Agency, identity and dominant discourses: a critical discursive psychology study of how lay people navigate the climate change values-actions gap.

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ABSTRACT

Climate concern seldom translates into pro-environmental behaviours, producing a values-actions gap typically investigated through an action-deficit lens. The present study rejects that lens, instead conceptualising myriad, competing motives influencing the decisions and actions individuals negotiate daily, including, but not limited to, pro-environmental activity. Taking a critical discursive psychology approach, this study analyses how lay people use culturally available discursive resources to navigate conflicting motives vis-à-vis the climate change values-actions gap. The paper presents findings from analysis of three focus group transcripts comprising 13 adults from the UK and Ireland, revealing two prominent repertoires and corresponding suborder codes. The first repertoire, 'a drop in the ocean,' is characterised by a tension between individualism and structuralism. The second repertoire, 'I'm only human,' locates the tension between the rational and instinctual. Within both themes, constructions of agency shift between individual, external, ambivalent and limited representations of power and responsibility to effect climate change. Participants deploy this agential fluidity to maintain a moral identity. Across the dataset, neoliberalism is revealed as the dominant discursive framework used to negotiate the values-actions. The paper makes recommendations for future research into the mechanisms of neoliberalist discourses and their influence on constructions of climate change agency and identity.

INTRODUCTION

Compelling evidence of anthropogenic climate change (ACC) is well-established in scientific literature (Cook, *et al*., 2013), yet even people who recognise the environmental impacts of human behaviour don't always act sustainably (Hoggett, 2019). Mainstream psychology typically investigates this values-actions gap through an action-deficit lens, seeking to identify barriers to pro-environmental behaviours (PEB) and overcome them with insights around attitudes, motivation, and behaviour (Kurz *et al.,* 2005). For example, barriers have been psychoanalytically conceptualised as defence mechanisms, such as denial, repression, and displacement, which are activated when individual or social identities are threatened (Kramer, 2010, cited in Hanna and Adams, 2019).

Social psychological approaches include cognitive dissonance theory, concerned with the mental discomfort experienced when holding contradictory beliefs (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959, cited in Hanna and Adams, 2019). Work in this field finds that people adjust beliefs more often than behaviours to alleviate discomfort, thus framing cognitive dissonance as a barrier to PEB (Lamm, Taylor and Rundy, 2017). Climate distancing approaches apply the theory of 'construal level' to research the relationship between spatial, temporal, social and hypothetical dimensions of psychological distancing and PEB, with proximity more commonly correlating positively (Maiella, *et al.,* 2020), but results are inconsistent. For example, when testing the 'legacy hypothesis,' that having children increases future-thinking and concern for future environmental protection, Thomas *et al.* (2018) found a lack of supporting evidence, instead concluding that parenthood shifts priorities to the child/ren's wellbeing. Social learning theory has investigated social influence on PEB, finding that social imitation of visible behaviours such as public transport use can help people to overcome the values-action gap (Babutsidze and Chai, 2018), and social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, cited in Hanna *et al*., 2016), relatedly frames climate action as driven by maintaining a positive self-image.

Critical discursive approaches provide an alternative treatment of the values-actions gap, investigating how culturally-situated linguistic resources are deployed to frame individual and collective climate (in)action. Rather than treating language as a tool to access the intrapsychic phenomena that drives human behaviour, talk is positioned as a social practice that constructs available versions of reality (Wiggins, 2017; Burr, 2015), shaping collective ideas about and responses to climate change (CC) (Kurz and Prosser, 2021). This approach has been used to analyse public climate change rhetoric (Wang and Huan, 2023; Nakkerud, 2023; Lucas, 2022; Kurz, Augoustinos and Crabb, 2010), as well as lay discourse (Zeyer

and Roth, 2009; Hanson-Easey *et al*., 2015). The literature often identifies repertoires that dichotomously frame CC using 'individualism versus structuralism' discourses, although Brownstein, Kelly and Madva (2022) argue the values-action gap would be better addressed through a symbiotic reworking of the two. Within a critical psychology framework, Adams (2021) problematises the focus on barriers to *individual* climate action as downplaying systemic factors. Correspondingly, Riedy (2022) identifies dominant neoliberal discourses as the prominent barrier to climate-mitigation engagement (see also Rutar, 2023; Beer, 2020), and presents 'discursive entrepreneurship' as a framework for stewarding linguistic landscapes towards social-ecological meaning-making.

