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How Do Young People Deal with Border Tensions When Making Climate-Friendly Food Choices? On the Importance of Critical Emotional Awareness for Learning for Social Change

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Abstract: If we are going to be able to fight climate change in an effective way there is a need for a profound sustainability transformation of society. The question is how everyday pro-environmental behavior such as climate-friendly food choices should be looked upon in this context: as something that hides the need for structural change, or as a starting point for a profound transformation? The aim is to discuss how emotions related to conflicts encountered when trying to make everyday climate-friendly food choices in a society that is not always sustainable can be used to promote transformational learning. Interviews were performed with 15 adolescents. Emotions felt in relation to conflicts and how the youth cope were explored. The results show that the youth mainly felt individualized emotions of guilt, helplessness, and irritation and that they coped primarily by distancing themselves from emotions felt, but also sometimes in a problem-focused way and through positive reappraisal. Results are discussed in relation to theories about critical emotional awareness and prefigurative politics. It is argued that by taking account of emotional aspects related to everyday conflicts in a critical manner, issues such as justice could be brought to the surface and transformative learning could be enhanced.

Keywords: climate change education; youth; pro-environmental behavior; conflicts; coping; ambivalence; climate friendly consumption; food choices; prefigurative politics

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1. Introduction

Today many sustainability researchers emphasize that if we are going to be able to fight climate change in an effective way there will be a need for a profound transformation of society in a more sustainable direction [1–3]. In this transformative process, social science plays a key role in identifying drivers of and barriers to change. In this regard, system-change and transformation are often placed in opposition to an individualized-lifestyle-solution approach to climate change. To concentrate on laypeople's everyday choices about consumption, transportation, eating patterns, and energy use is seen by some, at best, as promoting insignificant actions within the system and, at worst, as contributing to upholding unsustainable societal structures [4,5]. Others argue, however, that changes are needed at all levels of society, the micro, meso, and macro levels, and that every societal actor, therefore, needs to become involved [6,7]. The dichotomy between personal and political activism is seen as false according to these researchers and individual actions in everyday life could, under certain conditions, be a crucial part of a more profound transformation of society [7,8].

One group that is especially vital to include in these change processes is young people, who are the future leaders of society, but also citizens of today and who often are very worried about climate change and the impact this problem will have on their future [9,10]. In addition to being worried, young people to a high degree experience helplessness concerning climate change, i.e., they feel that they cannot influence this problem [11,12]. However, there has been far less focus on why young people feel that they cannot exert

much influence and what to do about this than on young people's worry about the climate problem. Therefore, *the aim* of this study is to explore how young people cope with negative emotions related to conflicts when trying to live in a sustainable manner in a rather unsustainable society. These emotions are seen as border tensions, which, if reflected upon, can reveal the border between the sustainable tendencies in society and the unsustainable values, norms, cultures, and structures that still dominate society, materialized through everyday practices. The focus will be on climate-friendly food choices because this is one of the most effective ways in which laypeople can help alleviate the climate problem [13]. *The aim is also* to discuss how the emotions felt, i.e., the border tensions, and the coping strategies used by young people can be utilized to promote learning, in both formal and informal contexts, for a more profound transformative change. The importance of promoting a critical emotional awareness to be able to deal with climate change and transformative change processes that goes beyond piecemeal behavior change will be emphasized.

With the aim to identify ways in which individual actions in everyday life could work as a starting point for more profound transformational processes it is valuable to first turn to research that focuses on pro-environmental or climate-friendly behavior in everyday life. In the next sections of this introduction three different views will be presented: (a) environmental psychology research with a focus on negative thinking patterns; (b) a governability perspective; and (c) dangerous dissent or prefigurative practice/politics. Thereafter, the core theoretical framework of this paper will be presented: First, a section about emotions and coping from a theoretical perspective and then a section about the importance of critical emotional awareness in taking part in change processes. The introduction ends by presenting the more specific aims and research questions. Next follows a presentation of a qualitative interview study with young people who make climate-friendly food choices to a relatively high degree. The article ends with a discussion of the results of the interview study, and the theoretical framework about critical emotional awareness is used to elaborate on the transformative potential of the young people's everyday engagement.

