*Article*

# "Just run over them" – Experiences, Perceptions and Evaluations of Violence Among Activists of Letzte Generation[1]

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**Abstract**
In the last years, *Letzte Generation* has been a prominent and controversial group of climate activists in Germany. In 2021, the group began protesting across Germany, inspired by strategies of civil disobedience throughout Germany. Since then, a broad debate has erupted about *Letzte Generation*, their strategies, goals and legitimacy. Videos of attacks, threats and verbal abuse of activists by bystanders appeared. To get an understanding of the activists' experiences and the violence they face on a regular basis, we conducted narrative interviews and a group discussion with activists from *Letzte Generation* in different cities. Through an analysis guided by the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), we sought to answer the following questions: What forms of violence manifest in the activists' stories and experiences? How do activists perceive and process violence in the context of their activism? What role do group dynamics within the *Letzte Generation* play in the perception and processing of violence? Our findings reveal a range of violent experiences (verbal, physical, state repression, media violence). Activists perceive violence against themselves as normal while violence against other activists is perceived as more serious. They use emotional suppression, collective structures and rules, and conjunctive knowledge to navigate these experiences. In addition, the group uses utilitarian logic to justify the risks they take. Members of the group found themselves in conflicts between group needs and individual priorities, in some cases causing psychological distress, in others motivation for further engagement.

**Keywords**
Letzte Generation; climate activism; violence; civil disobedience; coping; collective action

## Introduction

Climate change can be seen as one of the central challenges in our current world. It concerns the future of our planet's ecosystem, its biodiversity and the living conditions of the human species. The national and global discourse on the subject is characterized by different positions and assessments, often representing conflicting political interests of different groups. In Germany and other parts of Europe, *Fridays for Future* helped to bring protests against human-made climate change into public discourse in 2018, which drew greater attention to the issue. As Neuber et al. (2020) found out, the participants in the rallies are not so eager to engage in political parties but prefer engagement in climate groups and organisations of protest events such as demonstrations (p. 77). The large number of young activists in this movement is notable. Since the expected policy change did not ensue, some activists chose another path (Rucht, 2023a, p. 196). In this article, we will take a closer look at one of those movements.



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[1] For more information about the group and their activities see https://letztegeneration.org/en/.

In August 2021, a loosely organised group of activists from Berlin started a hunger strike, citing a climate emergency.[2] They demanded a debate with Chancellor Olaf Scholz about the government's climate policy and were invited to talk with him after about one month. Afterwards, these activists founded the group *Letzte Generation* ("Last Generation"), which started to use civil resistance, protests, social media, and other means to fight for a policy change concerning the climate crisis. Since its foundation, one central strategy of the group has been blockades of streets[3] (at major crossings, highways and traffic hubs), which is accompanied by showing banners, doing media work and, in many cases, executed by gluing themselves to the asphalt during a blockade, which causes prolonged traffic jams. Other notable actions included paint attacks on prominent monuments like the *Brandenburger Tor*, the *Kanzleramt* in Berlin and on valuable paintings, e.g. when activists threw mashed potatoes on a work of *Monet* in a museum in Potsdam. The response to these activities was divided: While some people supported the group and its intentions, around 80% of Germans (Statista, 2022) evaluated its actions as wrong.[4] At the same time, severe accusations and suspicions of terrorism were brought up by conservative, liberal and right-wing politicians against the group.[5] Simultaneously, there seemed to be more and more physical attacks on *Letzte Generation* activists during blockades. After the first half of 2023, there were 142 ongoing investigations due to crimes committed against group members (Tagesschau, 2023). Cases of physical assault, coercion, and verbal abuse were investigated. Many videos showed bystanders or car drivers attacking the activists. The group's activists have also faced violence from police forces (Frankfurter Rundschau, 2023b). Overall, there are a myriad of suspicions of violence-related action in various reports and narratives. These can be found alongside violent attacks on activists by police and bystanders. However, there is also evidence that peaceful protest and civil disobedience can "find success in generating support from the public" (Bugden, 2020, p. 9).