Discourse analysis is often combined with other conceptual and methodological approaches. For example, Hanna and Adams (2019) used discursive psychology to identify ways conflicting feelings about air travel are socially-managed (Wiggins, 2017), and psychosocial accounts of denial to explicate their findings. Participants negotiated sustainability contradictions through the production and maintenance of positive self-representations, which the authors characterise as discursive barriers to PEB in the form of literal, interpretive, and implicatory denial (Cohen, 1996; 2001, cited in Hanna and Adams, 2019). In the latter, people accept the reality (e.g. of ACC) but discursively diminish its implications to preserve their environmental integrity without behavioural change. Bodin and Björklund (2022) combined critical thematic analysis with discursive psychological approaches to look at how both parents and non-parents constructed the relationship between CC and reproductive choices in focus group settings. They found that acknowledgement of the environmental impact of having children did not influence reproductive choices, a tension negotiated using, among other strategies, consumerist discourses of 'debts and assets,' i.e., having children but reducing one's carbon footprint elsewhere to balance moral debts (Rieder, 2016, cited in Bidon and Björklund, 2022). Toivonen (2023) combined critical thematic and discursive approaches to study constructions of human agency in relation to climate change. She developed twelve agential themes, including 'individual' and 'external' which closely align to individualism-structuralism discourses, as well as 'limited' and 'ambivalent' agency that frame individual actions as ineffective, irrelevant or uncertain.

As the above review indicates, discourse analysis covers a range of approaches, including critical discursive psychology (CDP), which situates 'talk' at "the intersection between the everyday and the cultural" (Wiggins, 2017, p.45). CDP investigates the functional 'doing' of talk within the discursive resources that are made available through social constructions of

meaning, drawing on two key analytic concepts: 'Interpretive repertoires,' culturally available terms, tropes and discourses that create shared meaning (Parker, 2015), and 'subject positions,' or 'ways of being' in the world, (Locke and Budds, 2020). The latter are indexical identities that interpretive repertoires make available for people to accept or reject with varying functional effects but commonly used to legitimate realities (Burr, 2015). In climate psychology research, CDP can reveal the contextual linguistic resources that people draw on to negotiate the environmental impacts of their actions. An early CDP study on lay discourses on natural resources (Kurz *et al.*, 2005), for example, identified discursive strategies that included divesting responsibility for, or minimising the impacts of, harmful behaviours to maintain an environmentally-friendly identity without behavioural change, akin to implicatory denial discussed above.

Most of these studies, while providing rich, varied insights into the deployment of discursive devices and construction of conceptual response to climate change, nonetheless conceive of the values-action gap as a void within which people are doing nothing. Meistrup and Klitmøller (2023) contend that this perspective neglects to consider what people are doing *instead*, and how they experience this tension, suggesting instead that individuals' myriad, competing motives influence the decisions and actions they take throughout daily life, including, but not limited to, pro-environmental activity. On this point, Lertzman (2019) argues that people's relationships to climate-related issues are inherently ambivalent, and that sites of conflict yield valuable, often overlooked, insights into narrative constructions of climate change. A paucity of research has explored these points of tension in people's everyday lives using CDP. This study addresses that gap by employing a critical discursive psychology approach to the question, "how do lay people navigate conflicting motives in relation to climate change?"

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical and epistemological framework

This study adopts a social constructivist epistemology and a critical realist ontology within an interpretivist framework. While a relativist ontology considers that all social realities are constructed through language, critical realism recognises the existence of a material reality but contends that our engagement with such is contingent on discursively constructed meanings, which vary between sociocultural contexts (Locke and Budds, 2020; Burr, 2015). As such, CDP is the most appropriate theoretical and methodological tool for exploring lay

deployment of social, cultural and historical linguistic resources when negotiating the values-actions gap. Further, since both 'talk in action' and power are central to CDP (Parker, 2015), a focus group (FG) technique was used to allow for rich, interactive, discursive data.