1.1. Behavior-Change versus a Governability Perspective

Environmental psychology research has long pinpointed factors that can explain the gap between environmental values and environmental actions, that is, the fact that even if people are worried about climate change, they do not always act in a way that is climate friendly [14,15]. An approach that has been particularly prominent in recent years is to identify and summarize biases in people's judgments and to focus on negative and faulty thinking patterns about climate actions [15–18]. For example, the negative spill-over effect is about how people downplay their responsibility to be engaged by arguing that since they already do many productive things for society they do not also need to act in a climate-friendly manner [18,19]. Another strategy that people use is moral licensing [20,21]. Since climate-friendly behavior is rather costly, to cope, people try to find a balance between good and less good behaviors. An example is to argue that "I will do good things later so I can 'sin' now." Another example is how people deal with conflicts related to making climate-friendly choices in everyday life concerning energy use and food choices. Here it is quite common to cope in a black-and-white manner, claiming that if not everyone is behaving in a climate-friendly fashion, then there is no point in me doing anything, that is, to demand perfection from others, and also sometimes from oneself, which leads to feelings of helplessness, since no one can be perfect all the time [22–24]. These ways of thinking are perceived as precursors to why people do not act in climate-friendly ways, and they should thus be prevented.

This approach, however, has been criticized by researchers, not least in sociology, who argue that this focus on everyday behaviors and barriers is a kind of 'governed responsibilization' in which structural political problems are transformed into individualized life-style issues, based on a neo-liberal view of people as consumers rather than citizens [5,25]. This is also true for children and young people [26,27]. In this regard, power is not about imposing constraints upon people, but about making citizens exercise a kind

of 'regulated freedom' where they are governed through 'soft power' such as information campaigns and nudging [28,29]. People should make the 'right' consumer choices, but not necessarily question deeper structural and political problems. This criticism implies that the lifestyle choices people make in everyday life are not only unimportant but could even be dangerous since they keep people from questioning the real forces that maintain the unsustainable society [4,5]. The conclusion is that one ought to focus on overarching political and economic change instead and help young people retrieve a critical consciousness to be able to challenge power structures and provide opportunities to be collectively engaged [4].

The two approaches presented above, although very different from each other, share at least one feature; they both have a quite negative view of people's everyday engagement and the potential for these kinds of behaviors to be part of the big societal transformation that many argue is needed to deal with climate change. There is, however, a third approach that has a different and more positive view of people's everyday engagement, namely prefigurative politics or practice, also called dangerous dissent by some researchers.

1.2. Dangerous Dissent and Prefigurative Politics/Practice

O'Brien and colleagues describe three different ways in which young people can take on transformative agency in relation to climate change [30]. In addition to acknowledging behaviors within the system, such as voting and making climate-friendly consumer choices, or protesting against the system through for example demonstrations and civil disobedience, they also introduce a third form of possible transformative agency, namely something that they call *dangerous dissent*. This is a form of engagement that has not been much in focus concerning climate change (for an exception, see [7]). It challenges the current order not directly but by initiating, developing, and actualizing alternative ways of living that can inspire transformation. O'Brien and colleagues perceive it as the most 'dangerous' form of engagement since it presents inspirational alternatives to the current societal order and thereby challenges power relations indirectly, in a subversive way, that may not be noticed by those with traditional forms of power [30].

This third form of transformative agency is more commonly known as prefigurative politics or practice and can be practiced both by organizations and networks as well as by individuals in everyday life or in occupational roles [31]. A key idea of this prefigurative approach is that expressing criticism is not sufficient to change unsustainable systems and create more sustainable futures; people also need to act and experimentally actualize their preferred futures in the here and now [32–34]. By, for example, choosing to make climate friendly food choices in everyday life, young people can be role models for others, changing social norms around practices related to food.

Research also shows that young people who act in a climate-friendly manner in everyday life are aware of that their own behaviors do not have a big effect on the climate change problem seen in isolation, but they instead perceive themselves as role models and forerunners for a more profound change [22,23]. Using the language of prefigurative politics/practice, they are in away *prefiguring* a more climate-friendly future by deliberately disrupting unsustainable norms and routines, that is, finding cracks in the system that enable them to do things differently [32,34,35]. By doing so, they show that another way of being is possible, and movements who organize themselves around prefigurative practices are therefore often called hope movements. The prefigurative-politics/practice perspective has been criticized, however, for being too optimistic concerning both the ability to create greater macro change by changing social norms through living in a different way in the micro context [31,36], but also for not acknowledging the difficult emotions involved in the process of trying to live in a different way than the majority, and only focusing on the hopeful aspects [37].

1.3. Border Tensions

To disrupt and do things differently, such as making climate-friendly food choices to a large extent although not many others do that, is also painful and could lead to different

forms of tensions, internal and external, prompting negative emotions. Young people who want not only to embrace environmental values but to live in accordance with them need to relate to a lot of people who say that climate change is important but who are not ready to live in a climate-friendly way. In addition, they most probably need to deal with people who see them as "extremists" since studies show that activists are often seen through negative stereotypes [38]. In facing these more negative aspects, prefiguration is a messy process of struggle, constant negotiation, and learning [39]. In the best case this process could lead to transformative learning, that is, experiences that open up cracks for new ways of thinking and being [35].