This leads us to a closer analysis of the *Letzte Generation* and their actions. To understand the dynamics of social change related to the climate issue, understanding protest drivers like *Letzte Generation*, especially their members' sense-making, is necessary. Additionally, the increasing violence in the discourse and on the streets seems to play a crucial role in this dynamic. To better understand the activists and their experiences, we conducted semi-structured, problem-centred interviews and a group discussion with eight activists who engaged in different *Letzte Generation* groups in Germany. The interviews were analysed through IPA[6] and had a semi-structured

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[2] All quotes from non-English literature were translated by the authors. For information about the origins of *Letzte Generation's* protests, see https://letztegeneration.org/hungerstreik/ . See Rucht (2023a, p. 187-190) for a short overview about the founding and first actions of the *Letzte Generation*.

[3] In the beginning of 2024, the group announced to stop pursuing the central strategy of street blockades. Our research refers to the time period before. However, means of civil resistance such as blockades of airports happened afterwards as well but to a lesser extent. Street blockades were not done after the announcement.

[4] Based on the question "How do you evaluate the climate protests (e.g. street blockades) of the group Letzte Generation? ", around 80% of respondents answered with "rather wrong" or "definitely wrong".

[5] The attributes conservative, liberal and right-wing refer to the politicians mentioned in articles by Zeit, 2022, Frankfurter Rundschau, 2023a and Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2022

[6] IPA can be regarded as a phenomenological approach of interview analysis, which tries to "make sense of […] personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). It additionally includes "personalities, prior life experiences and motivations" (Smith & Osborn, 2004, p. 229). Thus, it offers a range of aspects relevant to subjective processing of experiences. Smith and Osborn themselves propose the IPA for analysis of "topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41, see also Smith & Osborn, 1998). Smith et al. (2009) present the steps of the IPA: an intensive reading phase of transcripts, initial notes on the data, development of emergent themes, a search for connections across themes, the integration of other cases and a search for patterns across all cases (pp. 82–101).

problem-centred character including more narrative as well as question-related parts (see Kühn & Koschel 2011 for group discussions; Rick 2023 for single interviews).

In the following, we will briefly present the current state of research on activist groups such as *Letzte Generation*, their perception throughout society, and climate activism in general. We will also present our central questions, which are derived from the current state of research. Afterwards, we will present and analyse the interview material with regard to the violent experiences of activists during protests and how they perceive and make sense of violence in general. Then, we will outline possible coping mechanisms of the activists and finally look at the group dynamics, social roles and possible conflicts, which often focus on harmful experiences during their protest. A summary of the results will follow, as well as a brief discussion of our study.

**Current State of Research**

This section will present the current state of research at the intersection of climate change, social movements and civil disobedience. The main topics in the context of this very topical issue are, for example, the mobilisation potential of climate movements and how they bring the need for action to the centre of society (Garrelts & Dietz, 2013, p. 16). Climate change is one of the key challenges facing humanity and yet, too little is being done by politicians and economic lobbyists (Garrelts & Dietz, 2013; Gleditsch, 2012; van Bronswijk & Hausmann, 2022). In this context, Gleditsch (2012) also analysed the political influence of social movements to see to what extent their demonstrations, actions and strategies of civil disobedience are effective at all (p. 7). In principle, the influence on political decision-making is still lower than one might have expected, but the activists were successful in anchoring the issue in broader social and political awareness (Garrelts & Dietz, 2013, p. 20). Many psychological studies are currently being published on the connection between climate change and emotions. In particular, the negative emotional consequences caused by fear of the future are being analysed (Heinz & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2023, pp. 225–227; Verlie, 2022, pp. 111–114). In addition, the connection between the climate movement, civil disobedience and violence is being debated within the framework of social science and legal disciplines, for example, if and to what extent penalties should be used by the judiciary to criminalise certain forms of protest (Gärditz, 2023; Grimm et al., 2023; Herbers, 2023).

The research of climate activism as a specific form of civic activism has received new and broad attention since the start of the *Fridays for Future* school strikes in 2018. The tactic of climate strikes, aimed at building up both political and economic pressure, has gained increasing popularity globally (Fischer & Nasrin, 2020). Garcia-Gibson (2023) defines activism as "confrontational activity that contributes (or whose actors believe or claim that it contributes) to preventing (or to expressing opposition to) impersonally bad or unjust outcomes" (p. 1), with climate activism referring to actions directed against human-made global warming.