Participants

Thirteen adults from the UK and Ireland were recruited using snowball and convenience sampling via social media. Following a successful pilot FG with friends, I invited friends, family, and associates to participate. As others have found (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014), this put participants at ease and supported conversational flow, but emphasised the importance of researcher-reflexivity, both from an ethical (Brewis, 2014) and analytic (Locke and Budds, 2020) consideration, to avoid exploiting ex ante data.

Criteria included people who acknowledge ACC but consider themselves to engage in minimal pro-environmental behaviours. All were aged >18, English speaking and able to give informed consent. Climate activists, professionals working towards climate mitigation, and climate sceptics were excluded. Although not criterion, all participants identified as parents and two as grandparents; this proved significant to the data.

Procedure

Data were collected via three online, semi-structured FG discussions, each comprising 4-5 participants and lasting approximately 90 minutes. Participants were issued the participant information sheet, and required to complete, sign and return the participant consent form in advance. To open the sessions, welcome participants, give a topic overview and establish safety within the groups, I used the scripted elements of the focus group schedule, and established a group agreement before introducing the first question. Questions/prompts were designed to be open-ended, as is standard in qualitative research (Paulson and Willig, 2008), and were informed by Lertzman (2019) and Meistrup and Klitmøller (2023) to elicit the climate tensions experienced within the minutiae of individuals' daily lives by exploring anxieties, ambivalences, and aspirations. The six questions/prompts were:

1. The title of this study concerns "conflicting motives in relation to climate change?" – what does that bring to mind for you?
2. In your everyday life, what makes you think about climate change?
3. What aspects of climate change worry you?
4. What environmentally friendly actions do you take in your life? Why?

5. When do you feel a conflict between your values and your actions regarding climate change?
6. What are your hopes regarding the climate?

At the end, I read the debrief document then issued it via email for participants' future reference.

The pilot FG was audio recorded, following which no methodological amendments were made, and so data from the pilot group was retained for analysis. FGs were audio-recorded using Microsoft Teams, and manually transcribed, pseudonymising participants, and data were analysed following Locke and Budds' (2020) six-stage guide.[1] Findings are presented under two overarching repertoires that are used to negotiate individual climate (in)activity, which I have called: (i) 'A drop in the ocean', and; (ii) 'I'm only human'.

Ethical approval was obtained from The Open University's D811 Module Team.

ANALYSIS

Regarding participants' strategies for negotiating personal conflict arising in the climate change values-actions gap, my analyses revealed two prominent repertoires and a series of primary and secondary codes (see Table 1). The first repertoire, 'a drop in the ocean,' is characterised by a tension between individual and structural responsibility for climate change mitigation. The second repertoire, 'I'm only human,' positions subjects as vulnerable to human instinct.

1: 'A drop in the ocean'

The most common strategy for negotiating the values-action gap is rooted in a tension between two repertoires that construct climate change mitigation as either an individual or a structural responsibility. Participants do not typically subscribe to one distinct repertoire but move between them with varying effect, drawing on aspects of their personal lives including consumer habits, travel and homelife to illustrate. Issues of power and agency are central to this tension, informing my second-level codes: (i) individual action shapes the system; (ii) the system shapes individual action; (iii) the system is untenable.

[1] Locke and Budds' (2020) six stages of CDP are: 1) Familiarisation with the data and initial coding; 2) Discursive constructions; 3) Interpretive repertoires; 4) Subject positions; 5) Discursive accomplishments, and 6) Practice.

