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“These Are the Very Small Things That Lead Us to That Goal”: Youth Climate Strike Organizers Talk about Activism Empowering and Taxing Experiences

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Abstract: Climate change is one of the most pressing issues we face, and the Fridays for Future wave of protests is unique both in its youth character and global reach. However, still not enough is known about how young activists experience their involvement and how the experience of climate activism connects to their personal development and psychological well-being. To gain an enhanced understanding of this issue, we conducted a qualitative study based on eight in-depth interviews with individuals deeply involved in the Youth Climate Strike in Poland. We analyzed the interviews using a rigorous multi-stage thematic analysis. Results showed that the empowering aspects of activism were associated with a heightened sense of agency, a sense of belonging to a community, a sense of duty and ethical integrity, of finding one’s voice and learning new skills, and a sense of personal growth. Activists also indicated aggravating aspects of involvement, such as involving the struggle for balance between activism and other spheres of life, overwork, and conflicts within a peer group. In conclusion, in contrast to the pressing nature of the climate change conundrum, climate activism is often experienced by its young participants as a mostly empowering experience.

Keywords: youth climate activism; collective efficacy; collective action; Fridays for Future; positive youth development; burn out

1. Introduction

The problem of climate change is probably one of the most pressing issues today. We cannot prevent global warming, but the sooner we act, the better our chances are of limiting its scale [1]. Since the beginning of the 21st century, involvement in pro-climate movements has increased significantly, and over the past few years, this process has intensified [2]. The Fridays for Future wave of youth protests is unique in its global reach and the sheer extent of youth participation [2–4]. The protests play an essential role in developing public awareness of climate change, as well as providing a formative experience for a generation of young people.

The aim of the present study was to explore and understand the experiences of young climate activists in depth. We sought to examine the meanings to their involvement, the motivations they declare for taking action, and how they experience sociopolitical engagement as either supportive of or detrimental to psychological well-being and personal development. We believe that the exploration of young people’s voices can contribute to unique insights into the psychological processes behind activism and reveal which aspects of civil and political involvement are experienced as sustainable and which as hazardous [5]. Psychologists and other professionals can use this understanding to better support young people who try to confront the challenges of climate change.

1.1. Youth Climate Activism and the Friday for Future Movement

Environmental threats feature a global mobilization potential because they affect everyone to some degree [2]. The global climate movement is essentially an ever-growing

and changing network of grassroots movements and organizations. In the late 1980s, climate scientists and non-governmental organizations had started pressuring countries and the international community to take appropriate action on global warming. Along with the worldwide lack of progress in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, pro-climate initiatives of the early 2000s increasingly focused on using non-institutional methods of pressure [2]. Collective action, including grassroots organizing and street protests, is recognized as one of the most effective methods for pursuing large-scale social change [6].

In August 2018, Greta Thunberg held her first protest in front of the Swedish Parliament, demanding that the government work towards reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Agreement. Her—then still solitary—protest set off a wave of climate strikes taking place periodically around the world, with young people demanding that politicians take the action necessary to stop climate catastrophe [7]. By December 2018, 20,000 people in nine countries had gone on strike joining the FFF movement. The March 15, 2019 protest took place in 2356 cities in 135 countries and gathered over 2 million people. On September 20 of the same year, more than 3.5 million people were on strike in 159 countries [8].

The Youth Climate Strike in Poland (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny, hereafter abbreviated as MSK) is a social movement which is part of the global Fridays for Future (FFF) initiative. Fridays for Future, Global Climate Strike, Youth Strike for Climate, and School Strike can be considered umbrellas, encompassing a network of activist groups operating around the world. In Poland, MSK activities include not only the organization of strikes, but also a whole spectrum of other initiatives, including numerous educational activities. Some projects are developed on a national level, but a lot also happens at the level of the local groups. The direct factor which contributed to the formation of the movement in Poland was Greta Thunberg's speech at the 24th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP24) in December 2018 in Katowice, Poland [9]. The first protest organized by the Polish MSK took place on 15 March, and the largest strike, on 20 September 2019, took place in as many as 68 Polish cities [3,4]. The largest strike in Warsaw gathered about 12,000 people [4].

1.2. Collective Action—Barriers and Contributing Factors

Despite the growing popularity of climate initiatives, strong commitment to collective action is an exception rather than a norm among both youth and adults [10,11]. Numerous barriers to pro-environmental behavior exist and have already been extensively described in the field of environmental psychology [12]. Non-involvement, denial, disavowal, and blame game are common causes for inaction [10,11]. These are strategies adopted to avoid responsibility for environmental destruction or the kind of involvement that might be personally taxing. In this context, Sally Weintrobe [11] speaks of the dominant *culture of uncare* associated with global capitalism, which is present both among adults and youth. A strong message supporting a culture of individualism and consumption, of focusing on one's own individualistic goals and achievements while ignoring community goals, is also widespread. Schools are also often involved in perpetuating such neoliberal messages, encouraging competition and individual achievement [13]. Furthermore, collective action—taking the form of self-organizing, the forging of resistance movements, political involvement, and nonviolent protest—is often perceived by citizens as more difficult than individual action. Therefore, transformative collective action is less common than individual action [14]. Citizens often prefer small-scale personal activities, such as energy conservation or recycling, which are doable on one's own, without the cooperation of others, and do not imply any apparent challenge to the political and economic status quo [14,15]. All of this makes it worthwhile to involve research in understanding why, despite all these obstacles, some persons endeavor to self-organize and act collectively.

In regard to general motivation behind activism, Van Zomeren and collaborators developed the Social Identity Model of Collective Action—SIMCA [16,17]—which takes into account the interplay between three predictors of involvement: perceived injustice, perceived efficacy, and social identity. They point out that anger associated with a sense of

injustice and harm, as well as identity and group affiliation, determine collective action; however, this is only possible if, at the same time, the persons involved have a high sense of personal agency. The global and complex nature of climate change often implies that there may be little individual sense of efficacy involved [18]. Therefore, a sense of collective efficacy is much more relevant [18,19]. With time, Van Zomeren and collaborators [16,17] proposed to extend this model by including a fourth factor—moral conviction, which is the belief in the universal ethical legitimacy of a given cause. It would be interesting to explore how these universal predictors manifest themselves in the specific experiences of youth activists, in the context of climate change.