Overall, it is noteworthy that both climate activism and civil disobedience have undergone examination in various studies (Bönnemann, 2023; Dietz & Garrelts, 2013; Herbers, 2023; Kiesewetter, 2022; Willke, 2023). Engaging in non-violent forms of action, the *Letzte Generation* aims to garner media attention and publicity to instigate climate policy changes (Rucht, 2023b, pp. 20–22). The media is pivotal in shaping perceptions and evaluations of actions and actors of the climate movement (Besio & Pronzini, 2010; Schurmann, 2021). This is reflected, among other things, in diverging perceptions of violence and views on whether the protests can actually be seen as non-violent actions.

When combined with civil disobedience, climate activism is currently navigating the (legal) tension between the climate emergency and criminal offences (Gärditz, 2023; Herbers, 2023). On the one hand, media and political discourse are criminalising climate activism and its various forms of action, while on the other hand, there is a noticeable absence of political concessions to address climate change. This creates barriers and tensions, contributing to a downward spiral (Jesse, 2023, pp. 299–300; von Dömming & Pichl, 2023, pp. 250–252). However, "both civil disobedience and peaceful marches increase support from the public for the climate movement" (Bugden, 2020, p. 9).

Schweinschwaller (2020) explored the *transformative power* of climate movements and identified goals such as mobilising people for systemic change, fostering a culture of collective action, and empathising with society (pp. 403–404). Peer groups and networks play a vital role in the climate movement for coordinating actions and articulating common goals, similar to other social groups (Posmek, 2022, pp. 216–217). According to recent studies, social and group identity

also play a vital role in the collective effectiveness of climate activism (see Furlong & Vignoles, 2023; van Zomeren et al., 2008). In particular, the term *moral identity* is often used in the context of climate activism, referring to both the activists as well as the support of the population. *Moral identity* refers to an individual's moral values and denotes "the extent to which being moral is important to the personal identity" (Misch et al., 2021, p. 1). Recent studies show that it is a relevant factor for both passive and active support of climate activism (e.g., Jia et al., 2017; Misch et al., 2021).

In addition, the climate movement can be broadly divided into a moderate wing, seeking changes within the existing institutional framework, and a more critical wing that principally rejects the capitalist economic system as a fundamental contributor to the climate crisis (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020, pp. 103–104; della Porta & Parks, 2013, p. 46). Inter-role conflicts are evident among members of various groups due to the heterogeneous nature of the climate movement (Brunnengräber, 2013, p. 367; Feldmann, 2006, p. 72) and society in general. Conflicts of interest and divergent objectives are identified both within international and German climate movements, as well as within individual groups (Dietz, 2013, pp. 405–407; Rucht, 2023a, p. 196; Wolling et al., 2023, p. 13). Additionally, there are broader social conflicts between classes that specifically revolve around ecological issues (Dörre et al., 2023, pp. 9–10). Torrau and Gloe (2021) also mention tensions between (mostly older) politicians and (younger) citizens (pp. 134–135), which are understood as generational conflicts in some cases (Hurrelmann & Albrecht, 2020).

There is a scarcity of studies addressing the perception or assessment of violence experienced by climate activists in the context of their activism, whether by the police, the judiciary, citizens, political opponents, or possibly carried out by the activists themselves (von Dömming & Pichl, 2023). Evaluating violence and non-violence is an ongoing process consciously explored to provide civil disobedience with the broadest possible impact (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020, p. 37). Della Porta & Parks (2013) applied the framing concept, which involves cognitive patterns for creating meaning, solutions, and coping strategies for actions, to the climate movement (p. 42). To some extent, the climate movement generates its own knowledge which is shared within networks for achieving collective goals (della Porta & Parks, 2013, pp. 53–54; Kössler, 2013, pp. 199–200). It derives from shared experiences and conjunctive spaces of knowledge. Consequently, the group collectively deals with negative emotions related to the climate crisis or activist actions (Verlie, 2022, pp. 58–59).

However, how to cope with experiences of violence, along with associated psychological and physical consequences, is yet to be further researched. Based on the research gaps described above, the following research questions are at the core of our empirical study:

- *What forms of violence manifest in the activists' stories and experiences?*
- *How do activists perceive and process violence in the context of their activism?*
- *What role do group dynamics within the Letzte Generation play in the perception and processing of violence?*

**Experiences of Violence during Actions of *Letzte Generation***

In this section, we examine the violence faced by the *Letzte Generation* activists that we interviewed. Rather than using predetermined definitions, we will describe the forms of violence that were expressed as such in the interviews.