Table 1: Summary of codes

Core repertoire	Primary code	Second-level code
1. A drop in the ocean *Climate change mitigation as a tension between individual and structural responsibility.*	1.1. Individual action shapes the system	Shop local
	1.2. The system shapes individual action	1.2.1. Just tell me what to do 1.2.2. In science we trust 1.2.3. If you build it…
	1.3.The system is untenable.	1.3.1. Consumer blaming 1.3.2. There is no ethical consumption under capitalism 1.3.3. Power without the will
2. I'm only human *Navigating dissonance through 'human nature' discourses that relinquish responsibility*	2.1. Social	2.1.1. The good parent: legacy 2.1.2. The good parent: influencing 2.1.3. The good parent: priorities
	2.2. Psychological	Desire
	2.3. Physiological	Basic needs

1.1. Individual action shapes the system

I defer to Mother Teresa in opening this section, quoted by Patrick as saying, "everybody can do something," (FG3, 218) when asserting individualised solutions to the climate crisis. Here, Toivonen's (2022) 'individual agency' is mobilised, conferring people with the power to influence climate change within the parameters of the current system. Invoking a 'beacon of goodliness' positions Patrick as a conduit for inspired, transcendent advice, legitimising his endorsement of contemporary 'shop local' discourses:

```
Patrick  But those of us who can afford to do that should do it,
         because that will encourage the Butcher, the Baker, and
         the Candlestick maker to set up shop and stay there.
         (FG3, 1250-1256)
```

In this extract, climate change agency is contingent on socioeconomic "privilege… which penalises people that are stuck in poverty" (John, FG3, 1242-1245). Patrick espouses humanist values and egalitarian principals but employs neoliberal discourses of supply and demand to frame these, further upholding the systemic status quo.

Here and elsewhere in the data, nostalgia for traditional consumer practices draws upon the 'back to basics' idiom, suggesting simple solutions to complex issues. Evoking nostalgia has been shown to increase PEB by reducing temporal distance (Huang, Yang and Zhang, 2024) but Anita, having earlier detailed going "to all the individual shops" (FG1, 260) in her youth, undermines the contemporary viability of traditional practices:

```
Anita    I don’t have the time now to go to all the individual
         shops if they all existed ((laughter)) to buy to buy my
         non plastic food ((laughter)) (FG1, 889-891)
```

Humour is deployed here to mock wistful notions, undermining the efficacy of the ‘shop local’ message and thereby positioning Anita as a (colloquial) realist, avoiding negative climate associations when shopping at corporate supermarkets.

1.2. The system shapes individual action

Within this repertoire, individual action is still possible but is constrained by wider governing structures that are responsible for disseminating PEB guidelines (‘just tell me what to do’), producing scientific-technological solutions (‘in science we trust’) and providing adequate infrastructure (‘if you build it’).

1.2.1. Just tell me what to do

A ‘well-intentioned citizen’ position recurs, reflecting a willingness to act sustainably but feeling “impotent” (Chloe, FG2, 194) without knowing “what you’re doing for the best” (Bridie, FG1, 464-465). Responsibility for disseminating clear ‘green guidelines’ is conferred on the Government:

```
Louise   I don't believe in a nanny state as such, but I think the
         times when people do take action and do things is when
         it's like ‘this is what we do, we recycle,’ there's a
         road map […] the government really to take a lead on that
         and be like, ‘these are the things that we all need to
         be doing to improve the trajectory,’ but it's not
         happening. So then everyone's just sort of fending for
         themselves (FG2, 1007-1019)
```

Louise’s refrain (‘I don’t believe… but’) allows her to maintain legitimacy within the dominant neoliberal ideology that minimises government interventions, while promoting liberalist ideologies that emphasise democratic governance and social justice. She cites unsubstantiated examples of successful government influence on individual action to support the demand for clearer, evidence-based instructions, but using technical language (‘roadmap,’ ‘trajectory’) adds weight to her case. The image of consequent chaos (‘fending for themselves’’), functions to vindicate her proposal for orderly guidelines.

