

How Climate Protesters Perceive Injustice and Justify Breaking the Law: Qualitative Interviews With Extinction Rebellion

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Abstract

Facing the looming threat of the climate crisis, climate movements using strategies of nonviolent civil disobedience have recently attracted attention. To better understand what drives such groups to protest possibly in law-violating ways, we conducted qualitative interviews among 106 people involved with Extinction Rebellion in the Netherlands. These interviews had two main goals: (1) to explore the relevance of perceived injustice as a motivation for protesters to participate in climate action and (2) to determine protesters' justifications for breaking the law with civil disobedient protest. Our findings show that perceived injustice was an important motivation for the protesters we interviewed. Specifically, they perceived injustice in their personal futures, government actions (or lack thereof), the unequal distribution of climate change impacts and responsibility, police treatment, and societal systems. Furthermore, protesters indicated a willingness to break certain laws with civil disobedient protests in a nonviolent manner, but their definitions of nonviolence varied. In particular, protesters legitimized disruptive actions by citing the current urgency of addressing what is at stake, future moral goals, and the past effectiveness of disobedient strategies. These findings help to understand how climate protesters' injustice perceptions and their intentions to participate in disruptive actions are shaped in today's society.



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Keywords

injustice perceptions, climate protest, civil disobedience, law violations, qualitative interviews

Samenvatting

Met het oog op de dreigende klimaatcrisis, trekken klimaatbewegingen die strategieën van geweldloze burgerlijke ongehoorzaamheid toepassen de laatste tijd de aandacht. Om beter te begrijpen wat dergelijke groepen drijft om mogelijk op wet-overtredende manieren te protesteren, hebben we kwalitatieve interviews gehouden bij 106 mensen die betrokken waren bij Extinction Rebellion in Nederland. Deze interviews hadden twee hoofddoelen: (1) het onderzoeken van de relevantie van waargenomen onrechtvaardigheid als motivatie voor demonstranten om deel te nemen aan klimaatactie en (2) het bepalen van de rechtvaardigingen van demonstranten om de wet te overtreden met burgerlijk ongehoorzaam protest. Uit onze bevindingen blijkt dat ervaren onrechtvaardigheid een belangrijke motivatie was voor de demonstranten die wij interviewden. Zij zagen met name onrecht in hun persoonlijke toekomst, de maatregelen van de overheid (of het gebrek daaraan), de ongelijke verdeling van de gevolgen van en de verantwoordelijkheid voor klimaatverandering, de behandeling door de politie en maatschappelijke systemen. Verder gaven demonstranten aan bereid te zijn bepaalde wetten te overtreden door op geweldloze wijze burgerlijk ongehoorzaam te protesteren, maar hun definities van geweldloosheid liepen uiteen. In het bijzonder legitimeerden demonstranten ontwrichtende acties door te wijzen op de huidige urgentie van het aanpakken van wat er op het spel staat, toekomstige morele doelen, en de effectiviteit van ongehoorzame strategieën in het verleden. Deze bevindingen helpen te begrijpen hoe de percepties van onrechtvaardigheid van klimaatprotesteerders en hun intenties om deel te nemen aan ontwrichtende acties worden gevormd in de huidige samenleving.

Trefwoorden

waargenomen onrechtvaardigheid, klimaatprotest, burgerlijke ongehoorzaamheid, wetsovertredingen, kwalitatieve interviews

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Many people have great concerns about climate issues. Some demand rapid changes and become involved in protests. Noting that legal marches do not bring about the desired changes quickly enough, climate protesters in Western societies have recently adopted strategies of civil disobedience with actions ranging from gluing themselves to paintings in museums, blocking highways, and occupying buildings of ministries and multinationals.

Why was this study done?

To better understand what drives people to protest against climate change, possibly in law-violating ways, we interviewed 106 people who affiliated with Extinction Rebellion in The Netherlands. Extinction Rebellion is a new climate movement founded in the United

Kingdom in 2018. Adopting the strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience, that involves the active refusal to obey certain rules, laws, or authorities, the movement has become the topic of a polarized debate and their tactics are strongly criticized in the media. However, in-depth insight into what truly motivates these climate protesters has so far been rather lacking.

What did the researchers do and find?

By interviewing climate protesters in an open manner about why they took action in different ways, protesters could freely explain their motivations and reasons for law violations. Specifically, the researchers paid attention to protesters' perceptions of injustice because the climate crisis is intertwined with unjust issues, and earlier research showed that perceived injustice drives collective action as well as law-breaking behavior. We found that all protesters mentioned injustice when asked about their protest motivations, but they referred to different types of injustice. Some mentioned the misconduct of governments, companies, and people, others inequalities between different groups in society, or systemic and ecological injustices. Although the majority indicated a willingness to break the law with climate protests, they only intended to do this for nonviolent disobedient actions. However, what they defined as violence differed. Among respondents, reasons for law violations put forward where: (1) the current urgency of addressing climate issues, (2) the moral goal to be achieved, and (3) the effectiveness that disruptive strategies had in the past.

