

Making sense of the social-ecological crisis – Narratives of human/nature-relationships among climate justice movements

The multiple crises of our times demonstrate the need for fundamental changes in our societal systems. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the average global temperature will exceed 1.5°C and 2°C throughout the 21st century leading to a further increase of extreme weather events unless urgently needed fossil fuel reduction policies are applied (IPCC, 2021). However, climate change is not the only pressing issue our planet and its inhabitants are facing. Further planetary boundaries such as land-system change and biodiversity have also been transgressed (Lade et al., 2020) putting the earth's health and thus humanity at great risk (Cardinale et al., 2012). While humanity is affected as a whole, ecological problems affect people differently depending on their economic status, class, or power relations (Bauriedl, 2016). This emphasises that the climate and biodiversity crises also need to be understood as social crises. Despite the scientific evidence and global commitments like the Agenda 2030 or the Paris Agreement, the global economy at large still remains on an unsustainable and unjust trajectory. To close this gap between knowledge and action, researchers and decision makers must go deeper and explore the underpinning worldviews, values, and goals (Abson et al., 2017) or mind-sets of actors which shape and drive human action (Göpel, 2016). Other researchers refer to this overarching structure through which humans make sense of the world and assign meaning to their actions as *narratives* (van der Merwe et al., 2019). Uncovering and understanding the narratives, worldviews, or mind-sets that shape currently unsustainable pathways, and imagining and experimenting with alternatives to challenge and transcend the prevailing ones is an essential lever for achieving a social-ecological transformation (Schlaile et al., 2021). To bring about a lasting just and sustainable transformation, targeting these deeper leverage points is essential. However, this has not yet been researched sufficiently (Göpel, 2016; Abson et al., 2017).

One important area for leveraging a transformation towards sustainability is the relationship between humans and nature. How we perceive and value nature shapes our interaction with it and, thereby, has profound implications for both ecological and social sustainability (Abson et al., 2017; Riechers et al., 2021). Different narratives of nature and human/nature-relationships can be identified and have already been discussed in the literature (e.g., Raymond et al. 2013). Especially in Western societies, the relationship is perceived as rather dichotomous with nature being conceptualised as “an object to be acted upon” leaving it without any agency (Voyles, 2018, p. 197). However, this narrative of domination neglects the agency of nature, for instance, in terms of phenomena like climate change or pandemics and underscores that humans do not possess real control over nature (Bauriedl, 2016; Bedall & Görg, 2014). The human-nature dichotomy is also reflected in descriptions of a “disconnectedness” between humans and nature, where humans are not perceived as part of nature. This diagnosis of an alienation from nature is often connected to a lack of awareness of environmental issues and care for nature and hence environmental destruction (Nisbet, Zelenski & Murphy, 2009). Furthermore, by separating humans from nature, social and environmental issues are often perceived as conflicting objectives, which creates additional barriers for acting sustainably within our social-ecological systems. For instance, the public discourse frequently revolves around the costs of climate action and how this may negatively affect lower income groups or future generations due to rising inflation or government debt (see, e.g., Lamb et al., 2020, for discussions on “climate delay”). Contrary to the narratives of domination and disconnectedness, in many indigenous communities, humans are viewed as embedded in and deeply interconnected with the natural environment (Whyte, Caldwell & Schaefer, 2018). This holistic conceptualisation of human/nature-relationships is also

increasingly advocated by environmental and climate justice movements around the globe as an important pre-requisite to addressing and overcoming the social-ecological crisis we are facing today (Bedall & Görg, 2014). This shows how different narratives of human/nature-relationships shape the current discourse of climate and environmental politics. However, the interaction and dynamics of these contrasting narratives and their implications for the multiple crises of our times require a thorough analysis to better understand which path our society will embark upon. Critically re-thinking our perception of and interaction with nature, namely towards a holistic approach to human/nature-relationships, seems to be a promising approach to enable a social-ecological transformation (e.g., Abson et al., 2017; Riechers et al. 2021). Ultimately, the question of agency arises: Who can bring about the necessary changes in perspectives and narratives?