1.2.2. In science we trust

Knowledge is also outsourced to “clever folks out there” (Imogen, FG3, 1737) and “smart clever people” (John, FG3, 1753) who are developing climate change solutions:

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Bridie   Absolutely the research that is going on, is gonna help
         it, so hopefully it’s not so bleak as we think it might
         be. (FG1, 1392-1393)
```

In deferring agency to expert others, speakers are positioned as reasoned and pragmatic, placing faith in science and constructing climate change as a resolvable, technical problem for STEM professionals. This draws on discourses of ecological modernisation to declare current neoliberal political structures as compatible with climate mitigation (Jernnäs and Linnér, 2019, cited in Kurtz and Prosser, 2021).

1.2.3. If you build it…

The ‘well-intentioned citizen’ returns here as one who requires appropriate infrastructure to facilitate PEB. For example, Anita accounts for her reluctant choice to drive to an appointment despite having a day off:

```
Anita    what you should be doing for climate change, is taking
         the public transport but (.) but, that, yes I could have
         done that but I would have needed all day to do that
         rather than the few hours it took ‘cause I went in my car
         (FG1, 167-172)
```

The inconvenience of inefficient public transport networks externalises human agency (Toinoven, 2022) and justifies Anita’s unsustainable action through the ‘powerless citizen’ identity, who is unable to access feasible sustainable transport options.

1.3. The system is untenable

In this strand, personal conflict around climate (in)action is contextualised within a wider social movement advocating urgent shifts away from capitalism to avoid disaster (Beer, 2022). ‘Systems change not climate change’ is its popular manifestation, associated with radical action against the status quo and a rejection of individualist solutions to climate change. Participants construct the system as immoral and, by positioning themselves in opposition to that system, signal their own virtue.

1.3.1. Consumer blaming

Participants, sometimes heatedly, contest capitalist discourses that blame consumer behaviours for the climate crisis (Park, 2022):

Chloe 'is it really bad that I've bought this T shirt from Primark? Well, it of course it is but ohh, but I'm not a billionaire who flies around in their jet all the time.' (FG2, 597-600)

By vocalising inner dialogue, Chloe indicates she has considered this issue before, and that her fast fashion habits cause dissonance and produce guilt: her actions may be questionable, but her morality is intact by accepting her flaws. Bolstering her moral position, the phrase “I’m not a billionaire” (recurring throughout the data) is mobilised to reflect socioeconomic disparities and reject individual responsibility for climate mitigation by constructing the connection between small consumer acts (buying a t-shirt) and acts of extreme wealth as indubitably absurd.

1.3.2. There is no ethical consumption under capitalism

The current political and economic system is rejected as inherently contradictory, where even ‘sustainable’ solutions have a social and economic cost:

Jacqui So like electric cars are good, yes, and on the other hand, I've heard that the lithium batteries that are in electric cars are unethically mined. So it's like, 'for fuck sake, why is is everything,' do you know, why is there an issue with everything? Go on just do the right thing and do it properly the whole way (FG3, 642-649)

Jacqui’s allusion to a vague source (‘I’ve heard’) roots her statement in objectivity, endorsing her accusations of moral ambiguity surrounding electric cars. In raising climate injustice, she makes micro-macro connections between consumer actions and global socioeconomic issues, framing individual motivation to drive electric cars as ‘good’ but undermining its efficacy by positioning consumers as misinformed, failed by “the people who are really in power” (Jacqui, FG3, 629). Her exasperated expression (‘for fuck sake’) expresses intense frustration with those in power, and her demand that they ‘just do’ what’s right constructs it as a simple solution.

