Youth climate change activists in Western Australia:

A locally-based theory of their journey to activism

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This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Education at The University of Western Australia.

Graduate School of Education

2018
DECLARATION

I, Katherine Carson, certify that:

This thesis has been substantially accomplished during enrolment in the degree.

This thesis does not contain material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution.

No part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of The University of Western Australia and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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The research involving human data reported in this thesis was assessed and approved by The University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval RA/4/1/8557.

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ABSTRACT

The study reported in this thesis aimed to generate locally-based theory regarding the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities. It is an interpretivist grounded theory study where semi-structured interviews were used to address this aim. Steps were taken to explore as diverse a range of perspectives as possible within a clearly defined setting. Chapter One is an introductory chapter. Chapter Two provides an extended overview of the research context internationally and nationally, as well as in relation to Western Australia. Chapter Three provides a comprehensive overview of literature related to youth climate-change activists. Here, the notions of ‘activism’, ‘environmental activism’, and ‘climate change activism’ are considered. Chapter Four details the research design of the study. Chapters Five, Six and Seven present the locally-based theory generated in relation to the central aim of the study. The central proposition of the theory is that youth climate change activists undergo a progressive journey both towards, and throughout, their activism, and that this takes place through three stages. The first stage is designated the stage of progressing from awareness of climate change to having active concern. The second stage is designated the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism. The third stage is designated the stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism. Chapter Nine concludes the thesis and outlines a series of recommendations on how youths could be encouraged to engage with the issue of climate change. Finally, it suggests areas for further research.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with sincere thanks and appreciation that I acknowledge the contribution made by the youths who were the subjects of this study. Their willingness to meet with me and speak freely about their activities and thoughts on their climate change activism allowed me to develop the substantive theory presented in this thesis. I initiated this study as I was concerned about youths’ lack of engagement with climate change in the classroom, and instead found a unique group of youths, passionate about fighting for their future and that of others. I know that with youths like these within the climate change movement, the fight will continue.

I would like to thank my principal supervisor, Professor Tom O’Donoghue, for his constant yet subtle guidance throughout the process. I am grateful for his gentle encouragement and confidence in my ability to complete the study. I would also like to offer my thanks to Professor Lesley Vidovich, for her support and optimism in the final stages of writing. Thanks to them both I have further developed my skills in writing and have presented a thesis of significance.

The support of my husband, Greg, and two children Abbey and Jonathon has been invaluable over the last three years. They may not have understood exactly what I was doing, but knew that it was an important task I had to complete. I thank them for their faith in me.

And finally, I acknowledge the love and support of my dear Mum, who was with me at the start of this journey, however did not remain with me to completion. I know she would have been proud.

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## Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>ACARA</td>
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<td>COP</td>
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<td>CSIRO</td>
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<td>NASA</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNFCCC</td>
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The study reported in this thesis aimed to generate locally-based theory regarding the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities. Climate change is acknowledged by the majority of scientists to be a significant threat to the future of the global community (Cook et al., 2013). Both oceanic and terrestrial ecosystems are suffering measureable temperature increases (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2014; National Aeronautics and Space Administration [NASA], 2016a) which, in turn, are affecting local flora, fauna and consequently human populations (Hansen et al., 2013; IPCC, 2014). Accordingly, these populations are increasingly looking to both local and global government bodies to mandate changes which mitigate the causes and consequences of climate change (Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, & Whitmarsh, 2007; Wolf & Moser, 2011).

Arguably, because of the already observed changes, climate change should be a critical political and social issue of the 21st century. Research, however, shows that a significant proportion of the public are disengaged with the issue (Lee, Markowitz, Howe, Ko, & Leiserowitz, 2015; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Poortinga, Spence, Whitmarsh, Capstick, & Pidgeon, 2011). This may, in part, be due to indifference shown by various political and industry leaders. Also, if indeed climate change is acknowledged by stakeholders with power to make change, many, including those in Australia, remain reticent to do so.

One response to the latter situation is that a global climate change movement of concerned citizens has emerged, aiming to persuade global citizens of the importance of
climate change mitigation, and also to convince powerful decision-makers to make change. Within the movement, youth form a significant and critical proportion of its population. These youth activists are of special interest due to their ability to connect with, and influence, other youth and thus, perhaps promote some fundamental perspective change in the next generation.

Contemporary research studies on youth and climate change most often focus on their engagement with the issue of climate change (Corner et al., 2015; Wray-Lake, Flanagan, & Osgood, 2010). Little research has been undertaken on the perspectives of youth who actively engage with the issue. The study reported later in this thesis, addressed the associated deficit in the research literature in relation to climate change activism. The particular focus is on the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities.

The remainder of this opening chapter is in five parts. First, definitions of key concepts frequently used in the study are presented. Secondly, the background to the study is outlined, including subsections on global climate change and climate change in Australia. Thirdly, an overview of the literature surrounding climate change activism, focusing particularly on youth and climate change activism, is presented. Fourthly, a brief description of the methodology of the study, elaborated in Chapter Four, is given. Finally an overview of the structure of the remainder of this thesis is outlined.

**Positionality**

The researcher has trained and worked as a veterinarian and has a special interest in the effect of climate change on ecosystems and fauna in particular. Although not an active activist in the climate change movement, the researcher supports the ideals of the movement and lives a low carbon lifestyle. In undertaking this research, she has set
aside these views and approached the data collection and analysis from an academic point of view.

Upon entering the science classroom as a teacher, she was concerned by the apparent disregard of students for this issue. She became interested in youth who were active in the climate change arena and, consequently, the focus of the study presented here was the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities.

Definitions of Key Concepts

Definitions of key concepts used through this thesis are now offered.

Activist activities can be considered to be located on a continuum. They range from those that are relatively passive such as writing letters and supporting an online campaign, through to highly active ones, such as participating in demonstrations and performing leadership roles (Corning & Myers, 2002).

Climate change refers to how weather conditions and patterns have altered over many decades, due to human activities. These activities have led to an increase in the release of greenhouse gases which affect the warming potential of the Earth’s atmosphere (Australian Academy of Science, 2015).

Climate change activists are those individuals who purposely engage in activities which promote the political and social aims of addressing the causes and consequences of climate change (Fisher, 2015).

Perspectives are defined as frameworks through which people make sense of the world (Woods, 1992). This definition comes from the interpretivist paradigm, which is the paradigm that guided the research methodology of the study reported later.
Theory is defined as ‘a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 15).

Youth, for the purposes of this study, includes persons who have left secondary school and are at an age to attend tertiary level education or enter the workforce. They include persons between the age of 18 and 24.

Background to the Study

Global climate change

The data collection for the study reported later in this thesis, took place in December 2015, a time when the issue of climate change was at the forefront of media reportage. The Paris Climate Agreement had recently been negotiated and hopes were high amongst global citizens and climate change activists that the issue was finally being addressed. At the time also, public concern for climate change was greater than ever, as the global temperature was reaching record-breaking highs and predicted climate change consequences had become manifest (NASA, 2016b). The political environment was favourable for the climate change movement to be effective, as countries continued to discuss matters in relation to the Paris Climate Agreement. This Agreement came to be seen as a justification for the work of those involved in the climate change movement.

As global leaders gathered for the United Nations Conference of the Parties meeting (COP) in Paris, 2015, there was a collective sense that this was an opportunity to really promote positive change (Harvey, 2015). At one level these hopes were achieved, with the stated aim of the treaty being to restrict global warming to “well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2015, p.2). However, scientists and activists alike quickly began to
acknowledge the insubstantial promises of the agreement. Climate modelling showed that if emission reduction pledges were adhered to, global warming could still be 2.3°C to 3.5°C (Rogelj et al., 2016). Also, emission reduction pledges are voluntary declarations, and no enforcement measures come into play should a country not meet its target (Selin & Najam, 2015). Therefore, pressure from the climate change movement continues to be critical.

After the release of the IPCC’s First Assessment Report on climate change (IPCC, 1990) grassroots organisations specifically focused on the issue began to emerge (Baer, 2014). The public’s awareness of, and concern for, climate change also began to gain momentum in 2006 with Al Gore’s documentary An Inconvenient Truth (Nolan, 2010). This public concern became particularly evident when 100,000 people marched on the streets of Copenhagen during the 2009 COP-15 (Gray, 2009). Since then, public concern has been sustained, with hundreds of thousands of citizens in over 175 countries, participating in the ‘People’s Climate March’ of 2015, which coincided with COP-21 (Rowling, 2015).

The climate change movement, is considered by some to be one of the most important social movements in global history. Due to its universal nature, the consequences of climate change have the potential to affect every living thing in the world, and the solution requires global consideration from both environmental and social justice perspectives. The diversity of the issue is reflected in the assortment of groups within the climate change movement.

Some groups such as 350.org and Greenpeace are large bureaucratic organisations, with financial supporters and paid employees, and are reinforced by a large number of volunteers. In general, they can be considered to be acting at the grassroots level. There also exist grassroots groups acting for the interests of their local communities, such as
the Hills Climate Action group in WA. All groups, however, focus on two objectives for the mitigation of climate change, namely the implementation of policy changes by political leaders to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the divestment of fossil fuel.

Climate change in Australia

Along with the rest of the world, Australia has higher average temperatures than in the past. Air and ocean temperatures across Australia are already 0.9°C warmer than in 1910 (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO] & Bureau of Meterology, 2014). Predictions as a result of this warming are dire. These include a significant decrease in rainfall in agricultural areas, increased hot weather events leading to an increase in bushfire risk, and rising sea-levels threatening highly populated areas (Reisinger et al., 2014). Areas of WA are especially vulnerable to climate change. The southwest of WA is one of the 25 most biodiverse hotspots in the world (Myers, Mittermeier, Mittermeier, da Fonseca, & Kent, 2000) and the consequences of climate change have already led to a significant loss of biodiversity in this area (Shire of Augusta-Margaret River, 2016).

One would expect that due to these potential climate change consequences Australia would be working hard at decreasing its greenhouse gas emissions. However, the statistics on Australia’s contribution to climate change mitigation policies are poor. In 2015, Australia rated the worst amongst the G20 countries (a group of 20 countries which represent approximately 85% of the world’s population) (Climate Transparency, 2016a), and was one of the few Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries where fossil fuel emissions were still rising (Mathiesen, 2016). Australian political leaders are reticent to engage in policy changes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, because Australia’s economy relies heavily on fossil fuel exports (Bureau of Resources and Energy Economics, 2014). Also, the
leaders of this mining industry, known as the ‘carbon lobby’, hold great power in the political realm (Crowley, 2013). Despite the majority of Australians believing climate change is occurring (The Climate Institute, 2016), it is clear that climate change mitigation policy is low on the Australian government’s agenda. Notwithstanding this separation between public opinion and political strategies, however, there is a strong climate change movement within Australia.

The exact number of climate change groups and members in the nation is difficult to quantify due to their diverse nature. It is clear, however, that the movement has a significant proportion of youth-led groups. Of these, the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) is arguably the largest, with over 150,000 members Australia-wide (AYCC, 2018). This organisation engages strongly with secondary school students, and encourages youth to take action amongst their peers through advocacy and campaigning (AYCC, 2013). Another youth focussed climate change organisation is ‘Fossil Free’, which grew out of the international organisation 350.org (350.org, 2016). It encourages grassroots groups to campaign for institutions, including universities, to divest from fossil fuel investment, and most Australian universities have a student-led group on campus (Fossil Free, 2017a). Other youth groups which are not climate change organisations, but include the issue as one of their areas of focus, include the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN) and the Australian Young Greens.

Overview of the Associated Literature

Activism

Contemporary social movements are conceptualised as networks of individuals and groups, who share and identify with a common set of values and act collectively to promote change (Jamison, 2010). Within these movements are individuals known as
activists. This label of ‘activist’ is rarely defined in the literature. Rather, it is alluded to as a person or citizen participating in actions to bring about social and/or political change. In this regard, Corning and Myers described the orientation of an activist as being “to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviours spanning a range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalised acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviours” (2002, p. 704). Activists’ actions, therefore, can be considered to be located on a continuum, ranging from those that are relatively passive such as supporting an online campaign, through to highly active ones such as participating in demonstrations.

Studies of youth activism, in particular, have long been reported in the academic literature. Some date back to the 1960s when demonstrations and sit-ins became popular forms of protest by students. However, amidst the generational uprising there were also concerns regarding the ‘apathy’ of youth (Block, Haan, & Smith, 1968). This characterisation of certain groups of youths as being apathetic and disengaged has carried through into the 21st century and crosses all political and social arenas, including that of climate change.

It is in their adolescence that young people struggle to find and accept their identity. In his influential framework for psychosocial development in an individual, Erikson (1950) views the stage of adolescence and that of young adulthood, as a time for the search for both identity and belonging. Adopting his developmental approach, researchers often focus on variables which they see as having the potential to influence the engenderment of an activist identity. Studies have shown that parental, role model and peer influence can affect an individual’s propensity to activist action (Arnold, Cohen, & Warner, 2009; Chawla, 1999). In youth activists in particular, family and friends have been shown to exert a strong positive influence through social networks
and exposure to organisations (McLellan & Youniss, 2003). It has been posited also, that personal experience of injustice may encourage activism (Harré, 2007).

Considering that Erikson (1950) describes the stage of young adulthood as one of a search for relationships, it is not surprising that the theme of belonging consistently appears in youth activist research. Both Kennelly (2009) and Harris, Wyn, and Younes (2010) interviewed youth activists and described the need for and sense of belonging felt by youth affiliated with an activist organisation. On this point, Harré argues that as participants undertake activist actions, they “increase the sense of solidarity and intense joint experiences that create powerful bonding and a shared history” (2007, p. 717). Also, where youths of similar values belong to particular organisations, this may facilitate a sense of acceptance and belonging (Baumeister, Dale, & Muraven, 2000).

**Environmental and climate change activism**

There is a large amount of academic literature supporting young people’s lack of engagement with climate change. However, few authors of research articles conceptually or operationally define the term ‘engagement’. It has been used in the context of climate change to discuss: interest in and awareness of climate change (Stevenson, Peterson, Bondell, Moore, & Carrier, 2014; Wibeck, 2013); concern about the consequences of climate change to the environment and humans (O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Ojala, 2012); the construct of pro-environmental behaviour (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Ojala, 2011); and activism (Arnold et al., 2009; Fielding, McDonald, & Louis, 2008). In the study reported later in this thesis, the term will be used in the sense which it has been used by Lorenzoni et al., who consider engagement as a “personal state of connection with the issue of climate change” (2007, p. 446) which is concurrently composed of cognitive, affective and behavioural facets.
Many believe that a lack of youth engagement in climate change is due to a deficiency in conceptual understanding of the science. There is much research demonstrating young people’s poor understanding of such crucial concepts as the natural greenhouse effect and the carbon cycle (Dawson, 2015; Wachholz, Artz, & Chene, 2014). Other research results consider that personal inconvenience may be a stronger influence on environmental behaviours than climate change knowledge (Boyes, Skamp, & Stanisstreet, 2009; Connell, Fien, Sykes, & Yencken, 2014).

There are those who argue that youth disengagement could be a coping response to the stressor of climate change. Research shows that youths can be anxious about the future global consequences of climate change (Harris et al., 2010; Strazdins & Skeat, 2011). Ojala (2012) found that some youths cope by diminishing the seriousness of the situation through disengagement with the issue. Another coping strategy identified is ‘meaning-focused coping’, where youths acknowledge the existence of the stressor of climate change, however, attempt to evoke positive emotions through engaging actively in the issue. These youths could be considered to be youth climate change activists.

The academic literature contains frequent reference to an ‘environmental identity’. However, there is no consensus on the definition of the term (Dunlap & McCright, 2008). Thomashow broadly describes an environmental identity as referring to “all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self” (1996, p. 3). In the literature, the term environmentalist (used in reference to an environmental activist) is conflated with that of environmental identity. Yet it is clear from the research that an environmentalist identity is only one facet of an environmental identity.

In the context of climate change, there appears to be little if any study undertaken on a specific ‘climate change identity’, or on ‘climate change activist identity’. Rather, these
constructs are more usually examined within the context of exploring an environmental identity or in terms of a social identity (e.g. Fielding and Hornsey, 2016).

Research surrounding environmental activists has also often focussed on their developmental influences. Tanner (1980), arguably the first to use ‘significant life experience’ research on adult environmentalists, found that experiences in the outdoors was deemed by them to be the most significant influential experience in their youth, with experiences with significant others also being frequently mentioned. Most significant life experience research which followed also found that an early positive experience with nature was deemed central to the life path of an environmental activist (Chawla, 1999; Wells & Lekies, 2006). Other significant life experiences alluded to by adult environmental activists or educators include: influential adults (including parents and teachers) (Chawla, 1999; Palmer, 1993); education (Palmer, 1993; Sward, 1999); reading environmental books (Chawla, 1999; Tanner, 1980); witnessing habitat alteration or destruction (Sward, 1999; Tanner, 1980); and concern for social justice (Horwitz, 1996; Sward, 1999).

In consideration of developmental influences on youth, Arnold et al. (2009) used significant life experience research on young environmental leaders. Results were similar to those in studies conducted on adult environmental activists and educators (e.g. Chawla, 1999; Horwitz, 1996; Tanner, 1980). Major influences were found to be: experiences of the outdoors in childhood; friends; adult role models; and youth groups, conferences and gatherings. These influences are in accord with Erikson’s (1950) life-stage of adolescence and emerging adulthood and the notion of individuals struggling to belong.

Research also indicates that to give support to this sense of belonging, adult environmental activists often advise environmentally sensitive youth to join an
environmental organisation, where they can form friendships with like-minded people (Chawla, 1999). Young environmental activists themselves have also been reported as recommending finding a group of like-minded people who can provide friendship and teamwork (Buttigieg & Pace, 2013). To be accepted into a group of people with similar ideologies as oneself and to find an important sense of purpose is invaluable to the formation of an individual’s environmental and environmentalist identity.

As an adjunct to significant life experience research, Fisher (2015) interviewed youth climate change activists from developed and developing countries to compare their life trajectories. He found participants were concerned not only with climate change and the environment, but social injustice as well. This combination of concern is termed ‘climate justice’. Similarly, Buttigieg and Pace (2013) argue that committing to climate change requires commitment to both environmental and social justice values. Today one could argue that climate change activists are committed to both as they publicly advocate for environmental justice alongside social justice.

The battle for climate change minimisation is ongoing and will continue well into the century. It is up to the people and those who speak on their behalf, namely, the activists, to continue raising public awareness over this potentially life-changing issue. The literature shows us that youth can be politically, socially and environmentally unengaged. However, it also shows us that youths can be politically, socially and environmentally engaged. Also, while research attention has been focused on the development of and influences on youth environmental activists, there is very little, if any, research focused in particular on youth climate change activists themselves. The research reported in this thesis was undertaken as one attempt to fill this gap. As the world sits on the precipice of irreversible climate change, today’s youths have the power
to make a difference, and it will be beneficial to all of us to gain a deeper understanding of them.

**Methodology**

The research aim of this study was to generate locally-based theory regarding the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities. It is acknowledged that the theory which has been generated is an ‘ideographic theory’, which is descriptive in nature and explains particular experiences or human actions within a specific socio-cultural context (O'Donoghue, 2007). Such locally-based theories cannot be used to predict what may occur in a different context; however, they are of use in making comparisons to themes or events which may occur in similar phenomena (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

When generating theory, it is essential that “research is begun as close as possible to the ideal of no theory under consideration” (Eisenhardt, 2011, p. 12). In other words, the theory needs to stem from the perspectives of the youth climate change activists themselves, and not the researcher. The approach used to achieve this aim and guide the study was based on the paradigm of interpretivism, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, and the methodology of grounded theory.

Regarding interpretivism, in this paradigm understanding is key and the researcher uses his or her skills as a social being to try to understand how others interpret and make sense of their own world (O'Donoghue, 2007). The interpretivist theoretical position of symbolic interactionism was adopted to further focus the methodology. Central to this theoretical position is the concept of perspectives, which can be defined as frameworks through which people make sense of the world (Woods, 1992). Symbolic interactionism
focuses on how these meanings, or perspectives as they are more usually termed, are constructed through individuals’ actions and relationships within various social areas.

The process of collecting and analysing data to generate substantive theory was based on methods adopted by those who embrace grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; O'Donoghue, 2007). The approach involved analysis of interview transcripts to generate substantive theory ‘grounded’ in the data provided by the youth climate change activists themselves.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using guiding questions to prompt discussion. The value in this process was the flexibility it provided to respond to and explore participants’ responses (Punch & Oancea, 2014), especially as the interviews progressed and themes being generated could be explored further. Also it allowed for ‘open’ collection of data such that the issues uncovered, were those significant to the youth climate change activists themselves. The data analysis approach was inductive in nature. Again grounded theory methods were used. The interview transcripts generated data, which upon iterative and comparative analysis, led to the substantive theory presented.

Youth climate change activists were selected through the snowball sampling technique, a form of nonprobability selection (Creswell, 2014). It is recognised that in using this technique, the participants are all known to each other, and thus may not be representative of the entire population. It must, however, be acknowledged that Perth, the capital of Western Australia (WA) and where the study was located, is an isolated city and anecdotal evidence indicates that the number of active youth climate change activists is small. The climate organisations work collaboratively on actions, and youth activists are known to each other. Those interviewed, however, represent a wide range of ages, roles and organisations. Thus, they constituted the spectrum one seeks to have
in a study like this where the intention is to study the range of possible perspectives that exist, rather than reveal those that are representative of the mean.

**Structure of the Thesis**

In the following chapter, Chapter Two, there is an extended overview of the background to the study. This examines the rise of the climate change movement and situates WA youth climate change activists within the Australian context. In Chapter Three, there is a comprehensive overview of literature related to youth climate change activists. Here, activism as a concept is introduced, followed by a focus on environmental activism, including climate change activism. The potential influences on the propensity of youths becoming activists is also explored. Chapter Four provides an in-depth explanation of the methodology of the study.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven, present the three central elements of the locally-based theory generated in relation to the central aim of the study reported in this thesis. The central aim was translated into the following central guiding question, namely, ‘What locally-based theory can be generated on the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities?’ Sub-guiding questions were generated from this central guiding question. These, in turn, were used to generate conversation questions. The conversation questions were then posed to the selected youths active in the climate change movement in Perth, WA. The final chapter concludes this thesis. It also outlines a series of recommendations which may promote engagement of youth in the issue of climate change. Finally, it suggests areas for further research.
CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Introduction

In the 21st century, as global temperature has reached record-breaking highs, and consequences of a changing climate have become manifest (NASA, 2016b), public concern about climate change is greater than ever (The Climate Institute, 2016). This has led to the emergence of a multitude of dedicated climate change action groups and lobby groups. The political environment is favourable for such movements to be effective as countries continue to discuss the Paris Climate Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015). This Agreement is seen as a justification for the work of climate change activists worldwide. At the same time, it represents but a small step on the long journey to climate change mitigation. To try to ensure that this journey is constructive, the global community, including climate change activists, continue to pressure political leaders to make bold policy changes which will help to limit global warming.