Given that prefigurative politics/practice is about creating new forms of practices and relationships, Trott argues that psychological research is well suited to study this form of engagement [40]. Psychological research could for example analyze border conflicts that arise when trying to create a more sustainable society within the limits of the present, i.e., the internal and interpersonal struggles that arise when utopian ideals and pragmatic realities clash [40,41]. Focusing on these conflicts can put the spotlight on the otherwise invisible borders between the sustainable and the unsustainable and, if analyzed in detail and critically discussed, could aid learning for societal transformation. Ojala and colleagues have explored in different studies what these kinds of conflicts consist of in relation to young people's energy saving in the household [23], recycling [42], and climate-friendly food choices [22]. What is obvious is that a prefigurative approach to coping with these conflicts, where young people see themselves as role models and precursors, enables young people to continue their engagement despite difficulties. However, these conflicts also consist of border tensions, i.e., emotional aspects, and can therefore trigger different kinds of emotion-regulating and coping strategies aimed specifically at these emotions. These emotional aspects have not been much in focus in earlier research. However, in the present article it is argued that these emotions and related coping strategies are important to acknowledge if we want to transform conflicts experienced in the micro context into moments for learning for macro change.

1.4. Emotions and Coping

Before elaborating upon why it is vital to take account of emotions and coping with these if one wants to promote learning for transformation, the concepts of emotions and coping need to be defined. In this article emotions are looked upon as complex organism-environmental transactions. A common definition is that emotions arise in a person as reactions to important events in the external environment and involves a number of sub-components such as appraisals (cognition/evaluation), physiological/bodily reactions, subjective feelings, expressive behavior, and action tendencies [43,44]. Here, an evaluative dimension (although not always conscious) is present, and thus emotions seem to reveal preferences, informing the person whether the current situation is in accordance with a valued state, positive emotions, or is a mismatch, negative emotions. Concerning conflicts when trying to make climate-friendly food choices, experienced emotions are, thus, expected to be of a negative character ("Negative" does, however, not imply a normative stance about that these emotions are negative for, for example, wellbeing and other aspects, just that they are negative because they are activated by interpretations of an event as hindering something important).

Böhm [45,46] describes four types of negative emotions felt in relation to environmental risks: The first two types are about evaluations concerning negative *consequences* of a risk and can be either future oriented, that is, prospective emotions of for example worry, or oriented toward negative things that have already happened, so-called retrospective emotions of, for example, sadness. The second two types are about *ethical principles* that people perceive have been transgressed, which leads to *ethics-based* emotions. The first type of ethics-based emotions has to do with blaming others, which leads to anger, and the second is about self-blame leading to guilt. Böhm's framework of emotions will be used to analyze and organize the interview data in the current study.

When people feel negative emotions, they often try to cope with them in different ways so not to be overburdened. Ojala is one of few who has explored how young people cope with negative emotions in relation to climate change (for review see [37]). Building on the transactional model of coping [47,48] she has identified three main ways of coping: problem-focused, emotions-focused, and meaning-focused coping. When using problem-focused coping, people focus on the situation causing the emotion and try to do something about it and therefore indirectly regulate negative emotion felt. When using emotion-focused coping, people focus on the emotions felt and try to alleviate the emotions in different ways. Meaning-focused coping concerns when people try to evoke positive emotions that can help them do something constructive with their negative emotions. Regarding meaning-focused strategies and climate change, it could be to use positive reappraisal, where one acknowledges the negative situation but also tries to search for positive aspects by switching perspective, and/or to have trust in different actors outside oneself, such as the climate change movement or scientists. This coping framework will be utilized to analyze the interview data concerning how the young people cope with emotions in relation to conflicts.

1.5. On the Importance of Critical Emotional Awareness

Why then is it important to also focus on emotions felt in relation to conflicts that arise when people try to live in a more sustainable way than the current norm prescribes? In transformative processes when our meaning systems are not able to make sense of cognitive, social, or practice-based conflicts, the emotions and tensions that occur can often reveal something more than is obvious about the problems at hand [37,49,50]. Negative emotions are often closely related to that values that people cherish are being threatened [51–53]. These values can be more or less articulated, and by scrutinizing emotions experienced, it is possible to bring these values up to the surface and discuss them in a critical way [54]. Taking account of emotions can promote learning for transformation by, for example, revealing emotionally drenched power inequalities that are hard to verbalize in a first instance [55]. People with less power in society can also lack the right words to articulate their values, because the rules of the communicative process are created by those with power [56,57]. To include everyone and to fight injustices in change processes related to climate change, it is vital to take emotional reactions seriously and interpret them as important communicative messengers that should be discussed so that they can be transformed into criticism and change [37,58].