1.3. Developmental Context of Youth Activism

Human socioecological perspectives, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's theory of development [20], highlight that no actions and developments happen without their context. Thus, they must be understood on all levels of ecological, individual and social systems, and the level of interaction between these systems [21,22]. Involvement in collective and prosocial activities during adolescence is rarely a solitary experience; instead, it is enacted in the context of a peer group and broader social environment [23]. Youth activism is nested within the social and proximal context of development. Families, schools, peer groups and neighborhoods constitute ecological support systems. The role of these systems is often decisive for the developmental outcomes of young people [24]. Broader contexts, including political context, media, culture, social groups, and social class, further shape the environment and experience of activism [24–26]. Several integrated models have been formulated to explain activism and civic participation. These models combine ecological and developmental perspectives with the SIMCA model (see [22] for review and discussion).

Flanagan and Levine note that the civic engagement of young adults is vital in terms of the future functioning of society and their individual development [27]. Describing the personal and psychological benefits of civic engagement of young adults, the researchers include, among others, fulfilling the need to belong, which is essential during adolescence, as well as the feeling that life has a broader purpose than seeking individual fulfillment. At the same time, Flanagan and Levine point out that a significant predictor of young people's involvement in civic life is their immediate social environment [27]. The type of institutions and schools they attend matters as much as the socioeconomic status of their parents.

1.4. The Empowerment Perspective on Activism

The empowerment perspective is probably one of the most widespread concepts through the literature on contemporary youth activism [21,24–26]. Empowerment is understood as a process by which individuals and groups take more control over their affairs [24]. The psychological meaning of empowerment is rooted in basic psychological needs, such as control, agency, and competence, which are also crucial compounds of psychological well-being and resilience [24]. In contrast to hopelessness and alienation, empowerment and its components self-efficacy, competence, leadership, and initiative comprise psychological flourishing, thus contributing to positive youth development. In various contexts, it has been demonstrated that empowerment lies at the core of positive developmental outcomes to civic participation, political engagement, and activism. Christens and Peterson [24], especially, have shown that sociopolitical control, which is an essential intrapersonal compound of empowerment, mediates between ecological support systems and the developmental outcomes of young people. Furthermore, empowerment, especially the sense of agency gained via activism, was found to be a protective factor in most difficult situations the youth face, such as in the case of school children living with war trauma [28].

Empowerment through activism can have significant developmental consequences. It is crucial for identity formation and exploration, in addition to experiences related to one's perceived agency [23,29]. The learning and personal growth aspects of activism are meaningful but often coincide with various risks. Activism comes with not only a positive developmental, empowering facet, but also a debilitating one, associated with potential

imbalance, disillusionment and burnout [30–33]. For example, Beilmann [33] described several costs of the intense civic participation of young people: from burnout to mental health problems. The challenges young activists face make them sometimes quit their civic engagement after a period of intense participation. Thus, activism can be understood both as empowerment, a technique of coping with external hardships and challenges, and at the same time, a risky endeavor with potential high personal costs.

1.5. Coping with the Climate Crisis and Youth Psychological Well-Being

Research shows that many young people worry about climate change and consider it an important social issue. However, often these worries do not entail a more sustainable lifestyle and a commitment to climate action [34,35]. One explanation for this discrepancy may be that young people are rather pessimistic about the future in terms of climate change [34]. It also fits into a broader theory claiming that in case of the young generation, awareness of climate change can have a particularly negative impact on well-being [34,36].

Studies examining the relationship between climate-related concerns and psychological well-being have provided mixed results [34,37,38]. Environmental concerns can coexist with both positive and negative well-being [34,38]. Specifically, Ojala sought to determine which factors contribute to the idea that environmental concerns are associated with a low sense of psychological well-being in some adolescents and a high sense of psychological well-being in others [39]. The study found that individuals with a higher sense of well-being experienced more feelings of meaning, hope and anger at the people in power in regard to environmental threats, and had higher trust in environmental organizations [39]. In another study, Ojala examined the relationship between the action-taking of adolescents and the coping strategies they used to deal with climate change awareness [37]. Those who used problem-focused and meaning-focused coping strategies were more likely to engage in pro-environmental behavior compared to those who de-emphasized the threat, but those who used problem-focused coping also experienced more negative emotions [37].

In a qualitative study [40] of deeply committed young individuals, their involvement as volunteers helped them to transform negative emotions such as fears and anxiety into collective action. Evidently, what activism needs is the ability to confront difficult emotions so as to learn from them. Narin [13], who in the process of qualitative interviews with young people involved in climate action in New Zealand came to a similar conclusion, stipulates that, provided that negative emotions transform into organized action, acting together can elevate the issues of hope and despair to a collective level. Phikala [41] strongly emphasizes that it is the awareness of the gravity of the climate situation that becomes the source of determination and paradoxical hope derived from acting ethically in the face of tragedy. Thus, the transformation of difficult emotions, with its accompanying ethical impulses, could be what drives contemporary climate movements and is also consistent with their own particular language and rhetoric [42].

1.6. Current Research

The current study aimed to seek answers to the qualitative research questions:

- How do young climate activists in MSK experience their involvement?
- What motivates them?
- Which aspects of this involvement are experienced by them as sustainable and supportive, and which as burdensome?

Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to the in-depth study of emerging social phenomena and personal meanings people attach to their actions. This type of research can also contribute unique insights into the psychological processes behind activism. In line with the tradition of qualitative research [5], the results are presented in such a way as to render the participants' voices as faithfully as possible and to grasp how they make sense of their experience.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The selection of participants was based on a mix of purposive and snowball sampling. We explicitly aimed to recruit persons, who were members of MSK and acted as organizers of the recent street protests in Poland. We planned to diversify the participants in regard to gender, age and place of residence. We expected our participants to be in the age group close to upper middle school, or shortly before or after this age, a demographic typical to most MSK groups in Poland. We approached the potential participants through various informal channels, including word of mouth and personal recommendations. Our first interviewees, especially, lived in our own large university city, and were recommended to us by word of mouth. Using a snowball procedure, we asked them to recommend further participants, also asking explicitly for those living in locations other than our starting city. Then, we interviewed those who were first to agree to the participation, and stopped recruiting new participants once we had collected enough rich material that could be meaningfully analyzed and reported within the frame of our study.