This chapter now contextualises the controversy surrounding climate change, giving background to the findings presented later in this thesis. First, it outlines the historical background of the science of global warming and climate change, the associated international response to climate change, and the consequent rise of the climate change movement. The context of Australia and climate change, is then considered. The relationship between Australian politics and climate change is next examined, as is the climate change movement in Australia. Finally, a short background on Australian youth activists and climate change is presented.
Global Warming and Climate Change

As far back as the 1890s, Svante Arrhenius raised concerns about the amount of coal being burned and about how the resultant increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide was bringing about an increase in global temperature. He predicted that if the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere was doubled, the Earth’s temperature could rise by 5°C to 6°C (Arrhenius, 1896). These predictions were revealed in 2016 as being startlingly accurate. Climate modelling by the IPCC (2013), the world’s foremost provider of climate change data, predicts that if current carbon dioxide emissions continue, it is likely that global warming will be 2°C above 1850 to 1900 levels by mid-century, and be above 4°C by 2100. Already there has been a reported rise in global temperature of 0.87°C over the period 1850 to 2015 (NASA, 2016a).

The measure of global warming however is not the only concern; there is also its rapidity. The current rate of global warming is over ten times that which has occurred in the Earth’s geological past (Riebeek, 2010). The result is that climate is changing so rapidly that flora and fauna, including humans, have little time to adapt and the negative consequences are unprecedented.

A number of greenhouse gas emissions, including those of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, contribute to the enhanced greenhouse effect. Of these, carbon dioxide emissions are the principal contributor to global warming and are used as the baseline of greenhouse gas emissions to compare emission rates and predict global temperature rises using computer modelling (IPCC, 2014). Human activity has increased atmospheric carbon dioxide by a third since the Industrial Revolution (NASA, 2016c) and emission rates are continuing to increase as global industrial and population growth continues. Once released into the atmosphere, climate scientists are unsure of exactly how long carbon dioxide can remain there. However, it appears that the effects could
The accepted limit to global warming of 2°C is an arbitrary one (Jaeger & Jaeger, 2011), yet it has been adopted as the target in the Paris Climate Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015). Increasingly in the literature, however, scholars are maintaining that achieving a global warming limit of 2°C is virtually impossible (e.g. Meinshausen et al., 2009; Victor, 2009) and that 4°C is increasingly likely (e.g. Anderson & Bows, 2011; Rogelj et al., 2011). In fact, climate modelling shows that if 2016 emission-reduction pledges are adhered to, global warming could still be 2.3°C to 3.5°C (Rogelj et al., 2016).

The International Response to Climate Change

In 1988, the first major international climate change meeting of both policymakers and scientists occurred, and the IPCC was formed (Burgmann & Baer, 2012). Its mission was to assess and collate existing published scientific data on climate change into comprehensible reports for policymakers. In 1990, the IPCC released its First Assessment Report based on the results of thousands of scientists’ and experts’ contributions. This report confirmed that human activities were increasing atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases and causing an overall warming of the Earth’s atmosphere (IPCC, 1990).

In response, a United Nations treaty was negotiated, resulting in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) being finalised at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (UNFCCC, 2000). The Convention’s objective was the “stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (United Nations, 1992, p. 4). In 1995, the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP) became the
governing body of the negotiating committee for the UNFCCC and its first meeting was held in Berlin (UNFCCC, 2000). Since then, national policymakers, scientists and interested parties that include activists, attend annual COP meetings to discuss how best to achieve the initial aims of the UNFCCC and to negotiate future treaties.

The COP-21 held in Paris in 2015, was the most anticipated conference in the history of the COP meetings. The aim of this particular conference was to negotiate and confirm mitigation obligations for beyond 2020, which was the endpoint of the previous Kyoto Protocol (UNFCCC, 2014). As temperature and weather statistics were breaking records, there was a collective sense that this was an opportunity for global leaders to really promote change (Harvey, 2015). In the lead up to the conference, world leaders made bold promises. For example, President Obama promised to cut the United States’ emissions by 26 to 28 percent from 2005 levels, by 2025 (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). Religious leaders also implored for a global commitment to be made to climate change mitigation and policy changes (Francis, 2015; International Islamic Climate Change Symposium, 2015).

At one level, the hopes of climate change activists and concerned citizens worldwide were achieved. All 196 countries attending signed an historic climate agreement, with the stated aim being to restrict global warming to “well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” (UNFCCC, 2015, p. 2). It was only in the days afterwards that scientists and activists began to acknowledge the insubstantial promises of the Agreement. As Clémençon put it, “The December 2015 Paris Climate Agreement is better than no agreement. This is perhaps the best that can be said about it” (2016, p. 3).

By 8 October 2016, there were 191 signatories to the Paris Climate Agreement and 76 nations had presented their documents of intentions and from 4 November, 2016 the Agreement was being enforced. The nations’ documents of intentions are voluntary
declarations of greenhouse gas emission reductions and no enforcement measures come into play should a country not meet its target. The intention is that these declared reductions will have taken place by 2030 (Selin & Najam, 2015). However, given predictions of global warming exceeding 2°C, the 2016 intentions and climate modelling predictions do not align even with immediate greenhouse gas emission restrictions (Rogelj et al., 2016). Thus, it appears that political leaders succeeded in promoting rhetoric, but that their actions on climate change had failed even before they began.

The Rise of the Climate Change Movement

In the 1990s, after the IPCC released its First Assessment Report, climate change began to become a focus of environmental groups (Mormont & Dasnoy, 1995). Until then, by promoting ‘green and clean’ living through such activities as reducing fossil fuel burning to provide cleaner air and decreasing deforestation to preserve the environment, they had inadvertently been promoting climate change mitigation behaviours (Jamison, 2010). It was not until the start of the new millennium, however, that large numbers of people began to take specific notice of climate change, not only as an environmental issue, but also as a social one. Soon, grassroots organisations specific to climate change began to emerge (Baer, 2014).

The public’s awareness of, and concern for, climate change began to gain momentum in 2006 with the release of Al Gore’s documentary An Inconvenient Truth (Nolan, 2010). Gore became the public figurehead for promoting climate change and he did much to popularise the scientific consensus on the matter (Burgmann & Baer, 2012). Also, 2006 witnessed the release of the Stern Review (Stern et al., 2006) prepared for the United Kingdom government by the economist Sir Nicholas Stern. This document informed
policymakers on the economic benefits of early intervention in climate change mitigation. As it was put, “Tackling climate change is the pro-growth strategy for the longer term...the earlier effective action is taken, the less costly it will be” (Stern et al., 2006, p. ii). In 2007, the release of the Fourth Assessment Report by the IPCC (2007), outlined the potential negative impact of climate change on such basic human needs as fresh water, food production, health and housing, and added weight to the political discussion and public awareness on the matter (Bond, 2012).

Further public concern for climate change became evident in 2009, when COP-15 was held in Copenhagen. Hopes were high that a rigorous global pact to combat climate change would eventuate. Almost 100,000 people marched on the streets of Copenhagen, making this the largest climate change protest ever recorded (Gray, 2009). Demonstrations occurred simultaneously in other parts of the world, with approximately 40,000 people marching in London (BBC News, 2009) and about 50,000 attending protests in Australian cities (Tarrant, 2009). Negotiations failed, however, and hope turned to anger with John Sauvne, leader of Greenpeace U.K. stating that “The city of Copenhagen is a crime scene tonight, with the guilty men and women fleeing to the airport” (‘Copenhagen deal reaction in quotes’, 2009).

In 2015, with global temperatures breaking records (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2015), the highly anticipated COP-21 was held in Paris. Expectations that protest would take place were high. Two weeks before the conference was to be held, however, several terrorist-related attacks occurred in Paris and a national state of emergency was declared, banning public demonstrations (Clarke, 2015). Instead of marching, activists placed over 10,000 pairs of shoes in the Place de la Republique to represent protesters who would have been there if permitted. Other protests took place
as planned, with 683,000 people marching in the ‘People’s Climate March’ in over 175 countries, including Australia (Rowling, 2015).

Along with the United Nations COP meetings, other large gatherings of climate change activists have occurred in the last few years. In 2014, the first ‘People’s Climate March’ took place to coincide with the United Nations Climate Leadership Summit held in New York (United Nations, 2014). Hundreds of thousands of people from 166 countries attended various protests. In New York alone, over 400,000 people attended (Alter, 2014). The annual ‘Earth Day’ has also increased in popularity, with ‘Earth Day’ 2012 reportedly having over one billion participants in 194 countries (Kopnina, 2012). Demonstrations such as these have served to not only increase public awareness of the issue of climate change, but also to allow everyday citizens to partake in activist actions.

**Climate Change Groups and Activists**

The climate change movement is considered by some to be the most important social movement in the Earth’s history. Due to its universal nature, the consequences, it is held, will affect every living thing in the world: “It contests current structures and power relations on behalf of all species and ecosystems” (Burgmann & Baer, 2012, p. 18). Also, Burgmann and Baer (2012) have argued that the issue is a unique one, as the solution requires global cooperation and consideration of social and inter-generational justice. This notion has been given the all-encompassing term of ‘climate justice’.

An assortment of groups exist within the climate change movement. These range from formal to informal groups, and from local to global groups. Yet, within each group there is a collective identity, as the members try to bring about political change. The movement is now focused on two strategies for mitigation of climate change, namely
the implementation of policy changes by political leaders to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and divestment from fossil fuel.

The climate change movement includes such well-established global environmental groups as Greenpeace, which now includes climate change activism as one of its priorities, encouraging members to campaign to end the mining and use of fossil fuel (Greenpeace, 2016). Organisations dedicated to climate change activism also exist. One of the most well-known is 350.org, founded in the USA in 2007 as a grassroots movement to fight climate change. The group is focused, in particular, on divestment from fossil fuel dependence and economic investment, and its strategy is to involve students in education institutions in activist action.

Both 350.org and Greenpeace are large bureaucratic organisations, with financial supporters and paid employees, and they are reinforced by a large number of volunteers. These are often local citizens, using the logistical support provided by the organisation and includes university campus groups. In general, they can be considered to be acting at the grassroots level. There also exist grassroots groups acting for the interests of their local community. These are called Climate Action Groups, and together they form the Community Climate Action Network. Such local grassroots groups form the majority of members of the climate change movement overall.

**Youth and Climate Change Action**

Today’s youth are our future global citizens, problem-solvers, decision-makers and community members. It is they who will have to manage the consequences of climate change. Hence, they are invested in the climate change movement and it is essential that they be a voice in the dialogue. In some quarters, there is a perception that youth are
disengaged from the issue of climate change. Yet, there are many climate change groups dedicated to youth involvement.

One international example is the World Student Environmental Network (WSEN) which supports student-led sustainability campaigns on university campuses. The WSEN “connects and supports students from all over the world who are striving to be incubators of the positive change needed for sustainability to be actively practised in all aspects of society” (WSEN, 2016). It aims to support campus-based groups in campaigns and holds an annual conference where group leaders come together to share skills and knowledge. The actions of those groups based in Australia will be discussed later.

In 2009, the UNFCCC allowed youth non-government organisations (NGOs) to participate in meetings and to receive support for attendance at all COP meetings (United Nations Joint Framework Initiative on Children, n.d.). As Christina Figueres, former Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC has put it, “Work by and for young people is a critical component of raising political ambition to reach a new, universal agreement on climate change” (United Nations Joint Framework Initiative on Children, 2013, p. 7). Such action, can validate the voice of youth in international climate conversations.

**Australia and Climate Change**

In 2014, the IPCC released its Fifth Assessment Report. For the first time, it published accounts of the impact of climate change according to regions. These included a section on Australasia (Reisinger et al., 2014). The chapter in question, having 37 contributing authors and citing 972 published references, contained a comprehensive and authoritative overview of potential climate change consequences for the Australasian region (Hughes, 2014). The consequences, it was held, included the following: a
continued significant decrease in rainfall in the Murray-Darling Basin and south-western and south-eastern Australia, leading to a decrease in agricultural production; a continued risk of loss of life and property due to bushfire risks in southern Australia; increased hot weather events in all Australian cities; continued threat to the survival of the Great Barrier Reef due to ocean warming and resultant acidification; and increased risks of extreme weather events causing flooding (Reisinger et al., 2014).

In 2016, some of the IPCC-predicted events occurred. The largest mass bleaching event ever recorded in the Great Barrier Reef caused the death of between 25% (Great Barrier Reef Marine Authority, 2016) and 35% (Coral Reef Studies, 2016) of its coral. This situation, it is held, was due to global warming from climate change, and scientists fear that the Reef will struggle to return to its previous state (Coral Reef Studies, 2016). In June, Australia’s east coast was ravaged by storms and severe flooding which led to the unfortunate death of several people and millions of dollars of damage to seaside homes (Peplar, 2016). In September, South Australia was lashed by a severe storm which caused the entire State to have an electricity blackout (King, McConnell, Saddler, Ison, & Dargaville, 2016). Professor Will Steffen of The Climate Council, led the resultant climate change conversation stating that, “The atmosphere is packing much more energy than 70 years ago, which contributes to the increasing intensity of such storms...This is a prelude to a disturbing future. And it’s only going to get worse if we don’t address climate change” (Climate Council, 2016).

In 2014, the Commonwealth, Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) reported that, on average, air and ocean temperatures across Australia were 0.9°C warmer than in 1910, with most of the warming having occurred since 1950 (CSIRO & Bureau of Meteorology, 2014). In 2015, Australia experienced 9 of 12 months being warmer than the established average (Blunden & Arndt, 2016) and weather statistics
indicated that heatwaves in Australia have increased in intensity and frequency over many decades (Steffen, Hughes, & Perkins, 2014). These heatwaves have the potential to affect the entire Australian public (Voice, 2016). In fact, one report has found that from 1844 to 2010, heatwaves have killed more Australians than all of the natural disasters put together, and have caused the death of at least 5332 people in the nation (Coates, Haynes, O’Brien, McAneney, & de Oliveira, 2014). Prominent Australian environmentalist and public climate change activist Tim Flannery says the relationship to climate change is undeniable (Hughes & Steffen, 2014).

Western Australia and climate change
The south-western corner of WA, which includes Perth, the State capital, is especially vulnerable to climate change. The IPCC predicted decreasing rainfall for the south west of Australia (Reisinger et al., 2014). This is already occurring with rainfall in the region having decreased by about 15% since the mid-1970s (Department of the Environment and Energy, n.d.). As a result, Perth has had to install two desalination plants, which together produce about half of the city’s water supply (Water Corporation of Western Australia, n.d.). Although the Water Corporation of Western Australia heavily advertises the sustainability of the plants, there remains concerns about the effect on local marine life due to the release of super concentrated brine into the ocean nearby (Danoun, 2007).

The south-west area of WA is one of 25 biodiversity hotspots originally recognised internationally (Myers et al., 2000). A recent report on the effects of climate change on this particular diverse region, highlights declining rainfall affecting river flow, loss of groundwater, habitat loss, more frequent bushfires than previously and an increase in disease (Bradshaw & Lane, 2016). These changes have already led to reports of 69 rare
and endangered flora species and 43 rare and endangered fauna species (Shire of Augusta-Margaret River, 2016).

**Australia’s Contribution to Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

In a 2016 international report prepared to compare climate change mitigation policies and actions by G20 countries, which together produce 75% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions, Australia rates as the worst (Climate Transparency, 2016a). On this, climate policy experts stated that if “all governments showed similar low ambition, global average warming would likely exceed 3-4°C” (Climate Transparency, 2016b, p. 4).

To the public, however, the Australian Government appears to be tackling climate change. On his Twitter account, Malcolm Turnbull, the Prime Minister at the time wrote, “Aust is tackling climate change with effective policies to cut emissions by 26 to 28 % below 2005 levels by 2030” (TurnbullMalcolm, 2016). The latter is the commitment Australia gave as part of the Paris Agreement (Prime Minister of Australia, 2016). However, if Australia’s climate change policy remains as it is, emissions will rise to more than 61% above 1990 levels by 2030, which is equivalent to a rise of 27% above 2005 levels (Climate Transparency, 2016b).

**Australian Politics and Climate Change**

Australia’s political leaders, are reticent to make policy changes because Australia is one of the world’s largest exporters of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and coal (Bureau of Resources and Energy Economics, 2014). Coal demand, however, is declining as nations slowly convert to renewable energy (International Energy Agency, 2015) and Australia’s dependency on fossil fuel exports could even be considered to be an
economic risk. In fact, economic modelling shows that if Australia changed to a 100% renewable based energy system by 2060, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita growth would be virtually the same as if Australia remained a fossil-fuel based economy (Turner, Elliston, & Diesendorf, 2013). However, the reality is that Australian political leaders are reluctant to revolutionise the nation’s energy systems due to the influence, wealth and power of mining and energy executives (Crowley, 2013).

In 2007, the then opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, was elected Prime Minister of Australia, largely due to his open support of climate change policy (Crowley, 2013). In 2008, his government proposed an emissions trading scheme which was colloquially named the ‘carbon tax’ (Department of Climate Change, 2008). The ensuing industry and public backlash led to a diminution of the scheme so as to be virtually ineffectual. The carbon tax, it is held, along with a proposed mining tax, resulted in a decrease in the ruling Labor party’s popularity ratings, and ultimately led to Kevin Rudd being replaced as Prime Minister. Popular opinion upheld that it was the ‘carbon lobby’ or mining industry which led to his demise (Crowley, 2013; Curran, 2011).

In 2013, the conservative Coalition Government [Liberal-National] party came into power with a strong election promise to abolish the carbon tax (Abbott, 2013). The new Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, openly declared climate change to be “absolute crap” (Allard, 2013). During his time as leader, he became an embarrassment in international climate change circles (Ricci, 2014), becoming the first leader in the world to repeal carbon pricing (Cox, 2014). In 2015, he reduced Australia’s renewable energy target and prohibited Federal investment in wind power (Gartrell, 2015). On wind tubines, he commented that they were “visually awful” and he wished to reduce the number “of these things” (Phillips, 2015).
In late 2015, Tony Abbott was replaced as Prime Minister by his own party. It was reported that social media and public opinion on, but not limited to, his denial of climate change contributed to his downfall (Mackenzie, 2015). The new leader proved to be little better regarding climate change policy. Within months of being in office, he reduced funding to the CSIRO climate science department.

Some hold that governments are responsible for leading the public in their action on climate change (Pietsch & McAllister, 2010; Tranter, 2011). However, governments are also strongly influenced by public opinion. Pietsch and McAllister argue that if “citizens agree with the majority of experts, government policy is likely to be far-reaching and swift” (2010, p. 218). This situation is most prevalent in advanced democracies such as Australia which has compulsory voting. In Australia, also, there exist individuals who publically advocate for change. These individuals, known as activists, continue to protest and lobby for political change on the climate change issue.

**Climate Change Movements in Australia**

The majority of Australians believe that climate change is occurring (The Climate Institute, 2016). However, the nation is rated as one of the worst in the world on climate action (Climate Transparency, 2016a). At the same time, because of the separation between public opinion and political strategies, there is a strong climate change movement within Australia. Its fundamental aim is to advocate for climate change and promote the establishment of policies aimed at substantially reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Australia’s climate change movement has been classified by Burgmann and Baer (2012), according to its hierarchical position of power. Those groups which act from ‘above’ are considered to be the most powerful in society. This tier includes
governments (both Labor and the Coalition) and corporations (members of the ‘carbon lobby’). It is these groups which have the power to make substantial changes to greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, it is also here that the climate movement is “largely absent” (p. 21). Groups in the ‘middle’ are those which bridge the gap between those above and those below, and also are those reaching out to groups below. Furthermore, they sometimes formally and informally participate in climate conversations with those above them. This middle tier includes the Australian Greens party, major environmental and climate organisations such as Greenpeace, ‘think tanks’ such as The Climate Commission, university research centres, and such public advocates as Tim Flannery. Groups acting from ‘below’ are the local, regional and national climate change movement groups and networks such as 350.org and the AYCC. Individuals at this level, it is held, also work the hardest (Burgmann & Baer, 2012).

Due to their diverse nature, the exact number of climate change groups and members in Australia is difficult to quantify. Diesendorf (2010) reported the formation of hundreds of grass-roots climate action groups from 2005 to 2010. At this time, he reported that there were over 100 groups listed on the Climate Action Network Australia website. On the same website in 2016, however, there were only 76 groups listed (Climate Action Network Australia, 2016). Nevertheless, this does not indicate a decline in climate change group numbers, as there are numerous networks and multiple websites used by these groups.

To determine the momentum in the climate change movement in the nation, one could examine numbers of attendees at popular Australian climate change marches and rallies. In 2009, over 50,000 people marched in cities across Australia as part of the ‘Walk against Warming’ (Tarrant, 2009). This number more than doubled in 2015, when over 130,000 people attended marches across Australia prior to the opening of COP-21 in
Paris (Snow & McGowan, 2015). The marches consisted of both climate change activists and concerned citizens partaking in activist actions.

**Australian Youth Activists and Climate Change Groups**

In the 2015, Australian Federal election, the media viewed Australian youth to be pivotal, in determining the outcome (Acheson, 2016; Bell, 2016; Karp, 2016). At the time, climate change was an important issue to youth (Youth Action & Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2016). The Greens Party recognised the potential of the youth vote and had the strongest climate policy of all parties (The Greens, 2017). However, over 350,000 Australians aged between 18 and 25 did not enrol to vote. This equated to almost half of the nation’s 18 year-olds (Anderson, 2016). It seemed that a significant proportion of youth were disengaged from the election. Nevertheless, there are youth engaged with politics and contemporary issues such as climate change and they engage in valuable climate change actions. Mostly they belong to one or more of the following climate change activist groups that will now be considered.

**The Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC)**

Arguably the youth-led Australian climate change movement is led by the AYCC, a not-for-profit coalition of youth organisations formed in 2007. Their mission statement indicates that they exist, “to build a generation-wide movement to solve the climate crisis before it’s too late” (AYCC, 2013). Australian youth are encouraged to take action among their peers because the “only way to solve the climate crisis is through a social movement” (AYCC, 2013). Promotion of advocacy is encouraged by annual summits for secondary school students and presentations by members at schools. In 2016, the AYCC launched the Students Climate Action Network (SCAN), a support
network specifically for secondary school students. The AYCC also incorporates Seed, the first Indigenous Australian youth climate change network (Seed, 2016). In 2017 the AYCC had over 150,000 members with local groups active in each State and Territory (AYCC, 2018).