However, since people typically do not enjoy experiencing negative emotions, they, as described above, often use different coping strategies to rid themselves of these emotions instead of facing them. Ojala [58] has argued that to promote learning for change there is a need to take account of the broad spectrum of ways that young people cope with emotions. This is vital since different ways of coping could be more or less constructive for an open learning process. Emotions and coping strategies to deal with them are furthermore not only individual but often influenced by cultural and societal emotion norms about what emotions are appropriate to feel, whose emotions are worth taking seriously and whose are not, and how to cope with emotions in a proper way. Therefore, these emotional aspects need to be critically considered; in other words, a form of critical emotional awareness should be promoted [37,59].

1.6. Aim and Research Questions

The first aim of this article is to through an empirical study with a group of young people who are highly active regarding making climate-friendly food choices explore emotional dimensions (emotions and coping) related to conflicts when making these choices. The second aim is to discuss how these emotional aspects can be used to promote a more profound sustainability transformation.

The empirical research questions that will be investigated in the results section are: (1) What emotions do young people experience when encountering conflicts when making

climate-friendly food choices? (2) How do they cope with these emotions? The theoretical research question that will be discussed in the discussion section is: (3) How can the emotions and coping strategies identified in the empirical study be used in transformative learning processes for a more sustainable society?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The methodological approach is influenced by phenomenology, as it is the participants' own subjective experiences and interpretations that are in focus [60]. In this case, 15 Swedish adolescents in their last year at senior high school took part in a study in which semi-structured interviews were performed [61]. The interviews were conducted by a student in the last semester of a master's program in professional psychology who was working part time as a research assistant. The student had training in interview techniques and in addition was instructed by the main author of this article. The interviews were based on an interview guide prepared by the main author of this paper. The themes in the interview guide were based on the research questions in this study and on another study focusing on what conflicts the young persons experienced. Some questions were also asked about emotions in relation to climate change in general. The length of the interviews was from 57 min to 75 min.

Regarding the sampling strategy, young people with relatively high scores on a measure of climate-friendly food choices in a quantitative survey study, and who had consented to take part in a follow-up study, were contacted and asked if they wanted to take part in the present interview study. The young people had all scored higher than the median on an aggregated measure of climate-friendly food choices that included questions about, for instance, avoiding red meat and food that was transported by air, as well as not wasting food [62]. The participants did not always score high on all aspects of climate-friendly food choices, but in general they were relatively good in making these choices.

Five young men and 10 young women in the age range of 17 to 19 years old were interviewed. Seven of the participants were enrolled in at natural science programs, six were pursuing social science programs, and two were taking programs with an aesthetic (art, music) orientation. Among the participants, 13 had a Swedish ethnic background. One had a family background from a country outside Europe and one originally came from another Nordic country. The interview study took place in late spring 2020 and, due to COVID-19, the interviews were performed via *Zoom*. As thanks for participating in the study, each interviewee received two movie tickets. The study was approved by the Swedish National Ethics Committee.

2.2. Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic coding was performed [63]. Thematic analysis focuses on detecting more overarching themes and subthemes across the whole sample, not patterns on an individual level. Thematic analysis can be conducted through using theory and earlier studies to find themes of relevance in the data (deductive coding), through inductive coding where the researcher puts theories aside and lets the data speak, and through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches [63]. In this study the material was first analyzed in a deductive way, where the theories about emotions and coping presented in the introduction were used to identify the themes. However, the specific emotions felt and the specific coping strategies used were identified in an inductive way. Since the material was rather small (only 15 interviews) no qualitative data-analyzing program (such as NVivo) was used to aid the coding process. Instead, the process of coding/analysis was conducted manually as described below.

As a first step, every interview transcription was read through in a free and open manner to acquire a good overview of the interviews. As a second step, the research questions and theories were used to guide a more structured analysis. Initial themes about emotions and coping were marked in all the interview transcripts, and interpretations

were also noted. As a third step, four separate documents were created with a focus on conflicts experienced, coping with these conflicts, emotions stemming from conflicts, and coping with these emotions. Excerpts from the individual interviews that matched these themes were copied and pasted into these separate documents. The documents were then analyzed in a deductive way for main themes and an inductive manner for subthemes, and quotations were chosen to illustrate these. The names of the young people accompanying the quotations were made up for reasons of anonymity. The focus of this specific study was only on emotions and coping with emotions, although relations to specific kinds of conflicts were also captured.

3. Results

The content of the conflicts the young people experienced were, for example, social conflicts with friends and parents, intrapersonal conflicts related to taste and convenience, practical conflicts related to price, conflicts related to lack of knowledge, and conflicts related to a feeling of not being able to really influence the climate-change problem (see [22]). The in-depth content of the conflicts that the young people experienced when trying to make climate-friendly food choices and how they coped with them in a practical manner have already been presented in another article based on the interview material [22]. In the present article the focus is, instead, on the emotions these young people felt in relation to these conflicts, i.e., the border tensions, and how they coped with these emotions.

