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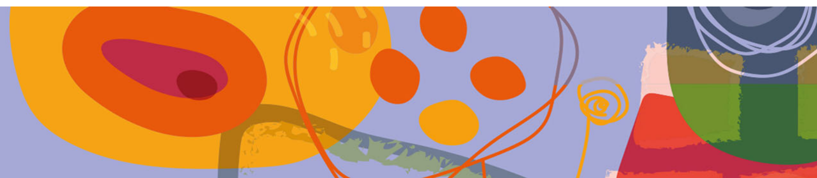

ARTICLE

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A typology of the climate activist

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As the climate crisis escalates and citizens increasingly come to understand the existential consequences of political inaction on our civilisation, they are demanding radical action. Although people are mobilising as climate activists in ever more creative and imaginative ways, our understandings about the variety of inside and outside climate activism lack conceptual clarity. Every year there are new accounts from different academic literatures about climate activists and their role in the vital politics of climate change. This paper argues that now is an appropriate time to draw together these accounts and begin a process of articulating a clearer sense of the contemporary climate activist. This paper offers an initial contribution to the endeavour by synthesising across literature a unified conception of the climate activist typologised in terms of their focal orientations and the theories of change they operate under. Utilising a matrix approach, it is argued that the climate activist seeks change relative to a specific endogenous or exogenous focus. Further, that climate activists orientate around collaborative or confrontational theories of change leading to 16 theorised-proposed mutually inclusive types of climate activists.

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Introduction

The climate crisis is one of the most challenging and intractable challenges that humanity has faced in its 10,000+ year history (Guterres, 2021). As best we can conceive, addressing this crisis will require rapid and profound civilisation change in national infrastructures, industries, and economies as well as in personal and collective behaviours, values, norms, and social structures (Klein, 2014; Stehr, 2014). However, our collective efforts to tackle these challenges, have largely been a story of failure (IPCC, 2022). Change across the many spectra noted above, on the level and the pace that our best science and forecasting tells us are needed (IPCC, 2022), necessitates challenging and overcoming the forces of incumbency and inertia rooted in vested interests, past investments, and sunk costs (Klein, 2014; Guterres, 2021; Morgunova and Shaton, 2022). 'Activists' denote devoted agitators for change arrayed against these forces and associated national laws (Snow et al., 2008; Woolston, 2016), and represent ethical and/or ideologically based rationales for actions and positions. This is for instance reflected when activists claim that 'their' activism may be an essential action to overcome the vested interests and sedimented socio-economic structures at the heart of the climate crisis (Guterres, 2021). However, the earliest environmental activists, experience has been that activism can come at great personal costs (Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991).

The exponentially increasing pace of socio-technical-ecological change in the post-war period culminating in the Anthropocene (Klein, 2014) has seen a rise in activists seeking to mediate against environmental crisis (Woolston, 2016), pushing for collective interests to assert control relative to elite interests (Pearce, 2013), and pursuing political actions to stay within the 1.5-degree C limit, as agreed in the 2015 UNFCCC Paris Agreement. While the rise in climate activism is a global phenomenon reaching far beyond environmental and climate injustice, we focus mainly on the climate activists in the Global North.

As always with the history of activists, framings and perceptions of authority, authenticity, and legitimacy are central determining forces in the effectiveness of activists (Worchel et al. 1974). While the activist in popular culture is often seen as a citizen of civil society (e.g., Townsend, 2007; Goldhaber, 2022), scholars are increasingly grappling with troubling questions about the role and place of science and scientists as authentic, authoritative, and legitimate voices and/or activists agitating for climate action (Hope, 2015; Stehr, 2014; Woolston, 2016). In this paper, the challenge of specifying what constitutes and delineates 'the climate activist' (Hope, 2015; Ro, 2022) is taken up by synthesising across multiple, intersecting, and, at times. mismatched literatures. This is undertaken to develop a multi-functional conceptual typology of the contemporary climate activist(s). In doing so, multiple literatures and frames of understanding the climate activist are bridged and a new analytical language about the key components of 'the climate activist' is developed.