While there is without doubt a shared responsibility of politics, businesses, science, and the civil society to enable a social-ecological transformation, within my dissertation project, I would like to focus on the role of social movements. In line with Uwe Schneidewind (2019), I argue that these movements actively contribute to a societal transformation by raising awareness, mediating between different interest groups, and experimenting with social-ecological alternatives. In particular, I strive to focus on and engage with the climate justice movement. While this movement is heterogenous regarding its composition, overarching goals, and actions (Sander, 2016), they acknowledge and highlight the interconnectedness of the social and environmental questions of our times while arguably possessing discursive power within international climate politics (Bedall & Görg, 2014). Against this background, I argue that climate justice activists are re-thinking and re-imagining how humans interact among each other and with nature by acknowledging the interconnectedness of the social and ecological dimensions. Thereby, they contribute to challenging current unsustainable and unjust narratives and pathways. Engaging with climate justice activists therefore allows researchers and decision makers to detect these signals of change. Based on this premise, I want to explore how climate justice activists *make sense* of the social-ecological crisis, that is, perceive, interpret, and respond to such complex situations or phenomena and how this might differ from currently dominating narratives of human/nature-relationships. These so-called *sense-making* processes have already been studied in the context of climate change, for instance, at the local level within communities that are developing climate adaptation strategies (Vanderlinden et al., 2020), among climate scientists and experts (Renouf et al., 2021) and in a survey on personal experiences and small actions around climate change (Panagiotou, 2021). Furthermore, a study in the United Kingdom has used the SenseMaker®-method to explore the organisational development of Extinction Rebellion UK (The Alternative UK, 2020). However, to my knowledge, an in-depth study of sense-making processes among climate justice activists in the context of human/nature-relationships has not been conducted to date.

Research questions

My overarching research interest focuses on the role of narratives in facilitating and achieving a social-ecological transformation. As mentioned above, one of the important levers for a transformation towards sustainability are human/nature-relationships. Hence, in the scope of my doctoral thesis, I want to explore how different narratives of human/nature-relationships interact and compete with each other, and how this affects the public discourse of climate politics. In my thesis, I want to approach this by pursuing the following (preliminary) subordinate research questions:

- 1) *What are predominant narratives of human/nature-relationships in the current public discourse of climate politics?*

2) *What are underlying narratives of human/nature-relationships among local climate justice activists and how do these influence their interaction within society and nature?*

3) *How do narratives of human/nature-relationships among local climate justice activists interact with each other and currently dominating narratives of human/nature-relationships and how does this affect the public discourse on climate politics?*

Theoretical framework

Climate Justice

First, it is important to clarify the concept of climate justice and shed light onto the emergence of the climate justice movement. Climate justice as a concept arose in the 1990s and started to gain attention especially from the 2000s onwards on a global scale (Bedall & Görg, 2014). The concept was deeply influenced by the environmental justice movement which emerged in the United States of America in the 1970s and 1980s. This movement can be seen as a merger of diverse social, economic, and environmentalist groups that raised their concerns about environmental and social injustices that particularly affected marginalised communities. Towards the 2000s, the concept of environmental justice started to expand both geographically and topic wise and was used as an analytical frame for a broad range of topics, such as energy and food justice, disaster management of natural catastrophes, and climate change. Especially after the Hurricane Katrina in 2005, climate change became a central concern for the environmental justice movement and the climate system was recognized as a necessary condition to achieve social justice (Schlosberg & Collier, 2014). The concept was taken up in the context of the global climate change negotiations by NGOs, grassroots movements, and several nation-states of the Global South to challenge the market-based and technological approaches to solving the climate crisis that vastly ignore social aspects. Against this background, climate justice movements acknowledge the historical ecological debt of the Global North and therefore its responsibility to provide financial resources for the South. The movement also demands abandoning and leaving fossil fuels in the ground, ensuring food and land sovereignty, and reducing overconsumption and production, especially in the Global North (Bedall & Görg, 2014; Schlosberg & Collier, 2014). The concept of climate justice has also been integrated into the “For Future” movements such as the *Fridays for Future* (FFF) that gained momentum on a global scale since 2019 (FFF Germany 2019; FFF 2022) and, for the first time, in the recent IPCC report, thereby highlighting the need to follow a justice-based approach to climate action and adaptation (IPCC, 2022).