The forms of violence perceived by the members of *Letzte Generation*, as revealed in the interviews, can be categorised into four main types: *verbal violence*, *physical violence*, *state repression*, and *media violence*. While the distinction between physical and verbal violence was quite clear, both during the interviews and in the process of interpretation, the differences between all four types of violence cannot be clearly distinguished. The focus is thus rather on highlighting the various ways in which violence has manifested in the activists' experiences and narratives. *Verbal violence* was evident during *Letzte Generation* blockades, with insults being a common manifestation, as well as threats such as being run over by cars (Elisa, individual interview, 106; Michaela, second individual interview, 33; Elisa, individual interview, 82). Incidents of *physical violence* ranged from shoving and pouring water over people's heads to kicks, punches (Katarina, individual interview, 34; Elisa, individual interview, 140), being forcibly pulled off the road (Ben, paired interview, 25, 26, 38 & 69; Elisa, individual interview, 52; Karl, group discussion, 36; Lotte, paired interview, 23; Paul, group discussion, 39), and so-called pain grips (Schmerzgriffe) or other violent measures implemented by the police (Elisa, individual interview, 56-66; Katarina, individual interview, 28; Ben, paired interview, 38; Michaela, second individual interview, 34 &

35). *State repression* was linked to police violence, such as when activists were kettled, chased by the police, or detained and harassed for a long time (Ben, paired interview, 41; Michaela, first individual interview, 35; Elisa, individual interview, 100). In addition to repression by the police, interviewees also reported repression by the judiciary as a consequence of the protests. During the group discussion, Paul mentions fines, residence bans, and preventive detention, i.e. penalties which can vary depending on the federal state (Paul, group discussion, 128). Elisa also mentioned house searches for which she was not present herself (Elisa, individual interview, 176). The last form of perceived violence of the respondents of the *Letzte Generation* is *media violence* in public interaction. This can manifest as threats and hate comments on social media, as illustrated in the following sequence: "I have a social media account where I get to read hate comments every day somehow" (Katarina, individual interview, 24). However, the primary focus of the *Letzte Generation* members' accounts is on media reports and reactions from politicians (Ben, paired interview, 53). Katarina elaborated on how politics addressed the *Letzte Generation*: "I find it difficult to describe us as climate terrorists or criminals because it stirs up the mood and divides society" (Katarina, individual interview, 44). In this context, it is important to note that members of the *Letzte Generation* reported a variety of perceived acts of violence, primarily by passers-by and police officers, but also by the broader public, namely in the media and by politicians. Within the four categories of perceived violence identified in the interviewees' stories, a multitude of subcategories could be discerned, ranging from insults and threats to punches and kicks against protesters.

**Perceptions of Violence by *Letzte Generation* Members**

To gain insight into the moral and emotional implications of their roles as activists, it is crucial to assess the interviewees' understanding of violence, and their actions and experiences. The general concept of violence is usually defined broadly, multifaceted, and subjectively. The common denominator is the infliction of *harm* to others, whether *physically* or *psychologically*. The perception of violence by activists changed depending on the context and role in which they experienced it, as well as on the role of the perpetrator, for example, "with the people who, uh, have decision-making power" (Ben, paired interview, 73). This perception aligns with the theoretical differentiation between *political* and *private* or *interpersonal* violence (Goltermann, 2020, p. 24).

The interviewees' own experiences were often not categorised as violence, even though they fit the prior definitions provided by the respondents themselves. *Verbal violence*, particularly in the form of insults, was directly assessed in the context of the specific situation, as it was considered *normal*:

> Uh yes, there was violence, but, or I would rather say verbal violence, um, but I would say in the normal range (laughing), so normal, yes, normally there should be no violence at all, but for a blockade, that was relatively (-) yes, a normal amount of violence, so I was shouted at or a man kicked in my direction, but not really kicked, just indicated, (((yes))) and his details were then taken, and I was supposed to file a complaint, but I didn't file a complaint because it's not in our interest. (Elisa, individual interview, 72)