3.1. Emotions Felt in Relation to Conflicts—Border Tensions

The first theme identified was *(1) emotions related to blaming other people or situations*. The conflicts that were related comparatively much to these kinds of emotions were foremost social conflicts. The first subtheme, were to feel *(a) irritated*, *frustrated*, or even *angry at other people*, primarily parents and friends, who did not make climate-friendly food choices, or did not take climate change seriously.

> Yes, but it can arouse quite strong feelings in me. I get, I actually get a little upset. There are times when I just want to, yes but smash a plate on someone's head—no but honestly, I get very, very, angry. **Hugo**

> Yeah, but a little bit of, like, irritation. But maybe mostly because they ... kinda so clearly show that they don't plan to become vegetarians, or more vegetarian, they intend to continue eating meat. **Felicia**

> ... a little bit of frustration sort of. That they don't want to make the same choices as I do. **Sebastian**

The second subtheme concerned that the young people also sometimes got *(b) tired* of the ignorance of others and/or of constantly having to defend their own position and argue for the importance of taking climate change seriously. The young people felt overburdened.

> It mostly is a feeling of tiredness from constantly having to explain why you do as you do and then having to argue why you should care about our planet. **Emma**

A third subtheme concerned occasions when the young people resisted temptations and chose the most climate-friendly alternative despite various difficulties and felt *(c) a bad feeling of missing out* on something nice and *envy* of those who did not think about these issues all the time and did not bother to make climate-friendly food choices.

> I feel a bit jealous, why can we not have ... I would like an avocado tree in my garden. **Hugo**

> Yes, but an annoying feeling sometimes, to be responsible for that choice, that you need to make these active choices [but not other people]. **Signe**

The fourth subtheme concerned *(d) practical conflicts* and *frustration* felt when for instance a grocery store did not have the more climate-friendly product one was searching for.

> Maybe a little frustration depending on what situation I'm in. Like, if I'm out shopping for some occasion, like I'm going to bake something for . . . a birthday party or something like that. If that happens, I can feel a bit frustrated. **Rashida**

Another spectrum of rather common feelings in relation to social conflicts was when, for instance, others did not seem to care and the young people felt different than other people. This is the second emotion theme of *(2) other-oriented emotions of grief*. The first subtheme concerned *(a) sadness* related to feeling that people that one cared about did not bother about things that one felt were important, that is, climate change and food choices. This was also related to feeling lonely and sometimes also to experiencing a kind of hopelessness.

> If it's a close friend, you may think it's a bit . . . sad that they do not remember that you do not eat the diet they have served . . . That you may get a little sad that they simply forget it . . . But quite a lot of hopelessness, I would say. **Frida**

> I have . . . kind of a, like, feeling of being lonely, that you have to fight the battle yourself. **Alexander**

The second subtheme was closely related to the first but also concerned a kind of betrayal where sadness was mixed up with a passive form of anger, that is, a feeling of *(b) disappointment*.

> It has not been that fun. It's not something I have felt bad about but I can feel that . . . I do not know how to get past such people. **Kirsti**

Conflicts that were connected to taste, convenience, and economy (price) were also rather emotionally drenched and related to the third theme of emotions, (3) *retrospective emotions of self-focused blaming*. The first subtheme concerned young people feeling *shame* and having *guilt feelings* for not being able to resist the temptation of eating meat or an exotic fruit or for being too lazy to make the right choice.

> I may feel a little shame . . . I'm a little ashamed to throw away that food. **Sara**

> What emotions are associated with such a situation when you feel compelled to throw away the food?

> A little guilt . . . **Alice**

A second subtheme was a bad feeling of *(b) egoism* that was related to thinking too much about the price of a product. The young people felt stupid and had a feeling of almost panic when they realized that for reasons of taste or convenience they were throwing away food in school despite their intention not to do so.

> . . . you can feel a bit like a failure . . . a tiny little feeling of having failed when you make bad choices or, like, something that's not so good for the environment. **Amanda**

> Yeah, or well, some negative feeling of selfishness. **Lucas**

A final conflict cluster that was related to emotional reactions involved conflicts relating to the complexity of the climate problem, lack of information/knowledge about how food choices influence climate change, and a sense of low outcome-efficacy, that is, a feeling that you cannot really influence the climate problem. This fourth emotion cluster concerned *(4) prospective consequence-based emotions of unease.* The first subtheme was about emotions such as being (a) *anxious, afraid, and worried* about uncertain outcomes in the future due to the complexity of the climate-change issue.