350.org

350.org was founded in 2008 by American environmentalist Bill McKibben and several college students to encourage grassroots level action against climate change. The name stems from scientists’ belief that 350 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is ‘climate safety’ (350.org, 2016). Despite 2016 levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide passing 400ppm (Krummer, 2016), the organisation continues to encourage grassroots groups of activists to campaign against the fossil fuel industry and its investors. The aim is to “shift money and politics away from dirty energy” (350.org Australia, 2017) and leave existing fossil fuel reserves in the ground. It is unknown how many active members there are in Australia. In December 2017, however, there were seven groups listed on the Australian website (350.org Australia, 2017).

Fossil Free

‘Fossil Free’ groups grew out of 350.org, when it launched its ‘Go Fossil Free: Divest from Fossil Fuels’ campaign in 2012. The campaign called for “institutions to immediately freeze any new investment in fossil fuel companies, and [to] divest from direct ownership and any commingled funds that include fossil fuel public equities and corporate bonds within 5 years” (Fossil Free, 2017a). The call for fossil fuel divestment has been heeded by university students, who began to campaign within their learning institutions for divestment from fossil fuel. In December 2017, there were six Australian universities who had committed to partial fossil fuel divestment (Fossil Free, 2017b) and 18 continuing campaigns in Australian universities (Fossil Free, 2017c).
The Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN)

The Australian Student Network (ASEN) is the Australian branch of the Student Environment Network (SEN). This is a national network of environment groups within Australian universities. The network is run by environmental activists, who organise campaigns and collectively share information and resources. The aim is to bring “people together through education and action for social and environmental justice” (ASEN, 2016). Like the AYCC the organisation promotes education and advocacy, and every year it coordinates Students of Sustainability conferences to promote activist skill sharing and ideas.

The Australian Young Greens

The Australian Young Greens is the youth arm of the political Greens party and it forms a significant organisation to which youth activists belong. The Greens is a relatively young party in Australian politics; it was 25 years old in 2017. It is gaining in popularity with voters, having had 10 Federal and 28 State members of Parliament in 2017 (The Greens, 2017). The Greens policies are underpinned by four pillars: ecological sustainability, grassroots participatory democracy, social justice, and peace and non-violence. It is these pillars, deemed crucial to the lives of young people, which attracts them to join the party. The Australian Young Greens has groups in each State and Territory, with many based on university campuses.

Conclusion

Post-COP-21, the path for the world to take is complex. It is exhilarating that, with the enforcement of the Paris Agreement, the world has united to fight climate change; however, according to Tim Flannery, it is but the “end of the beginning. The next phase is where the real work will have to happen” (McKenzie, 2015). Climate change activists
will publicly determine whether their nations are committing enough to emissions reduction. Thus, the need for climate change activists has not diminished. Rather, it has intensified. Furthermore, youth form a significant part of the movement. These are our future leaders, our future problem-solvers and our future global citizens, and so it is on these receptive young people, we must focus much of our attention.
CHAPTER THREE

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The academic literature regarding climate change is vast. Indeed, the issue is of such global concern, that thousands of studies exist that report projects constructed on different facets of it, including the following: climate change science; public perceptions, engagement and actions; youth perceptions, engagement and actions; and activism. The following literature overview is based on a selection of research papers specifically focused on areas relevant to the study reported later in this thesis, on the activism of youth climate change activists. The areas focused upon are activism, environmental activism, and significant life research. Within each of these areas, the focus is on the development of, and influence on, youth environmental activists and, where possible, on youth climate change activists.

Activism

Contemporary social movements such as the climate change movement, are conceptualised as networks of individuals and groups who share and identify with a common set of values, and act collectively to promote change (Jamison, 2010). Within these movements are individuals known as activists. This label is rarely conceptually or operationally defined in the literature. Rather, it is alluded to as a person or citizen participating in action to bring about social and/or political change.

In the media, activism is regularly portrayed as a ‘dirty word’, being often represented by images of an angry mob of protesting citizens (Toope, Kennelly, & Deibert, 2010). Indeed, in a study of self-identified young Canadian activists, many claimed they had
faced serious policing, including arrest, for partaking in organised and peaceful marches (Kennelly, 2009). Also, Kennelly asserts that there is an uneasy tension between being a good citizen and an activist. A good citizen displays desirable and responsible characteristics. Thus, activism can be seen as an action of a good citizen, yet it can also be “demonised as an undesirable element undeserving of recognition” (2009, p. 128).

Nevertheless, the actions of an activist, need not be radical. Taking this position, Corning and Myers (2002) describe the orientation of an activist as being “to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviours spanning a range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalised acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviours” (p. 704). Activist actions therefore can be considered to be located on a continuum, ranging from those that are relatively passive, such as writing letters and supporting an online campaign, through to highly active ones, such as participating in demonstrations and performing leadership roles.

Contemporary activism occurs in a global environment intimately connected via social media networks, that cross social and national boundaries, to draw together thousands of individuals for collective action (Diani, 2003). In the last few years, the power of this connection has been demonstrated in several global climate change marches and protests. The first People’s Climate March in 2014, attracted hundreds of thousands of participants in 166 countries to advocate for climate policy change by leaders attending the United Nations Leader’s Climate Summit in New York (Alter, 2014). In 2015, the People’s Climate March coincided with COP-21 in Paris and approximately 683,000 people participated in over 175 countries (Rowling, 2015). Collective action like this can be facilitated by the global availability of social media for the dissemination of information, expression of opinion and ease of engagement in activist actions (Valenzuela, 2013).
Activism in youth

Studies of youth activism have long been reported in academic literature. Some date back to the 1960s when demonstrations and sit-ins became popular forms of both self-expression and protest by students. However, amidst the generational uprising of that decade there were concerns regarding the ‘apathy’ of youth (Block et al., 1968). This characterisation of youth has carried through into the 21st century and crosses all political and social arenas, including that of climate change.

In the first decade of the 21st century, reports emerged of a decline in young people voting in the United States (Fisher, 2012) and Europe (Bennett, 2007). Enthusiasm for political participation in Australia is more difficult to quantify due to voting being obligatory, but voter registration in 2016 indicated that approximately 380,000 Australians aged between 18 and 25 were not registered to vote in that year’s Federal election. However, assessing numbers of youth voting in elections may lead to an unfair assessment of their engagement in both political and civic arenas (Fyfe, 2009). For example, it has been suggested that youth are not disinterested in politics as such. Rather, they may be disinterested in formal politics (Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002).

Active citizenship includes more than just being involved in politics. Thus, if one includes participation in unconventional politics, reform movements, boycotts, and even community service, a characterisation of youth as apathetic may not be valid (Youniss et al., 2002). In today’s globalised world, youth civic participation is occurring in novel ways as they disengage with structured organisations and become active in more broadly defined activist actions (Harris et al., 2010). As Bennett has put it, “young citizens find greater satisfaction in defining their own political paths, including: local volunteerism, consumer activism, support for issues and causes (environmental, human rights), participation in various transnational protest activities, and efforts to form a global civil society by organising world and regional social forums” (2007, p. 4).
Also, we need to consider youth involvement in such online activities as engaging in issues and campaigns through social media forums. Online forms of activism have become popular with young citizens (Evans, Halupka, & Stoker, 2014). These have been labelled ‘clicktivism’ in both the popular media (White, 2010) and academic literature (Karpf, 2010). Sometimes, the term is used disparagingly, being widely perceived as an instant form of self-satisfaction without the need to engage meaningfully (White, 2010). Others perceive that online activism is only one part of a larger campaign (Karpf, 2010) and that while the act itself is often an impulsive one, “the individual must still determine the validity of the cause; relevant to the effort required, and to their own, often preconscious, political moral/ethical/political code (Halupka, 2014, p. 119). As Bang (2004) sees it, young activists engaging in actions such as these are ‘everyday makers’ and are politically and socially active in their own unique, often unrecognised ways.

**Activist identity**

Research surrounding activists often makes use of the term activist identity. An identity relates to the “traits and characteristics, social relations, roles and social group memberships that define who one is” (Oysterman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012, p. 69). They are fluid and change over time and in different cultural and social contexts. For example, a young adult could have the identity of a student, athlete, friend, sibling, activist and others. Together, these identities form an individual’s overall self-identity and help him or her to make meaning within a particular context (Ryan & Deci, 2012). An activist identity is thus only one part of an individual’s overall self-identity and may differ in importance and relevance over time and place.

Erikson’s (1950) influential framework for psychosocial development in an individual emphasises a young person’s search for an identity and the important role of social
context in the emergence of one’s self-identity (Levesque, 2011). Erikson (1950) proposed eight stages of psychosocial development. The stage of adolescence encompasses the conflict of identity versus role confusion. At this stage of life, he argues, youth need to make decisions about career, gender roles, politics, and religion, and if they fail to do so, role confusion may occur. Marcia (1993) further expanded on this stage elaborating notions of ‘exploration’ and ‘commitment’. As adolescents ‘explore’ their identity, they try alternative beliefs, values and actions, and when one of these gives them more satisfaction than others, they may ‘commit’ to it. The next stage, that of young adulthood, is when an individual must develop intimate relationships or feel isolation (Erikson, 1950). Thus, adolescence and young adulthood are viewed as being a time for the search for both identity and belonging.

Adopting the sort of developmental approach outlined above, researchers often focus on variables which they see as having the potential to influence the engenderment of a civic identity. This kind of identity, as described by Youniss, McLellan and Yates, “entails the establishment of individual and collective senses of social agency, responsibility for society, and political-moral awareness” (1997, p. 620). Their meta-review of associated research studies argued that youth who participate in organised civic engagement through secondary school activities or community service projects, are more likely to vote and to join community organisations as adults, than adults who do not participate in civic activities in secondary school (Youniss et al., 1997). In other words, at this stage of adolescence, youth explore their sense of self and, if given the opportunity, may commit to a civic identity.

The formation of an activist identity, one might argue, is aligned with that of a civic identity. The development of an activist identity has been shown to be influenced by a combination of interconnected factors (Buttigieg & Pace, 2013). Studies have shown
that parental, role model and peer influence, can affect an individual’s propensity to activist action (Arnold et al., 2009; Chawla, 1999). Family and friends exert a strong positive influence on youth activism, through social networks and exposure to organisations (McLellan & Youniss, 2003). Significant life events may also be influential (Chawla, 1998; Scott, 2011). These could include personal experience of injustice (Harré, 2007). Societal pressures may also influence a young person’s perceived ability to engage in activist actions. For example, in a period of economic prosperity, youth may be supported by their parents and thus have more time to devote to activism (Harré, 2007).

Considering Erikson’s (1950) position that the stage of young adulthood involves a search for relationships, it is not surprising that the theme of belonging consistently appears in youth activist research. Both Kennelly (2009) and Harris et al. (2010) interviewed youth activists and described the need for, and sense of belonging felt, by youth affiliated with an activist organisation. On this point, Harré argued that as participants undertake activist actions, they “increase the sense of solidarity and intense joint experiences that create powerful bonding and a shared history” (2007, p. 717). Also, as youth of similar values belong to particular organisations, this may facilitate a sense of acceptance and belonging (Baumeister et al., 2000).

Gordon and Taft (2011) argue that most research on the development of youth activism has focused on such adult influences as families, educational institutes, and community and government organisations. Youniss et al. maintain that “political socialisation is not something that adults do to adolescents, it is something they do for themselves” (2002, p. 133). It is thus important, to understand activism and its influence from the perspective of the youths themselves.
Environmental Activism

Active members of an environmental or climate change group are commonly labelled as being environmentalists. The term was first used in the 1960s to denote “people who were concerned about the physical environment, [and] the pollution of our air and water” (Wiley, 1998, para.3). Tesch and Kempton (2004), however, assert that the term is ambiguous and can lead to difficulty in data interpretation. For example, in 1999, 50% of Americans responding to a Gallup poll identified themselves as being environmentalists. However, in the following year, 2000, the questions discriminated between environmental attitudes and environmental actions. This time, 83% agreed with the goals of an environmental movement, but only 16% said they were active participants within the movement (Saad & Dunlap, 2000).

To better define the term, Tesch and Kempton (2004) interviewed adult members of 20 different environmental organisations. Based on these results, the term environmentalist was divided into four broad categories:

i) those who identify with caring about the environment, but take no public action;

ii) those who act to conserve local habitats;

iii) those who take political or civic action through writing to politicians and attending public hearings; and

iv) those who take public action through civil disobedience such as attending demonstrations.

An activist has previously been defined as one who engages in “various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviours spanning a range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalised acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviours” (Corning & Myers, 2002, p. 704). Using this definition of the actions of an activist, the last three
categories include active environmental or climate change activists. The latter individuals were the focus of the study reported later in this thesis.

One way to estimate environmental activist activity, is to analyse environmental organisations’ membership, using self-reported data from international or national surveys. Data taken from the International Social Survey Program from 1993, 2000 and 2010 demonstrated that in developed countries there was a small decline in environmental group membership from 1993 to 2010 (Dalton, 2015). Also, in 2007, 8.0% of the Australian population was a member of an environmental organisation (Tranter, 2010). More recent Australian numbers, however, are difficult to locate.

The small reported global decrease in environmental organisation membership from 2000 to 2010 (Dalton, 2015) could be viewed as indicating the decline of environmental activism, or as Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2007) provocatively declared, the ‘death of environmentalism’. Some blame the transformation of environmental organisations from mobilisation to institutionalisation, such that high profile public activities decrease and attempts to influence policy increase (Tranter, 2010). Such a lack of protest might influence younger activists’ membership decisions. Rather than being seen as a decline, however, it could be viewed as being an alteration in activist actions, as demonstrated by the ordinary citizens participating in demonstrations such as the annual People’s Climate March.

**Environmental and climate change activism in youth**

There is a large amount of academic literature supporting young people’s lack of engagement with climate change. Few articles, however, conceptually or operationally define the term ‘engagement’. It is a term that has been used in the context of climate change to discuss: interest in and awareness of climate change (Stevenson, Peterson, Bondell, et al., 2014; Wibeck, 2013); concern about the consequences of climate change
to the environment and humans (O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Ojala, 2012); the construct of pro-environmental behaviour (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Ojala, 2011); as well as activism (Arnold et al., 2009; Fielding et al., 2008). In the study reported later in this thesis, the term was used according to the definition of Lorenzoni et al, who consider engagement to be concurrently composed of cognitive, affective and behavioural facets: “In other words, it is not enough for people to know about climate change in order to be engaged; they also need to care about it, be motivated and able to take action” (2007, p. 446).

Many believe that a lack of youth engagement in climate change is due to a deficiency in their conceptual understanding of the science. There is much research demonstrating young people’s poor understanding of such crucial concepts as the natural greenhouse effect and the carbon cycle amongst secondary school students (Boon, 2015; Dawson, 2015) and university students (Papadimitriou, 2004; Wachholz et al., 2014). Other research has focused on students’ conceptual understanding and its relationship to pro-environmental actions (Daniel, Stanisstreet, & Boyes, 2004; McNeill & Vaughn, 2012). Connell et al. (2014) found that despite the majority of Australian secondary student participants in their study displaying strong characteristics of an environmental identity, the majority had low levels of environmental knowledge and only half reported undertaking pro-environmental actions. On this, some consider that personal inconvenience may be a stronger influence on pro-environmental actions than is climate change knowledge. Boyes et al. (2009) found that even if secondary school students believe an action is useful in mitigating climate change consequences, such as using public transport, they are less willing to act in a pro-environmental manner if the personal inconvenience is large.
It is now thought that youth disengagement with climate change could be due to more than just lack of understanding or simple inconvenience. It is thought that it may be a coping response to the stressor of climate change. Research shows youth are anxious about the future global consequences of climate change (Harris et al., 2010; Strazdins & Skeat, 2011), with Australian secondary school students reporting “overwhelming feelings of environmental concern, mixed with frustration, cynicism and action paralysis” (Connell, Fien, Lee, Sykes, & Yencken, 1999, p. 95). Ojala (2012) found that some youth cope by minimising the seriousness of the situation through disengagement from the issue. Others concentrate on such ways to solve the problem as finding more information. Another coping strategy is ‘meaning-focused coping’. Youth adopting this strategy, acknowledge the stressor of climate change, yet attempt to evoke positive emotions through engaging actively with the issue (Ojala, 2012).

There are some youth who overcome climate change ‘action paralysis’ (Connell et al., 1999) and engage in ‘meaning-focused coping’ (Ojala, 2012) by becoming youth climate change activists. Early research found that young people from the middle class had a strong affinity for the environmental movement (Rose, 1997; Skogen, 1996). Similarly, Tranter (1996) found a significant relationship between tertiary education and environmental activism. This ‘cognitive mobilisation’ by those who are well educated and informed, allows for valuable understanding and skills, and means those who are cognitively mobilised are more likely to be involved in environmental activism (Inglehart, 1990). Regarding climate change activism, this view has changed, as it has become clear that as developing countries experience the effects of climate change, concern by their populations regarding environmental issues has increased, and in some cases has surpassed that of those in industrialised nations (Dunlap & York, 2008).
The perception of cognitive mobilisation in environmental activism can work as a barrier for those who do not consider themselves to be sufficiently educated. Strandbu and Krange (2003) interviewed young people aged 15–20, who were members of environmental organisations, as well as some who had environmental values but did not belong to an environmental organisation. They found that for working class youth, there were several ‘symbolic fences’ which were inhibiting their participation. These included the style and cultural identity of the members, as well as the intellectual image of the group. They concluded that the distinguishing features of the organisation and its members made some young people feel at ease, and others uncomfortable. This indicates that environmental organisations may need to focus on being inclusive (Fisher, 2015).

**Environmental identity**

Previously, identity has been defined as the “traits and characteristics, social relations, roles and social group memberships that define who one is” (Oysterman et al., 2012, p. 69). An individual is composed of many identities, which differ in time, place and importance over time. The academic literature contains frequent reference to an ‘environmental identity’. However, there is no consensus on the definition of this term, as there are “multiple, competing, and typically ambiguous meanings” in the literature (Dunlap & McCright, 2008, p. 1045). Some authors relate an environmental identity to the relationship or bond an individual has with the environment, based on personal and social experiences (Clayton, 2003). Others relate it to the pro-environmental actions one will take, such as recycling (Mannetti, Pierro, & Livi, 2004) and carbon emission reduction actions (Whitmarsh & O’Neill, 2010).

The definition of environmental identity adopted in the study reported later, was that of Thomashow who broadly described an environmental identity, as referring to “all the
different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self” (1996, p. 3). In the literature, the term environmentalist (used in reference to an environmental activist) is conflated with environmental identity. However, it is clear from the research literature that an environmentalist identity is only one facet of an environmental identity.

An environmental identity can vary in intensity from a strong connection, as is the case for an environmental activist, to a minimal one. Using quantitative instruments, facets of an environmental identity can be measured and compared to other quantifiable constructs, thus predicting some form of relationship. Whitmarsh and O'Neill (2010) developed a scale for measuring a general environmental identity. Using it they found that a generic ‘green identity’ is a predictor of a range of such pro-environmental actions as water and energy conservation, waste reduction and eco-shopping. Some research also has identified a specific behaviour identity as a strong predictor of such behaviour as recycling (Mannetti et al., 2004). Equally, Fielding et al. (2008) found a strong environmental activist identity is a significant predictor of environmental activist behaviour, as is membership of an environmental organisation.

In the context of climate change, there appears to be little if any study undertaken of a specific ‘climate change identity’, or ‘climate change activist identity’, with these constructs often being examined within an environmental identity or in terms of a social identity (Fielding & Hornsey, 2016). Yet this is one of the leading concerns of today’s youth (The Climate Institute, 2016). Also, due to climate change consequences influencing populations and the environment both locally and globally it is, arguably, the issue on which they are most active.
Significant Life Experience Research

Research surrounding environmental activists has often focussed on the influences on their development. Early on, Tanner (1980) used significant life experience research in adult environmentalists. Forty-five staff employed in conservation organisations were asked to write an autobiographical statement, describing the shaping influences on their decision to work in conservation. Forty-four of the respondents mentioned experiences in the outdoors, as being a significant experience in their youth. Of these, more than half indicated they had frequent contact with nature, many of them having grown up in a rural setting. The other frequently mentioned experience was that of being with significant others, including parents, teachers and other adult role models.

A number of studies followed on from Tanner’s (1980) research, further investigating significant life experiences of adult environmental activists and educators, with most studies reporting an early positive experience with nature was central to the life path of an environmental activist (Chawla, 1999; Horwitz, 1996; Wells & Lekies, 2006). Other significant life experiences common amongst adult environmental activists and educators included: influential adults including parents and teachers (Chawla, 1999; Palmer, 1993); education (Palmer, 1993; Sward, 1999); reading environmental books (Chawla, 1999; Tanner, 1980); witnessing habitat alteration or destruction (Sward, 1999; Tanner, 1980); and concern for social justice (Horwitz, 1996; Sward, 1999).

Some authors view Tanner’s (1980) research as being the first occasion when the variable known as ‘environmental sensitivity’ was investigated, although he did not use this term himself. Also, he claimed to be unsure as to the origins of the term and said he was not investigating such constructs in his research. In a later publication, Tanner claimed that at that time he was “interested only in formative experiences leading to political action, not in any sort of intervening variable” (1998, p. 421). Nevertheless,
Hungerford and Volk went on to define ‘environmental sensitivity’ as an “empathetic perspective towards the environment” (1990, p. 261) and to state that it is a prerequisite towards environmentally responsible action.

Chawla (1998) reviewed significant life experience studies which investigated self-reported sources of environmental sensitivity. She determined that there were remarkable similarities in significant life experiences which contribute to an environmental identity. These, she said, were essentially interactions between an external environment and internal environment. Those which have been identified in significant life experience research mostly belong to the physical world, or the external environment, involving interaction with nature and influential others. Few, however, address the ‘silent side’ of these experiences: “the internal environment of the child who receptively responds to these places and people” (Chawla, 1998, p. 380). This internal environment of an individual, or, ‘environmental sensitivity’, is very challenging to investigate compared to the external environment.

The review by Chawla (1998) began a lively debate on the value of such research. The relevance of the significant life experiences of adult environmental activists to modern day youth was questioned by Gough (1999). She asserted that an intergenerational gap was increasing due to media and technological influences and the diminishing ability of youth to interact with nature. Payne (1999) highlighted that formative experiences reported by environmental activists may also have been experienced by individuals indifferent to the environment.

To address the latter concern, Wells and Lekies (2006) interviewed 2000 members of the ‘general population’ in America to examine how childhood nature experiences could shape a life trajectory with respect to environmental attitudes and actions by any individual, not just environmental activists. They found childhood experience with
nature, especially participation in ‘wild’ nature, had a positive association with environmental attitudes and action overall. Those who had experience in ‘domestic’ aspects of nature, which are defined as being man-made natural areas such as parks, had a less positive relationship to pro-environmental actions. In middle school students, Stevenson, Peterson, Carrier, et al. (2014) found only a limited positive relationship between time spent outdoors and pro-environmental action, unlike the strong positive influence found in previous significant life experience research on adult environmental activists (Palmer, 1993). This, it was concluded, was due to a decline in ‘wild’ nature experiences and more organised ‘domestic’ nature activities.

