isolated from the decision making process, especially when the decisions pertained to her working group, struck Ziva as wrong. Her contribution/opinion, and that of her working group, were not fully considered or even questioned by the board. This shows to me a breakdown in the communication loop between various layers of the organisation. Although everyone in the JKB is or was a student of (applied) universities, mostly white, Dutch, and from the same age, they were not all rowing in the same direction. Ziva told me that she felt that the board had more of a "feel" for the lobbying side, and was more engaged with this side of the organisation. Which results in the feeling of being more disconnected from the 'higher located' lobbying side work groups and feeling more isolated from the decision making process.

All of the above tensions show how the meaning-making process around the climate change narrative has been further extended to the meaning-making process within a social movement through conflicts, negotiations, and contestations. My interlocutors are exploring how their public ecological actions make sense in their own lives. Simultaneously they are figuring out the relationship within and outside the JKB, which have changed over time through such actions from themselves and others. Just as the empirical data above shows, the conversation of me and Jada when we were walking in the park demonstrates this as well. At first, Jada was actively convincing others to change everyday actions to more climate-friendly ones, through starting discussions, giving climate facts, and insisting that everyone must change. It frustrated her that others still did not change their daily routine, despite the fact that she had been so clear. "How am I supposed to make others realise that change is necessary?", she



asked herself at the time. But after having attended the training course ‘Climate Talks’¹⁷, she had gained new insights and approached these kind of conversations differently. First, she would go to that relative who ate meat on a birthday, now she lets it go. Only when she knew that the other person was open to a conversation did she enter into it. This resulted in more open conversations, for example when she happily told that family member where she got her new outfit. Namely via a friend who wanted to get rid of some clothes. The question why she was wearing second-hand clothing was often asked afterwards, which opened up the conversation about ecological practices more naturally than bringing it up herself.

The meaning-making process should be seen in the perspective of relational connections, divided into social, physical and transcendent connectedness. Researching a village in the Dutch “Bible Belt”, Bos and others state that the component connectedness is at the foundation of meaning-making (ibid 2021). A conservative area in the middle of the country stretched from the northeast of the country to the southwest, the Bible Belt has a high concentration of practicing Protestants (Sobotka and Adigüzel 2002). As a result of their ethnographic study, Bos and others (2021) made a threefold division regarding connectedness. They found that people made meaning through social, physical and transcendent connectedness. Social connectedness arises in diverse social spheres, being known and remarked upon often leads to various forms of emotional or practical care. These diverse types of social connectedness appear to make life meaningful. Physical connectedness emerges through past experiences regarding someone’s physical context, for example a village environment, with its houses, trees and canals. This context evokes reminiscence and adds meaning to life. Sometimes the sources that provide social or physical connectedness are discontinued, but that does not mean that people do not seek other forms of connectedness. Bos and others (2021) call this transcendent connectedness. For example, someone who, because of social and physical exclusion, has found meaning in becoming detached from the world through religious orientation. What this triad shows is that everyday activities, social, physical and transcendent, contribute to how people make meaning in life.

The various connections inside and outside the organisations give meaning to the personal and public ecological actions of social movement members. Although some might say that people join a social movement due to the collective identity (Polletta & Jasper 2001), regardless of how compelling the ideology of the movement may seem, it seldom or never creates a perfectly consensual group (Burdick 1995). Meaning in life is, at its core, a situated

¹⁷ See introduction



lived phenomenon which is not only experienced, but rather actively crafted by daily activities and relations. In Elina's case, her workplace does not provide enough meaning for her ecological knowledge, so she joined a social movement. Having a physical place where she can use this knowledge in a social setting gives, for her, sufficient meaning to her practices. While in Jada's case, the way she gave meaning and expression to her desire for change was, as she noticed, not sufficient. By following a training and learning how to make a social connection in a different way, her practices around giving meaning to that desire have changed. Both were looking for a different way of giving meaning to their practices, and found each other in the transcendent connection of wanting to contribute to the mission of the JKB. In other words, meaning-making takes place within the sociocultural context of people's lived experiences (Bos, Cornielje & Laceulle 2021).

Lack of social and/or physical connection makes one reconsider membership in a social movement. My interaction with Thomas has shown me that despite feeling socially connected with the members of *On Tour*, the physical tasks he did for *On Tour* were not enough for his own sense of purpose and meaning. Thomas' remarks on the top-down steering of the JKB are influenced by his own meaning-making through his involvement with the JKB. His initial motives for joining were to join the research group on the *political lobby side*. He did an interview for a position within that group, but was not considered equipped enough. The interviewees motivated him to become a member of *On Tour*, but within a short time he became unmotivated. The tasks were not aligned with his motives to join, "I could not find my way", he stated on our long walk. The physical space and tasks given to him, were not what he personally considered as meaningful. "Although I still believe in the mission of the JKB, it is no longer the place where I see myself participating." Thomas still feels an overarching connection through believing in the mission. But the lack of physical connection is enough for Thomas to terminate his membership, as it did not provide him with enough meaning to his public practices.