What do these findings mean?

This research shows that injustice is an important motive for climate protesters that associate with the Dutch department of Extinction Rebellion and that they not just break any law, but certain laws such as disrupting public order and disobeying the orders of police officers. Although protesters gave different reasons for their nonviolent law-breaking they generally adhered to the idea that these violations should be open, purposeful, and deliberate. These findings are important, we argue, in part because a better understanding of protesters' perceptions of injustice and their justifications for breaking the law, can help prevent devaluation of climate activism and inform approaches aimed at protecting their right to protest and preventing serious escalation between protesters and the police.

Highlights

- Qualitative interviews were used to study the motivations of climate protesters who associated with the Dutch department of Extinction Rebellion.
- Extinction Rebellion protesters perceive injustice in governmental actions, the unequal distribution of climate impacts and responsibility, police treatment, and social systems.
- The majority of Extinction Rebellion protesters is willing to engage in civil disobedience and protest in nonviolent ways, but what they define as “nonviolence” varies.
- Law violations are justified by arguments about morality, the urgency of addressing climate issues, and the effectiveness of disruptive strategies.
- A better understanding of protesters’ injustice perceptions and their disruptive intentions could contribute to protecting their right to protest and preventing future escalation between protesters and the police.

Facing the threat of the climate crisis and the inaction of powerful governments and multinationals, groups of young people in Western societies have recently risen up to demand just and radical societal changes. Concerned about their own future and the fate of marginalized groups in the Global South they take to the streets. Although most of these climate groups adhere to principles of nonviolence, their action repertoires seem diverse, ranging from peaceful marches and road blocks, to occupations, trespassing, and property damage (O’Brien et al., 2018). Recently, their strategy changed with protesters gluing to famous paintings in museums around the world. Given the looming prospect and increasing urgency to address what is at stake, this prompts the question of how far these protesters feel they can go and what leads them to remain peaceful.

The question of why people participate in protests, has received much attention in social psychological research on collective action (see e.g., van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Collective action refers to any action that individuals take on behalf of a collective organization with the goal of improving the conditions of their own group or another group (Wright et al., 1990). Such protests can take different forms. A distinction is often made between normative and non-normative actions. Normative actions involve behaviors that fall within a certain societal system (e.g., legal demonstrations). Non-normative actions are behaviors that break the norms and rules of these systems, such as actions involving property damage (e.g., spray painting walls) and disruption (e.g., roadblocks). Importantly, not all protests that cross legal and social boundaries are necessarily violent and the distinction between normative and non-normative behaviors depends on the societal context in which these actions are performed.

Following earlier work on collective action, the current study has two goals: (1) to explore perceived injustice as a motivation for people who associated with the Dutch department of Extinction Rebellion to participate in climate protests and (2) to determine

what leads them to break the law with these actions. In studying these two goals, we note that earlier theories propose that people participate in protests because they want to express their grievances that arise from perceived injustices (van den Bos, 2018). Social injustice is central to collective action. In the past, movements have addressed injustices ranging from unequal distributions of wealth to discrimination and gender inequalities. In the wake of a century of activists dedicated to peaceful civil resistance, new social movements recently emerged, from Black Lives Matter to #MeToo, that strategically use nonviolent direct action to shape public discourse and force political change (Sharp, 2005).

The Justice Judgement Process

We argue that perceived injustice is important to climate movements. Elaborating on the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA; van Zomeren et al., 2008), studies showed that perceived injustice predicts participation in the environmental movement (see, e.g., Barth et al., 2015; Landmann & Rohmann, 2020). For example, concerned citizens may notice that powerful governments are not complying with the international climate agreements they have signed, and join an environmental movement to redress this. As climate protesters can face different injustices, ranging from governmental misconduct to human-caused environmental degradation, it remains unclear which types of injustices drive them to engage in disruption.

Following social justice theories (Sabbagh & Schmitt, 2016), people can use information about the distribution of outcomes, procedures and treatment encountered, structures or systems, and the violation of moral values, to make sense of injustice in the world around them. For example, young citizens might find that they are more negatively affected by climate change than their parents because climate issues are likely to worsen over time (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2022). In particular, the observation that the government does not take the climate concerns of young people seriously, and on top of that, they have fewer (or lack) opportunities to voice their concerns through politics, can evoke a sense of injustice.