Worldwide now there is less opportunity than previously for adults and children to experience both ‘wild’ and ‘domestic’ nature. In Australia, decreasing garden size (Pike, 2013) along with increased time spent looking at digital screens (Houghton et al., 2015), contributes to less time spent in ‘domestic’ nature. In fact, 1 in 4 children under the age of 16 spend less than 2 hours of their spare time playing outdoors each week (Planet Ark, 2013). Experience with ‘wild’ nature is also declining with 1 in 3 parents with children under 16 reporting their children have never spent time camping or bushwalking (Planet Ark, 2013).

This lack of interaction with nature, arguably, can lead to disengagement with, and lack of concern for, the environment, and can also become a generational issue. Environmentally disengaged younger and subsequent generations may accept a degraded environment as being normal. Kahn (2002) labelled this ‘environmental generational amnesia’.
Significant life experience research on youth

Significant life experience research has been used in studies on youth environmental activists, to determine which factors are important for promoting environmental citizenship through environmental education. Interviews with 12 young environmental leaders in Canada, were conducted by Arnold et al. (2009) to compare significant life experiences with results from adult environmental activists and educators (Chawla, 1999; Horwitz, 1996; Tanner, 1980). Findings were similar, with the main influences being: outdoors experiences in childhood; friends; adult role models; and youth groups, conferences and gatherings. The main differences in youth environmental activists was the inclusion of groups, conferences and gatherings, and the greater role of friends and role models in engaging in environmental activities.

These two influences are in accord with Erikson’s (1950) life-stages of adolescence and emerging adulthood, when individuals are searching for both identity and belonging. It is this need to belong which can conflict with an individual’s need for differentiation and self-expression (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Whitehouse (2014) interviewed two Year 10 girls who won an environmental award for instigating a recycling project within their school, but as a consequence, came up against opposition from their peers. The students struggled with their environmental identity and their need-to-belong and had to negotiate and position themselves as environmentalists who were trying to help in a small way, but not as ‘greenies’.

Advice from adult environmental activists to environmentally sensitive youth is often to join an environmental organisation, where they can form friendships with like-minded people who can provide a network of support (Chawla, 1999). Youth environmental activists themselves also recommend finding a group of like-minded people who can provide friendship and teamwork (Buttigieg & Pace, 2013). To be accepted into a group
of people with similar ideologies as oneself and to find an important sense of purpose is invaluable to the formation of an individual’s self-identity as well as one’s environmental identity. Adults with a strong environmental identity are likely to be environmental activists (Horton, 2003; Horwitz, 1996). This finding is the same with regard to youth activists (Matsuba et al., 2012).

Arnold et al. found that the influence of peers and role models on environmental activists at the life stage of emerging adulthood is strong: “In every case, the participant’s relations with other passionate and influential people combined uniquely with powerful experiences as the key to becoming a young environmental leader” (2009, p. 33). Buttigieg and Pace (2013) interviewed three youth leaders in a climate change action group in Malta and found similar factors operating to those identified by Arnold et al. (2009). These included experiences with nature, the importance of adult role models and friendship with peers. They concluded that there is no single factor which promotes environmental activism. Rather, it involves a combination of interconnected factors.

As an adjunct to significant life experience research, Fisher (2015) interviewed 17 youth climate activists from 14 countries to investigate their life trajectories and compare those from developed and developing countries. Most participants described a ‘transformative experience’, which they identified as committing them to climate change action. For them, this included both local negative experiences and global long-term issues. Also, he found participants were concerned not only with climate change and the environment, but also with social injustice issues.

On this, Buttigieg and Pace (2013) have argued that committing to climate change activism requires commitment to both nature and social justice values. One could argue that climate change activists today are committed to both as they publicly advocate for
environmental justice alongside climate justice. A recent notion of ‘climate change activism’ then, encompasses concern for both the environment and vulnerable people, as it “characterises the disparities of responsibility and impact” of climate change (Roberts & Parks, 2009, p. 393) and considers the legacy these young people and their children are facing (Molesworth, 2016).

Conclusion

The battle for climate change mitigation is ongoing and is likely to continue well into the century. Part of this battle involves activists continuing to place pressure on leaders to make policy changes. The literature shows that while youth can be politically, socially and environmentally disengaged, they can also be politically, socially and environmentally engaged. To date, however, research attention has been focused on mainly the development of, and influences on, adult and youth environmental activists. Unfortunately, there is very little, if any, research on youth climate change activists. This research reported in later chapters aimed to fill this gap. The aim of the research, was to generate locally-based theory regarding the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities.
CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The literature overview presented in Chapter Three, highlighted that despite the global importance of climate change and the emerging global climate change movement, few qualitative studies have been conducted focussing on youth climate change activists and their perspectives on their activist activities. The study reported in the remaining chapters was undertaken in response to this deficit. The locally-based theory generated from the study concerns the progressive journey to activism undertaken by youth climate change activists, from awareness, through commitment to persistence within the realm of climate change activism.

At this stage it should be acknowledged that the theory developed in this study was not expected to be a ‘nomethemic theory’ which has predictive qualities. Rather, it was considered to be an ‘ideographic theory’ which is descriptive in nature and explains particular experiences or human actions within a specific socio-cultural context (O'Donoghue, 2007). Such locally-based theories cannot be used to predict what may occur in a different context; however, they are of use in making comparisons to themes or events which may occur in similar phenomena (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken in this study. It begins with the theoretical approach adopted to frame the investigation, and discusses the use of the paradigm of interpretivism, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, and the methodology of grounded theory. Next, the data collection process and data analysis methods are outlined, along with details of the youth climate change activists interviewed for the study. Finally, a discussion of the strategies taken to try to ensure
the trustworthiness of the study is presented, along with a consideration of ethical concerns addressed.

**The Research Approach**

The aim of this study was to generate locally-based theory regarding the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities. When generating theory, the researcher needs to begin “as close as possible to the ideal of no theory under consideration and no hypotheses to test” (Eisenhardt, 2011, p. 12). Thus, the research approach that underpinned the study was chosen to ensure the results focused on the perspectives of the youth climate change activists themselves. This research approach was based on three levels frequently used to describe qualitative research (O'Donoghue, 2007), namely the paradigm of interpretivism, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, and the methodology of grounded theory. Each of these levels will now be considered in turn.

A methodology framework or paradigm, is “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). In the research being reported here, the paradigm used is interpretivism. Within this paradigm ‘understanding’ is key, with the researcher using his or her skills as a social being to try to understand how others interpret and make sense of their own world (O'Donoghue, 2007). Multiple realities are assumed within this paradigm, such that the generation of theory is dependent on the researcher’s interpretation of the area under review (Charmaz, 2006). Thus results “explicitly provide an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2014, p. 349). Adopting interpretivism allowed for an open interpretation of data, without prior assumptions or beliefs being made.

The interpretivist theoretical position of symbolic interactionism was used to further focus the methodology in order to generate locally-based theory on the perspectives of youth
climate change activists. Central to this theoretical position is the concept of a ‘perspective’, which can be defined as a framework through which people make sense of the world (Woods, 1992). There are three basic postulates of symbolic interactionism, as defined by Woods (1992) as follows:

i) Human beings give meaning to objects and act towards them based on this meaning. This meaning is a construct, developed within a social world using symbols such as language.

ii) The meaning given to objects through symbols is a continuous process. The individual constructs and modifies meaning according to changing factors such as social interaction.

iii) The construction and modification of meaning occurs within a social context. Thus social interaction affects the meaning determined by the individual.

In other words, symbolic interactionism focuses on how meanings are constructed through individuals’ actions and relationships within the social area in question. The use of this theoretical position allowed the researcher to generate locally-based substantive theory regarding the world of youth climate change activists.

The process of collecting and analysing data to generate substantive theory was based on grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; O'Donoghue, 2007). This involved analysis of interview transcripts to generate theory, which was ‘grounded’ in the data provided by the youth climate change activists themselves. On this approach, Glaser (2002) argued that grounded theory methods transcend all descriptive methods, because they allow the researcher to generate their own concepts from the data. What grounded theory is, he wrote, “is the generation of emergent conceptualisations into integrated patterns, which are denoted by categories and their properties” (p. 2). These categories, and the relationships between them, led to the generation of the substantive theory reported later.
A grounded theory approach is inductive. It involves engagement in simultaneous data collection and analysis, which Corbin and Strauss (2008) call the ‘science’ of qualitative research. Thus, as data were collected by the researcher in this study, concepts were generated which were validated against new and previous data. This ‘constant comparison’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach ensured that comparisons of emerging concepts were made at all stages of data collection and analysis.

**The Central Research Question**

The aim of this study was to generate locally-based theory regarding the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities. This aim led to the development of the following central research question: What locally-based theory can be generated on youth climate change activists’ perspectives on their activist activities? From the format of this wording it is clear that this is not the sort of specific question one poses in a ‘typical’ positivist study. Rather, it is a question that makes clear that the outcome of pursuing it will be theory generated inductively.

**The Data Collection Process**

Within this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted using guiding questions to generate conversation questions. The value in this process is the flexibility it gives the researcher, to respond to, and explore, participants’ responses (Punch & Oancea, 2014), especially as interviews progress and themes being generated can be explored and developed.

The initial set of ‘conversation’ data collection questions was developed from guiding questions yielded from cogitating Blackledge and Hunt’s (1985) key components of a ‘perspective’. They hold that a ‘perspective’ consists of: the individuals’ aims and/or
intentions; the strategies they use to achieve these aims and/or intentions, the significance the individuals attach to the situation; the outcomes individuals expect to achieve; and the reasons individuals give for their activity. The following central guiding questions were formulated in light of these key components:

i) What are the aims and/or intentions of the youth climate change activists? What reasons do they give for these aims and/or intentions?

ii) What strategies do the youth climate change activists say they use to realise their aims and/or intentions? What reasons do they give for using these strategies?

iii) What do the youth climate change activists see as the significance of their aims and/or intentions and strategies? What reasons do they give for this significance?

iv) What outcomes do the youth climate change activists expect from pursuing their aims and/or intentions? What reasons do they give for expecting these outcomes?

‘Conversation’ questions were generated from these data collection questions and were varied according to participants’ responses and to what they indicated to be their areas of interest on the topic.

**Participants**

Youth climate change activists were selected through the snowball sampling technique, a form of nonprobability selection (Creswell, 2014). It was recognised that in using this technique, some participants would be known to each other. This was unavoidable as Perth is an isolated city and the total number of active youth climate change activists is small. Furthermore, the climate organisations often work collaboratively on actions. As those interviewed displayed a wide range of ages, roles and organisations, the kind of diversity sought for theory generation was forthcoming.

Emails of leaders of climate organisations are freely available online. Two were initially contacted via email to participate in the study. Through these contacts, a list of youth
climate change activists with their contact details was generated. In total 19 activists were emailed. Of these, 11 agreed to be interviewed, but only eight eventually participated.

At the time the study was conducted, all eight participants were active in the climate change movement, being members of a related organisation and taking an active role within it. These roles included leadership and being general volunteers. Ages ranged from 18 to 27. Six of the participants were female and two were male. All of the main climate change organisations in Perth were represented by the participants. These organisations are: the AYCC, Fossil Free, and 350.org.

The participants also belonged to the following environmental and sustainability groups: The Greens party, The Western Australian Student Environmental Network (WASEN) and the Environmental Department of the University Student Guild. Table 1, to follow, shows the information pertaining to each youth climate change activist who participated in this study.
Table 1. Data on youth climate change activists interviewed for this study (2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Climate change organisation</th>
<th>Current role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>WASEN, Fossil Free</td>
<td>Leader, General volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>AYCC</td>
<td>General volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>AYCC</td>
<td>General volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>University Guild</td>
<td>Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>AYCC</td>
<td>Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Greens, Fossil Free, University Guild</td>
<td>Leader, General volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia*</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>350.org</td>
<td>General volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>AYCC</td>
<td>General volunteer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These participants had been active for less than a year.

The Data Analysis Process

Data analysis was inductive in nature and grounded theory methods were used. All audiotaped interviews were transcribed by the researcher and analysed in two stages. The initial phase involved using open-coding and allowed for words and phrases to be labelled and coded. This approach helps to “categorise, summarise and account for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43).

The following is an example of the open coding which was used in the initial analysis of each interview. This extract is from a transcript of an interview with Emily, who had been active in her organisation for less than a year. Here she is discussing whether she considers herself to be an activist.
**Interview Extract**

*Interviewer:*

Would you call yourself an activist?

*Emily:*

Depends on your definition of an activist, because I think a true activist, no, because the stereotype around a true activist is yelling at politicians and going to protests every second day kind of thing, and honestly, Amy is my vision of a true activist. But at the same time I think activism, particularly in an organisation that I’m involved in, is changing. People in, climate change activism as a movement, it’s moving more towards, rather than yelling at people and telling them they’re doing it wrong, working with them to get them on side, if that makes sense. So the protests and stuff, while they’re necessary, they don’t always work and it is more trying to work with organisations and with the community, and get everyone into the movement rather than screaming at them and telling them they’re doing it wrong [laughs]. So by the traditional definition of activist, no, but I’m standing up for climate change and I’m making my voice heard, and I’m making the organisation’s voice heard, and so in a way, yes.

**Coding**

- Does not consider herself a ‘true’ activist
- Stereotype of an activist
- Perception of a ‘true’ activist as one who partakes in direct action
- Activism within her organisation is changing
- Climate change activism becoming more about conversations with people (advocacy?)
- Does not believe direct action always works
- Intention is to increase awareness of others and involve them in the climate movement
- Offers a different perception of an activist
- More focused on advocacy.

Another example of open coding follows. In this extract, Natalie, who has been part of the climate change movement for four years, is discussing why she joined the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, and any intentions she had upon joining.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Extract</th>
<th>Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviewer:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So why did you specifically choose to join the AYCC at the beginning?</td>
<td>Mentions the environmental movement being concerned about climate change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Natalie:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think a lot of the environment movement was talking about climate change but there was no specific voice for young people and it felt really cool to have your voice heard in a space that was only for young people. And to be young you bring a unique perspective to this, and we have a duty but we also have a right to live and enjoy the same climate that our parents and our grandparents had, and to demand that right. So I think youth spaces are really important.</td>
<td>Specifically wanted to take action and be with other youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviewer:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you explain what you expected or hoped to achieve by joining the AYCC?</td>
<td>Feels an obligation to do something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Natalie:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expected to, well I wanted to do something. I just wanted something to happen and I wanted to join up with other people who were like-minded, and who also wanted to take action. I wanted to hear people’s perspectives, because everyone I think has kind of different reasons why they want action on climate change, and all of those diversity of reasons are what makes the movement stronger.</td>
<td>Also feels it is her right to have a similar future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sees youth as important in this fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intended to be active and do something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wanted to join a group of like-minded people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interested in others’ perspectives on the issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does climate change affect others?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the second phase of analysis, what Denzin (1998) calls ‘transformation’ took place. This is where the researcher started to develop categories, consider relationships between them, and identify the conditions that applied in both cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Written notes taken by the researcher both during and after each interview were also drawn upon in this analysis phase. Overall, the process resulted in the development of the concepts which form the substantive theory presented later in this thesis.

Tesch (1990) views comparison as the main activity in grounded theory methods. On this, he stated:

The method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence, etc. (p. 96)

It follows that during analysis of the first interview, data could only be compared with data within the transcript of that particular interview. However, once more than one interview had been transcribed and coded, comparison was undertaken between interviews, with data either supporting or contradicting developing concepts.

**The Trustworthiness of the Study**

The trustworthiness of the interview data and resultant theory presented in Chapters Five to Seven, can be assessed using quality criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). They proposed four quality criteria which provide a framework for researchers working in the interpretivist paradigm, to ensure an accurate picture is presented of the phenomenon studied. These criteria are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these criteria will now be considered in turn.
Credibility

Credibility addresses something approaching what positivists would see as the internal validity of the study. In other words, it tries to ensure that the study actually addresses the research question. Credibility was sought through the use of grounded theory methods to ensure that resultant themes, concepts and the relationships between them, were generated from the data itself. The youth activists who participated, came from a range of climate change activist organisations, had different roles within the organisations, and had varying years of experience. Thus, a wide range of perspectives from youth climate change activists were voiced, meeting the requirement in interpretive studies that variety be canvassed.

As previously outlined, five major guiding questions were developed using Blackledge and Hunt’s (1985) key components of a ‘perspective’. Using a semi-structured interview schedule with conversation questions deduced from the central guiding questions did not mean that a rigid approach was followed. Rather, it allowed for questions to be altered according to the responses of the participants. On completion of the data analysis, the themes generated were further developed through follow-up emails with some participants.

Transferability

Transferability addresses to some extent what qualitative researchers see as the external validity of the study, or how well the results can be applied to other situations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that since the results in qualitative inquiry are dependent on responses from a small number of individuals, in a particular context, at an exact moment in time, transferability, as it is understood by statistical researchers, is inherently impossible. Stake (2008) offers an alternative view seeing each study as an example within a broader group, allowing for the possibility of reader transferability.
On this point, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, that the researcher should provide “the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

‘Thick description’, which has been used throughout the study being reported here, includes background information providing the context of youth climate change activism in WA, background information on the participants and climate change activist organisations to which they belong, the description of the data analysis approach adopted, the logical and concise presentation of the theoretical notions, and relevant examples from interview transcripts.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to the trustworthiness of the findings. A strategy widely accepted as one that demonstrates the stability of data and the development of theory in qualitative studies is the creation of an ‘audit trail’. This process allows readers to follow the relationship or ‘trail’ between the collection of data and the generation of theory (O'Donoghue, 2007). The audit trail developed in the study being reported here included the following: handwritten notes taken during and after the interview, including impressions, any response which stood out, and any which may have differed from previous youth activist responses; transcripts with notes and highlighted quotes of interest; a collection of quotes and themes to support emerging themes and concepts; handwritten notes on the developing theory; and multiple drafts of themes, concepts and the resultant theory. This extensive collection of raw data, process notes and materials, allows readers to make judgements about the trustworthiness of the substantive theory generated.
Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the positionality of the researcher in all aspects of the research. That is, it relates to trying to ensure that the results are “the results of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (Stake, 2008, p. 72). The present researcher’s own acknowledgement of supporting the ideals of climate change activism has been previously outlined. See ‘Positionality’ in Chapter One.

Ethical Considerations

Before potential participants in the study were approached, ethics approval was obtained from The University of Western Australia. Each youth climate change activist was initially approached by email, the content of which included a description of the purpose of the study. It was made clear that participation was voluntary and there would be no disadvantage to youth climate change activists if they declined to participate.

Once the interviewed youth activist responded positively and a confirmed time and date for interviewing was arranged, a copy of the participant information form and of the consent form were emailed. The participant information form contained details of the study, including its purpose, the interview details, the potential benefits of the study, and an assurance that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Upon arrival for the interviews, all participants were given a hard copy of the participant information form to read and they signed the consent form before the interview began.

Interviews took place in a private room, to try to ensure personal privacy, and all participants were informed that the interview was being audiotaped; they all consented. Once the data were collected, the audio recordings were secured on a password protected computer, and later transcribed. All personal details have remained
confidential in the presentation of the data and pseudonyms have been used throughout the exposition. These pseudonyms will continue to be used in any future publications based on the study.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the research approach used in the study being reported here, which aimed to generate the substantive theory presented later in the thesis. It has outlined the research paradigm of interpretivism, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, and the research methodology of grounded theory. The data collection process and analysis were discussed, along with the constant comparison method used to acknowledge and clarify concepts and themes generated. Finally the trustworthiness of the study has been discussed, along with ethical considerations. The locally-based theory is now outlined in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

In being a study which aimed to generate theory, the presentation of that theory in the results chapters and in the concluding chapter of this thesis is in the present tense. This is simply because it makes no sense to present a theory in the past tense, as occurs in the presentation of a case study (which this thesis was not concerned with). However, where examples from the study upon which the theory is based are given, these are presented in the past tense.
CHAPTER FIVE

FIRST SET OF RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter, and the two which follow, present the three central elements of the locally-based theory generated in relation to the central research question addressed in this study. The question was as follows: ‘What locally-based theory can be generated on the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities?’ This question was pursued in the case of youths currently active in the climate change movement in Perth, WA. The central proposition of the theory generated from data collected within this context, is that youth climate change activists undergo a progressive journey both towards, and throughout, their activism, and that this takes place through three stages. The first stage is designated the stage of progressing from awareness of climate change to having active concern. The second stage is designated the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism. The third stage is designated the stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism. This chapter presents a detailed exposition on the first stage. Chapters Six and Seven will deal with the second stage and the third stage respectively.

The First Stage:
The Stage of Progressing from Awareness of Climate Change to Having Active Concern

Usually, youth climate change activists possess a general awareness of climate change as an environmental and social issue in the early years of their youth. However, they do not feel concern about the matter during this initial period. Rather, at some point they have an experience which ‘triggers’ a progression from general awareness of climate
change to concern about climate change. This concern then further progresses to become active concern. This active concern is such that they seek to become, and then do become, active members within a climate change activist organisation.

The term active concern is used in this exposition to define the process that youth climate change activists undergo towards the end-point of the first stage. It relates to a ‘concerned individual’ participating in ‘active actions’. Furthermore, the very end point reached in the stage of progressing from awareness of climate change to having active concern, is when one becomes a member of a climate change organisation.

Three sub-stages are identifiable in relation to the progression of youth climate change activists from possessing a general awareness of climate change to having active concern. Each of these sub-stages will now be considered in turn. The first section of the chapter elaborates on the first sub-stage, namely, that of possessing a general awareness of climate change. The second section elaborates on the second sub-stage, namely, that of triggering a progression from general awareness to concern. The third section elaborates on the third sub-stage, namely, that of having active concern and becoming a member of an activist organisation.

The first sub-stage of the first stage: Possessing a general awareness of climate change

Youth climate change activists commence their journey with no initial desire to be activists, even though they possess a general awareness of climate change as a public issue. The strength of this awareness can be due to a number of influences. These include significant others, conventional mass media, and formal schooling. Each of these influences will now be considered in turn.
Influences on general awareness of climate change

The influence of significant others

The strength of the general awareness of climate change amongst those who go on to become climate change activists is, in the case of some, attributable to the influence of significant others. This influence forms a foundation from which a progression from awareness of climate change to having active concern about climate change can occur. Parents in particular, can be very influential in this regard through their expressions of concern about climate change. In these expressions, they may deliberately acknowledge the controversy and significance of climate change and engage their children in open discussion about it.