Finally, we recruited eight people between the ages of 15 and 21: six women and two men. At the time of the interviews, most of the participants were high school students, and one person was just starting her first year of college. Four were involved in MSK activities in major cities, and the other four in different regions of Poland—two in smaller cities with populations between 50,000 and 100,000, and two in cities with populations over 100,000. Most of the participants came from families of medium or high socioeconomic status and were students of high-ranking schools. The characteristics of this small group of participants, although random to some extent, resemble the general composition of youth climate strikers who, in Poland, are more likely to be female, come from families with higher-than-average socioeconomic status, and are students of respectable high schools [3,4]. The largest MSK groups operate in major Polish cities, particularly Warsaw and Krakow, whereas local groups in smaller cities are often scant [9]. To preserve anonymity, study participants were randomly assigned letters to label their statements within the analysis. The main characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study sample.

	Symbol	Demographics	Participation in Youth Strikes
1.	K.	Female, just entered high school, big city.	Active in MSK from the very beginning. Deeply involved in the organization of the first climate strike protests; now a less active member.
2.	L.	Female, just entered high school, recently moved to a big city.	She joined MSK shortly after the first strikes. The immediate impulse to become involved was the invitation from an MSK ambassador operating at her school.
3.	Z.	Female, recently a freshman in college, lives in a big city.	Active in MSK from the very beginning. Strongly involved in the organization of the first climate strikes.
4.	W.	Female, just entered high school, big city.	She joined MSK after the first climate strikes, deeply committed, works remotely. After the strikes, she had a week-long break in her involvement; then, came back.
5.	F.	Male, just entered high school, lives in a city with a population between 50,000 and 100,000.	Took part in a major MSK strike and then organized an MSK group in his town.

Table 1. *Cont.*

	Symbol	Demographics	Participation in Youth Strikes
6.	D.	Male, completing high school, lives in a city with a population between 50,000 and 100,000.	First joined an MSK group in a neighboring larger city; then organized a group in his city, which resulted in a climate strike protest in his town.
7.	M.	Female, just entered high school, lives in a city with a population over 100,000.	Joined MSK shortly before the major strikes, and together with one other person organized a climate strike protest in her city. In addition to climate activism, she is also involved in youth political activism on a town level.
8.	S.	Female, in the middle of high school, lives in a city of more than 100,000 residents.	Wanted to join a climate protest in her city, but it turned out that nobody was organizing it, so she decided to do it herself. Apart from the MSK activity, she tries to be active in other fields of social activism.

2.2. Procedure

The interviews were conducted in two rounds from November 2019 to April 2020: four were conducted live and the other four were online during the COVID-19 pandemic. A change in the interview form was necessary due to the pandemic. The second round of interviews took place during the most strict lockdown. However, we did not notice essential differences between in-person and online interviews (audio and video). Interviews were similar in length, with online conversations being slightly more focused on purpose, and those conducted in-person involving some more small talk. The lack of significant differences between the two forms of interviews can be explained by the fact that discussions using online technology were familiar to the participants because they were also attending school and all other meetings, including MSK meetings, online at this time. XX (initials concealed for anonymous review) conducted all interviews in person, using a pre-prepared interview guide. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 40 and 90 min. Although the interview guide was developed to allow a broad exploration of the research questions, emphasis was mainly placed on the modes of experiencing activism. Respondents were asked in various ways about what activism in MSK means to them and how they experience it.

Questions addressed motivations for climate action, history of participation, and the emotions that are associated with activism. Example questions include: How long have you been active in MSK?; How did you become involved with MSK? Why?; What do you do at MSK?; Has your relationship with MSK evolved over time?; Was there any moment that was particularly important to you? Can you tell me about it?; What does MSK give you?; What problems do you face (individually and as a group)? The interviewer followed a conversational interview format, allowing new themes to emerge beyond the initial questions, and paid attention to topics important to interviewees, actively exploring them via prompts and follow-up questions.

2.2.1. Research Ethics

The study was approved by the ethics committee (name withheld for the purpose of blind review). All participants were given complete information about the study, its objectives and means of using the results, as well as their rights, including the possibility to withdraw from the study. All participants gave their consent to participate in the study. In cases of minors, informed consent was also collected from their parents.

2.2.2. Researchers

Both researchers are psychologists with interests in social and clinical psychology, and are supporters and allies of the youth climate protest movements. We reflected on our

own involvement in the issue, and how it might have influenced our understanding of the research topic via discussion and supervision within a research team.

2.3. Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analyzed systematically using a rigorous multi-step thematic analysis following the procedure described by Braun and Clarke [5]. The overall approach to inquiry was pragmatic. The analysis was inductive and happened at the semantic level [5]. Thus, identifying themes was conducted without attempting to match the content to prior assumptions or established theory. Both authors read the transcripts multiple times and discussed each interview, looking for distinctive patterns of meaning. We both annotated the transcripts with initial notes, memos, and initial ideas for themes. For this, we worked on shared text files containing transcripts and annotated them. We did not use any specialized software. The analysis was semantic; therefore, several codes could be assigned to the same text fragment. For example, a story about learning to deal with differences within the activist group, which are especially salient in instances of stress and overwork, would be connected to the themes of peer-group relationships, of learning new things, but also to the theme of stress and overwork [5]. In the next stage, both authors identified several subthemes, which they then grouped into master themes by merging initial coding frames. Differences were solved through discussion. At this stage, we have written the first draft of our analysis and included quotations selected as especially relevant to illustrate the ideas. The final form of the analysis was translated into English, discussed several times by both authors, and reviewed outside the team for consistency and clarity.