Mindful of varied definitions of the activist (e.g., Snow et al., 2008; The Activist Handbook, 2022), we opt for a composite definition of "*strenuous exertion(s) and/or risk-taking to advance a particular cause or greater good*" that served as starting point. 'Risk' refers to '*the anticipated dangers-whether legal, social, physical, financial, and so forth-of engaging in a particular type of activism*' (McAdam, 1986; Gamson, 1997; Woolston, 2016). And 'strenuousness' refers to the personal cost of adopting an activist persona (McAdam, 1986), or what Wiltfang and McAdam define as '*the expenditure of time, money and energy required …. in any particular form of activism*' (1991). One of the tensions in seeking to construct definitional boundaries around 'the activist' comes from its exclusionary potential. Yet we argue that in an age of multiplying sites for activist challenges to power and inequalities, the project of setting conceptual definitions of activist identities must be set somewhere. In this endeavour we argue that good faith self-identification as a climate activist is legitimate, but that we also need to analytically explore the conditions that precipitate the emrergence of climate activists. As argued by Doty and Glick (1994) typologies are more than simple classification tools. Certainly, the typology developed here is useful for categorical purposes in synthesising across the proliferation of accounts of the climate activist from disparate literature evident in recent years. Further than this however, it also represents a first attempt at systematising the rationale for people identifying as climate activists, and perhaps in time towards new theorisation about institutional change through climate activism and activists.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: methodology, the literature review, the proposed climate activist framework-typology inclusive of explanations and examples for the endogenous and the exogenous form of the 'climate activist' and a conclusion highlighting the limitations and next steps for this framework.

Methodology

We have maintained a focus on studies of activists in the period characterised by rising environmental awareness from the early 1970s up to the present. We are mindful that the variables of 'theories of change' and 'focus' that construct our multi-functional typology lean more towards accounting for the 'climate activist' in the global north due to the particularities of the socio-political, economic, and cultural milieu. That said, Fig. 1 is not exclusively an artefact for describing the climate activist in the global north. Indeed, our purpose in constructing this typology was to offer a broader utility for climate activists in the global South as well, though we are mindful that it will likely have a lesser value for explaining climate activists in the global south. The literature search was conducted using search strings with climate change and activist/activism in Google Scholar and Web of Science. This provided an initial list of 48 papers.

We designed and structured the literature review on efforts to advance a particular cause or greater good tend to be *specific and focused*, rather than unspecific and general, a commonality observed across the many and varied activist literature and disciplines (Snow et al., 2008). With this focus as a defining aspect, we build on Battilana and Kimsey's conception (2017) that differs between two broadly conceived 'focus' for the climate activist—on changing 'oneself' or changing 'the other'. We conceptualise this in terms of an *endogenous focus* (change within themselves) or an *exogenous focus* (change within the other). As ideal types and at a generic level, these are mutually exclusive whereas in practice it is messier. The initial list of papers was filtered according to relevance, and analysed using the exogenous/ endogenous focus of change; the strenuousness (dedicated drive); the risk; and whether the ethical/ideological aspect was highlighted. Importantly, the 'activist' refers to individuals or collectives of individuals.

The exogenous and endogenous focus structures the presentation of the findings from the literature review in the typology below. Whilst potentially many variables might be used to construct a typology of the climate activist, our review of multi-disciplinary literature revealed how the endogenous/exogenous focus for the activist is particularly pertinent. These are constructed out of either collaborative or confrontational dynamics of change, stressing the particular social milieu they exist within, which also structures the typology. The review served as the foundation for our typology, and its details are thus presented in the elaboration below.