Such statements indicate that the activists did not consider these actions severe enough to file a formal complaint, even though local police recorded them for this purpose. It remains vague to what extent the activists waive formal complaints due to a perceived lack of severity or due to the group's interests. The interview data supports both reasonings: While "interests" as well as rules and values of *Letzte Generation* are clearly stipulated and outlined (see below), the narrations of personal experiences and impacts of violence suggest a habituation effect. The contemplation of violence as *normal* is evident in other responses, too. Goffman explains that normality in social interactions is based on shared cognitive assumptions, which can also make harmful behavior appear commonplace and therefore acceptable. Within groups, the social order can be adopted as the norm, while at the same time there is a group-specific 'normality' in which violence, for example, can be perceived as 'normal' and thus relativized (Goffman, 1983). They talked about "normal insults" (Michaela, first individual interview, 39), and even if these were defined as violence, *verbal violence* was portrayed as less harmful. The representation of *verbal violence* may differ from the actual perception. For example, one respondent reported that she "simply doesn't

really absorb insults, um, but specifically I know exactly that we were called 'cunts'" (Elisa, individual interview, 82). The specific memory of the situation contrasts with the sarcastically formulated narrative: "There were two girls and a man, and I think we were the cunts (laughing)"(Elisa, individual interview, 82). This might suggest that experiences were consciously presented as less serious than they were emotionally perceived or that the actual impact was suppressed, as sarcasm could be a coping strategy, on which the next section will further elaborate.

Even though *physical assaults* were perceived as more harmful than *verbal violence*, the rendition of those incidents did not show any surprise or gravity, either:

> So far, there have been, in quotation marks, small things, so the kick was like that, and the pushing was as far as I know the most severe violence we've experienced, and as far as I know, nothing really permanent has happened to anyone, I mean, okay, a few had scratches on the hand from being pulled away by the police, one was gently and slowly run over the feet, and a hand was run over, I think, but um, [those were] all things that resulted in, in quotation marks, bruises, um, so no one has completely lost composure to the point of driving into this street blockade with their car. (Paul, group discussion, 208)

On the one hand, this shows the harmless portrayal of *physical violence* as "small things", but their recollection of run-over feet and hands conflicts with the activist's conclusion that "no one has completely lost composure". This conveys the impression of an unusually high tolerance and adaptation to violence.

Contrasting reports of personally experienced *physical violence* with violence witnessed against other members of the group, respondents rendered their own experiences in a much more distanced, sometimes sarcastic way: "I have also been insulted, run over. Yes, but I survived" (Elisa, group discussion, 42). Reports of witnessing violence against other members of the *Letzte Generation,* however, were often perceived as much worse and are more challenging to cope with. A striking example is Ben's account of his own experience of violence compared to witnessing the violence inflicted on his girlfriend, Lotte:

> So when it happens to me, like if I'm dragged off a street, um, maybe hit by a car, pushed away, um (2) then it's still a thing, somehow at that moment, I'm really full of adrenaline anyway... but what is much harder for me is when other people are subjected to it... especially when I'm there and I see it, like for example Lotte, my girlfriend, being pulled by her hair (I: mhm), um, I find that much worse or when people are beaten um, that's much harder to ( ) process, also, already difficult at that moment, and especially afterwards when the adrenaline subsides, then it's really always a lot. (Ben, paired interview, 35)

It is noticeable that the tone changes in the descriptions of violence against other members. Instead of sarcasm, more severe and emotional formulations like "the most impressive" (Paul, group discussion, 39), "creepy to see" (Katarina, individual interview, 34), "very intense situation" (Katarina, individual interview, 34), "hard to endure" (Katarina, individual interview, 80) were used. The discrepancy between their definition of violence, their individual perception of violence, and the perception of violence against others was a pattern throughout all interviews. It remains unclear whether personal experiences of violence were actually perceived as harmless or if they were only presented accordingly. Based on the interviews, it can only be speculated whether the reasons for the latter might be unconscious self-protection, or conscious self-presentation.