Following strategies for ensuring the reliability of qualitative data analysis were adopted: we used discussion, self-reflexivity, and supervision, both within and outside the research team. We analyzed the interviewer's impact on the dynamic of each interview separately; for example, how the researcher's preconceptions and ideas may have affected the interviewing process. With attentive awareness of their personal, supportive attitudes towards the climate movements, researchers were particularly cautious for possible bias resulting from this. We systematically documented each stage of the process of analysis via annotating transcripts and documenting emergent themes. After several rounds of rewriting, both authors agreed on the written presentations of the results and all modifications performed in the review process.

3. Results

Table 2 shows a map of the themes and subthemes identified in the thematic analysis.

Table 2. Master themes and sub-themes identified in the thematic analysis.

Master Theme		Subtheme	
1.	Participation experienced as a necessity	1.1.	Awareness of global emergency
		1.2.	Concern for own future
2.	Participation as an empowering experience	2.1.	Participation as a form of experiencing agency
		2.2.	The powerful experience of street protest
		2.3.	Learning, acquiring new skills
3.	Participation as a peer group experience	3.1.	Friendship and connections
		3.2.	Experiencing conflicts and differentiation within the group
4.	Participation as a taxing experience	4.1.	Activism and other areas of life
		4.2.	Mobilization before a public protest
		4.3.	Overworking and burn out

3.1. Participation Experienced as a Necessity

The first theme that emerged from the analytical process was participants experiencing their activism as a necessity. They argued that in the current situation, it is immoral not to take action. The climate crisis is so colossal that it leaves one no choice but to engage. Two dominant lines of arguments were present in their narratives. The first one was the awareness of global emergency, connected to the obligation to care for the good of the whole planetary ecosystem and the future of humanity. Participants expressed particular concern for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, including persons in the Global South, migrants, and endangered animals and ecosystems. This subtheme relates to the care for the global problem and includes a strong sense of ethical obligation to oneself and others. Another line of argument was linked to personal safety and was motivated by the need to safeguard one's future and the future of close others. These two themes are related, although they appeared in participants' narratives as two co-occurring sources of motivation—collectively acting for the climate is in one's own best interests. At the same time, it is part of fulfilling a moral duty to others and nature.

3.1.1. Awareness of Global Emergency

In various statements of the study participants, climate activism was presented as a necessity, a natural consequence arising from an awareness of the changes in the global environment. For example, D. spoke of her growing awareness, which determines her involvement:

D.: Once I've realized what is happening, it is as if this awareness cannot be undone. For me, having this awareness and doing nothing is simply immoral. ... Let's say that I will do everything I can, right?

Additionally, K. could not imagine not taking action while confronted with the gravity of the problem: "I would have to deny that something like this is coming, a catastrophe ... " L. stressed climate change was an ultimate challenge, which concerns everyone:

L.: The climate catastrophe is the one thing that, it seems to me, is the most important right now in this situation, because, well, everything depends on it, really, and it doesn't just affect particular social groups, but all of us.

Due to its all-encompassing character, climate change results in creating a common fate that produces an "all of us" concern, which transcends the particular interests of different groups. Thus, caring for the climate implies caring for oneself and others at the same time. This is experienced by participants as an ethical obligation or a moral duty. When talking about her motivation, S. also named a related category, the one of civic duty:

S.: I feel like it's my civic duty a bit. Somebody just has to do it. As I see other people around me being passive, I come to the conclusion that I have to be one of the people who are going to be involved.

Moral incentives are linked to concern for others. An altruistic theme associated with the realization that climate change will affect the less privileged appeared in the narratives of several participants. S. said:

S.: From an idealistic point of view, I am also terribly upset by the way humans are destroying the planet. I feel an awful lot of anger towards the previous generations who are actually leaving us with a terrible problem. ... So it is mainly this, but for me the social aspect and human rights are also extremely important; namely, that the climate catastrophe ... In all likelihood it will result, for example, in an increase in violence against women or in climate-induced migration. ... So my personal goal is to make sure that we contribute as little as possible to this.

F. embraced an even broader perspective, speaking not only of other people, but also of other beings inhabiting the Earth:

F.: Who are we as a species anyway, having appropriated this planet and doing whatever we damn well please with it. We're not the only ones here. There are millions of other animal species that would like to live, too.

In these statements, the sense of ethical obligation arising from an awareness of climate emergency is abundant. Considering all actions undertaken in moral terms can be very taxing on an individual conscience, but at the same time, it conveys a certain maturity. If "doing the best I can" results in a sense of personal integrity, of taking the right side or doing the right thing, it can at the same time also be experienced as empowering.

3.1.2. Concern for Own Future

The second distinct pattern within the theme of activism experienced as a necessity is connected with concern for one's own future and the future of close ones. To what extent the awareness of the climate change consequences affects thinking about own future is evident in F.'s statement:

F.: There won't be much of a future. If I live to see it . . . How old will I be in 2050? About fifty or so. It's possible I'm going to be still alive and then we'll all burn, because that's what it looks like at this point. Or I won't even live to see it, I don't know. Shit, I'd like to live to a peaceful old age. You know what I mean?

Climate catastrophe redefines expectations concerning one's future and renders it fraught with more uncertainty than before. In this case, climate activism takes on the meaning of a fight in one's best interests, as well as a realization of the obligation to care for close others, i.e., family. S. was explaining it this way: "I would like to save my future, the future of my children, my sister's, and so on." The experience of activism as a form of "saving" oneself and family members from a severe threat carries a heavy load of emotions and can be very taxing. Young participants use strong language while speaking about this. For example, F. refers to the dangers of the future in blunt terms—if we fail to carry out radical reforms, "*we will burn*". This is a metaphor, but at the same time, a very evocative vision.

One may wonder if experiencing a more altruistic motive—acting on behalf of vulnerable people and other species—and a more individualistic motive, saving oneself and one's own family from a danger, do not have different psychological consequences. However, both motives are also clearly intertwined and coexist in the narratives of participants. In a sense, any commitment to limit the consequences of climate change combines acting in the interest of others and in one's own interest. In the first case, however, a strong sense of ethical obligation comes forward and is also connected to expressions of being proud of fulfilling this obligation. Taking action, following a civic duty, doing "all I can" can provide a person with a sense of accomplishment. In the second case, there is much more anxiety, fear and uncertainty evoked, and the language used by participants to describe this, including the use of metaphors, is much stronger. In both cases, however, participants experience their climate activism as a "no choice" situation—a moral and practical necessity.