Missing some forms of connection makes one consider whether having another form of connection is enough to continue membership. The absence of social and/or physical connectedness causes members of a social climate movement to reconsider their membership, which is partly based on transcendent connectedness. The transcendent connection of my interlocutors is based on the shared beliefs and motives to contribute to a social climate movement. These beliefs and motives are found in the way they act as environmentalists and ecological citizens. But sharing the notion of ecological citizenship and exploration of the phases of environmentalism does not mean that my interlocutors feel connected on all levels.



Similar to Thomas, Ziva was not happy with the social hierarchy. Especially how she experienced the end of the Podcast workgroup. The lack of social connection as a result, led to a review of whether that shared transcendent commitment was sufficient to retain membership with the JKB. In Ziva's case it was, as she continued her membership within a different working group. The social connectedness she felt with the other members of GROW was enough for her to stay. But missing certain connectedness made her more critical about what the JKB can and should mean to its members.

Regardless of how compelling the ideology of the movement may seem, it seldom or never creates a perfectly consensual group (Burdick 1995). However, hearing others stories and sharing struggles and ideas regarding the same subject benefits the individual meaning-making process (Singer 2004). Expressing these issues, and finding similarities in stories, does not mean that meaning-making is done through the same process (Creese & Backledge 2012). Rather through past experiences and the way people create narratives around them affects the degree to which meaning is attached to them. Talking about it would give my interlocutors the opportunity to create social connectedness. While simultaneously allowing them to explore the meaning they give to their personal and public ecological practices and the phase of environmentalism they are acting in. Continuing with the interaction I had with Ziva, she explained over dinner that everyone has different interests within GROW. "One person would like to know more about social media influences, while another is interested in networking with climate organisations". By means of a personal growth trajectory and corresponding group moments, these kinds of things would come to light sooner. Giving more meaning to the individual tasks within GROW, aligning members more closely with their own personal interests. "Now, I don't know whether Jelke wants to be on team Social Media", admitted Ziva with a slight frustration, "I would have wanted a few meetings that focused on what does it mean for everyone to be a part of GROW and what everyone thought could contribute or wanted to learn". Ziva's frustration about not having these personal talks regarding the individual meaning-making processes suggests that the JKB could be more attentive to give the physical and social space for this. All in order to create connectedness, leading up to a more satisfied meaning-making process within the social movement.

Participation after reflection

Members of social movements differ in their satisfaction with their participation and the meaning it gave to their public and personal actions. Caused by their initial perceptions on



what the JKB could provide for them, giving meaning to their ecological and environmental practices is (not) met. Daphne, a member of *On Tour*, felt that she made her contribution and said “it is time to let the next batch of *On Tour* members put their stamp on the concept.” The meaning making process regarding her social movement practices had come to an end, and she was content with what she had achieved during her time with the JKB. Daphne told me that “I have been able to look into the world of climate environmentalism and understand it better.” As well as finding direction for her ecological actions in it and seen the value of it. Being fulfilled with this, Daphne found that her meaning-making process regarding her individual and collective ecological actions did not need to be continued within the social movement.

Disappointment with the representations and forms of connection does not directly lead to non-involvement. Fre, the chair of *GROW*, did not really express negative thoughts about her time with the JKB during our encounters. Fre felt transcendent connectedness with other members of the JKB, without even having to talk with them. As she explained, “it is no longer necessary to state where everyone stands on climate issues; everyone stands behind the same thing when they join the JKB.” Later on I came to understand that she did have some remarks on this. Since she was chairperson of *GROW*, she had more contact with other members of the JKB. Although she heard from other *GROW* members that they missed the community feeling within the JKB. Not seeing and talking to other members outside their working group made the other members feel disconnected from the rest of the movement, despite the overarching connection through shared views of climate issues. Regardless of this disconnection, my interlocutors remain members of the JKB.

Remaining a member of a social movement shows that being a member is not merely about gaining ‘successful’ relational connections. To give meaning to life, people need to adhere to three facets; understanding the world around them, finding direction for their actions and seeing value in their lives and actions. Martella and Steger (2016) base this argument on various empirical materials of psychological research. They see meaning as the mental process of connecting things together, where the reflection on the process enables a person to examine their life in its entirety, to make sense of it, to give it direction, and to find value in. Humans give meaning in relation to others, through different interpretations of the world, people and their practices (Martella & Steger 2016). Fre's example shows that her working group continues to be committed, despite lacking a social connection with the rest of the movement. Several *GROW* members have indicated that they have learned more about the (work) field of climate and sustainability, meaning that they learned more about this part of



the world around them. As their membership still gives them the opportunity to understand that field better, they remain members.