Activists in academic literature: an overview of diverse literature. The first strand of the literatures implicitly orientates

Focus:	Endogenous		Exogenous	
Theory of Change:	**Collaborate**	**Confront**	**Collaborate**	**Confront**
Scale:				
Individual	**The Champion**	**The Lone Wolf**	**The Influencer**	**The Critic**
Group	**Solidarity Networks**	**Action Groups**	**Pressure Groups**	**Social Movements**
Coalition (Group-of-groups)	**Boundary Spanners**	**Resistance Groups**	**Epistemic Communities & Organisers**	**Advocacy Coalitions & Organisers**
Institutional	**Share/stake-holder Activists**	**Disrupters**	**Experts**	**Judicial Activists**

Fig. 1 (Experimental) Typology of the climate activist. Author created. Blue squares denote theoretic/empirical contributions from management studies, orange squares from organisational studies, yellow squares from political science, green squares represent contributions to social movement studies, the purple square from environmental social sciences, the turquoise square from legal studies, and the grey square is not represented in literature but theorised by the framework.

around activists focusing on precipitating change in 'others'. Within this exogenous focus, the 'other' is positioned in the activist's subjectively self-identified or objectively positioned social reality. This exogenous focus is, as Cortese (2021) notes, the generally and widely utilised and reported narrative of the activist on the street marching for change. Conversely, there is an increasing body of literature (e.g., Worchel et al., 1974; Cortese, 2021; Morgunova and Shaton, 2022) from multiple disciplinary perspectives that conceptualises 'the activist' as individuals or groups exerting themselves for change in organisational, institutional or social settings of which they reside or are situated (Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991; Hysing and Olson, 2018). Such activists are rooted in an exogenous focus with associated beliefs in epitomising the change they assume others want to benefit a common good. This literature offers a critical counterpoint to the standard-common exogenous activist narrative (Cortese, 2021).

Similarly, not all activists are identified to act according to objective intellectual rationality as opposed to emotional rationality. Some studies stress how the position of activists as outside decision-making processes on the object/issue they aim to change implies that this change is often beyond their agency. However—and conversely—activists do *potentially* have agency over the targeting of their exertions, to align these with their personal preferences, biases, and options.

The endogenous and the exogenous focus of the activist each employ common but differentiated theories of change (Klugman, 2011; Chen and Suen, 2017). The predominant theory of change employed is not necessarily fixed, rather it evolves in response to perceived successes and failures, in response to shifting group compositions and based on individual life course progressions, as shown by Nolas et al. (2017) and Corning and Meyers (2014). Significantly, theories of change are tied to deeper individual identities, as shown by, e.g., Fisher (2014), and are furthermore influenced by the individual's wider professional and personal experiences and evolving personal worldviews (Fisher, 2014; Chen and Suen, 2017). The individual activists might at a given moment and situation mobilise around a specific theory of change, be it one based on a belief in the effectiveness of interpersonal collaboration and dialogue or based on confrontation (Chen and Suen, 2017). However, significantly, these are dynamic socio-philosophical perspectives among activists about precipitating change. Moreover, conceivably, individuals might simultaneously hold multiple (and potentially contrasting) activist positionalities within different organisational/institutional settings replete with their theories of change. This means that individuals may adopt different activist identities in different settings concomitantly.

Another central commonality, identified in the activist literature, refers to the multiple and escalating scales of social organisation at which activist exertions occur. Some draw attention to activists operating at the individual scale (Woolston, 2016; Chen and Suen, 2017; Millward and Takhar, 2019); others note the commonly understood collective conceptualisation of activists in acting together and towards shared outcomes (Van Dyke and McCammon, 2010) (e.g., in groups). There is a smaller literature exploring the role of activist co-ordinators of other groups—as coalition mobilisers (Fisher and Nasrin, 2021; Gawerc, 2021). These three key organisational scales can be seen across the varied activist literature: individual, groups, and coalitions of groups (Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991). Other literatures discuss activists operating at institutional scales and settings (Pettinichio, 2012). Naturally, organisations can be institutions and vice versa, and often organisational-scale activists operating under either confrontational or collaborative theories of change, are also co-conceived as institutions. That said, some literatures and activist conceptions orientate toward institutions (separate from organisational baggage) as the objects of activism and the scale of efforts. These tend to focus on activists utilising formalised mechanisms for change in institutions, such as leadership and steering bodies, or mechanisms for democratic prioritisation and decision-making. These key terms established, Fig. 1 graphically portrays our multi-functional typology of the climate activist.