> A little, I was about to say fear there . . . but maybe a little fear that it is so difficult to find out how good something is for the environment, or not. That it is so difficult to obtain information. **Sara**

> I would not say fear or so but some kind of . . . fright I would say. Like, oh, that is pretty complex, when you kind of think about it. And I would probably also say that it might be a little anxiousness. **Sebastian**

The second subtheme was about feeling that one's climate-friendly actions in the private-sphere do not really influence the climate issue at large, which was connected to emotions of *(b) helplessness* and sometime even *hopelessness.*

> Well, It is a feeling of helplessness like, that I can't really do anything, sort of. **Amanda**

3.2. Coping

How then did the young people cope with these emotions? The most common coping strategy was to cope in an *(1) emotion-focused way*, where the young people *distanced themselves from the emotions felt*, for example, by *(a) just pushing away the feeling or not thinking about the feeling anymore*. Some talked about a learning process where they had learned to distance themselves over time from the negative emotions felt so as to not be overburdened. Others claimed that the emotions were actually not especially strong and that they did not need to do anything; *(b) the feeling disappeared by itself.* These distancing strategies were used for all kinds of negative emotions and conflicts.

> How have you coped with this feeling of loneliness?
>
> I have swallowed it . . . pretended it did not exist . . . it will pass after a while. **Alexander**
>
> I think about something else, often . . . **Lucas**
>
> I manage my emotions by not dealing with it at all, I suppress it. Trying not to think about it simply. **Sara**
>
> How do you handle that frustration then?
>
> Usually I try to let it go, so as not to ruin the mood. **Emma**
>
> . . . you often kind of push aside those thoughts because they're hard on you. **Amanda**
>
> I think if it had been six months ago, then it might have been more anxious. But now I would say that, now I just let it go. **Sebastian**

A second way to cope with emotions was to use (2) *individualized problem-focused coping* where the young people used their emotions as motivating forces to (a) *plan to make more climate-friendly food choices* right now, in the future, or in another context. They were coded as individualized because they only focused on small things to do in everyday life, not collective engagement. Coping also sometimes took the form of (b) *trying to influence others*, to tell them that they ought to be engaged as well. These problem-focused strategies were used foremost in relation to internal conflicts and self-blame emotions (to compensate for guilt feelings) and social conflicts and feelings of irritation (to try to influence others).

> How do you cope with this guilt feeling?
>
> But then I think that I need to compensate for that later, when I have the possibility to eat better. **Alice**
>
> What do you about the guilt?
>
> I often try to do better the next time. **Emma**
>
> Can you say a little more about this fear or anxiety that arises and how you deal with it?
>
> Yeah, but it's . . . the easiest thing is just to put the product down, because then I figure that the responsibility isn't on me anymore. It winds up with someone else who intends to buy it. **Sebastian**
>
> And, of course, there is an irritation sometimes that people have . . . preconceived notions. But that being said, I'm trying to turn it into an opportunity to enlighten people . . . **Kirsti**
>
> How do you usually deal with the irritation you feel?

> Well, I usually say to my family that they should, or especially my parents, who prepare the meals, that, well, "can't you fix some veggie food today, can't you cook more vegetarian or maybe cook some fish" sort of. **Felicia**

It should be mentioned that there was one exception: Sara, who also coped in a more *(c) collective-oriented problem-focused way* with the negative feelings. She said that the negative emotions triggered critical thinking and at least thoughts about becoming politically engaged. It is more unclear if she also translated this frustration into real collective political action.

> I don't really know what I have done about that feeling. It's more like I feel that like big corporations are trying to conceal something from us because they want to sell this food and make money, when it's maybe not climate friendly, because they don't care about that, they want to make money. And then I get all socialist and (laughing) and think we need a revolution to get rid of these giant corporations. **Sara**

Regarding the negative feelings that could sometimes be related to making climate-friendly food choices regularly, some of the young people kept up their engagement by trying to emphasize and focus instead on the positive feelings of making these choices, a kind of *(3) positive reappraisal*. Often it took the form of switching between positive and negative aspects of making climate-friendly food choices in everyday life. The positive aspects were, for example, the good feeling of being able to help and contribute to an important issue and a positive feeling of being able to do something practical concerning a messy and complex issue such as climate change.

> That it sort of feels hard to start with but that you kind of . . . but that at least you've done something even if it's not much. So I still think it's a good thing to be able to help in some way. **Frida**

> Yes, it can be bothersome, but. I try to see it positively, it feels better afterwards . . . I think you feel good about taking . . . making climate-smart choices. **Wilma**

> Yeah, it's kind of some kind of negative feeling of egoism in some way . . . I mean even when I make climate-smart choices I do it for myself somehow, because I know it will make me feel happiest then. And like, when I do what's best for the world, then I'm also doing what's best for me. Since it feels best for me if I do what's best for the world. That's the way I think. **Lucas**

> That's kind of tricky anyway, because it can be both, yeah, a bad feeling maybe sometimes to stand up for the choice of having to make these active choices. But then it can also be kind of a relief in a way that you've had the opportunity to make a choice. **Signe**