Regarding acknowledging the controversy and significance of climate change, Chloe, one youth activist in this study, accredited her awareness in this regard to parental influence as follows: “I’ve been aware of it [climate change] for a long time. My parents are both scientists and so I was kind of exposed to a lot of environmental stuff from a young age”. Also, regarding engaging youth in open discussion, Natalie, another youth activist, stated, “I was already a bit aware because my family, we always talk about issues around the dinner table”. This participant went on to describe her regular engagement with the environment at a young age, particularly through family bicycle rides in the countryside.

Exposure to, and consideration of, the environment, is another way in which parental influence can promote youth activists’ general awareness of climate change. They may do this by modelling concern for the environment. On this, one youth activist stated:

My Dad is pretty environmentally conscious, so it would have been probably through him, or in a family setting. He is just an old hippy essentially, so he would have been interested in environmental stuff full stop. And I guess a
conception of the ethics of sustainability, and a world view that is closer to considering the natural environment. (Daniel)

To this, he added that during his school summer holidays, he used to work with his father revegetating local bushland.

Another way in which parental influence can promote consideration of the environment is through parents modelling pro-environmental actions. Emily, one of the youth activists participating in this study, illustrated this when stating:

*My mum always taught my sisters and I to respect the environment. We always used to do Earth Hour and we’d go and do tree planting. So there was definitely an interest there, just not specifically in climate change, until I actually learnt what it was.* (Emily)

Views along these lines suggest that parental interactions and modelling actions can be fundamental influences in the formation of a general awareness of the importance of responding to climate change. Furthermore, they can help youth to form a strong foundation from which active concern about climate change can develop.

A further influence on youth awareness of climate change can be teachers who model in the classroom an interest in, and concern for, climate change. Specifically in primary schools in WA, the teaching of topics about sustainability can include attending to climate change (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016). The following quote from one youth climate change activist, illustrates how a primary school teacher can have a positive influence in creating an awareness of climate change:

*It was probably in Year 4 that I had a teacher who actually had a vested interest in climate change. I don’t think it would have happened [awareness of climate change] to any other primary school child who didn’t have that teacher.* (Ivy)
Also, in secondary schools, climate change is explicitly taught as part of the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2016). In relation to this, the following is a quote from Emily on how she was influenced by a secondary school teacher of Geography:

*The Geography teacher that I had was also an activist in his own right; a 60-something year old guy with a great sense of humour. He would go off and be protesting in front of government and giving big talks at meetings and stuff, and telling all the students about it, and I don’t think I would have the same sort of passion that I do for it, if it hadn’t been for him.* (Emily)

Emily continued to say that it wasn’t the subject matter the teacher was teaching that was most influential. Rather, it was the “attitude” he had. This “attitude”, she claimed, influenced her decision to pursue a career in environmental management and sustainability.

**The influence of the media**

General awareness about climate change among some youth activists, can be brought about through particular societal institutions, and especially the media. The topic is regularly mentioned in the nightly news on radio and television as being the cause of an extreme weather event. Also, it is often mentioned in political conversations about Australia’s energy future.

Youth climate change activists like Ivy, claim that they first learnt about climate change through the media. On this, she stated, “*From a very young age I was exposed to climate change. My parents would make me watch the 7 o’clock news every night*”.

For some, the sensationalisation of climate change by media outlets, can also lead to anxiety. One youth activist related his experience in this regard as follows:

*Actually I would have heard about it a lot, I guess just through media stuff as well. I’m pretty sure I remember, maybe I was like eight or nine, it was a big*
source of anxiety. I think for me it, was probably a big part of an existential kind of angst all through the young years. (Daniel)

He concluded by saying that climate change is still “the thing that ultimately worries me the most”. Comments such as these, lead one to propose that the influence of media on youths’ awareness of climate change is not always a positive one and can lead to overwhelming feelings of angst. At the same time, some individuals also claim that the anxiety experienced can form the foundation of a general awareness of climate change from which concern can develop.

The influence of formal schooling

Within Australia, climate change can be taught in primary schools as part of the overarching cross curriculum priority area entitled ‘Sustainability’. It is usually included implicitly within such environmental-focused topics as recycling and water conservation. In secondary school, it is explicitly taught in Year 9 Humanities and Social Science as part of the teaching of the topic entitled ‘Challenges to Food Production’ in Geography. It is also included in Year 10 Science within the teaching of ‘Global Systems’, when addressing the carbon cycle (ACARA, 2016).

Inclusion of content on climate change in the Australian Curriculum at both primary and secondary school levels, ensures that youth are educated about the issue at school. However, some youth activists in this study, indicated that this does not necessarily translate into awareness. On this point, one stated:

In high school, our English teacher showed us An Inconvenient Truth, but I don’t really know how aware of it I was. Like I understood it and I processed it, but it didn’t feature much in my day-to-day life. It wasn’t on my mind a lot. (Julia)
Another participant commented in like fashion, stating:

*I don’t really remember learning about it at high school. But if we did it would just be like one of those topics you have to do and do an assignment on and you’re like “Done” and you move on.* (Dylan)

In similar vein, many youth climate change activists claim they have to work hard when trying to remember being taught climate change as a topic at secondary school. To be a positive influence on youth activists’ awareness, they hold, it is not enough for teachers to educate students simply on the scientific concepts and social issues related to climate change. Rather, they need to model in the classroom an interest in, and concern for, climate change.

To summarise considerations so far in this exposition on the first stage of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, namely, the stage of progressing from awareness of climate change to having active concern, the nature of the first of three sub-stages has been outlined. The sub-stage considered is that of possessing a general awareness of climate change. Three major influences in promoting this general awareness were identified: significant others, media, and formal schooling. It should not be assumed, however, that these influences, occur in isolation. Rather, they intersect and interact to create an awareness of climate change, such that a foundation is formed from which concern can develop.

**The second sub-stage of the first stage:**

**Triggering a progression from general awareness to concern**

Initially, youth activists with a general awareness of climate change, do not necessarily demonstrate a desire to become activists. At some point in their progressive journey to activism, however, they do have an experience which acts as a ‘trigger’ to move them from general awareness to having concern. Triggers can be one or a number of three
types: formal events, informal events, and knowledge acquisition. Each of these types will now be considered.

**Experience types which trigger concern**

**Formal events**

A formal event is one which the individual deliberately chooses to attend and involves the presentation of information by a climate change expert. Examples of such events include conferences and workshops relating to sustainability issues and climate change. On formal events, one youth activist in this study, reported:

*I think the one time it really hit me is when I went to a conference with my dad and the plenary speaker was CB [a climate scientist] and he was talking about climate change. He was saying, the only way we can stop climate change is if we switch to nuclear because that’s the fastest way we can switch to a renewable energy source. I was like, that’s crazy, climate change must be pretty serious if he’s talking about that.* (Chloe)

Another youth, Dylan, commented in a similar fashion, in relation to a workshop run by a climate change activist organisation: “*The last year of university I got invited to the Power Shift, a conference that AYCC held. And from there figured out, ‘Oh yeah, this is actually a really big issue’.*** He continued by stating that at the workshop they talked about climate science and the urgency of the global situation, and that as a result, he came to realise “it’s our generation’s issue”.

Overall, quotations like those presented above, illustrate that for some individuals, receiving information from a climate change expert can trigger a sudden realisation of the significance and gravity of climate change. They may then move from *general awareness of climate change* to *concern about climate change*.
Informal events

An informal event is one in which the individual inadvertently participates. In this regard, one participant in this study, recalled witnessing the devastation of a bushfire in her community. On this she stated:

*I did live in the Perth hills, so surrounded by this bushland. When deforestation happened I thought, “Wow, I’m losing my home, this is insane.” Bush fires would wreak havoc in the region and I would think, “Why is this happening?”* (Ivy)

In similar vein, Natalie witnessed the suffering of others that, she held, was attributable to climate change. This, she claimed as follows, triggered her concern about climate change:

*I went to the Maules Creek Coal Mine which is being built north in New South Wales and there was a big blockade and frontline camp, and just seeing how much people are fighting to save their homes, and how companies and the government is sacrificing so much for short term profit, and they’re not thinking past that at all.* (Natalie)

She found the whole situation to be *“so unfair”*. Experiencing an informal event can, youths claim, be distressing for them. As a result, they claim, they often immediately seek membership of an activist organisation.

Knowledge acquisition

A knowledge acquisition trigger is one in which an individual deliberately and purposely seeks out information about climate change for themselves. This differs from a formal event, where the individual actively receives information from an expert in their field.
Knowledge acquisition can involve searching online for sources of information. As an individual’s understanding about climate change and its consequences begin to deepen, it can then trigger the development of concern. The following quotation from Amy, illustrates how this knowledge can be perceived:

I started to transition to become vegan, when I was doing that [travelling]. I started doing my own reading and research into sustainable living and sustainability. And so, veganism really was kind of what first got me interested in sustainability and climate change. That progressed into other individualistic sustainable living pursuits. I was more politically engaged on different issues and started to challenge ways of thinking. (Amy)

Amy was a student who had been travelling widely, having taken a ‘gap year’ after finishing secondary school, when, she “was really seeking something”. That “something” became concern about climate change.

To conclude this exposition on the second sub-stage in the first stage of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, namely, the sub-stage of triggering a progression from general awareness to concern, the trigger in all cases is usually one or more of three types: formal events, informal events and knowledge acquisition. Again, as with the influences on climate change awareness in youth climate change activists, these experience types do not occur in isolation. It is possible, for example, for an individual to experience an informal event, and then actively seek knowledge on climate change as a result. This experience or combination of experiences, can trigger active concern. This active concern will now be considered in relation to the third sub-stage of the first stage of progressing from awareness of climate change to having active concern.
The third sub-stage of the first stage: 
Having active concern and becoming a member of an activist organisation

Following the experience, or experiences, which trigger a progression from general awareness to concern, youth climate change activists can progress to active concern. In this sub-stage, they possess a desire to engage in climate change activism and, as a result, seek to become members of a climate change activist organisation. The following quotation from Ivy, illustrates some reasons why youths may take such action:

*You’re going to be a lot more effective because there is a lot more of you, there’s already systems in place. I guess you’re working as a movement, working with people that are like-minded and really are co-existing together. I don’t think I would have been as effective as an individual.* (Ivy)

Ivy continued by saying that even Naomi Klein, the well-known public social activist and commentator, chose to be part of a climate change organisation rather than acting alone, because she finds it to be more effective in trying to achieve the climate change movement goals.

Youth activists, it appears, also require an organisation to provide them with the resources, skills and social support to become an effective part of the climate change movement. Furthermore, it appears, that they become members of a climate change organisation in one or more of three different ways, namely by actively seeking, by invitation, and by joining at university. These three pathways are now considered in turn.
Pathways to becoming a member of an organisation

Actively seeking

Some youth activists actively seek out a climate change activist organisation through engaging in online research. Often, their concern is triggered by knowledge acquisition. They then continue their research on climate change by seeking out an activist organisation. Julia described such a journey:

So this year I had a full-time job and it was quite dull. I had a lot of time to be on the Internet and read a lot of articles and get angry about things and, you know, get really frustrated. So I had a lot of time on my hands so I contacted them [the organisation] and told them I would like to help out. (Julia)

She went on to say that she deliberately chose an organisation that was not very well established and was uncomplicated. This illustrates that some youth climate change activists can give careful consideration to, and accumulate knowledge about a particular organisation, before deciding to join it.

By invitation

Youth climate change activists can also be invited by peers or other individuals to join a particular climate change activist organisation. Often, this can occur when an individual attends a formal event organised by a particular organisation. For example, in WA, the AYCC runs ‘Power Shift workshops’ for secondary school students every year. In the following quote, Dylan points out how some youth return to the AYCC after attending a Powershift workshop as secondary students: “I think they’re good [PowerShift workshops] because sometimes, they might not do anything at the school, but sometimes the kids will volunteer for us afterwards, after they graduated”. Indeed, Dylan himself joined the AYCC after attending one of their workshops at university.
Emily was invited to become a member of an organisation by a peer at a ‘Living Smart’ workshop she attended. On this workshop she stated:

*It’s a community-based course where essentially you learn how to live greener on a practical level, so they teach you about bike maintenance and all those sort of things. But we were in the same class together and I was saying that I was interested in a couple of the rallies and protests that she’d been to recently, and it just came up in conversation in class, and she’s going, “Well, if you’re interested in this, have you heard of this organisation?”* (Emily)

Finally, and still in relation to joining an organisation by invitation, youth climate change activists may join after having given the matter only minimal consideration. This can be because of having previous experience with it, or because it has been recommended to them by a trusted peer.

**Joining at university**

Youth climate change activists who attend university may also discover an activist organisation while there. Organisations such as ‘Fossil Free’ are represented at university orientation days and maintain a presence on campuses through social media, through advertising, and through hosting regular stalls. In this regard, Amy described her introduction to climate change activism as follows:

*The way that I got into collective activism is through AYCC. And that was when I started uni. I just signed for everything. And when I started uni, I didn’t know exactly what I wanted, but I knew that it was something about environmental and social issues. AYCC was the start of that.* (Amy)

Amy had already experienced a knowledge acquisition trigger and was looking to become a member of an organisation, when she joined.
Overall, joining at university may seem like a decision made on impulse. However, individuals who do, are already at the stage of active concern. Thus, they may often just be simply unsure about how to approach the process of joining.

This concludes the exposition on the third sub-stage of the first stage of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, namely, the sub-stage of having active concern and becoming a member of an activist organisation. In this stage, youth possess a desire to engage in climate change activism and in order to do so, become members of a climate change activist organisation. There are three pathways to joining an activist organisation: actively seeking, being invited and joining at university. Once youth activists have become members of an activist organisation within the bigger climate change movement, they begin to experience the satisfaction of being a part of an active organisation. This then leads them into the second stage of their progressive journey to activism, namely, the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism.

Conclusion

The central research question in the study upon which the theory being reported here is based, was: ‘What locally-based theory can be generated on the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities?’ The overall proposition generated with regard to this aim, is that youth climate change activists undergo a progressive journey both towards, and throughout, their activism, and that this takes place through three stages. This chapter has detailed the elements of the first of these stages. The next chapter, now details the central elements of the second stage.
CHAPTER SIX
SECOND SET OF RESULTS

The Second Stage:
The Stage of Consciously Committing to Climate Change Activism

Youth activists indicate that by becoming members of a climate change activist organisation, they consciously commit to their climate change activism. Furthermore, following joining, they cogitate their intentions. These often align with the overall vision of the organisation they choose to join. Then, as active members, they explore different types of actions and as a result, may engage in different roles within the organisation. Also, youth activists state that over time they begin to consider the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to the organisation and to the climate change movement as a whole. This consideration may then determine whether they remain as climate change activists and, if so, whether they remain with the initial climate change organisation they joined.

Three sub-stages are identifiable in relation to the progression of youth climate change activists through this second stage, namely, the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism. The first section of the chapter elaborates on the first sub-stage, namely, conscious awareness of commitment to climate change activism. The second section elaborates on the second sub-stage, namely, adoption of climate change activist actions. The third section elaborates on the third sub-stage, namely, consideration of belonging to an organisation. Each of these sub-stages will now be described in turn.
The first sub-stage of the second stage: 
Conscious awareness of commitment to climate change activism

Youth climate change activists say that once they join an organisation they may begin to consider their intentions for having done so. These intentions are often multiple and may also change as they become increasingly active as members. They can, however, be grouped into four categories: to become active, to increase awareness amongst others, to engage with other youth, and to increase personal knowledge. Each of these categories will now be considered in turn.

**Intentions when joining a climate change organisation**

*To become active*

Some youth climate change activists hold that one of their intentions when joining a climate change organisation is to become involved in some undefined way. Initially, they say, they may not have been aware of the actions they would take, just that they wished to become active. On this, Natalie voiced, as follows, how she wanted to “*take action*”: “I wanted to do something. I just wanted something to happen and I wanted to join up with other people who were like-minded, and who also wanted to take action”.

Similarly, Julia stated that “*For me, it’s doing something, not feeling like you’re just being idle*”.

Both participants knew that they wanted to be involved in the climate change movement. Both also said that they had deliberately chosen an organisation which, they felt, was most in need of assistance. As Julia put it, “*I kind of wanted to pick an organisation that needed help, that wasn’t very established and that was just people of the community working together to do stuff. Just kind of uncomplicated, you know*”. In other words, the motivation for such activists on joining an organisation is often no more than knowing, as they put it, that they simply “*wanted to do something*”. 
Other youth climate change activists claim that one of their intentions when joining an organisation was to increase awareness of climate change amongst the general public. This awareness, they state, included providing knowledge about the issue itself, as well as on actions that individuals within the community could take. One youth participant in this study, Chloe, commented on her intention in this regard, as follows: “In general, I wanted to contribute to creating a community that has more awareness of climate change and know the things that they can do and contribute to them actually doing those things”.

Emily, another participant in the study, voiced a similar intention, stating, “I really want to get the word out there”. She then went on to give the following example of a proposed fossil fuel mining development about which others seemed to have no awareness:

*It really surprises me when I just speak to the general public or even other people in the movement as a whole, and they have no idea what’s going on, or there’s this big event that’s just happened, say with the drilling that was going to go on the Bight with BP, and there were so many people even within the movement that just had no idea; it’s not something that’s mainstream, it’s not something that’s important.* (Emily)

Such youth climate change activists, then, claim that their overall intention is to inform citizens about climate change, and potentially, to advance the power of the civil movement on the matter in order to influence powerful stakeholders and decision-makers.
To engage with other youth

Other youth climate change activists claim, yet again, that their intention on joining an organisation was to engage in particular with other youth. They are in a separate category to those who seek to increase awareness amongst others. This is because some, being youths themselves, declare an intention to engage their peers in debate on the issue of climate change. Coupled with this, some also express a desire to be inspirational role models for youth. This, they hold, may in part be due to their perception of youth as the future leaders in the global climate change movement.

Regarding a desire to inspire youth, one youth activist related the following:

*I wanted to inspire young people to take action because I think people give young people a bad rap...I wanted to empower people to take action because I think we’re more powerful than we allow ourselves to be.* (Natalie)

Another youth activist commented in similar vein, stating that her intention when becoming a member of a climate change organisation was to set an example for young people. On this, she went on thus:

*Just using my, joining as a member, that would set an example for other people. And then I could spread the message, I could be, this party’s amazing, look at all these policies, you don’t have to join but look at these amazing things that they’re advocating for and that we all should be advocating for.* (Ivy)

She stated that she believed that youth need role models of young climate change activists, and held that some youth feel uncomfortable that they might be “seen to care”. She further stated that she wanted to tell other youth the following: “Don’t not care about issues because you feel like you’ll be alienated or it’s not cool or it’s not with the trend. It’s totally cool to be passionate about things.”
To increase personal knowledge

Some youth activists state that one of their intentions when joining a climate change organisation was to increase their personal knowledge on climate change. This may include a desire to acquire knowledge not only of the issue itself, but also on actions used by organisations in ‘the fight’ against climate change. Regarding the former, Julia, described the importance she attached to learning more about climate change, stating that one should make “yourself aware, because the issues seem so big and so daunting and, unforgiving, that there is no way out”. Her intention, she said, was to increase her understanding about the issue of climate change itself. To this, however, she added that she also had a desire to learn about strategies to assist in ‘the fight’ against climate change. Chloe, in relation to increasing one’s personal knowledge of these strategies, further stated that she deliberately sought to “gain the skills and knowledge to continue this fight”.

Natalie, another youth participant in the study, said that she wished to increase her understanding of other activists’ perspectives on their action for climate change. On this she commented as follows:

*I wanted to hear people’s perspectives, because everyone I think has kind of different reasons why they want action on climate change, and all of those diversity of reasons are what makes the movement stronger.* (Natalie)

This matter of being able to view the issue from different perspectives, she held, was an important intention for her when joining a climate change activist organisation.

The intentions of youth activists, can also, it seems, often align strongly with those of the initial climate change organisation they choose to join. This may be because the organisation they join is one to which they are drawn because of its alignment with their personal vision. Emily voiced her appreciation of the vision of the AYCC, when stating:
I think it’s quite a well-rounded vision that they have...In terms of addressing both social justice and the need for political action, and the need for technological advancements, and it’s quite holistic in its approach to how climate change needs to be solved, if that makes sense, which aligns pretty well with my values. (Emily)

Similarly, Natalie, was drawn to the AYCC, she said, because of its focus on youth involvement. She went on:

A lot of the environment movement was talking about climate change but there was no specific voice for young people and it felt really cool to have your voice heard in a space that was only for young people. (Natalie)

Both youth activists had an affinity with this organisation, they said, because of its specific focus on youth involvement in the climate change movement.

Youth activists also stated that when located in this sub-stage, they acknowledged they wished to be active in the climate change movement. As Emily stated, “I think everyone has the ‘Let’s solve the climate crisis’ intention.” Yet some may not be aware of the actions they will take in order to “solve the climate crisis”.

To summarise considerations so far in this exposition on the second stage of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, namely, the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism, the first of three sub-stages has been outlined, namely that of conscious awareness of commitment to climate change activism. In this sub-stage, one identifies one’s intentions of joining a climate change activist organisation in terms of one or more of four categories: to become active, to increase awareness amongst others, to engage with other youth, and to increase personal knowledge. These intentions, activists hold, may influence them in deciding upon which organisation to join. As they become active in the organisation,
they say, they learn of, trial, and adopt certain climate change activist actions. Now, they say, they are beginning their lives as activists.

The second sub-stage of the second stage: Adoption of climate change activist actions

Youth activists, say that as they become active members of their chosen climate change organisation, they begin to acquire knowledge of a variety of activist actions being undertaken by other members. They also hold that they then may perform these actions and later choose whether to continue with this type of action as part of their activism. The type of action, they say, will often align with the initial intention of the youth climate change activists.

The climate change activist actions identified can be grouped into four categories: direct action, advocacy actions, organisational actions, and individual conservation actions. Each of these four categories will now be considered in turn.

Types of climate change activist actions

Direct action

Youth activists commonly use the term ‘non-violent direct action’ or ‘NVDA’ when talking about direct action. When asked to define it, Amy stated:

Nonviolent direct action is like kind of targeting the problem directly... It’s focused on grass roots organising, which is really empowering people to collaborate and also think for themselves, collectively just take things that much further. It’s targeting the source. So it could be like going to an oil and gas conference and disrupting things with a blockade. (Amy)

She then commented that she is passionate about direct action, because, as she put it, “You are not only directly engaging with decision-makers”, but it also gives you “a really strong story for the media so that you can then share your message”. Further, she
views engagement in such actions as being a method for informing and engaging with a wider audience.

Ivy is of the same view, stating that direct action is a useful method for getting the media involved. She described her perspective on direct action as follows:

> It's a bit different to politics because I think it's a bit more creative and it gets people thinking in a different way and it gets a different audience. Because politics is a very specific audience, it’s directed to people who follow politics but this is to people who are at an event or who are in a particular field. Also, with the media when you do a direct action, media love it and it gets publicised a little bit. (Ivy)

She concluded this “publicises your issue and it again gets people thinking in a creative way, and asking ‘What are these people doing? Why are they doing it?’”.