As has been shown throughout this chapter, meaning-making processes within social movements differ from person to person. An individual's focus depends on the issues they encounter and feel are important to them. Joining a social movement comes with a degree of expectation. Whether these are met or not, the individuals will evaluate their membership, and may find that the movement does not give them the right connections or facets to make meaning. Through all the examples of frictions, reflections, connections and facets of giving meaning, being a member of a social movement involves working with limitation and political conflicts. Dealing with such limits and issues shows the bumps and side-roads taken in order to give meaning to practices within the movement. For instance, Thomas resigned his membership after failing to create a role for himself due to push back from the board. Unable to change his mind and being discontent with his role within *On Tour*, Thomas decided to say goodbye to the JKB. Yet, he looks back on an instructive period, one in which he found out how he would like to give meaning. For example, joining trainings from *GROW* and continuing to work with the youth party Young Democrats. Being a member of a social movement means working with limitation, through organisational 'bubbels' and political issues from the hierarchy within.



Conclusion

The prospects for reducing climate change are not currently positive, no one can doubt that. Recent news has argued that climate scientists say limiting global warming is failing¹⁸. However, it is not the time for pessimism where we are convinced that climate action is no longer meaningful. Rather, the news could have shared that “now is the time to act, as climate scientists argue that limiting global warming can be done better.”¹⁹ The Young Climate movement remains committed to preserving a liveable planet for themselves and generations to come. The voluntary members can undeniably say that they were the ones who embedded ecological practices both on a personal and public level, to shape and construct the practices of others.

Through my ethnographic engagement with two JKB working groups, I argue that figuring out where ecological practices fit in daily life is a process in which there are hiccups and the road is one with different directions. By drawing on Dash (2014) and May's (2008) notion of ecological citizenship and its affiliated duties and rights, I have argued that joining a social climate movement is preceded by exploring how ecological practices fit into pre-existing personal practices. Claiming Tesch and Kempton's (2004) typology of environmentalists should be seen as fluid identification processes, was at the basis of explaining the various understandings of *activism*. Moreover, with the help of theory on meaning-making, I was able to clarify that 'the figuring out' of practices is influenced by different relationships and facets to assign meaning to these practices.

The sub-arguments of the chapters have led to the confirmation of my main argument. As the first chapter has shown, young ecological citizens encounter ecological practices and start to discover and integrate such practices into their own lives. While processing the meaning-making of ecological practices in one's own life, young dedicated people are looking to see where they can contribute to a bigger collective. In the second chapter, the focus was on adding further meaning to the movement. While contributing to one's own wishes, the urge to inform, inspire, and motivate others by calling upon their duties and rights regarding ecological citizenship. Doing activism or being an activist is shaped through their connotation of activism, while their engagement with 'critical citizenship on pedagogy' shapes their contribution to the meaning-making of the bigger collective. The third chapter focused on

¹⁸ <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/video/2433105-klimatewetenschappers-beperken-opwarming-aarde-gaat-mislukken>

¹⁹ <https://decorrespondent.nl/13515/het-grootste-misverstand-over-klimate-dat-de-strijd-tegen-de-opwarming-kan-mislukken/1489474635-350b796b>



relating the prior expectations with thoughts, and experiences during their involvement with a social climate movement. Through the differentiation of expectations, experiences, and thoughts about the engagement with a social climate movement, being satisfied with the meaning-making differs. Working with limitation and political issues within the movement affect the reflection on whether their predefined ambitions have been achieved. In the last instance, the narratives in the three chapters contribute to the argumentation regarding the main question. Hence, the argumentation that joining a social movement is preceded by the making meaning of personal practices, while being a member of a social movement gives people the opportunity to make meaning of affiliated practices in public. Thereby contributing to the work of Kurzman (2008) who argues that meaning-making within a bigger collective is the main reason why people join a social movement. Although, I argue that while the contribution to the bigger collective is important and valuable to people, it is shaped through the personal understanding of how this meaning-making should be constructed. Therefore, the personal and public meaning-making processes interchange with each other and shape one another.

This research has set out to make clear the path of young people becoming a member of a social movement. It aimed to connect the ecological practices of critical citizens to the phases of environmentalism within the broader scope of meaning-making. But as the meaning-making of personal and public ecological practices is not done after ending the involvement with a social movement, more effort should be put into (engaged) researching if the meaning-making of certain practices is ever over. As people tend to participate and engage more in society during their younger years (Bucholtz 2002), additional research could provide how the participation and engagement of contemporary young ecological citizens change over the years alongside the still changing climate.

My understanding of how to make meaning concerning my ecological practices has changed throughout the research. My research interlocutors and the meaning-making theory have enabled me to reflect on myself. Through their openness about their path to being satisfied with their practices, I was able to witness the possibilities of contributing to the desired change in the behaviour of others. JKB's *On Tour* and *GROW* can surely be defined as illustrative examples for avenues of trying to achieve such a goal. My interlocutors showed me that talking and discussing shared struggles will lead to feeling connected with each other. Thereby 'setting the ground' for the examination of differences. By operating in this way, my



interlocutors believe they can bring about more change. Their belief, enthusiasm, and their result in inspiring others, have led to me changing my way of trying to bring about change in people. As said in the introduction, I became less active in pushing others in the ‘right’ direction. We have to protect the planet together, not by pushing or fighting with each other, but by working together with both humans, the planet, and what it has to offer us.



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