To form justice judgements, people often evaluate their relationships with important others, such as social authorities (Tyler & Lind, 1992). The experience that, for example, politicians, police officers, or judges, have treated you as person or your group in unjust manners is central to injustice perceptions (Jansma et al., 2022; van den Bos, 2015). For example, when peaceful climate protesters observe that their group is violently arrested during protests while other groups are allowed to continue their protests, they may feel unfairly treated. This can drive them to participate in social protest.

In the current climate crisis, the benefits and burdens are unequally distributed between social groups. This is because the consequences of climate change primarily affect those who did not provoke it. Younger generations are burdened by the actions of older generations, the Global South already faces environmental breakdown while they

have less contributed to global emissions, and lower status groups have less resources to adapt to a changing climate. When people judge such inequalities, or its underlying colonial structures or neoliberalist systems, as a justice problem, it can foster participation in protests (e.g., Bond et al., 2020). This is because social justice is a moral concern that strongly drives collective action (Rothmund et al., 2016). Specifically in the climate context, ecological injustice that involves humans' harmful attitude toward nature and non-human life, is considered a moral issue (Bandura, 2007).

Why People Break the Law With Civil Disobedient Protest

To date, nonviolent civil disobedience is a core strategy of groups protesting against climate change in Western liberal societies. Although disruptive actions could end in a criminal offence (disturbance of public order or disobeying a police order), civil disobedience among climate protesters is on the rise (de Moor et al., 2021). So why do people participate in climate protests that sometimes involve law-breaking?

Nonviolent civil disobedience, is a tactic in which a citizen deliberately breaks a rule or a law, with the aim of changing these laws or policy (Chenoweth & Cunningham, 2013; Rawls, 1971). The underlying idea is that disrupting societal systems or processes in a nonviolent manner brings the desired attention to the injustices people want to address, which legal or violent alternatives fail to do. One environmental movement that is known for its disruption is *Extinction Rebellion*. Extinction Rebellion (XR) is founded in the United Kingdom in 2018 and is rapidly growing internationally (Richardson, 2020). Their characteristic actions are mass road blocks and occupations of ministries and companies. Extinction Rebellion demands governments to declare a climate and ecological emergency and ensure necessary climate policies (Extinction Rebellion, 2019).

Although recent work has examined the protest motivations of other European divisions (e.g., Bowman & Pickard, 2021; Furlong & Vignoles, 2021; Smiles & Edwards, 2021), it remains unexplored what drives Dutch Extinction Rebellion protesters towards (or from) law-breaking tactics. At the same time, Extinction Rebellion's disruptive strategies are large criticized and debated in the Dutch media. This, combined with conflicting perspectives in a polarized debate around climate policy, impede a better understanding of protesters' true motivations. Moreover, disobedient strategies make repeated conflicts between climate protesters and police inevitable, which could give way to escalation as both groups have opposing aims (protesters aim to disrupt the order that the police needs to maintain) (de Graaf, 2011; della Porta, 2018). We also note that when protesters' motivations are misinterpreted, their fundamental right to protest could become jeopardized (Dodd & Grierson, 2020; BBC, 2022). To address these issues, we delved deeply into the motivations of climate protesters who associated with the Dutch department of Extinction Rebellion.

The Current Research

The current research adopted an exploratory bottom-up approach to investigate: (1) the injustice perceptions of people who associated with Extinction Rebellion Netherlands and (2) their justifications for breaking the law with civil disobedience. We conducted 106 qualitative in-depth interviews with protesters between October 2020 and October 2021. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because experiencing injustice is inherently subjective and people communicate and respond to it differently (van den Bos, 2003). Furthermore, studies showed that climate groups find it difficult to arrive at a mutual understanding of what is just (and what not). For example, Piispa & Kiilakoski (2022) found that protesters experienced difficulties defining climate injustice when they interviewed them, making “the concept itself, at times, toothless” (p. 6, see also Martiskainen et al., 2020). Moreover, to understand why people violate social norms and legal rules it is essential to look for more profound explanations because their attitudes and beliefs depend greatly on situational characteristics (Galtung, 1990). The inductive interview approach reduced the likelihood for important matters being overlooked and provided protesters with the opportunity to talk freely about their motivations while leaving room individual interpretations (Boeije, 2010).

Method

Data Collection and Recruitment

Before data collection, the principal researcher (first author of this paper) made several fieldtrips to establish contact with potential respondents and familiarize with the movement. We collected data in three waves that all involved similar recruitment procedures (see Table 1). Respondents were recruited through direct contact at demonstrations in the Netherlands, online, and through snowball sampling¹. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams due to Covid-19 restrictions in Wave 1 and during protests in Wave 2 and Wave 3. In Wave 3, a group of students (who were trained and used pre-defined questions) helped collecting the data. During fieldwork Covid-19 guidelines were adhered to at all times.