3.2. Participation as an Empowering Experience

MSK is an activist movement, and its distinctive feature is youth involvement. Young age of the activists determines the specificity of the movement, as well as the way they experience activism. Many participants spoke of how participating in MSK was empowering for them in various ways. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged: participation as a form of experiencing agency, the experience of street protest, and learning and acquiring new skills.

3.2.1. Participation as a Form of Experiencing Agency

The subtheme of agency stands out as the most elaborate theme in the study, with many different facets. It starts with the idea that for some of the respondents, it was vital that they were creating MSK from scratch, without the involvement of adults, and that they

were working out the rules of operation and looking for solutions to emerging problems on their own. It gave them a sense of being in charge of the emergent movement. W. stated:

W.: I think it's easier for us to do it when we're in MSK, mainly because it's a completely different situation when someone your own age says to you, Hey, you're in charge, yo (with laughter). And when older people say, Oh, young people need to mobilize, whatever . . . I am not surprised, because when I heard it from older people before, I was so . . . I mean it didn't sound very encouraging. . . . It's just that with your peers you feel relatively equal.

The youthful nature of the movement was an essential factor for participants who described MSK as their "own" space over which adults had no control. The aspect of generational distinctiveness and finding one's own voice was just as significant. Teenagers are a group whose voice is often hardly heard in the public debate, and due to them being underage in the eyes of the law, they cannot have much social influence; for example, they cannot vote. Engaging in MSK makes their voice more audible, and the sense of decision-making that comes with it can be very empowering. Adults can be supportive, but young activists have constructed the message they wanted to convey and decided on its form entirely on their own. Several participants also spoke of how important it had been for them to have participated in the movement from the beginning. The experience of organizing events and protests independently and being successful can also contribute to the sense of empowerment. M. recounted the situation in a smaller town that allowed two teenage girls who were new to the movement to organize the entire protest:

M.: I joined two and a half weeks before the date of the September strike. It was September 20th, two and a half weeks (laughs). Me and another girl organized an entire strike. The most chaotic two weeks of my life so far (laughs). . . . In two weeks we organized the climate strike. None of us were of age, so we had to find someone to sign the paperwork, to help us with the microphones, but it was up to the two of us to spread information around town, which is not that small. And so ultimately about 130–140 people came.

These experiences—speaking in their own voice, control over own affairs and actions, accepting responsibility and leadership—are parts of empowerment and are connected in participants' narratives to the sense of their personal growth. They can also contribute to higher self-efficacy, despite the difficult climate situation. However, one may wonder to what extent people who join the movement already have an increased sense of self-efficacy and to what extent the experience of involvement shapes a proactive attitude. Regardless of the answer to this question, participation in MSK was often portrayed by participants as a solution to young people's perceived lack of agency. F. discussed this:

F.: I also thought about it in such a way that I am 15 years old, and what can I really do? I don't even have the right to vote. How can I influence anything? It wasn't until later that Greta Thunberg was on TV, as she went on strike. And I thought that was a cool idea.

K. recounted that at first, she was afraid to take the initiative and the experience of organizing her first event alone became a turning point:

K.: Somehow, I didn't believe in myself; [rather, I was sure] that I wouldn't be able to do this and that and all that. And I still have a bit of a problem with it. . . . Then there was a time when I organized my first lecture on my own, and it mobilized me a lot and gave me a sense of agency.

In contrast, other participants reported that agency in the sociopolitical domain has been essential to them ever, and this existing attitude has only been enhanced by their subsequent MSK participation. For Example, M. stated that she always had the need to get involved in various initiatives, as she said: because I like to have control over my life. I like to have an influence on something. W. also made similar remarks:

W.: It seems to me that this comes mainly from home and also a little bit from scouting, that I simply always think that if you want something to be done, you have to do it. And that's generally an approach that I have, which is not always rationally justified. I've always had a sense of agency and I think I always will, because that's what I believe. It's a little hard for me to explain. I just feel that way (with amusement). So for me it's a little bit difficult to talk to people who don't have this sense of agency because I cannot really do justice to this irrational feeling.

D. connected the theme of agentic action to hope:

D.: Why do I get involved? Because this way I feel that I am doing something to have hope, because without involvement it would have been difficult to hope. To be able to feel, to make a difference.

Hope, especially when it is an active hope, implying sustained effort and engagement, is also a central part of empowerment. Action-orientation and a sense of agency may serve as a protective function against experiencing difficult emotions. K. talked about how, rather than thinking about climate catastrophe, she tried to focus on specific projects:

K.: Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to cope with it, and I wouldn't be able to function. . . . Check (making a hand tick gesture), I did this and that. This project I completed, here I wrote back to somebody, some stuff there And not on the basis that some big change, . . . and that I must think about it non-stop, and so on, because then I think I would die.

Later, K. elaborated more on the idea of action oriented towards a distant goal; specifically, based on small steps:

K.: And so I feel that this seemingly minor work; for example, publishing some articles, cooperating with various institutions, the media, organizing strikes all the time, meeting with politicians, working in social media, and so on, is some kind of grassroots work. I have a feeling that these are the very small things that lead us to that goal.

What is important is that what they do as MSK matters and, unlike learning at school, has a direct impact on the world. F. stated:

F.: Like, instead of studying for biology, I preferred to do a presentation (for MSK) because I thought it would have a better effect. Like the fact that I'm going to learn for biology, well, it's only going to do good for me, but the fact that I'm doing a presentation for the climate strike means I can convince a few people that they're wrong and that this climate change is dangerous after all.

These strategies, primarily focusing on small steps, doable actions, having direct impact on the world, and having agentic experiences, both in terms of individual agency as a person and collective agency as a youth movement, come forward in participant's narratives a deliberate way to sustain motivation and protect participants from overwhelming emotions.