*Fear* was a recurring theme in all interviews and was frequently mentioned in connection with the expectation of violence. Several respondents reported that the violence from both passers-by and the police was increasing with more actions and, consequently, there was more attention by the media and society: "[...] the willingness for violence towards us increases, then fear naturally increases" (Elisa, individual interview, 168). Multiple respondents mentioned the anticipation of pain grips which led to *anxiety* in the lead-up to further protesting campaigns (Elisa, individual interview, 6; Michaela, first individual interview, 44; Michaela, second individual interview, 14). This fear led to the avoidance of certain planned initiatives by the *Letzte Generation* (Elisa, individual interview, 6; Michaela, second individual interview, 20). One activist reported

that she could "hardly sleep several nights beforehand" (Katarina, individual interview, 22) due to anxiety. The interviewees also recounted an increase of *police violence* over the course of their activism. While the presence of police initially provided security and calm during the first few campaigns, negative interactions with the police diminished the activists' trust in the executive organ, resulting in increased fear of actions: "[...] that completely took away the security and felt absolutely unsettling. [...] we had the feeling that anything could happen [...] that was even worse" (Ben, paired interview, 38). This is noteworthy especially in contrast to the mentioned normalisation of violence. While the activists accustom themselves with the actual experiences of violence and increasingly perceive them as normal, the fear of potential acts of violence increases. While this may appear paradoxical, an explanation could be the habituation to violent experiences as a form of coping, while the actual fear of recurrent or even worse acts of violence increases. Like a growing menace, the increasing anticipation of violence could be considered a symptom of a less visible form of violence.

The respondents attributed the perceived increase in violence against them partially to reports and representations in the media. Several activists stated that even reputable media outlets legitimised violence from passers-by through their style of reporting. They interpret phrases like *criminals* or *climate terrorists* as implicit calls for violence against the activists (Ben, paired interview, 53; Elisa, individual interview, 50; Karl, group discussion, 209; Katarina, individual interview 42 & 44; Paul, group discussion, 210) and view *hate speech* and negative spins of the activists on social media platforms as contributors to this public perception (Ben, paired interview, 53; Elisa, individual interview, 44).

Confronted with the question of whether their actions in the *Letzte Generation* can be categorised as violence, a claim of some politicians and media outlets, the initial reaction of the respondents reflected the group's creed of absolute non-violence, which will be discussed further in section seven. However, individual respondents admitted that blockades can be defined as a form of violence, but argued that these are a crucial part of their protest: "[...] on the other hand, (if) we were completely non-violent, then we would (just) stand in some corner where no one cares" (Maria, group discussion, 29).

Respondents rarely addressed the potential aspect of violence in their actions, but one exceptionally experienced activist extensively reported that the allegations of violence "hurt super super much" (Ben, paired interview, 69) and distanced himself from them. Additionally, he distinguished himself and other activists from *ordinary* criminals and criticised the legal treatment as being illegitimate and unfair. He emphasised "that we are honest" (Ben, paired interview, 43) and stated that this judicial approach "serves no real purpose except intimidation" (Ben, paired interview, 43). This suggests that the activists justify their actions with a higher moral purpose: climate protection. The urgency of climate protection serves as justification for the blockades: "We're sorry that people are being disturbed right now, that people can't come home and so on, but still, we don't apologise for doing this, because we see the urgency, yes, to draw attention to the climate crisis and its consequences" (Maria, group discussion, 112). Interestingly, none of the respondents categorically rejected the use of violence. One activist saw the use of violence as a "question of legitimacy" (Karl, group discussion, 31) that required a very "good, ethical justification" (Karl, group discussion, 31). Another activist ascribed the *Letzte Generation*'s nonviolence to the privilege of a democratic society (Ben, paired interview, 64).

**Coping Strategies**

The different ways of recounting the personal and witnessed experiences of violence in a sarcastic, emotional, outraged, or downplaying manner suggest that the activists were, unintentionally or deliberately, trying to navigate through processing these experiences. As mentioned above, one may speculate that suppressing the severity of the experience is a means of protecting oneself. Apart from that, the *Letzte Generation* and its activists employed individual and structural coping strategies to process the experiences.

The problem-focused coping of the activists can be described as diverse. In preparation for their actions, they have trained to deal with potential conflicts calmly. For example, one interviewee stated, "So the training is super important [...] because nonviolence is trained [...] I was quite surprised at how meditative the whole thing was, it was very much about how to stay calm or what to do if we notice that we are too restless..." (Elisa, individual interview, 152). A concept called *Emo-Support* (Katarina, individual interview, 50) entailed that activists address their emotional needs and seek professional help from psychologists to cope with violence and stress.