Political Ecology as a lens for examining human/nature-relationships

To get further insights into how climate justice activists perceive nature and how they situate themselves in social and ecological terms, I will draw on the approach of Political Ecology. This theoretical lens allows to examine human/nature-relationships from various perspectives such as neo- or post-marxist, feminist, post-colonial approaches, or the theory of societal relationships with nature. These different approaches to Political Ecology all have in common the linking of social and ecological issues, i.e., connecting questions of access, use, and destruction of natural resources with power relations and dynamics, inequalities, and dependencies. They are furthermore guided by an explicit normativity in that they criticise, critically reflect, and intend to overcome existing inequalities (Becker & Otto, 2016). The German discussion of Political Ecology is particularly guided by the theory of societal relationships with nature (*gesellschaftliche Naturverhältnisse*) (e.g., Bedall & Görg, 2014). Against this background, climate change is perceived as a social-ecological crisis which is rooted in both the domination of nature and social domination, for instance, in terms of class, sex, and race (Bauriedl, 2016; Bedall & Görg, 2014; Brand & Wissen, 2011). Therefore,

Political Ecology approaches emphasise the need to consider the social origins and consequences of the climate and biodiversity crisis instead of addressing merely environmental issues and following a technology-based and/or conservationist approach to solve the crisis.

Sense-making in times of crises

Since I am interested in how climate justice activists make sense of the social-ecological crisis and how this affects their interaction with the natural world as well as their political activism, sense-making serves as a useful concept for my thesis. Sense-making as a conceptual term was first introduced in the end of the 1960s and is both used as a theoretical concept and methodology (Golob, 2018). According to Golob (2018) “through sense-making, humans constantly try to and actually do make sense of the challenging situations they are facing in their lives” thereby creating new understandings, ways of organising and enabling new practices. These sense-making processes are embedded in societal contexts and ultimately depend on “culture, prevailing narratives, knowledge systems, and experiences” (van der Merwe et al. 2019, p. 1). Therefore, many scholars using sense-making as a theoretical concept or methodology focus on narrative research to uncover sense-making processes. For instance, Dave Snowden, coming from organisational and complexity studies, examines (micro-)narratives to better understand how humans understand, respond, and adapt to complexity. For Snowden, the guiding question is “how do we make sense of the world so that we can act in it” (Snowden, 2021). Hence, sense-making processes are central for actively shaping society towards sustainability.

Methodology

To approach my research questions, I will first carry out a systematic literature review on selected debates about human/nature-relationships in the past five years. Additionally, the literature review will address the role of climate justice and climate justice movements within sustainability transitions. In this context, I will also consider studies that make use of the sense-making concept and/or methodology. The conducted literature review will serve both as state of the art of my doctoral thesis and theoretical framework for the discourse analysis. It will also be of help for drafting the framework for the survey which I plan to conduct with climate justice activists.

Subsequently, I will carry out a discourse analysis of climate politics to capture predominant narratives of human/nature-relationships. Within the scope of the first paper of my dissertation, I will examine the public discourse in Germany during the summer of 2021. In this time, the election campaigns for the federal elections took place in Germany. Since climate change (and environment) was among the mostly prioritised topics during the time of the election (Meyer, 2021), I expect a higher news media coverage during this period and competing narratives of different actors engaging in the public discourse, i.e., public debate, of climate politics. To examine the public discourse and identify predominant narratives of human/nature-relationships, I will make use of articles from German quality newspapers that address climate change and carry out a qualitative content analysis.