3.2.2. The Powerful Experience of Street Protest

Participating in street protests stands out in the narratives as another theme that brings the sense of empowerment. Our interviewees described protesting on the streets as a very powerful and energizing experience. For W., the exuberant aspect of the first strike in which she participated impressed her, and in essence became the impetus for her involvement in MSK. The same was true for F.—the direct stimulus for his joining MSK was participation in a climate strike protest. S. also spoke about how strong and positive the experience of participating in a protest was for her:

S.: And so every protest is that together with five hundred young people we are standing and shouting, for example. So, after such two hours I am absolutely ex-

hausted, but at the same time these are probably the highest doses of endorphins I have ever experienced.

How participants in the study describe the climate strike brings to mind a narrative of a feast or a festival. The contrast between the seriousness of concerns related to the climate change and the form of the protests is striking. An MSK street protest has a festive feel to it—a lot of positive energy is on display, music is playing, and at some points, dancing ensues. W. also spoke of experiencing the energy and power of the crowd during the strike:

W.: The protest on 20 September was amazing because I happened to be with a friend at the time, she had a speaker on her back and I had a microphone, and I generally, I don't know, activated the crowd. I think that's what it's called. Or—I was a crowd animator. That's what it's called I guess, but it was amazing. And when you're walking in such a When you're walking, everyone's chanting, and you're kind of the initiator of that energy, it's amazing altogether. I remember I had a terribly, terribly sore throat the next day, just so awful.

Participating in climate strike protests appears to be a deeply empowering experience. There is energy and an element of fun, also important is the communal nature of the strike—experiencing emotions together and chanting slogans. This is not only speaking out, but also experiencing the power that a voice can carry. Expressing opposition loudly and collectively has a different resonance from thoughts or private conversations. The awareness of climate change is difficult and aggravating, and yet (or because of this) the MSK protests are vibrant and energetic events.

3.2.3. Learning, Acquiring New Skills

Another empowering aspect of MSK participation is the idea that involvement helps to achieve developmental goals, which the participants consider valuable to them in general. These could take the form of learning some practical skills, gaining experience, and personal development in a broad sense, such as broadening one's worldview or developing personal strength. In response to a question about how his involvement with MSK had impacted his life, D. spoke of practical, organizational and interpersonal skills he gained:

D.: I got more organized. . . . Also, let's say group management and getting things done. Not only within the group, but also, for example, with some people, how to talk to someone. . . . If I were to bet on one moment that has changed me the most, it was joining MSK.

M. also mentioned new skills: For sure it has taught me a lot of new skills related to social media, taking pictures, shooting movies, talking to the camera. . . . It's added a lot of skills that broaden my horizon. S. also spoke of how the experience of being at MSK was empowering and educative to her on many different levels:

S.: It has broadened my horizons incredibly. It seems to me like nothing else had and also I stopped being afraid of making the most of opportunities. I mean I started to believe a little bit more in my abilities, in what I can do and so on. . . . I feel that my activism was much more educational than any stage of my education. . . . On the other hand, I know that I am doing something that is much more effective, and not only is it teaching me, but also I am doing something useful.

Many of the interviewees also spoke about how important the MSK activity was for them in a context of their age—how they had grown thanks to it, and how much they had learned. L. stated that it had given her a whole lot in different dimensions:

L.: What I can say for sure is that, well, I talked about the fact that I'm learning a lot at MSK, but I'm learning a lot because I'm one of the youngest people there, because I'm 15 years old, and yet there are people who are Actually, the age range is about 18–20 years old. . . . And also, it might be a bit silly, but MSK teaches me, I don't know, language to . . . to express myself coherently, logically . . . so I just have to discuss and develop my language skills.

The developmental aspect of MSK engagement, the idea of learning and growing while also impacting the real world, adds another layer to the sense of empowerment present in participants' narratives.

3.3. *Participation as a Peer Group Experience*

Another theme that emerged in the thematic analysis was the importance of peer groups. Respondents spoke extensively about how they met people similar to themselves, thanks to their involvement in MSK. For some, the promise of companionship was crucial in their decision to join the movement, whereas others recounted interpersonal tensions that negatively impacted their motivation to become involved. Despite such pitfalls, for basically all interviewed participants, MSK was an essential point of reference, an object of identification, a wellspring of a sense of belonging, and the source of developmental experiences related to peer group participation.

3.3.1. *Friendship and Connections*

Participants explained that through MSK, they met people who share the same values and experience similar fears. M., coming from a smaller city, spoke about the importance of the acquaintances she has made all over the country:

M.: It brought me a ton of contacts from all over Poland and that's probably the most valuable thing, these connections. These are the people who think the same way, because maybe on a daily basis in X (name of the city) I don't have that many friends who are super committed, who I dunno, don't eat meat, or are interested in ecology or climate.

S. spoke of how serious responsibilities and social relations intertwine in MSK; she pointed out that the people involved in the movement are teenagers confronting extremely mature issues:

S.: I also really like the kind of attitude at meetings that from ten to twenty we work and think, and then we go for a beer or something, or to dance somewhere. And it's great, in the sense that it's such a combination of, on the one hand, super important and mature stuff, but on the other hand, gosh, we're still teenagers.

The matter of interpersonal relations was also present in D.'s narrative: D.: Exactly, we are in this pretty much together, so it brings it closer, whether it's on a friendly basis or some other. This was actually something that surprised me. Because of how serious the problem is, and because we are aware of it, it is through these emotions that we get closer more easily and quickly. We make connections and feel more like we find soulmates in these people and so on.

3.3.2. *Experiencing Conflicts and Differentiation within the Group*

The theme of conflicts arising within the group appeared in many of the interviews. W. shared such insight, along with the others:

W.: But I remember that [after the climate strike protests] that was the moment when people started to get on each other a little bit . . . It was that moment of unloading all those emotions. . . . It seems to me that ideology certainly holds us very tightly. If we didn't have . . . If we weren't a climate movement, I think we could have probably stopped after September.

K. also spoke about the crises within the movement: "I have the impression that because of all that was going on, they simply quarreled with each other, because suddenly it was as if differences in their outlook on life came to the surface." The tensions involved worldview and political issues, in addition to interpersonal relationships.

M.: Because there are lots of such issues, and these are interpersonal problems, these are precisely the problems with understanding which direction the move-

ment should take. There are some problems with the actions we are engaging in because not everyone will like everything and so on.