1) The first author visited 17 events in 2020 and 2021, including peaceful protests, trainings, road blocks, and bank occupations. These events were usually part of a “Rebellion” (national action week).

Table 1*Interview Characteristics (N = 106)*

Wave	N	Type	Time duration (min)	
			M	Range
1	40	Online	72	46–102
2	32	Field	24	9–36
3	34	Field	21	8–37

Sample

In the total sample ($N = 106$), 55 people identified as women, 47 as men, and 4 as nonbinary, with ages ranging from 17 to 77 years ($M = 35.99$, $SD = 15.61$). Most protesters were students. They lived in different parts of the Netherlands (both urban and rural) with the majority living in the Randstad. Respondents had varying nationalities (77.36% were Dutch). Within the movement, respondents had different positions and roles, ranging from being a participant of protests to being part of organizational circles at the local or national level. Our generally White, student, and highly educated sample, resonates with previous research in the European climate movement (Wahlström et al., 2019).

Our sample was largely determined by the possibilities that presented themselves during our research, yielding a convenience sample. The amount of interviews provided sufficient data to reach a saturation point, producing concrete, repeated, and emerging themes (Boeije, 2010). No interviews were excluded. Research respondents were not chosen completely at random for a snowball recruitment method was used. We did try, however, to ensure that respondents were as diverse as possible.

Interview Procedure

The interviews, semi-structured in nature, involved topic lists and open-ended questions. The development of the interview materials was informed by systematically collected fieldnotes, our research question, and the literature on perceived injustice. In line with Finkel (2000) and van den Bos (2018), we operationalized perceived injustice as “the general feeling that something is not right”. This broad operationalization of perceived injustice ensured that respondents could relate to this issue in a way that fitted their interpretations of the injustice concept.

Topic lists contained individuals’ general motivations to participate in climate protests; their experiences with injustice; and their intentions to breaking the law and opinions on the use of violence during climate protests. Both the order in which questions were asked and their phrasings were flexible and could be adapted to the flow of each interview². Interviews were recorded on an encrypted audio device and conducted in English or Dutch.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation occurred (Boeije, 2010). Data was prepared manually by transcribing the interviews verbatim in the original language of the interview and pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity. Sensitive information was eliminated from the transcript.

Data Analyses

Our analytical procedure consisted of a combination of inductive and deductive strategies. Our coding approach involved thematic analyses (Roulston, 2001) and elements from a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We developed a code manual which we used as a guide during coding and performed our analyses NVivo (QSR International, 2018)³.

Data analysis proceeded in three stages. The first stage involved the systematic open coding of each segment of the data. The first author named and classified the textual data resulting in a long list of lower-level codes. Each time a bulk of eight to ten interviews was coded this way and followed by an evaluation round within the research group. We checked whether text fragments had been assigned to the correct coding labels to minimize rating inconsistencies, and developed new coding labels when the old ones proved inadequate.

In the second stage, codes were subdivided into the higher-order categories from the code manual. The goal of this “axial” coding stage was to bring together the text fragments that were identified to establish connections between themes and subthemes. We sought to establish a set of constructs that were theoretically meaningful, and internally consistent, robust, and distinct. Newly emerging, inductive codes were integrated into categories by looking at similarities and differences between these codes, using “sensitizing concepts” and “thick descriptions” (Boeije, 2010). For example, the category *perceptions of injustice* was defined as “All text fragments dealing with respondents’ experiences with injustice”.

During the final stage, we reviewed all codes and examined potential connections between them. This analysis provided the opportunity to identify and label emerging themes (Boeije, 2010). The analysis concluded with an interpretative phase during which we developed an explanatory framework that draws on the number of different interviews in which each core category occurred and the interrelationships between them.

Although presented as a linear, step-by-step procedure, our analysis was iterative: data collection and analyses were undertaken concurrently. We verified our code manual and updated it when necessary. When we discovered new information we analyzed the codes following the three steps described above replicating our earlier findings.

2) Our interview procedure can be found in Jansma et al. (2024), Appendix A.

3) Our code book and interview instrument can be accessed at Jansma et al. (2023b).