Typology of the climate activist. Figure 1 is a multi-dimensional typology comprised of multiple variables and conceptual

overlapping between types. This means that individual climate activists might self-identify under different types simultaneously or variably under different settings or spatiotemporal situations.

The endogenous activist focus. Exemplifying Mahatma Gandhi's maxim of '*be*(ing) *the change you want to see*' many would-be activists orientate around an endogenous focus, as they consider the change they aim to achieve (in pursuit of a cause), based on their situation. This is a profoundly self-reflective vision of the activist focused on change from 'within'—be that of their own and peers' behaviour, their professional organisation, an organisational ecosystem they operate across, or a wider institutional setting. Thus, the endogenous focus implies working for a change within institutions, communities or individuals, whether this is in politics (governing), civil society, or the economy (Morgunova and Shaton, 2022). As noted by Hysing and Olsson (2018), the endogenous focus carries particular forms of individual and professional risks for individuals seeking change from within, a situation that can be ameliorated or exacerbated for activists exerting themselves under different theories of change. From the perspective of climate activists this can be rooted in the understanding that every member of global society (to differing degrees) is engaged in producing carbon emissions and exacerbating climate change, and thus change from the inside is a legitimate target for activist exertions, as it exposes authenticity for activists as well as serves as an example.

Employing the collaborative theory of change. Millward and Takhar (2019) note how the network bonds within groups of activists can be tighter or looser depending on a variety of factors, including individual values, energy, ethics, the nature of the cause, and many others besides. A common factor in the 'solidarity network' is a shared understanding of the theory of change—a belief that open, visible, and collaborative collective (and predominately non-violent) actions are the lever for precipitating change, all within the context of personal or intra-institutional change. Where individuals thus act out and share a *collaborative theory of change*, they join around a belief that reason, discourse, and mobilisation can directly precipitate or contribute towards the desired change. Activists here play the role of 'the *champion*(s)', such as Mahmoud Mohieldin—one of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's climate champions. Where champions accrete with other like-minded activists, they begin forming networked bonds and activist groups based on collaborative activism.

A good example of climate activists adhering to collaborative theory of change is Divest Harvard, which comprises a collective of students, academics, and professional staff advocating collectively for the divestment of university investments in fossil fuel assets. At a higher level of organisation, some individuals actualise their activist persona by acting between and across different endogenous activist groups. Divest Harvard articulates how these boundary spanners seek to unite and coalesce disparate but common groups to maximise their transformative potential. Goodrich et al. (2020) stress how activists as boundary spanners can facilitate shared learnings and resources as well as help coordinate the actions of activist groups. Finally, Rosemary O'Leary's (2014) studies of dissident ethics emphasise an additional layer of 'being the change you want to see' that can occur intra-institutionally. Where institutions often employ more formalised and codified mechanisms for change and can employ their knowledge, experiences, and relationships to navigate the institutional levers for change in pursuit of their cause; such as the Global Climate Coalition (Brulle, 2022).