1.3.3. Power without the will

Relatedly, Jacqui goes on to illustrate a recurring point across the data regarding lack of political will on climate change, citing global responses to COVID-19 as demonstrating capacity if the will were there:

Jacqui during the recent pandemic, the whole world made a collective decision and got on with it really quickly. So why, why is that not happening in regards to climate change? (FG3, 348-352)

Complex power subversion unfolds in this extract. Jacqui provides unequivocal, temporally-proximal evidence that swift, effective political collaboration on urgent global threats is possible, refuting any ‘pragmatic’ defences of inaction. On the surface, she places responsibility for climate change in the system, but her demanding question reclaims some of the power by positioning political and economic elites as answerable to the public. Additionally, she has already indicated that powerholders “don’t care enough” (FG3, 633) and so in fact her question becomes rhetorical, exposing neoliberalism as fundamentally unqualified to resolve the climate crisis and the system thus untenable.

2: ‘I’m only human’

In this second core repertoire, participants navigate dissonance by drawing on culturally-legitimated representations of the social, psychological and physiological fallibility of human ‘nature.’

2.1. Social

Constructions of relational networks are deployed to contextualise participants’ motivations to act sustainably and to justify unsustainable actions. The most prevalent relates to parental identity and produces the subject position of ‘good parent,’ through ‘legacy,’ ‘influencing’ and ‘prioritising’ narratives.

2.1.1. Legacy

‘Legacy’ draws on popular climate discourses about protecting the planet for future generations:

Imogen Oh Blimey. So I I feel quite passionate about ensuring that we're leaving this world in a really good place for our children and our grandchildren. (FG3, 52-55)

John In terms of my motives, just guilt and having a son and thinking about the future and how I'm going to leave the planet. That's why I'm trying to change products and do bits and pieces. (FG3, 246-149)

It is a familiar trope that the 'good parent' worries about their children's future. Imogen uses common slang to express alarm ('oh blimey') and affective language ('passionate') to position herself as a 'good parent' who cares deeply about the impact of her environmental legacy on her children. John flippantly invokes emotion ('just guilt') and by detailing his efforts constructs himself as considered, active and trying his best, underscoring the 'good parent' position.

2.1.2. Influencing

Similarly, the 'good parent' is presented as a role model who influences their children's pro-environmental learning. Explaining her earlier commitment to "living really small" (FG2, 147), and only buying second hand clothes, Erin celebrates that her teenage daughter has "only ever worn second hand clothes, so new clothes feel odd" (FG2, 527-528)

Erin that was an example to me of how their upbringing has affected them and changed their behaviour (FG2,534-535)

Here, the 'good parent' is conscientious and proud, scaffolding their child/ren's climate action, but it can be challenging:

Rosie [it] sustains our household conflict around the segregation because I I don't wanna stop because actually it might just set the right example for the children (FG2, 491-494)

This preparedness for interpersonal conflict in defence of her values, demonstrates a dogged commitment to being a role model who chooses her child's needs ('for the children') over taking the path of least resistance.

2.1.3. Prioritising

The third construction of the 'good parent' echoes Thomas *et al.*'s (2018) findings that parents prioritise children's wellbeing over pro-environmental behaviours:

Anita My daughter's thirteen so she's just discovered Primark (1.)

Cassie Mm

Carole Oh God

Bridie Oh (FG1, 573-579)

Anita's dramatic pause (1.) and the knowing responses of the group, construct a common understanding that equates Primark with fast fashion, an unsustainable behaviour, but here Anita prioritises her daughter's healthy social and emotional development over protecting the environment:

```
Anita       It's more the socialising, you know, meeting her
            friends and the independence that she's now being
            allowed […] it's not the buying (FG1, 622-626)
```

Drawing on contemporary discourses around positive parenting, that foreground understanding your child's needs, Anita aligns with the 'good parent' position, as does Carole when prioritising her children's safety by driving them to school:

```
Carole      they probably could have walked from primary school
            […] but there's like a big busy road beside me that
            cars just fly' (FG1, 372-376)
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Connecting micro-level experiences (walking to school) with macro-level issues (infrastructure), reiterates the limitations of the individualist approach to climate responsibility discussed earlier. The risk-benefit analysis ('probably could have… but') allows Carole to occupy the 'good parent' position by protecting her children, whilst maintaining moral integrity: she does care about the environment, but she cares about her children more.

2.2. Psychological

Psychological traits, and in particular 'desire,' are invoked to mediate climate dissonance, and justify environmentally unsustainable behaviours. Here, desire is constructed as a force that overrides reason and governs action, best illustrated by a discussion balancing the harmful effects of flying with the urge to travel. Anita states that, "we all like our holidays" (FG1, 177) asserting a universal understanding, and Bridie elaborates:

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Bridie      the opportunity to go somewhere (.) amazing, you know,
            would you say no just because you can't (.) drive there?
            (FG1, 125-127)
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This persuasive statement constructs holidays as fortuitous ('opportunity'), exciting, and full of wonder ('amazing'), connoting a "seize the day" mentality and using a rhetorical question to produce a taken-for-granted, collective opinion that human desire supersedes environmental concern.

2.3. Physiological

Physiological urges are treated similarly in talk, with basic needs such as food and sleep constructed as normative priorities that inhibit PEB:

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Anita     you know you shouldn’t be buying convenience food but
          ( ) you’re hungry (FG1, 221-223)
```

Anita identifies as knowledgeable and informed, and her short pause ( ) and unambiguous assertion (‘you’re hungry’), constructs an unassailable biological justification for buying prepackaged foods. At other times participants offered more detailed accounts of their PEB before citing physiological defences for inactivity. For example, this short extract from a longer account of Erin’s tiring efforts:

```
Erin      even if you're doing the best you can […] you don't
          feel like you're doing enough and I just got to the
          point a few years ago where I actually just got
          exhausted and just thought, ‘I just, I'm just gonna
          live my life’ (FG2, 170-176)
```

Erin’s moral position as a conscientious citizen (‘doing the best you can’) remains intact, and by constructing PEB as both incompatible with ‘living life’ and physically unsustainable (‘exhausted’), she deploys a ‘life is for living’ repertoire as an irrefutable statement to support her inaction (Zeyer and Roth, 2009). In both extracts the ‘basic human needs’ repertoire functions to relinquish agency to ‘natural,’ thus uncontrollable, impulses.

DISCUSSION

This study has presented two overarching repertoires, and six corresponding primary codes, that participants constructed when navigating conflicting motives about climate change. Next, I will review these findings in relation to previous literature, emphasising the emergent links between this study and previous findings regarding agency, identity, and dominant discursive frameworks. Finally, I will critique the strengths and limitations of this study and make some recommendations for future research.

The starting point must be to endorse Meistrup and Klitmøller’s (2023) proposal that the values-actions gap is not an empty void of inaction but rather a bustling crowd of (discursive) doing. Upholding Lertzman’s (2019) assertion that most people experience coexisting contradictions relating to climate change, participants constructed this ‘crowd’ as a space where conflicting positions, discourses, responsibilities and identities can ‘mingle,’ illustrated by Louise’s call for increased government regulation whilst rejecting the “nanny state.”

To the first main repertoire, ‘a drop in the ocean,’ and attendant suborder codes. It is unsurprising that tension between individual and structural solutions to climate change emerged as such a prominent repertoire, given its prevalence in both public and lay discourses (Wang and Huan, 2023; Nakkerud, 2023; Lucas, 2022; Kurz, Augoustinos and Crabb, 2010; Zeyer and Roth, 2009; Hanson-Easey et al., 2015). Codes ‘individual action shapes the system’ and ‘the system shapes individual action,’ construct the tension between individual and state responsibility for CC as strained, but compatible. Toivonen’s (2022) ‘individual,’ ‘limited’ and ‘external’ agency themes are reflected in agential constructions that shift between individuals who can vote with their feet to ‘shop local,’ individuals whose power to do so is limited by socioeconomic status, and individuals whose capacity to exert impact is contingent on external scaffolding by way of infrastructure and/or information. In ‘the system is untenable,’ agency is transferred to political and economic others deemed more impactful, reflecting ‘external’ and ‘ambivalent’ agency and illustrating the discursive fluidity of power, a central tenet of social constructionism (Burr, 2015) Importantly, agential positions were flexibly taken up by each participant at varying times, most frequently to align the speaker within an environmentally-moral identity, the “positive self-representations” of Hanna and Adams’ (2019) sustainable tourism study, to which I will return. I also note that a neoliberal discursive framework underpins the talk herein, for example Patrick’s rejection of multinational dominance using the ‘supply and demand’ language of free market capitalism competes with his ‘shop local’ message. I suggest that, where Brownstein, Kelly and Madva (2022) advocate for a symbiotic reframing of the individualism-structuralism dilemma, my findings indicate this is already occurring at an interactional level, presenting a potential resource for further developments in transforming discursive ecological landscapes (Riedy, 2022).

In the second core repertoire, ‘I’m only human,’ the values-actions gap is represented as a struggle between the rational and instinctual self. Participants make use of what Zeyer and Roth (2009) term ‘folk psychology,’ or commonsense ‘knowledge,’ to produce tension, drawing on popular Freudian repertoires associated with the unconscious urges of the id, the moralising super-ego, and the reasoned arbiter of the ego. While more explicit in the ‘physiological’ code, where the urge to eat outweighs the reasons to avoid pre-packaged foods, the struggle to resist impulse is also seen in the maternal instinct to protect offspring from harm, or in satisfying one’s hedonistic urges by taking that flight or buying that t-shirt, at whatever environmental cost. Such discourses of material desire arguably highlight the dominance of neoliberal-capitalist discourses (Rutar, 2023), underpinned by hedonistic assertions that pleasure is the is the ultimate goal, in use. Since social norms dictate that

we value reason over impulse in decision-making processes, when speakers frame their reasoning ('you know you shouldn't be buying convenience food…') in opposition to their instinct-driven actions ('but you're hungry,' Anita, FG1, 221-223), they transfer responsibility for their actions to realms outside their control. This partially aligns with Toivonen's limited agency, in which humans are not able to do what is needed to protect climate change, and closely reflects Kurz *et al.*'s (2005) finding that divesting responsibility supports reputation-management.

Arguably more significant, however, is the implications of these divestments for ethical identity management. As with the agential shifts, I contend that such culturally shared associations with 'pub Freud' (Kelly, 2014) are deployed in detailed identity work to uphold an environmentally moral self while avoiding behavioural change. Indeed, from a CDP perspective the methodology of the study arguably set this agenda, combining the sample criteria (people who identify as caring about the environment) with focus group dynamics to lay a situational expectation that participants 'show up' in that identity (Locke and Budds, 2020). At the moments of conflict, moral identities are discursively negotiated by maintaining positive self-representations (Hanna and Adams, 2019; Hanna, *et al*., 2016), most successfully achieved herein through the 'good parent' subject position. This social constructionist framing both supports and elucidates Thomas et al.'s (2018) survey-based quantitative assumption that parenthood shifts priorities to the child/ren's wellbeing, and again here neoliberalist discourses dominate. Fast fashion (intricately linked to supply and demand narratives) is presented as a 'cost' of being a parent who prioritises their child's wellbeing over the environment, and the 'debts and assets' discourse (Bodin and Björklund, 2022) is reflected when parenthood, guilt and future-thinking are traded with efforts to "change products," [John, FG3, 149] managing dissonance by balancing one's overall 'carbon footprint.'

Within both core repertoires, constructions of agency shift between individual, external, ambivalent and limited representations of power and responsibility to effect climate change. Participants deploy this agential fluidity to maintain a moral identity that allows them to circumnavigate behaviour change while saving moral face. That these fluid variations of agency and identity are underpinned by neoliberal discursive frameworks, dominant in negotiating the climate change values-actions gap, here and elsewhere (Wang and Huan, 2023), is perhaps the most significant finding from a critical discursive psychology perspective, providing a departure point for future research into the bidirectionality of micro-macro discourses regarding climate change.

This study has illuminated some of the common tropes deployed in navigating the CC values-actions gap and, while not aiming to bridge the values-actions gap with findings, this paper may inform climate communication aimed at lay people who care about the environment. The qualitative nature of this study and the relatively small sample size limit the generalisability of the findings. Further work is needed to investigate whether similar repertoires and corresponding constructions would emerge in other contexts. Future research could further interrogate the connection between agency, identity and neoliberal discursive frameworks and PEB, to inform supportive mechanisms for stewarding discursive transformation.

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