Reflexivity

To ensure the research quality and ethical standards, strategies of reflexivity were employed at various stages during the research process (Palaganas et al., 2017). First, we frequently reflected on how our own and respondents' background (perspectives and position) influenced the study. During field visits, the principal researcher always indicated her academic affiliation and research interest and was open about supporting their cause. Although this could be considered a bias (Frey, 2018), we used a transparent communication that allowed us to ask more precise follow-up questions during the interviews. Second, we systematically made notes during field work, interviews, data analyses, and interpretation. Third, interviews were conducted by more than one researcher, which ensured triangulation of our interview procedure. Fourth, we adopted a quantitative measure of intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). A group of two coders (first wave) and five coders (last wave) independently coded and discussed a randomly selected proportion of 25% of the data units. Coders achieved a good level of interrater agreement (98% and 86% respectively; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Injustice Perceptions

As mentioned earlier, our first goal was to explore perceived injustice as a motivation for climate protesters. We found that all respondents spoke about instances of injustice at some point⁴. Most of them mentioned injustice in response to our opening question "why is it important for you to take climate action?" ($N = 50$, 47%) or after we subtly followed up on our opening question ($N = 55$, 52%) signaling the importance of the topic for their motivation. Only three respondents talked about injustice at a later point in the interview (3%). Although all protesters talked about injustice, they described different *types* of injustice that they perceived personally, in their social environment, society, or the world at large. This is consistent with the idea that injustice judgements are subjective and multi-layered (Finkel, 2001; van den Bos, 2003)⁵.

Personal Injustice

Respondents perceived the idea that climate change endangers their personal future and those of their friends and relatives as an injustice that affects them personally. Specifically, we coded this as referring to a personally experienced *unjust future* ($N = 17$,

4) We examined when (some form of) injustice was brought up during the interview by noting for each transcript in NVivo whether the code 'perceptions of injustice' occurred either as (1) a response to our opening question, (2) after further questioning but before other topics were discussed, or (3) at a later point in the interview.

5) See Jansma et al. (2024), Appendix B for an overview of codes, descriptions, and example quotes.

16%). For example, Respondent 13 said, “The way we deal with the climate problem is not right ... it has greatly changed my view of the future, my own dreams and goals ... for example, my desire to have children”.

Being aware of the dangers threatening their future, respondents felt that they themselves were not taken seriously in their concerns by national governments. As described by Respondent 29, “I see a government who abandons us”. We coded this as *personal maltreatment by government* ($N = 9$, 8%). Codes involving protesters’ personal notions of injustice, regarding their future and government treatment, were subdivided into the overarching code *personal injustice* ($N = 29$, 27%).

Group Injustice

Many respondents also described the way in which the police interacted with the group of climate activists during protests as unjust, which we coded *group maltreatment by police* ($N = 50$, 47%). They recalled officers arresting protesters without legal basis or in a discriminatory and violent way (e.g., pulling hair, flipping wrists, and pushing people). Specifically, protesters compared how their group was treated compared to other groups, which we coded *group deprivation* ($N = 15$, 14%). For example, Respondent 29 said, “Climate activists were removed very violently ... also bystanders ... at the farmers’ demonstrations there was no intervention at all ... politicians gave the farmers a heart to heart ... so extremely unfair. There are clearly double standards in the Netherlands”.

Social Injustice

Many respondents talked about how certain groups of people relatively bear more damage from the climate crisis and its proposed solutions. We coded this as *social injustice* ($N = 71$, 67%). As described by Respondent 29, protesters perceived inequalities on a social and global scale, but also over time:

You have the injustice of today, from the privileged to the non-privileged ... the Global North has caused all the emissions, but the Global South has to deal with all the consequences ... the injustice that older generations are screwing younger generations. (Respondent 29)

Respondents most often talked about the Global North being more responsible for causing and solving climate change while the Global South will be primarily and firstly affected by its negative consequences. We coded this *intercontinental injustice* ($N = 48$, 45%). When respondents noticed that less-privileged groups are burdened more by climate change than more-privileged groups, we coded this *interclass injustice* ($N = 29$, 27%). The perceived unequal distribution between generations, involving younger generations being harmed by the actions of older generations, was coded *intergenerational injustice* ($N = 30$, 28%).

Systemic Injustice

Respondents perceived the current status quo (or social) system to be the underlying cause of personal, group, and social injustice. We coded this as *unjust systems* ($N = 59$, 56%). Respondents deemed the system, to which they referred with words as “toxic”, “sick”, or “criminal”, responsible for causing, maintaining, and worsening climate issues. When talking about these systems, respondents described institutionalized trends, such as the lobby of the fossil industry, consumerism and capitalism, and colonial practices. As described by Respondent 29, “I’m in a failing, destructive, immoral system. That’s why I’m taking to the streets”.

Respondents perceived the way people act toward animals and non-humans as an injustice caused by how society is shaped. They described how humans’ superior attitude toward ecology leads to environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and animal extinction. We coded this as *ecological injustice* ($N = 35$, 33%). Respondent 7 said, “The way we treat the world and the climate ... I don’t think that’s right. Nature can’t stand up for itself”.