For young climate strikers, MSK is not only a source of a sense of belonging, but also a space for experiencing differences between each other. Even though they share a common goal, they may have different views regarding how to achieve it. It is possible to think that the initial excitement and delight experienced by some was linked to the idealization of the movement and a failure to notice differences between members. Divergence of approaches poses a challenge to the daily functioning of the MSK; however, from a developmental perspective, it can also be seen as a valuable experience. MSK is a space where activists experience what it is like to work together in spite of having different opinions or approaches. It is important that there is no requirement of homogeneity, and members (theoretically) give themselves the right to differ from each another. Trying to cope with these challenges, they also pay attention to such practical issues as the division of labor or the question of whose voice will be heard in public. These topics link both to the previous theme, that of learning and growing, and to the next theme, that of activism as a taxing experience.

3.4. Participation as a Taxing Experience

3.4.1. Activism and Other Areas of Life

Many participants spoke of how stressful it can be to balance activism with other spheres of life. Among them were students at prestigious high schools, which are highly ranked and often competitive. Participants were asked about the scale of their involvement in activism timewise. The answers varied, and the hourly input fluctuated depending on the time of year—it was smaller on a daily basis, and much larger during periods of mobilization before public protests.

K.: Well, sort of different little things like that, which ultimately add up to, like ... Well, I don't know, I don't know if that includes some of the meetings, but it takes me, I think, 1–1.5 hours a day. Something like that at the moment. And then weekends, when a meeting sometimes extends to 8 hours.

S. said that in an average week she spends several hours on activism:

S.: It really depends on a week, or a day, or how much I want to get involved. But there've been weeks when it is as if I easily worked part-time at MSK, because, for example, there've been times when ... On a few occasions I simply had an 8-hour stretch of different calls.

Eight hours in a day is a full-time work day. M. spoke about the number of working groups in which she is involved, and consequently, the multitude of responsibilities she has:

M.: I'm also active in a ridiculous number of these subgroups. I'm active all over the international [section] in FFF, in this international group that connects FFF to the Youth Climate Strike. A little bit in social media—international and national. ... I'm also in the organizing team of the online climate strike, in terms of the whole movement; [that is] I'm in it both in Poland and internationally. And in a few other groups. These chats are very active, these groups are countless, and there are a lot of messages, so this also takes up a lot of time.

Similarly to the others, S. spoke about the difficulty of mixing school and activism.

S.: I'm a rather overworked person on a daily basis because, let's face it, it's extremely difficult to combine the two. I'm also in a good school where a lot is expected of us. So it's rather difficult to juggle all that on a day-to-day basis, to do activist work, to take care of school, and I still have to go to an event once a month and so on, so all of it can be a drag. I still want to have a social life and so on. But somehow I manage, and I'm trying to have it all.

On the one hand, activism can help in the quest for one's own identity, but on the other hand, a strong identification with the movement can sometimes limit the exploration

of identity in other fields. The need to distance oneself from the movement was discussed by K.:

K.: I felt something like that at some point, after that September, in particular I was the MSK. I mean it in the sense that MSK wasn't exactly myself, but I became the MSK. I was simply filled with this activity in this particular movement, and I lost my identity a bit. And I have the impression that now is the moment when I'm stepping aside . . . and [what follow is] a bit of exploration of where I am, who I am, what I'm up to, what interests me, apart from activism.

For many participants, MSK has become an important object of identification. Some activists initially idealized the movement, and the "stepping aside" mentioned by K. can be seen as a step that allows them to see their involvement from a distance. Withdrawal is sometimes associated with burnout and doubts regarding the activity of the MSK, but it can also be understood as coming closer to a more realistic view of the movement.

3.4.2. Mobilization before a Public Protest

In virtually all interviews, the time of preparation for the protests was described as a very intense and exhausting experience. The activists were operating in different towns; therefore, they considered different moments pivotal, but the majority of the interviewees associated their most powerful experiences with the mobilization before the climate strike protests in March and September of 2019. They described these periods as both strenuous and exciting. Z., who participated in organizing the rally in March, said:

Z.: In February I just didn't sleep until at least 4:00 a.m. I only watched videos of the demonstrations in Australia (laughs). And simply non-stop I was on some kind of total upswing non-stop (laughs). And I had some enormous expectations as to what was going to happen after this climate strike event. I also remember that our work mode before the first climate strike was . . . I don't remember the last week before the first climate strike.

K. talked about the period before the September march:

K.: I mean, September was hardcore. It was like . . . working from morning till evening, skipping school, dropping out of social life. It was just really from the end of August, mid-August to this 20th of September. And I know it sounds like a month of drudgery; it wasn't that terrible, but it was really way too much for people who are our age and are not ready for such extreme emotions.

S. also spoke of emotional tension: "I remember that it was a terribly crazy time in my life. These 10 days, it was like I alternated between crying from stress and simply being happy, I couldn't wait for it to happen already".

Mobilization before the strike—either in March, September or November—was described by the respondents as an intense time associated with experiencing many extreme emotions. The interviewees' statements combine an element of incredulity and a sense of being part of something big with stories of exhaustion and operating at top speed.

3.4.3. Overworking and Burn Out

The theme of overwork and burnout was an important one that was present in the statements of many participants. Several interviewees who initially became deeply involved in the functioning of the movement gradually lost their enthusiasm. Physical tiredness, coupled with mental fatigue, and the high level of emotional intensity, proved unsustainable over time. S. talked about experiencing states of exhaustion once in a while, as she also shared some broader thoughts about movement:

S.: I just have this observation that people simply end up getting terribly overworked, and I know this from my own first-hand experience as well. But there are some people who have such a great sense of responsibility that they are in

absolutely every work group, doing everything. And I kind of have the impression that this often leads to some kind of burnout and so on. Overwork is just not good. And I think that's one of the main problems too.

Exhaustion and conflicts within the group bring not only discouragement, but also reconsideration. A frequent reaction to sustain commitment is by drawing clearer boundaries. For example, Z. is tired but still wants to remain part of the movement. Speaking of her need to focus on other areas of her life, K. has also reduced her involvement. M. too spoke of partial withdrawal:

M.: I mean I think maybe I'll just step back from that first line of action. Let's say, I'll let go of the media and international affairs. No, maybe not international affairs, because that's what I enjoy the most. I will let go of the media, all these work groups, and so on. I will be the kind of activist who simply organizes climate strikes in her city.