> Advocacy actions

Youth climate change activists hold that they often begin their activist actions by engaging in advocacy. The purpose of advocacy, they hold, is to spread the message to others through dialogue, and thus, potentially, to increase civil involvement in the climate change movement. Amongst the advocacy actions they identify are lobbying politicians and other decision-makers to acknowledge the existence of climate change when considering policy development and financial investment.

Regarding spreading the message, Natalie stated, “Every time you have a conversation with someone it builds the movement...If you think about it in terms of movement building, then it is definitely making a difference”. She said that she has great faith in the social movement, and continued by quoting Gandhi thus: “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, and then you win”. Similarly, Chloe, another youth activist, stated that an important aspect of activism is “just talking to people about the issue”.

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Regarding lobbying politicians as an advocacy action, Emily, another participant in the study, gave the following specific example of speaking with Members of Parliament (MPs):

One of the things we have done as an action but not as a protest has been to work with MPs through meetings to make sure that climate change is actually on their agenda. So within the organisation, but I know other organisations have done this as well. We meet with MPs, we’ll ask them a few questions, make sure they actually have an idea of what they’re talking about in terms of climate change. (Emily)

Overall, it appears that such youth activists, while questioning the effectiveness of direct action in making significant change, often still engage in it.

**Individual conservation actions**

Youth climate change activists, when located in the sub-stage under consideration, say that they are consciously committed to their activism and perform activist actions as a member of their organisation. They also hold that they may perform individual conservation actions in order to limit their ecological footprint. Indeed, some say that due to their awareness of, and concern for, climate change, they were already performing conservation actions before becoming members of an organisation.

Youth climate change activists also claim that they often perform multiple conservation actions as part of their regular daily routine. On this, Ivy, described some of her daily conservation actions:

The little things that I do, like always take shorter showers, always turn the lights off in the house, recycle as much as I can, buy ethical clothing, these little things I know will add up to help. I’m also a vegetarian. I turned a vegetarian when I was eight, so I’ve been vegetarian for ten years. (Ivy)
She continued by stating that she is a vegetarian, primarily in order to reduce her ecological footprint, rather than because of having any particular concern for animal welfare. Another youth activist also detailed as follows some conservation actions she undertakes daily:

Little choices around normally using more ecologically friendly containers, we don’t really use Glad Wrap anymore, we carry the little canvas shopping bags and stuff that’s everywhere. It’s just little things like that. (Emily)

Others say that they struggle with guilt about driving a car due to its potential carbon emissions. On this, Daniel detailed as follows his choice to drive a car:

I guess driving is probably the biggest one. I live a life that I really actually couldn’t lead if I didn’t drive. I just have things too closely packed together. I can’t take the bus. I would have to re-organise my life and do less things. And I think that’s the correct choice. I think that the things that I’m doing are valuable enough that they outweigh the cost of my car. (Daniel)

As with such decisions, some youth activists also state that they struggle to always make an ‘environmentally friendly’ choice. Ivy described the limited choices available to her in shops:

In our world at the moment it sometimes is really difficult. For people who are vegan, and they’ve gone vegan to lower their footprint, it’s hard to find food sometimes. It’s annoying with ethical clothing because sometimes you don’t like what’s there and there’s very low choice. (Ivy)

Emily, another youth activist, agreed with the difficulties in making environmentally friendly choices due to cost, when she stated that “Being more environmentally friendly is the more expensive option”.
At the same time, some youth climate change activists try not to become too anxious about the decisions regarding their conservation actions. Dylan, a participant in the study, said, “If you always worry about it then you’ll never live”. This perspective may be due to a view that individual conservation actions, whilst important, are not enough to limit global warming and resultant climate change to below two degrees Celsius. Youth climate change activists of such a persuasion hold that the change required is much larger than can be affected by the actions of individuals. Rather, they say, it would require a societal change.

Regarding the latter matter, Chloe commented:

I think it is not up to our electricity consumption to change this. It is a matter of the big companies that are continuing to produce it and the government that are subsidising them. If we can have all our electricity produced not from coal that will do a lot more than just turning off our lights. (Chloe)

Another youth activist commented as follows in similar vein, concluding that the power to make substantial change lies almost totally in the hands of only a few, very powerful decision-makers:

I get really frustrated when people put the blame back on individual actions because at the end of the day it would take a lot of individuals to change little things in their life, but it would only take one CEO [Chief Executive Officer] or one politician to do, you know, to sign a piece of paper to change much more. (Julia)

Daniel, another youth activist, yet again, stated that what is required is “large-scale societal change and a kind of structural change”. Also, those who hold such views claim that this is one of the reasons why they belong to the climate change movement.
This concludes the exposition on the second sub-stage in the second stage of *the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists*, namely, the sub-stage of *adoption of climate change activist actions*. In this sub-stage, four categories of actions were identified: direct action, advocacy actions, organisation actions, and individual conservation actions. As youth climate change activists become active by performing these actions, they begin to acknowledge the benefits of belonging to a climate change organisation. This results in their moving into the third sub-stage of the second stage of *the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists*, namely, the sub-stage of *acknowledging the benefits of belonging to an organisation*. This third sub-stage will now be considered.

**The third sub-stage of the second stage: Consideration of belonging to an organisation**

Youth climate change activists say that as they become active in their chosen activist organisation, they begin to consider the relative benefits of their membership. Some hold that by belonging to an organisation they can achieve more than by acting solo. This, they state, is because of the ability to utilise the logistical structure of an organisation and be part of a large collective movement. On this matter of having structure, Natalie stated: "*People are stronger when they act in a group*". It is when located within this sub-stage, participants argue, that they really come to see the benefits of belonging to an organisation and to working as a collective movement of people.

As youth activists perform activist actions as members of an organisation, working within the larger climate change movement, some also state that they begin to consider factors which may influence them persisting as an activist. This relates both to persisting within their initial climate change organisation, and to persisting as activists within the larger collective movement. During this consideration, they reflect on
alignment with intentions, training and skill attainment, and time management. Each of these three categories will now be considered in turn.

**Intentions when joining a climate change organisation**

*Alignment with intentions*

As youth climate change activists become active within their chosen organisation, they have the opportunity to perform different activist actions, as already described in relation to sub-stage two, namely, *the adoption of climate change activist actions*. Then, just as described in sub-stage one, namely, the *conscious awareness of commitment to climate change activism*, they can again reflect on the type of action which they view as best suiting their intentions. For example, after performing direct action, some youth activists may view this as being the best way to go about trying to initiate significant change. This, some hold, may be due to interaction with important decision-makers.

Amy, one of the youth activists, expressed the confidence she had in engaging in direct action as follows:

> *It gets to a point in the movement where lobbying can only go so far. Direct action is an opportunity to use your body to communicate a message because there is only so much placard waving that you can do. There’s only so many rallies you can attend. I find that rallies, even though I’ve only been involved for a really short time, really disheartening in comparison to direct action.*

(Amy)

Some share this view and continue to hold direct action as being at the heart of their activist activities. Others, however, feel that it may not always be effective. On direct action, Emily yet again stated:

> *It’s an old way to do it, and it’s something that environmentalists have been criticised for over the years a lot, is telling people they’re doing it wrong but not*
actually telling them how to do it right. And I think that protests kind of run along that vein of action, whereas a lot of the time there’s better ways you could do it, or there’s better ways that you could spend your time... It is more trying to work with organisations and with the community, and get everyone into the movement. (Emily)

Overall, then, such youth activists view lobbying and negotiation with decision-makers as being the most constructive approach to take.

From these differing perspectives on the value of engaging in direct action, one can see how being a member of an organisation which does not fit with an individual’s intentions, could be discomfiting. Some climate change organisations have policies whose implementation requires a focus on direct action. The resultant discomfort felt by a member on realising that the organisation does not fit with his or her intention, may result in a youth activist joining another organisation; one that he or she consider may better suit his or her intention. For example, Ivy, described her view thus on being an active member of the Greens Party:

I’ve been part of the Greens Party for about a year and a half now and recently I’ve been a bit disappointed with the way they conduct themselves in regards to activism....So I wanted to be involved in NVDA [Non-Violent Direct Action], more, so I was referred by a friend of the Greens to talk to the Fossil Free Movement, on campuses. (Ivy)

She later also stated, “I think politics is one of the most effective ways you can make change alongside activism”. For Ivy, performing both direct action and advocacy actions are important to her in her efforts aimed at trying to achieve her intentions. Accordingly, she chose to belong to two different organisations simultaneously.
Other youth climate change activists resign from the first organisation they joined, if they feel its policies and tendencies do not suit their intentions. On this point, Daniel described why he changed from the Greens Party to joining the Environmental Office at his university:

*I'm not really that interested in political stuff as much as I am in trying to do stuff I guess. The operational kind of side of things appeals to me more...We had a meeting, and the first meeting was not like, what do you want to say? It was what do you want to do? And that was a big thing for me, like being able to kind of work on things that have real outcomes.* (Daniel)

For him, being involved in action that led to clearly visible outcomes is important to his intentions. Accordingly, he resigned from his organisation and took time to cogitate his next move.

*Training and skill attainment*

Some youth activists acknowledge, that in being an active member of an organisation, one can acquire training which can result in the development of certain skills. Some of these skills are related to activist actions. Experience gained can also provide them with logistical skills and communication skills associated with working within an organisation. These skills, they hold, are of benefit to them in their activism and also could be of benefit to them in their future work in a career.

One youth activist described some of the training provided to her when she was a member of a climate change organisation. On this, she stated:

*[We receive] education around climate change and what we’re doing in the movement in general, which then helps when we’re having to talk to other people, but we work on conversation skills, particularly around getting across*
the message of climate change and why it is so important, and around better engaging with people. (Emily)

As one of Emily’s intentions was to engage in advocacy actions, she came to realise that “engaging with people” is an important matter for her to consider in relation to her activism. She later described the associated training she received that equipped her to engage in dialogue with MPs, so that “You never really go in [to speak to them] unprepared”.

In relation to experiential learning, Daniel, another youth activist who partook in the study described the skills he developed as leader of his organisation:

Leadership stuff, team management stuff, I guess all of the skills that come with kind of project management running, you know, running a team, my team this year was 17 people so it was quite big. And, I failed spectacularly in communicating with lots of those people, and learned a lot. And you know you probably had lots of projects that failed, and learned a lot from those. And came to terms with what bureaucracy’s really like, and that was really really important stuff to learn. (Daniel)

He viewed his failures, like his successes, namely, as learning experiences. Emily, another youth activist, detailed her experience with others in her organisation and how some of them use their activism experience to gain high-level government positions:

People from AYCC, particularly those who are in the national body and are getting paid, end up moving into government organisations, as they have that experience and they don’t necessarily have qualifications, but they’ve had the experience running this sort of organisation. (Emily)

Such youth activists view their experience in an organisation as being more than an experience related solely to climate change activism. Rather, it also provides them, they say, with an opportunity to gain life-skills which can be utilised in future careers.
**Time management**

Youth climate change activists state that once they become active members of an organisation and of the climate change movement, they may then struggle with time management. They are young people, with a full life, often studying at university to gain qualifications and pursue a career. They may also have a job and a social life. Thus, they say, adding another commitment may overextend them. Regarding this, Amy, described a struggle she had as follows:

*The sad thing, I struggle a lot, because in my mind, my course is just as much about climate action as my activism is, and so it’s not like I’m studying something completely unrelated to my activism. So I really acknowledge that I would like this academic backing to what I’m doing. I want to learn as much as I can from an academic and theoretical perspective on what I’m engaging with physically, and in the community... I really value my university education a lot, but it’s so difficult to prioritise it over the other thing [climate change activism]. (Amy)*

She views her university studies as being complementary to her activism. However, she struggles with juggling the time demands of both. Emily, another youth activist, is in a similar situation, stating that she often foregoes sleep when she is busy:

*Particularly with uni sleep is normally the thing that I sacrifice. With uni and AYCC, sleep is the thing where it’s the one that drops off instantly, and it’s the one that I’ve had to learn to not [sacrifice], because you end up in a bad mood, you end up with no energy, you’re having to spend extra time having a nap or something because you just can’t cope. Living off coffee is not healthy. (Emily)*

She continued by narrating the following allegory which allowed her to understand the importance of taking care of herself:
A saw as a tool only gets better and better the sharper it is; it’s more effective. So essentially the more you’re taking care of yourself and the more that you’re making sure that you’re solid and you’re okay, the better a volunteer you can be, or the better a friend, or whatever, the better you are as a tool. (Emily)

At the same time, others believe that a lot of the pressure experienced by youth activists can be self-imposed:

I’ve never felt pressure from the people around me. I’ve felt personal pressure, like personal responsibility that, “Oh, if I don’t do this it’s bad, I should be there, I should, I should, I should, I should do this, I should do that.” I felt that personal pressure, but I’d never felt any pressure from anybody else around me; they’re always very understanding that you do what you’ve got to do kind of thing. (Julia)

Such youth activists say that they can feel a “personal pressure” to continue in their activism. This, they hold, can influence their consideration of issues related to their commitment to climate change activism. The strength of their commitment and sense of obligation can, in turn, determine their continuation and persistence in climate change activism.

Conclusion

The central research guiding question in the study upon which the theory being reported here is based, was: ‘What locally-based theory can be generated on the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities?’ The overall proposition generated with regard to this aim, is that youth climate change activists undergo a progressive journey both towards, and throughout, their activism, and that this takes place through three stages. This chapter has detailed the elements of the second of these
stages. This was the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism. The next chapter, now details the central elements of the third and final stage.
CHAPTER SEVEN

THIRD SET OF RESULTS

The Third Stage: The Stage of Persisting in One’s Commitment to Climate Change Activism

Often, as one matures, commitments and priorities in life change. A consequence for certain youth activists is that they are not able to devote as much time and energy to climate change activism as previously. Those who do persist, however, tend to possess a sense of obligation to continue what they call the ‘fight for climate change’. They often ‘fight’, as they put it, not only for the environment, but also for populations who lack a voice in the climate change dialogue. Furthermore, youth activists state that they also ‘fight’ for themselves and for those they love.

Youth climate change activists at this stage describe themselves and their actions for climate change by regularly using the term ‘activist’. Their argument is that by engaging in activist actions, a sense of hope for the future is cultivated amongst themselves. This, in turn, provides them with a positive motivation to persist long term in their climate activism.

Three sub-stages are identifiable in relation to the progression of youth climate change activists through the third stage, namely, the stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change. The first section of this chapter elaborates on the first sub-stage, namely, that of possessing a sense of obligation towards being a climate change activist. The second section elaborates on the second sub-stage, namely, that of acknowledging being a climate change activist. The third section elaborates on the third sub-stage, namely, that of maintaining a sense of hope for the future.
The first sub-stage of the third stage: Possessing a sense of obligation towards being a climate change activist

Youth climate change activists often recognise that they are sometimes perceived to be privileged due to residing in an urban area in a developed country. Their situation in this regard, however, is perceived by themselves in a positive manner on the grounds that it provides them with economic stability and with the knowledge that they are not directly affected by climate change consequences. Natalie, a youth activist in this study, voiced her perspective on her personal privileged position as follows:

I have the privilege in that I’m not from the Pacific Islands, or I don’t live next to a coal mine, and I think I’m really lucky that I can almost switch on and off. And people who are impacted every day can’t: if you’re in the Torres Strait or if your land is being destroyed for mining. (Natalie)

Another youth activist commented in like fashion, stating:

I am in the position where I have so much privilege and I have potentially so much power, if I didn’t do everything that I could I would feel guilty. Because climate change is such an urgent thing just doing everything you can in activism is important. We don’t know if it is going to change anything but doing something is better than sitting back and not. (Chloe)

Due to her perceived privileged status and her perceived potential “power”, Chloe also feels obliged to do everything she can to be active on the issue of climate change. As a result, she claims, the sense of obligation already existing amongst herself and her peers, strengthens their commitment to climate change activism.

Youth climate change activists’ perspectives on what they see as their privileged positions, they claim, can also result in the generation of a sense of obligation towards responding to the issue of climate change. Indeed, once they have progressed through the second stage in their activism journey, as considered in the previous chapter, namely,
the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism, they come to further understand the consequences of continued fossil fuel usage and resultant climate change. This knowledge, they hold, can result in the development of a personal obligation to persist in being active within the climate change movement. The obligation, they argue, stems from a sense of injustice towards one, or a number, of three categories of individuals: the disadvantaged, generations of youth, and the activists themselves. Each of these three categories will now be considered in turn.

**Obligations for persisting in climate change activism**

**Obligation towards disadvantaged populations**

Some youth activists claim that their perceived privileged position generates a sense of obligation in them towards populations lacking the opportunity to participate in discussions on climate change, including populations in developing countries. This, they state, may arise out of the anger they experience on realising the injustice of citizens in developing countries being exposed to the worst of climate change consequences. Further, the situation appears even more unjust to them, when considering that individuals in these countries, contribute the least to the causes of climate change.

Regarding the latter matter, Emily, a youth activist in this study, stated the following:

> It’s something that is impacting on people that are the least to contribute, and while they may not be my next door neighbour, they’re still human, they still have human rights to not be climate change refugees because the waters are rising and their island’s going to go under. (Emily)

Another youth activist, Amy, commented similarly, including other types of disadvantaged populations also in her comment: “[It’s about] the injustice that’s caused towards Indigenous people and the fact that they experience climate change, and disadvantaged people, and marginalised people, experience the effects, first and worst”.

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To this, she added that she views climate change as “an opportunity to combat so many different social issues”. This is reflective of the perception of some youth activists, that while climate change is a root cause of social injustice, it may also be viewed as providing an opportunity to bring about social change.

Some youth climate change activists also no longer view the issue as being only about the environmental consequences of climate change. Rather, as they see it, it is also about social consequences. The term ‘climate justice’ is used by them to include concern for both the environment and global populations. Natalie, another youth activist in the study, summarised this view of injustices associated with climate change when she stated that “It’s the biggest form of racism, sexism, colonialism and classism all in one. All tied together in a nice little package. Oh, and intergenerational injustice”. Such youth activists also view their own generation as being disadvantaged in regard to what they call the ‘fight’ for climate change, viewing them as another population to ‘fight for’.

**Obligation towards youth**

Youth climate change activists claim they are often conscious of their own and others’ perceptions of their inexperience and naiveté. As a population, they hold, they do not constitute a public voice in the climate change dialogue. Indeed, for some, the under-representation of youth in the decision-making processes about climate change is deemed to be an injustice. This, they argue, is because youths are the ones likely to suffer the consequences of climate change in the future.

Due to the perceived injustice, some youth climate change activists also state that they have an obligation to ‘fight’ for their peers. Regarding this, Ivy commented:

*Like I said before, if we don’t do it who else is? We need to be shouting a little louder to those old men in parliament that are not listening to us. They’re old,*
and they’re not looking towards the future. The future is ours and they’re not advocating for young people at all. (Ivy)

This individual, who is active in the political scene, later added, that youths “are not heard in parliament if we don’t advocate for it”.

Some youth climate change activists, may also demonstrate feelings of generativity, by showing concern for future generations. This concern, they say, compels them into action to protect the future global environment and its population. Emily, a youth activist in this study, stated, “Not only is it something that’s impacting on my generation and is going to continue to well into the future, it’s something that’s going to impact on those who don’t exist yet, future generations who don’t have a voice”. Such comments are indicative of the perspectives held regarding the concerns of youth climate change activists for the well-being of current and future generations of youth.

Personal obligations

Some youth climate change activists also possess a sense of personal injustice, noting that inadequate decisions about mitigation of climate change consequences are being made by political leaders. Coupled with this is a perception that decisions are made without the voice of youth activists being heard. The problem, as they see it, is that many of these decisions affect the future of the youth activist’s own life and the lives of those about whom they care.

Regarding the impact of climate change on their personal lives, one youth activist stated that “It just threatens everything I care about. I want to do all these things and grow up and have kids, but it’s threatened by it” (Natalie). Another commented in similar vein, voicing concern as follows for those about whom she cares:

Firstly it’s going to impact so many things, it’s going to make every other issue in the world worse in the future. I’ve got hopefully a lot more years to be
around on this Earth and that’s what climate change is going to impact, my future and all the people I care about. (Chloe)

Overall then, those who identify personal injustice view themselves as ‘fighting’ for their own future health and wellbeing, as well as for that of those about whom they care.

Equally, many youth activists are conscious of the potential power of their generation to influence change. They advocate strongly for youth to become actively involved and to lead the climate change movement. Regarding this, Amy, one youth climate change activist stated:

I feel like youth should be at the forefront of this movement. I feel like why should I be dedicating my life to anything else when I have the ability, and the knowledge, and the skills to be taking this action. How could I prioritise anything else when we’re facing this crisis, when such urgent action needs to be taken? (Amy)

Another, Natalie, commented in a similar fashion: “Youth bring a unique perspective to this, and we have a duty, but we also have a right to live and enjoy the same climate that our parents and our grandparents had, and to demand that right”. She continued by saying that “When young people do what we do best, things can happen”. Such youth activists say that they believe that youth have the power to promote change, and hold that they should become a critical voice on the issue of climate change in order to try to take control of their own future.

To summarise considerations so far in this exposition on the third stage of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, namely, the stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism, the first of three sub-stages has been outlined, namely, that of possessing a sense of obligation towards being a climate change activist. In this sub-stage, the obligation identified is one stemming
from a perceived obligation to one, or more, of three groups of individuals: disadvantaged populations, youth, and the activists themselves (personal). These obligations, activists hold, deepen their commitment to climate change activism and support continued persistence within the climate change activist realm. Also, youth activists hold that as they recognise these obligations and continue their actions, they begin to identify with being an activist. This results in them moving into the second sub-stage of the third stage of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, namely, that of acknowledging being a climate change activist. This second sub-stage will now be considered.

The second sub-stage of the third stage: Acknowledging being a climate change activist

Activism is an important part of the lives of youth climate change activists, and mostly they identify as one. This is distinct from identification as an environmentalist, namely, one who is perceived as an individual primarily concerned with preserving the quality of nature and the environment. Emily, a youth activist in this study, described an environmentalist as follows: “I think of an environmentalist as someone who’s very passionate about conservation, and while I have a lot of friends who are passionate about that and while I myself think it’s a really important topic, it’s not my main focus”.

Some individuals begin their activist journey as environmentalists, due to their concern for the environment. As they progress through their journey to activism, they say, they also recognise the social injustice of climate change. Emily indicated this when stating that climate change is a “systemic issue that contributes to everything”.