Furthermore, many respondents noticed that people, companies and governments systematically fail to acknowledge or (correctly) address climate problems ($N = 69$, 65%). We coded these instances as *harmful conduct of people, companies and governments*. As described by Respondent 65, “The government recognizes there is a problem by signing a Paris agreement. Why don’t they do something? That bothers me a lot”.

In particular, noticing the Dutch government fails to guarantee the safety of her citizens, respondents believed the “social contract” was compromised (Rousseau, 2004). This led them to legitimize engagement in disruptive actions ($N = 18$, 17%). Respondent 59 explained, “I feel the government has broken the social contract with its citizens ... if the government is no longer able to protect the citizen ... the citizen must simply revolt”.

Justifications for Breaking the Law

Our second aim was to explore what reasons people put forward to explain their law breaking with civil disobedient acts. First, we asked respondents whether they wanted to violate the law when protesting against climate issues. We found that the vast majority of interviewees indicated that they were willing to break *certain* laws with civil disobedience ($N = 86$, 81%), such as the violation of public order (roadblocks), entering private or prohibited areas (occupying ministries), and disobeying law enforcement officers (not assisting when arrested), but *only* nonviolently. Respondents generally approved of actions that were performed in an *open, purposeful* and *deliberate* manner. For example, Respondent 58 said, “I think it is fine [law-breaking] as long as you do it openly” and Respondent 64 said, “Breaking the law is not a problem ... if you stand behind the goal and ... bear the consequences”.

Effectiveness, Morality, and Urgency

Respondents explained their motivation for law-breaking involving civil disobedience with different arguments. Most protesters pointed to the *perceived effectiveness* that disruptive strategies had in the past ($N = 70$, 66%). Respondents deemed such tactics currently necessary because conventional approaches like petitioning, voting, and marches, proved unsuccessful. Supporting their arguments respondents often cited historical actors such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Rosa Parks as well as the current media attention that Extinction Rebellion disruptions have generated. As described by Respondent 65, “I think it’s justified if we think it works ... some good examples: the civil movement in America ... the women’s suffrage in the Netherlands in the 1970s”.

Respondents also brought forward other reasons for their lawbreaking, such as *moral arguments* ($N = 45$, 43%). For example, Respondent 65 argued, “Civil disobedience, breaks a rule, but for a higher purpose”. Some respondents believed law violations to be morally justified because certain rules were unjust ($N = 26$, 25%), relying on the idea that “When a law is not fair, you can break it” (Respondent 40). They justified their disobedience similarly, as argued by Respondent 19, “The police just follow the order of the municipality ... and that is not always fair ... it is reasonable to go against the injustice ... doesn’t matter if the police try to stop you. You’re still doing the right thing”.

Other respondents referred to *feelings of urgency* ($N = 25$, 29%). For example, Respondent 19 said, “The situation is so severe that we really need to do everything that is in our power”. They saw no other options while time is running out. Respondent 90 said, “Things are so serious and urgent that the end justifies the means”. This indicates that experiencing the urgency of addressing what is at stake may make climate change mitigation feel more important than staying within legal limits.

Definitions of Nonviolence

Although all respondents indicated they wanted to remain nonviolent, we found that what they defined as nonviolence varied. As Respondent 12 reasoned, “I would say violence is when someone gets hurt, I don’t give a shit about property”. As shown in this quote, respondents sometimes distinguished between violence directed at people or property ($N = 29$, 26%). Respondents generally approved of violence directed against the property of large polluting corporations more often than against responsible individuals. Property damage was often justified by pointing to the reversibility of damage caused by climate actions (because washable materials are used) and protesters’ intentions to clean up afterwards.

Respondents also gave different reasons for their adherence to nonviolence. For example, Respondent 79 said, “If they blow up Shell headquarters, I wouldn’t shed a tear ... I’m not against it principally, but practically I doubt if it solves the problem”. When respondents indicated they adhered to nonviolence because of strategic reasons,

we coded this as *strategic pacifism* ($N = 20$, 19%). When respondents stated they were morally against violence, we coded this as *moral pacifism* ($N = 32$, 29%).

Discussion

In this study, we spoke with 106 climate protesters of the Dutch department of Extinction Rebellion about their motivation to participate in climate protests and specifically explored the importance of perceived injustice. We found that all protesters talked about instances of injustice they noticed in their environment, society, or the world at large. This is also reflected in Extinction Rebellion's recent implementation of the "climate justice for all" demand (Extinction Rebellion NL, 2023). In line with research among #FridaysForFuture protesters (Piispa & Kiilakoski, 2022), our interviews revealed that protesters had different understandings of injustice. We distinguished four types of injustice perceptions that were important to Extinction Rebellion protesters: (1) *personal injustice*, (2) *group injustice*, (3) *social injustice*, and (4) *systemic injustice*.