4. Discussion

In this study a group of late adolescents who were relatively good at making climate-friendly food choices in everyday life were interviewed about the emotions they felt in relation to conflicts encountered when making these choices. The focus was also on coping with these emotions. The four types of emotions identified by Böhm [45,46] in relation to environmental risks were also present in the current study, that is, emotions of anger related to blaming others for breaking ethical principles, emotions of guilt and shame for breaking ethical principles oneself, future-oriented consequence-based emotions of worry, and lastly feelings of sadness and grief. The young people foremost used emotion-focused coping in the form of distancing, but also problem-focused coping and a form of meaning-focused coping, positive reappraisal. These three coping strategies are well-known in the literature regarding coping in general [47,48] and in relation to coping with climate change [37].

4.1. Relating the Empirical Results to Earlier Research

Regarding the other-oriented emotions of grief that the young people felt, they were not as clearly related to things that have happened before as in Böhm's [45] study, but rather were part of an ongoing process of being sad and disappointed about the ignorance of others close to oneself. In this regard, a recent study showed that it is rather common that young people in many countries feel betrayed and let down by the adult world, not least politicians, regarding climate change [9]. The authors argued that these feelings can also be a threat to young people's general wellbeing. In the present study, the feelings of grief and disappointment were aimed at people close to oneself such as parents, but also friends, and one could ask if this could not be an even greater risk regarding low wellbeing. Moral injury and betrayal are most detrimental for wellbeing when others close to oneself, or oneself, are seen as transgressing moral norms and principles [64].

Since the interviewees made climate-friendly food choices to a higher degree than most other young people, some of the emotions felt and emotion regulation strategies used most probably also influenced their engagement in a positive direction. The most probable emotion cluster that works, or at least could work, in this way involves emotions of self-focused blame. Earlier research has found that especially guilt is an emotion that is positively related to pro-environmental behavior [65,66]. However, this engagement often only concerns small things carried out in everyday life and more seldom collective engagement.

In this study, the young people sometimes coped in a problem-focused way with their guilt feelings about occasionally making less climate-friendly choices, that is, they let these feelings be motivational forces to make climate-friendly choices later instead. This could be an example of one of the barriers identified in environmental psychology research, namely moral licensing [20,21]. In this case the young people justify bad behaviors with arguments that they will do good things later on. However, since this is a group that made climate-friendly food choices to a relatively high degree, and since the interviews showed that the youth really struggled with guilt feelings and shame, this way of coping could rather be an example of the constant struggle and negotiation taking place when people try to live in a sustainable way in a more or less unsustainable society, that is, this way of coping could instead be seen as a necessary part of a prefigurative practice/politics process [31,39].

Guilt feelings, and not least shame, are often heavy feelings to bear, and research has shown that it is not always enough to cope in a problem-focused way to avoid general negative affect [67]. Therefore, it is not strange that the most prominent coping strategy that the young people used was to distance themselves from these feelings, a kind of emotion-focused coping. Distancing could be a necessary, and not merely a negative, coping strategy that in some instances makes it possible to continue to act without being distracted [68,69].

The young people also felt anger and frustration in relation to, foremost, social conflicts. Anger and frustration have primarily been discussed as a something that can motivate collective engagement, for example regarding climate change [70,71]. However, these cases involved clearly articulated anger towards people with power positions in society such as politicians or adults in general. In the present study frustration was mainly aimed at friends and family, which makes these emotions much harder to deal with, and they seemed to sometimes lead to sadness. The young people most often coped with these feeling by using distancing strategies where they simply pushed away frustration and irritation.

Another way to cope was to try, in a problem-focused way, to convince others that they should take climate change seriously, eat more climate-friendly food, or not waste food. This way of coping, together with the coping strategy of positive reappraisal, could be seen as at least a tendency to engage in prefigurative practice/politics [30,31]. The young people tried to influence others in more subtle ways than seeking direct confrontations. In earlier studies where emotions have not been in focus, but rather conflicts about living in a sustainable manner, coping in a prefigurative way, however, seems to be more prominent than in this study with its focus on emotions [23,24].

This study is a first explorative study to explore emotions and coping in relation to climate-friendly food choices and as such it contains weaknesses that need to be dealt with in future studies. It is essential to conduct more qualitative studies with diverse groups of people in, for example, different countries. There is also a need to conduct quantitative studies that in a more objective way can capture emotions and coping in relation to this topic. One main strength with this study is, however, that it can provide a groundwork for developing quantitative measures that have a good face validity, that is, are based in young people's own experiences. The study with its combination of theories also gives a valuable theoretical contribution to the literature.