Justification of their actions was another means to cope with accusations of violence against them: "[...] the climate crisis is certainly worse than a fifteen-minute delay, and a person killed or, let's say, a crushed hand or something, is also worse than a fifteen-minute delay (((yes))) and I believe that somehow you have to weigh that against each other, or can [...]" (Elisa, individual interview, 136).

To some extent, the activist involvement of the interviewed individuals also included emotion-focused coping mechanisms. Among the interviewed members of the *Letzte Generation*, the techniques for emotion-focused coping included emotional suppression of violent experiences. One respondent expressed their emotional coping with incidents during roadblocks: "[...] so I noticed that I am very numb to it, actually, I was almost surprised that this video caused such a stir, so it's good that it did, but, um, the only thing that was relatively new for me is that there was a truck [...]" (Ben, paired interview, 50). At the same time, the respondent was aware of the limitations of emotional suppression: "[...] so I feel like I'm really doing very little, probably more suppressing, because [...] it keeps happening again and again [...] there are situations that are more difficult to process" (Ben, paired interview, 35). Another form of emotion-focused coping occurs in the processing of violent experiences during protest actions through debriefings:

> So we really value not only preparing but also debriefing the actions, the blockades [...] by debriefing, we simply mean this emotional exchange, because afterwards, you're just stirred up, that's probably natural [...] as small groups or even as the Letzte Generation as a whole, we place a lot of value on all coming together at some point and being able to talk about everything [...]. (Elisa, group discussion, 63)

One of the members of the *Letzte Generation* mentioned feelings of hopelessness and exhaustion in this context: "[...] we had a lot of Emo-Support, we are also connected with Psychologists for Future and get support from them, but after a while, it wasn't enough, so some people were just burnt out..." (Elisa, individual interview, 68). In a group discussion, Elisa also explained that she uses the suppression of hostility during protest actions as a strategy to protect herself: "[...] that we are attacked, that we are insulted, that we are pushed and so on [...] like a wall or like a tunnel vision, because then you try to build yourself up..." (Elisa, group discussion, 54). An activist explained her participation in the actions of the Letzte Generation as follows: "[...] and then last year in November people in Bavaria were locked away for thirty days in preventive detention without a court ruling without anything, um, I said I can't stand this injustice anymore..." (Katarina, individual interview, 4).

Forms of meaning-oriented coping strategies could be found among the interviewed members in their handling of the public perception of their violent experiences through videos on social networks and media representation: "[...] the raids were a very big point, so, many new people who are now joining say that they cannot understand at all that these house searches happened, that this criminalisation is something that is simply no longer bearable..." (Katarina, individual interview, 94). Focusing on the positive aspect, namely doing something good for the world, enabled members of the *Letzte Generation* to make activism more bearable despite negative and sometimes violent confrontations: "[...] I gave a lecture again yesterday [...] sometimes I'm pretty tired of all the activism, and I'm finished, and I think so much, what are you actually doing, and then I give a lecture and hear again, in very fresh way, why we do this..." (Michaela, second individual interview, 24).

The strategies for coping have been extensively studied across various groups and contexts, but less so within the realm of the climate movement (Frick et al., 2022; Hunecke, 2022). Coping strategies provide a psychological framework for dealing with damages, violence, or stressors (Carver et al., 1989; Kobasa, 1979; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Vaillant et al., 1986). Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress Model offers a theoretical framework for analysing individual stress reactions. At its core is the individual's perception and evaluation of stressors, which leads to the selection of coping strategies. Based on an evaluation, the person selects coping strategies, which can be either problem-focused and involve direct actions to solve the problem, or emotion-focused, and aim to cope with the emotions associated with the stressor. In micro-level coping research, sense-oriented coping complements Lazarus & Folkman's approach by introducing another coping strategy (Ojala, 2016). An overarching classification and evaluation of

the three coping strategies by the Institute for Ecological Economic Research (IÖW) suggests that different strategies may be helpful depending on the context and situation (Frick et al., 2022).