For the second (and third) paper, I would then follow an action research approach to engage with local climate justice activists in Germany (and possibly Colombia) and thereby examine how they make sense of the social-ecological crisis. This helps uncovering (micro-)narratives of human/nature-relationships among participants and exploring whether and how these might differ from the predominant narratives in the public discourse. In line with Peter Reason and Kate McArdle (2004), “action research is not a methodology but an orientation that shapes methodological practices”. Central to an action research approach are the principles of critical

reflection, participation of and collaboration with all those involved in the project (Reason & McArdle, 2004). Hence, my dissertation project will be guided by these central principles to ensure that my research is not conducted *on* but rather *with* activists and is therefore relevant for those it addresses. For this, I plan to apply a mixed-methods approach using the SenseMaker®-software, developed by Dave Snowden, as an online survey tool. The survey will consist of an open-ended prompting question and a set of predetermined follow-up questions. This enables participants to formulate micronarratives of their own experiences within the context of the social-ecological crisis and to make sense of the individual stories they shared. The SenseMaker® approach helps uncovering underlying mind-sets, values, and goals of climate justice activists as well as new trends or signals of societal change. For the process of drafting, testing, and finalising the framework, I intend to conduct a first workshop with interested climate justice activists thereby ensuring a more discursive approach. Furthermore, the process of self-interpretation reduces researcher bias and gives participants epistemic control of their own (micro-)narratives (van der Merwe, 2019).

After the survey, I plan to organise workshops that are open to the participants of the study to present an overview of the collected data, analyse patterns, and enhance discussions of the results. Further interesting points to take up could be the felt impact of climate activism and whether the identified (micro-)narratives are already visible in public debates. Additionally, positive or inspiring stories that illustrate the impacts and importance of climate action on a small scale, could be highlighted in the workshops to strengthen local climate justice organisations. However, to contribute to the public discussion of climate politics and foster the reconnection between humans and nature, it will also be of importance to share research results beyond participants of the study and academia. For this, I will explore other means of science communication, such as arts-based approaches that might be more appropriate to capture and transmit the identified narratives.

Finally, to conclude my dissertation project, results of both the discourse analysis and the engagement with climate justice activists shall be contrasted to answer my third research question: *How do narratives of human/nature-relationships among local climate justice activists interact with each other and currently dominating narratives of human/nature-relationships and how does this affect the public discourse on climate politics?*

Field access and research plan

Taking into consideration the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and in accordance with the planned cumulative dissertation, I will start my research with the literature review and analysis of the public climate politics discourse. In parallel, I will start engaging with local climate justice groups within Germany. So far, I already have contacts to local climate initiatives in Essen, Cologne, and Koblenz. However, due to my new affiliation with the University of Hohenheim, I will explore, whether local groups in the Stuttgart area might be interested in engaging in a study. Furthermore, due to my background in Latin-American Studies, I would be very interested in engaging with climate justice activists from Latin-American countries to consider diverse perspectives within my dissertation. For instance, I have contacts in Colombia who are involved in local environmental projects. I will carefully explore this option depending on the pandemic and interest of potential participants.

Timetable

		Year 1						Year 2						Year 3					
Month		2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24	26	28	30	32	34	36
Preparation	Problem Description, SoTA, Research Gap	■	■																
Theory	Sensemaking	■	■	■															
	Climate Justice	■	■	■															
	Political Ecology	■	■	■															
Methodology	Discourse Analysis			■	■	■	■												
	Action Research			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	SenseMaker* (draft, pretest, finalisation)							■	■	■									
Analysis	Collection of micro-narratives I (Germany)								■	■									
	First Overview and Analysis of Results									■	■								
	Workshops for joint analysis and reflection										■	■							
	Collection/Workshops II (international) *												■	■	■				
Conclusion	Feedback, Corrections, Formalities, Print																		■

* depending on pandemic, mutual interest

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