Perceiving Injustice in Different Contexts

Worried about a future where the effects of climate change are visible, Extinction Rebellion protesters (27% of the interviewees) indicated their personal concerns were not taken seriously by the Dutch government. Consistent with recent studies among young Norwegian and Finnish climate activists (Haugestad et al., 2021; Piispa & Kiilakoski, 2022), protesters felt deprived of their future as it is filled with uncertainty and doom, and noted political inaction by leaders. Because our study included older people (on average, they were 36 years old), protesters often emphasized that they were mostly concerned about their children's or grandchildren's future rather than their own.

In addition to individual experiences of injustice, nearly half of the protesters we interviewed (47%) perceived that their protest group was treated in unjust manners by the Dutch police. Perceived mistreatment by police is closely related to Extinction Rebellion's disruptive strategies that typically involve police intervention. While acknowledging that their group is deliberately breaking the law, protesters felt it was unfair that the disruptive protests of other groups (such as the farmers who blocked Dutch highways with tractors), were not interrupted or ended in arrests.

Furthermore, the injustice perceptions of many protesters (67%) originated from the observation that certain social groups (rich vs. poor), generations (young vs. old), and continents (Global North vs. South) are unequally harmed by and responsible for climate-outcomes. The idea that certain people and communities who are least responsible for climate change suffer the most severe consequences drives climate activism in Western societies (Bond et al., 2020; Reese & Jacob, 2015). Since the protesters we interviewed themselves primarily belonged to the privileged groups they spoke it (as most of them

were Western, white, and wealthy), examining how this affects their protest motivation is relevant. For example, studies could look into experiences of collective responsibility, solidarity, or guilt.

Lastly, protesters perceived the current societal system (status quo) as the cause of the injustices they perceive. Respondents talked about an unjust system that is intertwined with harmful practices, such as people, governments, and companies' failure to recognize or act correctly on climate matters. Following Extinction Rebellion's "Change the system-approach" (de Moor et al., 2021), a slight majority of respondents talked about unjust systems (56%). Fewer respondents (33%) mentioned that addressing ecological degradation drove their action, which is consistent with work showing that ecological injustices are less important to current climate protesters than other injustices (Piispa & Kiilakoski, 2022).

Taken together, our findings indicate that climate protesters perceive injustice in their personal and social environment, but also more generally in contexts that are more distal to them in time and space (see also Jansma et al., 2022). By showing that climate injustice involves a plurality of experiences on the individual, global, and system level, we align with recent work that provided a similar typology (Piispa & Kiilakoski, 2022). However, our study highlights the additional importance of disobedient protesters' evaluation of intergroup interactions with police officers.

Why Protesters Cause Disruption

In our sample, the majority of Extinction Rebellion protesters indicated a willingness to engage in civil disobedience and protest in nonviolent ways. We found that they *deliberately* break *certain* laws, such as disrupting public order or not following orders of authorities. Protesters legitimized disruptive actions by pointing to the current urgency of addressing what is at stake, future moral goals, and the past effectiveness of disobedient strategies. Considering conventional methods ineffective, protesters deemed disruptive strategies morally justified, and a last resort, to save the planet.

Protesters generally approved of strategic nonviolent law violations when performed in an *open*, *purposeful* and *deliberate* way. They argued the law breaking should not be done secretly but during the day in a public place, serve an instrumental aim, and protesters should accept the legal consequences of their actions (such as arrests, fines, and jail time). This fitted Schuyt's (1972) analysis of civil disobedience. Yet protesters' opinions about what constitutes nonviolent action varied, leaving room for broad interpretations and for autonomous groups to carry out a range of actions self-defined as nonviolent. Importantly, as emerged in the interviews and evidenced by the de-escalation trainings organized by Extinction Rebellion, the movement is highly aware of the subjectivity of what constitutes violent behavior.

As the urgency to address climate change is even likely to increase in the future (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021), it will be interesting to examine

whether climate protests remain peaceful, whether conflicts between protesters and the police intensify, and when protesters begin to consider violence an effective tool (van den Bos, 2018). Current insight into why Extinction Rebellion protesters move back and forth between legal and law-breaking actions can provide a starting point to understand their motives. This may inform theory and practice on how to prevent future escalation. For example, insight into protesters' goals could help local municipalities to facilitate these goals peacefully. When this can be achieved, this increases the likelihood that concerned citizens can continue to exercise their right to protest.