Youth climate change activists often perceive an activist as one who regularly engages in non-violent direct action. One youth activist, defined the difference between an advocate and an activist as follows:

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There’s different theories of change and one side is more advocating, is what I see it as, like doing lobbying and getting people on your side by being like them and being on their side. And then there’s the other side, it’s activism, like actually getting out there and just screwing things up in a good way. (Chloe)

She continued by stating that an advocate talks about climate change and “does that in a kind of socially acceptable way”. This perception of an activist as one who takes part in direct action and “screwing things up”, may affect an individual’s strength of identification with being an activist.

When it comes to identifying as an activist, there appears to be four types: individuals who identify with the term; individuals who initially identify as an advocate or environmentalist and progress to identify as an activist; individuals who do not perceive themselves as ‘true’ activists; and individuals who do not like to use the term. Although the strength of identification with being an activist may differ, all four types engage regularly in activist actions. Each of these four types will now be considered in turn.

**Types of identification as an activist**

*Individuals who identify with the term*

Individuals who identify with the term activist regularly take part in non-violent direct actions. An example of this is protesting at an oil and gas conference. One youth activist in this study, described the following action:

*We were at an oil and gas conference that was at the casino a couple of weeks ago and we decided to blockade the doors. It was a non-violent direct action just to kind of disrupt the whole event. And those people that walked past us and were going “tut-tut” at these greenies, it didn’t matter that they were thinking negative about it, they were actually thinking about it.* (Ivy)
She continued, stating that she considers herself to be an activist because she believes in the effectiveness of direct action and regularly takes part. She concluded that she is also active in social issues, which “obviously environmental issues feed very well into”, adding that she calls herself a “foot soldier of justice”.

Individually who initially identify as an environmentalist or advocate and progress to identify as an activist

Individuals who initially identify as an environmentalist or advocate and progress to identify as an activist, regularly attend non-violent direct actions. Thus, by this stage they acknowledge they are a climate change activist. Also, however, they say that initially they became involved in the climate change movement as environmentalists or as advocates.

Regarding beginning her activist journey as an environmentalist, Chloe, a youth activist in this study, stated:

Yeah, I just really really care about the environment, because that was where my passion for climate change started and then I learnt so much more about it. That it’s more of a social issue as well and that really drives me as well but... yeah I started off as an environmentalist. (Chloe)

Her parents, she says, both of whom were ecologists, were major influences on her consideration for the environment.

Regarding beginning one’s activist journey as an advocate, youth activists state that they begin with minimal activist skills and engage in few direct actions. One youth activist, Amy, described her progression from advocate to activist as follows: “I feel like I used to, when I was doing the individualistic behaviour change stuff, I would say, ‘I’m an advocate.’ And as I became more heavily involved in doing direct actions and stuff, I more identified as an activist” (Amy). She also acknowledged that she is involved specifically in climate justice activity because she perceives climate change to be a
social justice issue. She does not want to be considered to be just an environmentalist, because she considers environmentalists as “being so absorbed in nature and not really caring about humans so much”.

Individuals who do not perceive themselves to be ‘true’ activists

For some individuals, the perception of an activist as one who regularly engages in non-violent direct action, can influence their personal identification with activism. Emily, a youth activist, has been active in the AYCC for six months. She does not strongly identify with being an activist, as indicated when she stated that “The stereotype around a true activist is yelling at politicians and going to protests every second day kind of thing” (Emily).

She continued by saying she does not identify with the traditional definition of an activist, but is still “standing up for climate change” and making her voice heard. In fact, Emily is the leader of a climate change organisation in her university and is heavily involved in organising and running workshops and events.

Julia, another youth activist, voiced a similar reticence to being called an activist:

I’m not a very confrontational person, so I wouldn’t say I’m a very good activist. Actually, I like more the background organising stuff and planning and policy and all that kind of stuff a lot more...When I think about the term activism and then I look at what I do, then I am, I know I am, but I would never call myself an activist. (Julia)

She acknowledged that she has read literature about the roles people perform in climate change activism and identified most with being a ‘reformer’ because, as she put it, “I’m not a very extroverted person”. Overall, then, youth activists who do not regularly take part in non-violent direct action, it appears, tend to identify less strongly with being an activist than do those who do take part in such action.
Individuals who do not like to be labelled

Some individuals are hesitant to be labelled with any term, as they perceive this to be disaffecting to others. If they label themselves as an activist, they hold, this may alienate some people from becoming members of activist organisations. This may be due to their perception of an activist as one who regularly takes part in non-violent direct action.

On the latter, Natalie described her identification with being an activist by stating, “I guess people say [I am an] activist and stuff. But sometimes I think that can be a bit alienating for people, for new people”. She continued, stating that despite her lack of a label, she is very committed to climate change because of “the crazy actions” she has taken. This, she says, included dressing up as a love heart on Valentine’s Day to represent how much she loved climate change. Daniel commented similarly, stating, “I’d probably shy away from that stuff because I think it constructs an us/them thing. I would kind of purposely just define myself as not particularly extraordinary I think”. Other youth activists, yet again, consider themselves to be “not particularly extraordinary”, and regard their personal input as only a small contribution to the larger global climate change movement.

The four types of activist identified are influenced by the perception of an activist as one who regularly engages in direct action. This perception of an activist, however, is also evolving within the climate change movement, as commented on by the following youth activist:

I think activism, particularly in the organisation that I’m involved in, is changing. Climate change activism as a movement, it’s moving more towards, rather than yelling at people and telling them they’re doing it wrong, working with them to get them on side. (Emily)

This comment mirrors Chloe’s previous comment on an advocate being an individual who is active in climate change in a “socially acceptable way”.

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This concludes the exposition on the second sub-stage in the third stage of the *theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists*, namely, the sub-stage of *acknowledging being a climate change activist*. In this sub-stage, four types were identified: those who identify with being an activist; those who initially identify as an environmentalist or advocate and progress to being an activist; those who do not perceive themselves as ‘true’ activists; and those who do not like to be labelled. Those in all four types regularly engage in activist actions. Also, as youth activists persist in their commitment to the climate change movement and undertake activist actions, they hold that they cultivate a positive sense of hope about the future. This results in their moving into the third sub-stage of the third stage within *the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists*, namely, *maintaining a sense of hope about the future*. This third sub-stage will now be considered.

**The third sub-stage of the third stage:**
**Maintaining a sense of hope about the future**

While acknowledging the potential, dire consequences of climate change, youth climate change activists, say that they also remain hopeful about the global future. They view the issue of climate change as offering a chance for powerful social change to take place. This moment in time, they hold, is an opportunity for the global population to unify and for the possible resolution of multiple social and environmental injustices.

Natalie, a youth activist in the study, viewed the present as a pivotal moment in modern history, stating that “It's a really good opportunity to change structures in our society that need changing. And I think we’re at a really crucial point where we can either do that or not”. She continued by stating that the positive changes being accomplished are incremental and that she recognised that “we are in it for the long haul.”

Regarding opportunities for social change presenting themselves, another youth activist was particularly optimistic about the future, as he stated:
I think there is room for it to be enormously powerfully positive. Because we are moving increasingly towards a more global world. The world is actually more peaceful than it has ever been, despite what you would hear on the news. And, there’s a pretty good argument that a global threat and climate change is the first truly global threat. It will actually be able to bring us together as, you know as people, as human beings, which is a really incredible thing. (Daniel)

He also confidently stated that there is always hope, because “Three degrees is better than four degrees, and four degrees is better than five degrees, and so-on.”

This sense of hope for the future that is displayed by youth climate change activists, is promoted by one, or a number of, three influences: being a member of an organisation, being active, and being surrounded by a community. Each of these three influences will now be considered in turn.

**Factor promoting hope**

*Being a member of an organisation*

Being a member of an organisation within the climate change movement, reveals to some youth activists, that they are only a small component of a larger national and global movement of people. Youth who are concerned about the potential, dire consequences of climate change, state that it is reassuring to know that there are thousands, if not millions, of people who share their concern about the issue. Together, these concerned individuals and the youth activists form a global climate change movement comprised of people willing to be active on this issue.

Regarding the movement, one youth activist, commented as follows:

*I find it hopeful because there is so much good that can come from it. From the actions that we are taking. I know that there is so much hope so it can’t be*
hopeless. Things are happening. And there are so many people in this. There is a massive climate movement. (Chloe)

This comment is indicative of the perspectives of those individuals who benefit from the knowledge that, as they put it, others ‘fight’ for climate change alongside them.

Belonging to an organisation, activists hold, can also provide them with hope through providing knowledge of, and experience with, small achievements in what seems an overwhelming global issue. Emily illustrated this view when stating:

It’s almost like you get a buzz, because you talk to other people and there’s so many people that they don’t even necessarily have to have the same, exact same views as you. But getting to communicate with other people in the movement and hear about all the amazing things they’ve done, or just all of the progress we are making, because more often than not, if you’re not involved in those sort of things you don’t see the impact. (Emily)

She also acknowledges, that belonging to an organisation, allows her to see different options and solutions to a problem she previously viewed as being “just not doable.” In such individuals, any achievement, while being acknowledged as being minimal in outcome, is also, when successful, claimed to be empowering for them.

Being active

Being a member of an organisation, youth activists note, allows them to experience activist actions, including non-violent direct actions. By being active within the climate change movement, some youth activists state that they are provided with a sense of empowerment as they become pro-active in their own future and the future of those about whom they care. By taking part in actions to promote awareness about and accountability regarding climate change, they are making their voices heard. On this, Amy commented:
I also feel like my activism makes me feel very empowered. It’s like a way of coping, because it balances things out. But also, on a separate note, I suppose just being engaged and being a part of the movement is reassuring that this really needs to be done and this is what I want to do. (Amy)

Amy also views being active in the climate change movement, as being a coping mechanism for her on realising the overwhelming nature of the issue. On being active, Daniel commented in a similar fashion: “The more hopeless it gets, the more you should do things. And the more hopeful it is, you can still have an impact for your actions.” In such individuals, hope, they say, is promoted through being active.

**Being surrounded by a community**

For some youth climate change activists, belonging to a group of like-minded individuals, they say, promotes a sense of positivity. This positivity, they hold, can be due to having a support network. On this sense of community, Amy, a youth activist in the study, commented:

_A really good thing about being involved in the movement is the sense of community and being around like-minded people who do also feel really connected to these issues and are really keen to do something about it constantly and consistently...Having that support network around you of people who are in such similar positions is really crucial to sustaining your activism as well._

(Amy)

Julia commented similarly, stating that she felt she could be her true self at her climate change organisation. She went on as follows:

_You know, I go to work all day and be around people who I felt like I didn’t know and they didn’t know me and we’d have really bland shallow conversations about the weather and the football and things like that. And then I go to 350 in the afternoon and you can breathe and you can be yourself and_
everybody's very direct and open, and I just really appreciate that about people.

It's not a façade. (Julia)

Such activists' comments also illustrate ways in which having the support network of like-minded people, can facilitate the persistence of one’s commitment to climate change activism.

Not all youth climate change activists, however, feel a sense of hope for the future. Julia, for example, stated: I actually find it pretty hopeless. That’s why I don’t focus too much on the ends, because I don’t really think it’s going to work at this stage. She continued by stating, “It’s pointless either way. Either way you’re dead. Everybody dies so, I don’t know, got to try and make it. I care about the Earth and I want it to survive, so I’m going to give it a go.” Yet, despite such misgivings about the future, she says on her activism that she will “give it a go”. Thus, she says, her obligations towards being a climate change activist and acknowledgment that she is, promote her persistence within the climate change movement.

Conclusion

The central research aim of the study being reported here was to generate locally-based theory regarding the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities. The overall proposition generated with regard to this aim, is that youth climate change activists undergo a progressive journey both towards, and throughout, their activism, and that this journey takes place through three stages. This chapter has detailed the elements of the third and final of these stages. This, it will be recalled, was the stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism. The next chapter now concludes this thesis by considering various aspects of the results of this
study, both in relation to the current literature and in relation to some recommendations for engaging youth in the issue of climate change.
CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

Unprecedented levels of carbon dioxide were recorded in the Earth’s atmosphere in 2016 (Krummer, 2016). This was accompanied by a continued rise in global temperature (NASA, 2016a), with resultant measurable climate change consequences (NASA, 2016b). These events, according to certain scientists, are directly attributable to increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, resulting primarily from the combustion of fossil fuels (Climate Council, 2016). The answer proposed for the mitigation of the consequences is to minimise the use of fossil fuel and promote renewable energy sources (Hansen et al., 2013; Rogelj et al., 2011). Yet, many political leaders, including those in Australia, appear reluctant to make policy changes which acknowledge these solutions (Climate Transparency, 2016a; Crowley, 2013). As a result of such reticence, ‘everyday citizens’ are joining the climate change movement and becoming activists (Burgmann & Baer, 2012). A significant proportion of these activists are youths, ‘fighting’, as they put it, for their own future, as well as the future of others.

The academic literature on views and actions about climate change, however, is primarily focused on adult populations (e.g. Howell & Allen, 2016; Tranter, 2011). Also, studies which do focus on youth, mostly consider what is termed ‘disengagement’ with the issue (e.g. Feldman, Nisbet, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2010; Hibberd & Nguyen, 2013). Very few studies have been conducted on youths who are engaged with climate change, and in particular on those who actively engage with it, namely, ‘youth activists’. This study has gone some way towards addressing this deficit by generating locally-based theory on youth climate change activists’ perspectives on their activist
activities. The participants were selected from youths involved in organisations within the climate change movement in Perth, WA.

The study makes a number of contributions in the area of youth climate change activism. First, as already indicated, very few qualitative studies have been conducted on the perspectives of youths on climate change and, in particular, on the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their own activist actions. Secondly, the results provide a language which can be used to engage in dialogue about features of youth climate change activism. In particular, this language can be used by researchers interested in youth climate change activism, especially those examining the development, commitment and persistence of youth climate change activists. Finally, the theoretical insights generated from the study on their climate change activist actions can provide other climate change activists, educators, and climate change communicators with practical suggestions on the influences on, and development of, the concerns of youths regarding climate change. To summarise then, the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists has the potential to be used to bring about social change through promoting a valuable understanding of youth climate change activists and their relationship with the issue of climate change.

This final chapter now provides an overview of the study presented in the previous chapters. This is followed by a summary of each stage in the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists. The properties of each stage are discussed in relation to previous relevant studies and also as particular features of interest in relation to youth climate change activism. A number of recommendations for educators, for climate change activist organisations and for youth climate change activists are then outlined. Finally, some areas for further research are proposed.
Overview of the Study

The aim of the study presented in this thesis was to generate locally-based theory regarding the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities. This aim was pursued in the case of youths currently active in the climate change movement in Perth, WA. The study was conceptualised within both the interpretivist paradigm and the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. The processes of data collection and analysis were undertaken using grounded theory methods. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with active youth climate change activists. These interviews focussed in particular on their perspectives on their activism. The interview transcripts, which were subjected to iterative and comparative analysis, led to the development of the substantive theory presented.

This thesis began with an introductory chapter which provided an overview of the purpose and structure of the study. Chapter Two presented the background to the study, providing an outline of the context within which youth climate change activists operate in relation to their activist activities in Perth, WA. Chapter Three provided a literature overview based on a selection of research papers specifically focused on areas related to the activism of youth climate change activists. Chapter Four outlined the methodological approach taken in the study. Chapters Five, Six and Seven presented the central elements of the locally-based theory generated in the study reported in this thesis. The central proposition of the locally-based theory generated from data collected within this context is that youth climate change activists undergo a progressive journey both towards, and throughout, their activism, and that this takes place through three stages.

An overview of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists is shown in Figure 8.1, following.
Figure 8.1. Graphic representation of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists
A discussion on the theory, is now presented, by considering it in relation to climate change activism in youth and associated literature.

**Discussion**

There is a limited number of research studies with a focus on the life paths of youth climate change activists. Buttigieg and Pace (2013) and Fisher (2015) have written up the only studies that seem to appear in the literature and both of these document significant life experience studies. There are also very few studies on the life paths of youth environmentalists, although some on adult environmentalists do exist (Chawla, 1999; Matsuba & Pratt, 2013; Wells & Lekies, 2006). While the latter indicate some similarities in the influences on an individual’s journey to those influencing youth climate change activists, there are also noticeable differences.

It appears that very little research has been undertaken in the area of the development of, and influences on, climate change activists, and in particular on youth climate change activists. Certainly, no one in WA has studied the area. Thus, I undertook my research, to generate locally-based theory on the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities. The result was *the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists*. An overview of the main features of this theory is now presented.

**First stage:**

**The stage of progressing from awareness of climate change to having active concern**

The first stage of *the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists*, is designated *the stage of progressing from awareness of climate change to having active concern*. This stage has three sub-stages through which youth climate change activists progress. Individuals commence with a general awareness of
climate change, progress to concern after experiencing a triggering experience, and demonstrate active concern by becoming a member of a climate change activist organisation.

The first of the sub-stages is possessing a general awareness of climate change. In this sub-stage, youths possess some general awareness of climate change. This awareness is usually there as a result of one or more of three influences, namely significant others, the media and formal schooling. It is through communication with these influences, and the views expressed in interactions, that the state of awareness in youths of climate change, and their understanding of and positions towards the issue, are generated.

In regard to significant others, this category includes parents, teachers and peers. They interact with youths in both formal and informal ways, influencing their acquisition of knowledge about, and awareness of, climate change. Previous studies on adults (Chawla, 1999; Palmer, 1993) and youths (Arnold et al., 2009) who are environmental activists, have indicated the important influence of significant others on positions adopted both towards the environment and associated actions. The study presented in this thesis indicated that significant others may also stimulate awareness of climate change in youth. In particular, it is proposed, that significant others can demonstrate a concern for climate change which, consciously or sub-consciously, can affect youths’ perceptions of the issue.

Others have agreed that media is the most common source of information about climate change for secondary school students in Australia (Dawson & Carson, 2013). There are also studies indicating that within the media, the source of the given information and presence of any bias has been shown to be an influence on the climate change perspectives of the general public (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Carvalho, 2010). The possibility that it may also influence youth awareness of climate change, is indicated in
the theory generated and reported in this thesis. This possibility also aligns with the perspectives of Feldman et al. (2010) and Hibberd and Nguyen (2013).

Formal schooling, as has been recorded elsewhere, is another source of climate change information for secondary school students in Australia (Dawson & Carson, 2013). Yet, as in the United States, where, middle school and secondary school science teachers spend only one to two hours per year directly addressing climate change (Plutzer et al., 2016), the overall amount of time spent on the issue in Australian secondary schools is low (Dawson, 2012). Nevertheless, formal schooling was generated as a category separate to teachers in the category of significant others in the theory being reported here.

The theory also indicates, that while many youths possess a general awareness of climate change, it takes a triggering experience for some to progress to concern. On this triggering experience, when in the second sub-stage, namely, the sub-stage of *triggering a progression from general awareness to concern*, the experiences in question can be formal events, informal events and/or knowledge acquisition. These experience types can be both positive and negative.

A formal event is defined as one which the individual deliberately chooses to attend as it involves the presentation of information by a climate change expert in such settings as conferences and workshops. In this regard, what has been termed ‘the trigger’, equates to the ‘trigger of knowledge for environmental concern’, that has been identified in research on adult (Chawla, 1999; Palmer, 1993; Sward, 1999) and youth (Arnold et al., 2009) environmentalists. In similar vein, the theory being presented suggests that knowledge can be an influence leading to climate change concern in youths. It is also suggested that as some youths acquire more knowledge about climate change, this ‘triggers’ a desire to take action.
The third type of experience which can trigger a progression from general awareness to concern, relates to informal events. These are defined as events where the individual participates inadvertently. Some participants in the study upon which the theory being reported here is based, experienced negative events, such as having land cleared around their home, or a nearby bushfire. Such personal experiences and their influence are in tandem with those described in other studies on youth activism (Harré, 2007) and youth climate change activism (Fisher, 2015).

By contrast, while childhood experience with nature has been identified as a common influence leading to environmental concern in adult (Chawla, 1999; Wells & Lekies, 2006) and youth environmentalists (Arnold et al., 2009), interaction with nature was not identified as being a strong influence on youth climate change concern in this study. This aligns with Stevenson, Peterson, Carrier, et al.’s (2014) study on middle school students, in which it was found that there was only a limited positive association between time spent outdoors and pro-environmental actions. They concluded this was due to a decline in ‘wild’ nature experiences.

Further, regarding the latter, it is instructive to keep in mind that time spent outdoors by youths, in both ‘wild’ and ‘domestic’ nature, is decreasing in Australia (Planet Ark, 2013), leading, it is held, to disengagement with, and lack of concern for, the environment. The results of this study, however, suggest that a lack of engagement with the environment does not necessarily prohibit an individual from being concerned about the consequences of climate change. This, it is proposed, may be due to the fact that youth activists view climate change as primarily a social justice issue rather than an environmental one.

Returning to the main features of the theory generated: once youths have experienced a triggering event they may have active concern and enter the third sub-stage, namely, the
sub-stage of *having active concern and becoming a member of an activist organisation*. The term active concern relates to an individual who has a desire to become involved and be active in the issue of climate change. According to the results of the study being reported, the most common approach to becoming active, is to join a climate change organisation. There are three pathways identified for becoming a member of such an organisation. These are actively seeking out an organisation, by invitation, and joining at university. Most youths join an organisation with which they are familiar, and research has shown that family and friends have the potential to influence this decision through social networks and exposure (McLellan & Youniss, 2003).

**Second stage:**

**The stage of consciously committing to climate change activism**

The second stage of *the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists*, is *the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism*. In this stage, youths consciously commit to the climate change movement and explore what it means to be a climate change activist. In this second stage there are three sub-stages through which youths progress. First, they become conscious of their commitment to climate change activism while considering their intentions when joining a climate change organisation. Then, as members of an organisation, they adopt the actions of climate change activists. Finally, after trialling these actions, they consider whether they wish to persist with climate change activism and remain in their current organisation.

When youths enter the first sub-stage of the second stage, namely, the sub-stage of *conscious awareness of commitment to climate change activism*, they possess intentions they wish to achieve. These intentions are to become active, increase awareness amongst others, engage with other youth, and increase personal knowledge.
In regard to becoming active, participants in this study often stated that they just wanted to ‘do something’ in the ‘fight for climate change’. On this point, it is posited that to become active helps one to relieve the overwhelming sense of helplessness often associated with the issue. This perspective has also been identified by others engaging in research in the field of youth climate change activism (Buttigieg & Pace, 2013; Ojala, 2007). In accordance with the theory outlined here, they also hold that if this perspective is adopted, then the intention to increase personal knowledge aligns strongly with the intent to be active. In other words, individuals wish to know more about the issue of climate change, and to be able to understand fully its causes, impacts and solutions, as well as the network of political, economic and social interactions within each of these areas.