The process of recognizing one's limits is a significant formative experience. The skills that emerge in the course of coping reported by participants include seeking balance, setting boundaries, the ability to endure frustration, coming to terms with the imperfectness of movement and relationships, maintaining commitment, and moderating the dynamics between states of excitement and fatigue. These experiences are demanding, but highly valuable. Thus, the theme of overwork was often connected in participants' narratives to the theme of growth and learning. In youth narratives, to engage sustainably, to find balance is something that needs to be learned.

4. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that, in contrast to the distressing nature of the climate change quandary, the activists reported experiencing their involvement as an overwhelmingly positive experience that supported their personal growth. The empowering aspects of activism entailed a heightened sense of agency, belonging to a community, fulfilling civic duty and ethical integrity, finding one's own voice, and learning new skills. In this sense, the collective goals of pro-climate mobilizations and the personal goals of adolescents were not in conflict. Acting for the common good involved simultaneously pursuing one's personal-growth-related and identity goals.

In regard to establishing and sustaining motivation to engage in activism, our results support the SIMCA model of collective action [16,17]. The anger concerning injustice to the human and non-human world, as well as inter-generational discontent; collective identity build around the climate engagement; and strategies of enhancing both individual and collective sense of agency are all clearly present in the activists' narratives. Meanwhile, the most strongly represented and most clearly emphasized was the fourth factor of the SIMCA model, the belief in the universal moral legitimacy of one's position and the ethical obligation pertaining to the climate crisis [16,17]. An ethical and universalizing focus—as opposed to championing the rights of a particular group or groups, especially of one's own milieu—might be the hallmark that distinguishes climate activism from other types of activism. All the same, participants unanimously stressed that humanitarian aspects of the climate crisis, including the rights of minority groups, are equally highly important to them. This is consistent with earlier research [43] demonstrating that the humanitarian and human rights aspect is central to those who engage in addressing the climate crisis, somehow in contrast to traditional environmentalists who used to focus more exclusively on nature.

Of particular note is the interplay between individual and collective agency evident in the narratives of MSK members. This lends support to the conceptualization formulated by Pacherie [44]. She notes that when implementing collective action, it is important that participants share a common goal and complementary individual plans, and that they are able to anchor these plans in the context of real-world actions and execute them in a coordinated manner. A shared sense of agency is stronger in situations where the involve-

ment of individual participants is of comparable importance—participation in egalitarian collective action is more likely to elicit a sense of shared agency than participation in a hierarchically structured action [44]. This perception may be modulated by the strength of the sense of group membership—strong attachment to group members may enhance the sense of shared agency, regardless of circumstances [44]. These mechanisms seem to be harnessed by MSK, an egalitarian movement which grants voice to many. It can therefore be assumed, in line with what Stensenko [29] pointed out previously, that MSK specifically supports the development of a relationally embedded understanding of agency, which lends a transformative character to the process of collective action, and thus can be sustainable in terms of social change.

Although the dominant narrative about activism in the current study is associated with its positive and developmental aspects, activists also pointed to the aggravating aspects of their involvement. These included overwork, the difficulty to achieve balance between activism and other areas of life and identity, conflicts within the peer group, and the quest for a conceptual identity of the emerging movement. Activists also described a number of active strategies they used to cope with psychological strain, both related to climate change itself and to activism. A common strategy was action orientation, focusing on small steps, and the aforementioned shifting of individual concerns with action efficacy to the collective level. These findings support a prior analysis by Narin [13], based on interviews with members of climate action groups in New Zealand, which indicated that shifting emotions and actions to the collective level is a core strategy of climate movements. In relation to overwork and burnout, the most commonly used strategy was taking breaks from activism, as well as consciously limiting the number of hours spent on such activities. Notably, among the participants of the current study, no one chose to abandon activism entirely; concurrently, sustaining commitment remained grounded in ethical arguments and notions of duty.

In terms of self-reflexivity, we were careful to reflect on our roles and preconceptions in the course of research. We paid attention to balance positive and negative aspects in our inquiry and give space to the ideas and emotions of the participants. One especially salient aspect that arose in the self-reflexivity and supervision process is the following. We experienced ourselves in the role of adults and observers, as more focused on difficult aspects of climate crisis and challenges of pursuing social and political change. In contrast, in the voices of young activists, these were the positive emotions and stories of personal growth which came forward. We have put deliberate effort into keeping this tone accurate in the presentation of results. We are also aware that action focus and highlighting positive sides of involvement can have a regulatory function; they help achieve goals and cope with the heaviness of the climate crisis. Interestingly, some of our young interlocutors shared this interpretation and named several conscious strategies, such as focusing on small steps, the festive atmosphere of the street protest, and similar, as things that help them cope with the awareness of the difficulty of the situation.

The study has several limitations. Firstly, we used a small-scale qualitative design and purposive sampling. Thus, our results are not intended to be generalized to all young Polish activists. The purpose of the present study was to explore and understand personal experiences of climate activism and not to produce any representative data. Secondly, the study is context-specific, which is both a strength and a limitation. It reports a possibly under-reported context of central-eastern Europe. It was conducted in Poland which, despite the specificity of this part of Europe, culturally and economically belongs to the Global North. Kleres and Wettergren [45] recently demonstrated that the psychological processes driving activism, including fear, hope, and anger, differ between the Global South and North. Activists from poorer and countries more directly exposed to climate change experience more anxiety and anger, whereas positive and hopeful messages are more often emphasized in the North. Another limitation of the study is the relatively short length of practice of the activists interviewed. Although many of them had actively organized MSK since the very beginning of the movement in Poland, the movement as

a whole is relatively new. One may therefore wonder whether such positive, in many cases, enthusiastic, assessments of activism are not due to the relatively early stages of involvement. In future studies, it may be worth exploring the long-term perspective, i.e., how the impact of activism on the lives of people on the threshold of adulthood will be seen by them years later.

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