The current insights need to be backed up with more research. For example, the protesters we interviewed provided moral justifications for breaking the law. How absolute these moral values are and how this translates into morally convicted behavior could be further explored (see Barth et al., 2015). Furthermore, investigating the nonviolent social norm of Extinction Rebellion is important because it could buffer violence within the movement, but also cause "radical flanks" to split off (Tompkins, 2015). Lastly, as this study showed that experienced police mistreatment can be a reason to participate in disobedient protests, future studies could investigate the interactions between activists and authorities further (see Jansma et al., 2023a).

Connecting Perceived Injustice and Climate Action

The current study adopted a qualitative interview approach to delve deeply into the motivations of Dutch climate protesters. More quantitative research is needed to examine how different injustice perceptions lead to engagement in different types of protests, as different motivational pathways could be underlying this relationship (see Reese & Jacob, 2015; Tausch et al., 2011). Because classifying protesters' experiences into injustice categories was sometimes difficult, a questionnaire can be used to construct a reliable scale that differentiates various factors to measure perceived injustice. Furthermore, individuals' perceptions of injustice as well as their protest intentions are not confined to the present. Protesters' behaviors are constantly changing in a dynamic way in interaction with their environment (Jansma et al., 2022). Hence, longitudinal studies could trace how perceived injustice and protest willingness change over time.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider that our broad conceptualization of perceived injustice did not differentiate between people's perceptions of injustice, unfairness, and morality, while in the psychological literature, opinions on the interrelationships between these concepts diverge (see, e.g., Goldman & Cropanzano, 2015). Drawing on the work of Greene (2013) and Haidt (2012), we believe justice judgments often stem from sentimental experiences that people face after confronting injustice in society. Yet, climate protesters' mutual understanding of these concepts could be further explored.

In addition to injustice, respondents also mentioned other motivations for their protest participation. For example, they indicated a desire to do something meaningful (see Kruglanski et al., 2022), believed in the effectiveness of protesting with their group (see

van Zomeren et al., 2008), and wanted to express their love, fear, and anger (see Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). These issues could be examined in follow-up research.

Limitations

A potential limitation of this study concerns the generalizability of the results. Within our Dutch sample, we ensured a diverse sample of protesters by recruiting them during different events (lectures, legal marches, disobedient actions) throughout the Netherlands (both urban and rural). Although the climate movement has some commonalities globally (Haugestad et al., 2021; Wahlström et al., 2019), injustice perceptions of people protesting in the Global South could differ in important ways (see Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). Additionally, marginalized and young people could rely more on civil disobedience for they could perceive they have less options within the system while law-breaking is less appealing to activists of color (Hoffman et al., 2016). Therefore, translating our insights to other climate movements and national contexts warrants caution. Furthermore, the extent to which protesters spoke about their individual reasons for breaking the law may be questionable. During the interviews, protesters shared similar stories, for example, about the historical effectiveness of disobedient strategies. The exchange of individual and group narratives remains a topic of future research.

Conclusion

In the midst of the current climate crisis, new movements have risen up to address the injustices they perceive in their social environments, interactions with authorities, and the world at large. Faced with the dilemma of choosing a protest repertoire that both is effective and moral, climate protesters are driven by a sense of justice and urgency to address what is at stake. As long as climate issues worsen and are not adequately addressed, nonviolent disobedient climate actions likely continue in the future. To trace the climate movement's future trajectories, it is important to understand how climate protesters' perceptions of injustice and their intentions for disruptive action are shaped in today's society.

Openness and Transparency Statements

The present article has been checked by its handling editor(s) for compliance with the journal's open science and transparency policies. The completed *Transparency Checklist* is publicly available at:

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Diversity Statement. In the list below, the check mark (☑) indicates which steps were taken to increase diversity within the context of this paper. Steps that were not taken or did not apply are unmarked (☐).

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Supplementary Materials. The following table provides an overview of the accessibility of supplementary materials (if any) for this paper.

Type of supplementary materials	Availability/Access
Data	
a. Interview data.	Because our data consists of sensitive interview data, we cannot make it public. If researchers would like to see our interviews, they can do so by contacting the corresponding author.
b. Codebook.	Jansma et al., 2023
Material	
a. Appendix A - Interview procedure.	Jansma et al., 2024
b. Appendix B - Descriptions, example quotes, and frequencies of injustice types.	Jansma et al., 2024

Type of supplementary materials	Availability/Access
Study/Analysis preregistration	
The study was not preregistered in the present form, but was preregistered as a study that was part of a larger research project.	—

Badges for Good Research Practices.

Open data: NO.

Open code: YES.

Open materials: YES.

Preregistration: NO.

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