Still considering the theory in relation to other bodies of literature, it is also suggested that within the climate change movement a common goal amongst organisations is to increase the general public’s awareness of climate change and its consequences. This may be because civic activism is considered by some to be the most efficient method to achieve emissions reductions, and thus a reduction in climate change consequences (Ockwell, Whitmarsh, & O’Neill, 2009). It follows then, that some youth activists have a desire to increase the awareness of climate change amongst their peers.

Returning then to considering the second stage of the theory presented here, once youths have joined an organisation, they begin to adopt activist actions used by other members of that organisation. This is when they have moved into the second sub-stage, namely, the sub-stage of adoption of climate change activist actions. Within the sub-stage in question, the adopted actions can be categorised into direct action, advocacy action, organisational action and individual conservation action.
Direct action, has elsewhere been identified as the action most associated with activists by the media and the general public (Kennelly, 2009; Toope et al., 2010). In this study, the youth activists themselves associated such direct action as disrupting bank and industry annual general meetings, with being an activist. A belief was also expressed by many that this was the best method for achieving change due to gaining increased exposure through media and internet coverage. These actions encourage a feeling of solidarity, as also reported in Ojala’s (2007) study on youth climate change activists.

In relation to advocacy actions, this process equates to that identified by McNally (1995), as being where people speak or act either for themselves or on behalf of someone who is unable to do so. Specifically in terms of climate change, youth activists may see themselves as ‘speaking’ not only for the current global community, but also for future generations. Indeed, within the theory being reported here, an intention for some youth is to be able to disseminate information, not only to the public, but also to other youths.

The category of organisational actions includes logistical actions necessary to maintain an active activist organisation. By adopting these actions youths acquire knowledge and skills about the operation of a small or large organisation. Acquisition of these skills has also been acknowledged as a positive consequence of activism in previous research studies on youth climate change activists (Buttigieg & Pace, 2013; Ojala, 2007).

In this study, many youth activists also felt the need to become role models in their demonstration of such individual conservation actions as recycling, using public transport, and dumpster diving. This was so, despite their acknowledgment that individual actions are not enough to have a significant effect on the enhanced greenhouse effect and resultant climate change. These actions, however, have been
integrated into daily life in most developed countries and form part of an environmental or ‘green’ identity (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010).

In regard to individual conservation actions, participants in this study, regularly engaged in these actions. Some, however, struggled with the actions as they often encountered issues associated with time management and guilt over the decisions they had made. Their careful consideration of their actions indicates further that youth climate change activists may also have a strong environmental identity. In relation to this, studies have already shown that a strong environmental identity is a significant indicator of adults (Horton, 2003; Horwitz, 1996) and of youths (Matsuba et al., 2012) becoming environmental activists. It is proposed here, that a strong environmental identity is also present in many youth climate change activists.

Returning again to the fundamental elements of the theory, once youth climate change activists have undertaken activist actions, they then consider whether the strategies and actions of their chosen organisation align with their ideals. This happens when they have moved into the third sub-stage, namely, the sub-stage of consideration of belonging to an organisation. Some youth climate change activists may consider if the organisation to which they belong aligns with their original intentions. For example, those who desire engagement in direct action, may not be comfortable in an advocacy-based political organisation such as The Young Greens. Further, in this sub-stage, youth activists may change the organisation to which they belong, or join an additional group.

By being active within their organisation, youth climate change activists acquire training and skills. This may also be a factor in their consideration of continued membership of a particular organisation. A project by Inglehart (1990) suggested that those who were already well educated and skilled, were more likely to be involved in environmental activism than others. In this study, the educational attainment of
participants was not considered; however, results suggest that youth may be able to acquire new skills after they have become active within a climate change activist organisation. These skills are viewed by youth climate change activists as relevant and useful to employability in their future lives.

In the sub-stage of consideration of belonging to an organisation, youth climate change activists may also reflect on the time commitment of being an active member of an organisation. At this stage of life, youths generally have multiple obligations and may struggle with time management as each of the obligations in their life compete for a limited amount of time. Youth activists who have economic support and do not require a job may have more time to devote to activist activities. In fact, some participants in this study who are financially secure expressed an obligation to use their extra time for their activist activities, a result seen in previous research on adult environmentalists (Lubell, 2002) and youth activists (Harré, 2007).

In particular, according to the results of this study, youth climate change activists can struggle with finding time to devote to their university study. They may also feel a sense of conflict and guilt, particularly when studying a topic related to their climate change activism. Indeed, some youth may, in this sub-stage, consider their university study to be more important and adjust their activist activities accordingly. This perspective aligns with previous research studies which suggest that although an activist orientation is stable, the propensity to take actions can change with an individual’s stage in life (McAdam, 1986; Wall, 1995).

**Third stage:**

**The stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism**

The third and final stage in the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, is the stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism. It is within this stage that youths decide whether to persist in the realm
of climate change activism. There are three sub-stages through which youths progress in this final stage. First, youths develop obligations towards different populations, and this influences their persistence in the ‘fight’ for climate change mitigation. Next, they consider the importance of being an active youth climate change activist for their own self-identity. Finally, they acknowledge that their activist actions can promote a feeling of hope within them. This sense of hope encourages them to persist in climate change activism, despite the issue often appearing to be overwhelming and hopeless.

When youths enter the first sub-stage, designated possessing a sense of obligation towards being a climate change activist, they consider the obligations they possess towards themselves and others, to continue as a climate change activist. The populations to whom they feel obligated are disadvantaged people, youth, and themselves. Results from the study upon which the theory being presented here is based, suggest that many youth climate change activists feel obligated to advocate on behalf of, and for, disadvantaged populations. They view these citizens as contributing the least to climate change, yet suffering the most from its consequences. This form of social justice, known as ‘climate justice’, is acknowledged by the UNFCCC (2015) as being an integral facet of the climate change problem. It is also recognised by some researchers of youth climate change activism as being an important factor in youths’ commitment to ‘the cause’ (Fisher, 2015; Ojala, 2007).

According to the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, another obligation felt by youth activists is towards current and future generations of youth. This concern, which in certain bodies of literature is termed ‘generativity’ (Matsuba et al., 2012), has been a salient theme in significant life experience research studies on environmentalists. It has, for example, been recognised as an influence in adult (Chan, 2009; Horwitz, 1996) and youth environmentalists
(Matsuba et al., 2012). The results of this study suggest that the same concern for future generations can also be found in youth climate change activists, and in doing so, supports the results of a study by Ojala (2007).

When youths enter the second sub-stage, namely, **acknowledging being a climate change activist**, they begin to recognise themselves as activists. The strength of identification with being a climate change activist appears to rely on youths’ perceptions of an activist as one who engages in radical actions. This perception is one perpetuated by media and upheld in public opinion (Gavin, 2010; Kennelly, 2009). Yet, the actions of an activist need not be radical, as evidenced by the four actions of a youth climate change activist previously identified. These are direct action, advocacy actions, organisational actions and individual conservation actions. Of these four activist action types, only direct action can be considered as being radical action.

Some youths identify with the term ‘activist’, acknowledging that they themselves are one. Others may not perceive themselves as ‘true’ activists due to the fact that they do not directly partake in direct action. Yet, some of the youths also acknowledge that they perform roles in leadership and logistical support. These organisational actions are as important to the collective climate change movement as is direct action. However, they are viewed by some youths as not being the actions of a ‘true’ activist.

Regarding **acknowledging being a climate change activist**, some youths initially identify as environmentalists or as advocates. Youths who identify as environmentalists, do so because they originally had great concern for the environment. As they gain more knowledge about the political, economic and social aspects of climate change, these youths may recognise the social justice issues associated with climate change and begin to identify more as climate change activists. On this point, it is posited that an alteration
in identification from environmentalist to climate change activist is due to a perception that environmentalists are only concerned about the physical environment.

Other youth activists do not like to use the term ‘activist’ and do not wish to be labelled in light of their perception of activists as people undertaking radical actions. Youths of this type consider the term to be alienating to other youths, or to members of the public. They are concerned that some individuals who may wish to join the climate change movement could reconsider doing so if they do not perceive themselves to be radical or willing to undertake radical actions. Strandbu and Krange (2003) in referring to such perceived barriers, termed them ‘symbolic fences’.

Returning to the theory generated, the final sub-stage in the third stage, namely, *the stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism* is that of *maintaining a sense of hope about the future*. At this stage, it is again instructive to consider that the issue of climate change is acknowledged by politicians, scientists and activists alike to be a ‘super wicked problem’ with no simple solution (Levin, Cashore, Bernstein, & Auld, 2012). Indeed, the magnitude and complexity of the issue is such that it can overwhelm some youths and it has been suggested that this may be part of the reason as to why they disengage from it (Connell et al., 1999; Ojala, 2012). In order for youth climate change activists to persist in their activist activities, they need to remain optimistic that the actions they undertake will make a positive difference. On this, three factors which promote hope within youth activists were identified. These factors can be categorised into being a member of an organisation, being active and being surrounded by a community.

One of these factors, being a member of an organisation, relates to youths now being members of an organisation to which other youths with similar values belong. This promotes a sense of acceptance and belonging amongst them. The need for belonging,
as identified by Erikson (1950) in his framework of psychosocial development in the stages of youth and young adulthood, is a perspective upheld in other research on youth activists (Harris et al., 2010; Kennelly, 2009). Being a member of an organisation also allows youth activists to experience small accomplishments in their ‘fight for climate change’. Such achievements as working with other youths to increase their awareness, they say, can be empowering. As a result, they argue, a sense of hope and therefore a reason to persist within the movement is developed.

Regarding the second factor identified with promoting hope within youth activists, namely, being active on the issue of climate change, ‘doing something’ facilitates a sense of self-efficacy in some youths. Youths who become active on this issue may acknowledge the stressor of climate change, yet attempt to evoke positive and constructive emotions through actively engaging with the issue. Ojala (2012) called these actions ‘meaning-focused coping’. In such individuals, ‘doing something’ gives them purpose and encourages them to persist within the realm of climate change activism. This factor has been found as a source of hope in previous research on youth climate change activists (Ojala, 2007).

In relation to the third factor identified with promoting hope within youth activists, namely being surrounded by a community, many youth climate change activists acknowledge that they are a part of a global collective movement. In such an overwhelmingly large and potentially catastrophic situation, they say, it is life-affirming that there is a worldwide network of hundreds of thousands of individuals ‘fighting’ alongside them. This notion on the significance of belonging to the collective movement is similar to Ojala’s (2007) findings that youth climate change activists trust in the power of the collective; their belief is that with this many individuals fighting the same fight, there is a real chance for global change.
Recommendations

The researcher acknowledges the limited scope of the study, which was undertaken with eight participants active in the climate change movement in Perth, WA. Nevertheless, given the ‘thick description’ provided in the results chapters, it can be argued that the locally-based substantive theory has potential application to other similar situations and locations. In particular, the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists provides one with both a framework and a set of concepts which can be used to engage in dialogue about perspectives and dimensions of youth climate change activism. It is also a useful tool to assist one in making suggestions on how to increase youths’ interest in, and concern for, the issue of climate change. The theory can also be used to suggest strategies that can be used to influence youth and their relationship with climate change. This is not to go so far as to say that one should have as an objective to produce climate change activists. It is, however, to argue that the locally-based theory could be drawn upon when framing programs to ensure that youths are aware of the issue and the role they could play as current and future global citizens when making economic and political decisions.

In taking guidance from the theory generated to suggest further recommendations, one also needs to consider three groups of stake-holders. These are educators, climate change activist organisations and youth activists themselves. This matter will now be considered in relation to each group.

Educators

As seen in relation to the first sub-stage of the substantive theory generated, namely, possessing a general awareness of climate change, educators have the potential to influence the early awareness of youths on the issue of climate change. They are often the ones responsible for providing trusted knowledge about climate change and have the
opportunity to plant the early seed of general awareness about climate change. On the topic of education, most studies on climate change education are presented within the realm of environmental education. The locally-based theory generated from the study that has been reported here, however, indicates that youth activists do not necessarily view climate change as being primarily an environmental issue. Rather, for many it is, instead, a social issue. Thus, it may be more helpful to frame climate change education in terms of ‘climate justice’, instead of as environmental education.

The point being made here is that using the term ‘environmental’ may give the impression that climate change is primarily an environmental issue and that environmental aspects of the issue are favoured over political, economic and social aspects. This, in turn, might inhibit engagement by youths who do not consider themselves to be environmentalists. This perspective is upheld, indeed, by previous research on climate change activists (Fisher, 2015; Howell & Allen, 2016).

Specifically, in relation to Australia, climate change is taught in isolation at secondary school level within the curriculum areas of Science and Humanities and Social Science. Yet climate change is recognised by scientists and sociologists alike, as being a ‘super wicked problem’ requiring both interdisciplinary understanding and multifaceted solutions (Levin et al., 2012). Also, youth activists themselves, demonstrate that their interest in climate change is not necessarily compartmentalised and separated in their thinking into environmental and social justice concerns. The theory that has been reported here certainly upholds this view. Hence, it is recommended that climate change, as a topic, be taught in an interdisciplinary manner in secondary schools. On this, it is also recognised here that this is not an original suggestion, having already been made by certain climate change education researchers (Schreiner, Henriksen, & Hansen, 2005; Strazdins & Skeat, 2011).
A significant aspect of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, also, is that outdoor experiences in nature may not constitute an important influence in promoting concern for climate change. Instead findings suggest that it is important for educators to engage in conversations about all facets of climate change, including those of a political, economic, social and environmental nature. This prompts one to suggest, that incursion experiences using presentations by climate change communicators would be worth fostering. On this, American researchers have found that a brief 50 minute ‘edutainment’ assembly on climate change had a positive impact on secondary school students’ knowledge about, and attitudes towards, the issue (Flora et al., 2014). Thus, given the indication in the theory outlined in this thesis of the strong influence that peers can have in the first stage of youths becoming climate change activists, a presentation by activist group representatives, and especially youth activists, might be especially meaningful to youths.

Activist organisations

Activist organisations have an important role to play in continuing to promote the issue of climate change amongst both the general public, and the decision-makers responsible for making changes which can mitigate the consequences of climate change. In order to achieve the objective, activist organisations need to continue to have a presence in the realm of climate change activism, both in the physical and the online world. Recalling the second sub-stage of the presented theory, namely, triggering a progression from general awareness to concern, it will be remembered that youths possessing a general awareness of climate change have an experience which can trigger active concern about the issue. The experiences can include a formal event, such as a presentation at school, or knowledge acquisition, in which youths may discover an organisation online as they search for more information about climate change. It is thus recommended that activist organisations continue to actively promote themselves in schools and at universities,
where attending youth could be potential new members. If youths decide that climate change is an issue important enough for them to become part of the movement, the organisation with which they are most familiar will most likely be the one they join.

When new members join an activist organisation, it is imperative that they feel welcomed and an immediate part of the climate change activist community. The second stage of the presented theory, namely, *the stage of consciously committing to climate change activism*, indicates that youth climate change activists can possess varying intentions when joining an organisation, and also can adopt a range of different activist actions once they are members. This suggests that not all youth climate change activists may be comfortable with engaging in direct action. It is thus recommended that new members initially be given organisational roles, which will allow them to feel valuable to the organisation without experiencing great pressure. As they acquire training and skills in the varied actions of an activist they may become more comfortable with performing advocacy or direct action roles. Also, participation in the operation of the organisation can promote a sense of achievement which can, in turn, encourage feelings of self-efficacy. It is proposed that this self-efficacy will assist youths in moving into the third stage, namely, that of *persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism*.

Youths in the climate change movement who are committed to ‘the cause’, however, are required to manage different aspects of their busy lives. Some youth activists can feel overwhelmed by their obligation to the climate change movement and its associated time commitments. In order to encourage youths to persist in the movement, and move into the third stage of the presented theory, namely, *the stage of persisting in one’s commitment to climate change activism*, it is important that activist organisations are explicitly conscious of the time management issues of youth. They can assist youths on
this by delegating roles fairly amongst members and being supportive if they need some
downtime from their activist actions.

For youths to persist in the movement, it is essential that they possess feelings of hope
in the ‘fight for climate change’. This can occur in the final sub-stage of the reported
theory, namely, that of maintaining a sense of hope for the future. In this regard, the
issue of climate change is known to be vastly complex and at times can be completely
overwhelming, leaving youth activists feeling a sense of helplessness. Therefore, their
worries and fears should be counterbalanced by constructive emotions, including
hopefulness. It is thus recommended that any small successes within the organisation,
and the wider national and global movement, be acknowledged and celebrated. Climate
change provides a long-term challenge, and successes are only likely to occur in
incremental stages. Any positive step must be perceived as a success of the entire
climate change movement and thus provide a positive reason for youth climate change
activists to persist as activists.

**Youth activists**

The most important function youth activists can play in the lives of potential youth
climate change activists is to be role models for climate change concern and action.
Through modelling, youth climate change activists have the potential to influence the
general awareness of other youths in the first stage of the reported theory, namely, the
stage of progressing from awareness of climate change to having active concern. In
relation to this, it is recommended that youth climate change activists interact with other
like-minded youths as often as possible, particularly at schools and at universities.

Youth climate change activists can be a significant other in raising general awareness of
climate change in youths. This can occur informally through conversations with friends
and family, or in more formal settings where they can present themselves as members of
climate change organisations and as activists. As seen in relation to the second sub-stage, namely, that of *triggering a progression from general awareness to concern*, it is in formal events that youth activists have an opportunity to trigger concern in other youths. Their passion for the movement could inspire other individuals to become members of an organisation. At all times, these youth activists are representative not only of their climate change activist organisations, but of the climate change movement as a whole.

In considering the recurring theme of ‘belonging’ in *the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists*, it is important also that youth activists acknowledge the social aspect of being members of their organisations. The social benefits of belonging to a network of like-minded people should be made explicit in any interactions with other youths. Also, being an activist should be represented as providing a place of participation, support and empowerment. The final sub-stage of the substantive theory presented here, namely, that of *maintaining a sense of hope for the future*, indicates that it is through participation that some youths can overcome their worries and fears about climate change consequences, and replace them with positive and constructive emotions. Thus, climate change activism is a way for youth to engage with climate change in a beneficial manner.

**Areas for Future Research**

The literature overview presented in Chapter Three, demonstrated that there is a lack of research on formative influences on climate change activists, and in particular on youth climate change activists. While there is a substantial amount of research on environmental activists, the substantive theory presented here indicates that the issues of concern for the environment and climate change are not the same, and should not be treated as being so. Thus, there is the potential for many research studies to be
undertaken within the area of climate change activism and on the formative influences on climate change activist development.

The majority of studies on formative influences on adult and youth environmentalists draw on significant life experience research studies. The prevalent themes generated from these studies are acknowledged when considering environmental education initiatives to encourage environmental concern. It would also be valuable to investigate influences on climate change activism in relation to significant life experiences. The results of studies with this focus could then be used to generate further theory to inform climate change education initiatives both inside and outside the classroom.

A corpus of studies does exist which indicates that youths are more likely to engage with climate change if they can experience it directly through educational, outreach, or social programs (Corner et al., 2015). An issue associated with the development of such programs is that climate change concern is highly contextual in nature. Worldview, value orientation, socioeconomic status, level of education and geographical location, are but a few of the influences that lead to climate change concerns of various types. It would thus follow, that many local theories of climate change concerns need to be generated to influence the development of locally appropriate programs.

Furthermore, while there is a considerable body of research on aspects of environmental identity and environmentalist identity, there is little mention in the literature of a climate change identity and of a climate change activist identity. It is acknowledged that climate change identity can be a complicated construct and may have features that are specific to certain geographical areas and to socio-economic status. This raises awareness once again of the need for the generation of locally-based theories on the matter.

Finally, the few studies which have been undertaken on climate change activists have mostly focused on youth activists and on their current perspectives. More research could
be undertaken on adult climate change activists to generate theory on their formative influences, and to compare and contrast them with the formative influences on youths such as those who participated in this study. Given the daunting and often overwhelming nature of the issue of climate change, longitudinal qualitative research in this field could also be instructive. The results of the local theories generated from such studies could be used to inform activist organisations on possible influences on the long-term commitment of youth activists, and on how they might harness or address them.

**Conclusion**

Within the academic literature there is a reasonable volume of studies related to environmental activism. This is not surprising given that the modern environmental movement has been alive since the 1960s. Yet, climate change is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the climate change movement gaining momentum to become a global collective one only in the past two decades. As a result, studies on climate change activism are not plentiful and often are conflated with those on environmental activists. The locally-based theory generated from the results of the study reported earlier in this thesis, however, indicates that these two issues can be viewed very differently by activists. Thus, it may be of minimal benefit to compare results from a study on environmental activists to those on climate change activists.

Considered in terms of an ‘ideal type’, the principal difference between environmentalism and climate change activism is that activists view the issue as more than an environmental one. For them, it is primarily a social justice issue, affecting populations of developing countries, indigenous peoples, and future generations. This fundamental difference means that some influences identified in the various stages of
the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists differ from influences identified in research studies undertaken with environmentalists.

One recurring theme in studies on environmental activists is the influence of their childhood experiences with nature. These experiences are often reported as being perceived by activists as important influences on their development of an environmental ethic and their pathway to environmentalism. This has led to a call for environmental education in schools to provide such experiences for primary school students. Experience with nature, however, did not arise in the study that led to the generation of the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists. This suggests that education aimed at increasing engagement with climate change, may not need to focus on experiences in nature. This is a matter that might appeal to some, as such experiences are often impractical to organise in an urban environment.

In their developmental model of the trajectory of an environmentalist, Matsuba and Pratt (2013) proposed that an environmental self and identity begin to develop in early childhood. The locally-based theory generated and presented in this thesis, however, suggests that the formation of a climate change identity may not begin until adolescence. Following from this, it would seem that secondary schools and universities are the places on which to concentrate when developing strategies to promote climate change and climate change activist organisations.

Finally, the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists, indicates that there may be many pathways in the journey to youth climate change activism. Yet, one common theme is present in relation to every stage, namely, that the influence of social and organisational ties is strong amongst climate change activists. This highlights their need ‘to belong’ and their commitment to their climate change organisation and the movement as a whole. It is this commitment which
encourages youths to persist in their climate change activist activities and is the influence that perhaps their advocates should take cognisance of the most.

To summarise then, this final chapter of the thesis has provided an overview of *the theory of the progressive journey to activism of youth climate change activists* and has discussed it in relation to previous studies on environmental and climate change activism. Some recommendations have also been suggested for educators, activist organisations and youth activists, and some areas for future research have been presented. Overall, insights were provided on the perspectives of youth climate change activists on their activist activities and the influences on their journey to activism were discussed.

This locally-based substantive theory generated makes a contribution to youth climate change activist research, as few qualitative studies have been conducted on such youths’ perspectives on their own activist actions. Hopefully it can be used to bring about social change through promoting a better understanding of youths and of their relationship with the issue of climate change.
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