4.2. Promoting Transformative Learning Processes—Theoretical Discussion and Practical Implications

Although some of the emotions experienced and the coping strategies used were most probably positive forces for continuing to make climate-friendly food choices in everyday life, it is obvious that the young people experienced mostly individualized feelings in the sense that they were aimed either at themselves in the form of guilt and shame for not being able to live up to their ideals, or at people close to them in the form of frustration, anger, and sadness when these people did not take climate change seriously. They, furthermore, coped with these feeling foremost by using distancing. Can these emotional aspects be used to promote a more profound learning process towards societal transformation? For this to happen it is argued that the tendencies of prefigurative politics/practice that were present in how the young people coped need to be strengthened, but also be complemented with a more critical stance. This suggested approach does not perceive everyday climate-friendly behavior as something opposite to, or even dangerous for, societal transformation, as a governability perspective would (see [4,5]. It argues instead that the emotions felt when trying to behave in a climate-friendly way in everyday life through critical emotional awareness could be used to promote a more transformational change process where power is also criticized. This critical approach can be used whether or not climate-friendly food choices are seen as ordinary pro-environmental behavior or as a form of prefigurative politics/practice.

In finding ways to promote critical emotional awareness, it could be productive to turn to the educational theory of edge emotions, which emphasizes the importance of taking account of emotions in transformative learning processes both in formal and informal contexts [49,50]. Edge emotions are negative emotions evoked when our meaning system is challenged and because they are uncomfortable to experience, they could push people back into their comfort zone and hinder transformative learning. Therefore, this theory emphasizes that educators must arrange for their students to ponder these emotions in a critical way. This could aid the learning process since there is less risk that unconstructive coping strategies are used (see also [58]). Paradoxically a focus on emotions, thus, could lead to a more rational learning process [49,50].

A critical emotional awareness approach in addition acknowledges that both emotions felt, and coping strategies used, are not only individual but also influenced by larger emotion norms [37,59]. By critically examining both emotions and coping strategies, people could hopefully attain a deeper understanding of climate change and what hinders people and society from dealing with this problem. In the present study the emotions the young people felt in relation to experienced conflicts were mainly individualized and coped with primarily by distancing themselves from them. Taking a critical emotional awareness approach instead means lifting emotions such as these up to the surface by providing opportunities to discuss them [37,49,50,59]. By putting words to conflict-related emotions, one can acquire a better sense of control over them and can start to discuss the problems that lie behind the emotions in greater depth. In this way issues of responsibility and justice could be touched upon [55,56]. For example, one could discuss what actors have responsibility to act to fight climate change and what the balance between different actors should look akin to.

A critical emotional awareness perspective emphasizes that there are emotion rules that need to be discussed in a critical way as they could be an important factor upholding unsustainable norms and practices [37,59]. For example, why do so many of the young people in the present study experience guilt aimed at themselves, and irritation aimed at their parents and peers, but few feel anger towards actors with more power in society? Why is it so common to use distancing as a way to cope, instead of facing and critically discussing the emotions felt? Scholars such as Bauman and Donskis [72] and Ecclestone and Hayes [73] have argued that tendencies such as these are not innocent but rather inherent parts of the neoliberal society in which we live. Negative emotions are dangerous because they take time to deal with and they make people more critical and eager to learn [72]. Therefore, they both disturb the need for constant production and consumption that is so vital for the neoliberal economic order to function and represent a direct threat to this society's survival. Others have argued that there is a tendency to privatize emotions [32]. By making people feel guilt and shame, the focus is turned to things one can do at an individual level, preferably as a consumer, and political and structural factors are hidden. This is a form of governed responsibilization through steering with emotions. Using a critical emotional awareness approach in both formal and informal learning also entails giving people the opportunity to learn about these social theories about emotions and to discuss their own emotional experiences in relation to them.

Finally, it is important to understand that engaging in critical emotional awareness can be quite demanding. In this process it could be good to also take into account results from psychological research about the constructive role of positive emotions such as hope [48]. In the best case these positive emotions can reside side by side with negative emotions, helping people to face these darker emotions with maintained wellbeing [48]. In the present study some of the young people used positive reappraisal to a certain extent. If the desire is to promote this tendency of oscillating between negative and positive emotions in being engaged in climate-friendly behaviors, it is vital not to force a more positive outlook but rather to encourage autonomy in this process [69]. For positive reappraisal to work in a constructive manner, young people need to be given opportunities to actively and critically explore, for example, their cynical view of adults and related feelings of frustration, or the view that nothing can be done about climate change and accompanying feelings of hopelessness. By talking to others, one can learn that there are other ways to cope, for example, to see oneself as a role model and forerunner, which is a key aspect of the prefigurative way of looking at engagement [32–34]. By being active and critical in this positive reappraisal process, a practice-based hope could be promoted that could help people face border tensions and critically discuss the borders between the sustainable and the unsustainable tendencies in society.

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