Employing the confrontational theory of change. The *confrontational theory of change* is rooted in the belief(s) that individuals, organisations, and institutions cannot or will not rationally change themselves in the direction desired by the activist. Investigating civic behaviour and civic associations, Smith and Stoker (2009) and Harie (2014) examines how activists draw on a confrontational theory of change to justify their use of exertions and risk-taking that subvert (Creed & Scully, 2020) or nudge for change (Smith and Stoker (2009). Drawing on O'Leary's (2014) research we describe these as the *lone wolf* climate activist; whereby an individual orientates around the belief that their home organisation (e.g., a civic climate association or a public policy institution) is a legitimate focus for change, but that the organisation or management is unreasonably recalcitrant so justifying their hidden exertions to bring about change. Individuals with a shared understanding of change can coordinate and work collaboratively (within the network) through confrontational activist exertions. We follow Green et al. (2018) in those individual perceptions on the nature of change and situations (e.g., the determinants of focus) do not need to be shared for common focus to animate networked activist structures (Green et al., 2018). Indeed, all *Action Groups* may have in common their common cause and theory of change as it pertains to action and methods. Robinson, speaking from the genre of climate fiction (2021) proposes how this might mean covert intra-organisational action groups trying to bring about changes in the activities or climate footprint of a home organisation that is resistant to such changes. Though there is no obvious literatures to empirically evidence the existence of endogenous confrontational groups-of-groups, or what we term the *resistance* activists, we have observed this and introduced this as an explicit suggestion from the typology. There is an additional layer of social mobilisation that activist(s) might adopt internally through confrontational uses of institutional levers and processes for change. Much like the aforementioned *shareholder activists*, activists as *disrupters* utilise more nuanced intra-institutional knowledge and experiences to advance their cause. But rather than pulling institutional levers that precipitate consensual changes, the disruptors employ a confrontational theory of change in which they challenge power directly and seek to force change upon an institution from the inside. From the perspective of the climate activist, this might be seen in the shareholder activist group 'Engine No.1' which employs various stripes of confrontational shareholder activism to openly advocate for change within climate-laggard multinational corporations (Eccles and Mayer, 2021).

The exogenous focus. Adopting an alternative perspective, other activists orientate their focus and endeavours towards change in the/another to themselves, and rather than 'being the change' they aim for 'seeing the change' in individuals, organisations, and institutions. This is not mutually exclusive and can occur as a consequence of believing that they have limited agency to be the change, that focusing on others would be more effective, or that they have endogenously changed already, justifying a shift in focus to the other. The endogenous orientation is the classical philosophical orientation of mainstream social movement studies and practice (Cortese, 2021) and, consequently, there is a great deal written about it already (e.g., Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991; Woolston, 2016). Newer contributions at the institutional scales (in particular) however also increasingly address what we term the exogenous activist and need recognising.

Employing the collaborative theory of change. Individuals can exert themselves and/or take risks to collaboratively and discursively bring about change in others. Based on this collaborative theory of change, such individuals utilise the tools of discussion and persuasion to influence others towards change. Hestres and Hopke (2017) and Murphy and Bendell (2017) point to how the

influencer operates across the full gamut of scales from the micro and interpersonal interactions to the macro digital influencers exerting for change in global communities enabled through the communicative reach of social media and similar (Hestres and Hopke, 2017; Murphy and Bendell, 2017). Perhaps the best example of the influencer as a climate activist was the earlier activities of Swedish activist Greta Thunberg (2018–2019) which were highly publicised. Groups of like-minded activists can coalesce into collaborative *pressure groups* that seek change in others through mobilisation, symbolic protest, and rational discourse drawing attention to injustices, imbalances, and other activist focus (Murphy and Bendell, 2017; Wheaton, 2007). The theme of Thunberg evolved from her efforts in the *Fridays for Future* movement, indicating the emergence of such pressure groups. Collaborative *pressure groups* can coalesce and organise towards more efficient or effective collective efforts that are based on high levels of expertise in areas relevant to the topic. This happens for example through the exertions and risk-taking of *epistemic communities* and *organisers* (Gough and Shackley, 2001). For example, the efforts undertaken by the coalition of climate mayors who organise, coordinate, and share globally their efforts at leading change towards climate outcomes in others within urban settings (e.g., the Coalition for Climate Mayors). Other people located within institutional structures that legitimise knowledge and expertise in specifically knowable fields can pursue change in the field and institutional setting in which they are an *expert*. For the *expert* activists the risk profile is different, as they are risking their professional authority and legitimacy, and perceived scientific impartiality in their field of expertise (Hysing and Olson, 2018). They likely exhibit contested accountability conflicts between their knowledge, expertise, impartiality, professionalism, and other competing values and interests (Gough and Shackley, 2001). Yet, despite these conflicts, they still advocate for specific topics and arguments. In the case of the climate activist, this might include the climate scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) third working group who leaked alternative prescriptions for necessary radical societal change in the face of the climate crisis from outside of the IPCC's institutional reporting mechanisms in late 2021.

Employing the confrontational theory of change. Some individuals adopt the philosophical perspective that confrontation is the more effective lever for precipitating change in others (McAdam, 1986; Woolston, 2016). Whilst rarely working in true isolation, nevertheless individual *critics* can challenge and contest the opinions, positions, and privileges of others and seek to shame or force them to change rather than through reason and dialogue. An example of this is the climate polemic and *critic* George Monbiot who has and continues to use his column in the UK's *Guardian* newspaper to draw attention to the climate issues and injustices of the current age. Where and when critics seeking change in others coalesce and network with like-minded individuals, they can form *social movements* that exert themselves and take risks collectively for their shared cause (Giugni and Grasso, 2020). Operating under a confrontational theory of change these social movements can utilise the methods of mass civil disobedience (Celikates, 2016; Giugni and Grasso, 2020), and in places, even violent and non-violent direct action in the pursuit of their cause (Simpson et al., 2018). In some cases, some forms of direct action and civil disobedience become the gateway to extremist activist identities and activities (Horowitz, 2017). The mass civil disobedience of Extinction Rebellion (Shiva, 2020), Greenpeace, or even Earth First! in the 1990s are cases of these social movements (Lee, 1995). Individual activists can act as the instigators of advocacy coalitions where they bring together and *organise* between established social movements and new individuals (Sabatier, 1988). Based on policy theory, we know that these issue-bound coalitions often coalesce diverse and otherwise competing actors and interests together in the cause of confrontational activism for specific and broadly agreeable ends (Lee, 1995). For example, social organisers and political activist collective, *Tipping Point* (Aus). Similarly, like the aforementioned expert activist, other institutionally-embedded would-be activists adopt more confrontational strategies for change through institutional means. In this case, these are conceived as *judicial activists*, where national and international systems of jurisprudence offer the most well-institutionalised setting for confrontational activists seeking to influence change in others (Kmiec, 2004; Green, 2009). An excellent example of which being the climate legal firm *Client Earth* (Bell, 2017).

Conclusion

Activists are increasingly mobilising in response to the failures of meeting the challenges of the global climate crisis. In part, our proposed typology has been motivated by the need for a better, more inclusive conception of the community of climate activists from across different academic disciplines. However it is also more than a simple cataloguing exercise, it should be seen as an initial first step in systematising a typology of climate activists based on their motivations, tactics, and strategies towards a future institutional theory of the climate activist. We are mindful of the limitations of our approach—which might be considered reductionist where in practice people can identify as a climate activists across multiple places and spaces at different times or simultaneously, and apply different theories of change situationally (Horowitz, 2017). Furthermore, the typology tends not to capture the nuances and contradictions of the climate activist life (Lawson, 2021) and life courses (Nolas et al., 2017) and is likely to have greater resonance for activists in the Global North compared to the Global South. Moreover, the approach in this paper only applies to 'the activist' as opposed to activism. Some might argue this bracketing is problematic where climate activist identities are shaped iteratively or primarily by their activities (individual or collective) rather than through self-reflective identification.

The next task is to validate and enhance this typology through follow-up research and studies. Several questions fall out of the study and need addressing: how and why do climate activist theories of change evolve through time, experience, and learning? Does the typology have as much value in accounting for bad faith from across the political spectrum of climate activists? How do we empirically validate the typology, and especially try and identify and reveal the '*resistance*' climate activists (theorised here) exerting themselves and taking risks for coalition building on the inside of organisations and institutions? Finally, we argue that it is only through understanding such questions can we understand the role climate activists play in challenging inequity and injustice in the transitions towards future societal sustainability.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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Author contributions

All authors contributed to the conceptualisation and editing of this paper. It was substantively written and led by K-T as the first author.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

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