One of the critical ways for activists to deal with climate-related fears or other negative emotions is through their activism (Frick et al., 2022). According to problem-focused coping, individuals, regardless of their emotional experience with the collective problem, assess whether their group is compelling enough to address existing issues (van Zomeren et al., 2010, p. 340). If an individual prioritises assessing collective problems and shaping their emotional experiences, their path to protest involves emotion-focused coping. They strive to regulate the emotions associated with their situation in the social world (van Zomeren et al., 2010, p. 340). Emotion-focused coping strategies include techniques to reduce or deny the perception of threat (Frick et al., 2022). Since problem-focused coping addresses changes in crises limited to the context of the climate crisis, emotion-focused coping can serve as a strategy for emotional processing of the perceived insurmountable problem (van Bronswijk & Hausmann, 2022). If various coping strategies fail, the activists' crises can become overwhelming, leading to an eco-depression or individuals may work themselves into burnout through excessive activism (Macha & Adelmann, 2022).

**Collective Rules, Individual Needs and Role Conflicts**

Besides individual coping with violent experiences and harm, coping strategies also occurred in more group-oriented perspectives. The following section explores the group dynamics and the tension between individual priorities, societal imaginations of climate activism and group-related expectations of *Letzte Generation*. Future research may consider such a multi-level perspective for a fruitful analysis of climate protests and violent experiences. The combination of individual interviews and a group discussion is a small step towards this kind of multimethod research. Bigger research projects can apply an even more diverse mix of methods. Additionally, we investigated the process of developing group expectations and collective rules. To do so, a reference to Karl Mannheim (1980) seems useful: his sociology of knowledge includes the "conjunctive space of experience" (pp. 211–214). It describes knowledge as conjunctive knowledge, derived from shared experiences and familiar narratives in a secluded space (in our case, shared experiences by members of *Letzte Generation*). Shared knowledge of the activists is an important aspect of their group identity and dynamics. This section will analyse the collective expectations, rules and role conflicts prevalent in our interviews.

*Collective Rules: Development, Limits and Tensions*

During our interviews, the collective rules of the ingroup were frequently mentioned.[7] They refer to behaviour expectations by group members during protests and blockades. The three pillars of these acts of civil resistance were described by interviewee Katarina as *willingness to sacrifice*, *maximum disruption* and *non-violence* (Katarina, individual interview, 98). In addition, other central features are *passivity*, *mobilisation of the public* (Karl, group discussion, 105; Katarina, individual interview, 68), and *honesty/ transparency towards police or other state officials* (Ben, paired interview, 45; Katarina, individual interview, 78; Paul, group discussion, 97).[8]

Passivity and non-violent protest were addressed in multiple sequences of our interviews. One group member elaborated, "we would […] let people spit on us, let them beat us, everything, we would never fight back […] and that has to stay as it is, too" (Michaela, first individual interview, 60). This primary rule of non-violent protest of the activists was mentioned a lot, and most members of the group seemed to have internalised it to a certain degree. It was even used to distance the group from other activist groups; although we do not know about sanctions, Michaela elaborated that people who do not act peacefully "cannot stay with the group" (Michaela, second individual interview, 26). This shows that collective rules had a significant impact on the group dynamic. They constituted the groups' self-understanding. A primary argument for non-violence

[7] Although one could discuss if the rules come with sanctions (Pries, 2017, p. 83) and should therefore be labelled as sociological rules or norms, we want to refer to the term rule since activists use it themselves. It seems to mark "expectations and regularities of action" (ibid.), at least to some extent.

[8] Similar aspects of strategy were identified by Rucht (2023a, pp. 191–192) and also by Schweinschwaller (2020, p. 389) for activists of *Extinction Rebellion*.

usually drew on authorities and theories shared by all group members; frequently mentioned authorities were Gandhi and Martin Luther King as prominent examples of (successful) peaceful resistance (Elisa, group discussion, 108; Michaela, second individual interview, 64; Open presentation of *Letzte Generation* in March 2023). Since they assumed non-violent resistance to be the most effective form of protest, one can regard the justification as strategic non-violence.[9] These references are part of conjunctive knowledge derived from common protests, presentations, conversations, etc.

Besides broader justifications, the activists claimed that rules existed to ensure their safety during protests. They should be designed to avoid confrontation and violent attacks, as Kaufer & Albrecht (2022, p. 10) confirmed in participant observations. This led to the creation of detailed rules to use during blockades, which were explained by Elisa as follows:

> [...] We have some kind of security steps […], one thing is that many people first try to rip off our banners [...] we have a little rule that says as soon as someone tries to rip off the banner, we take our hands off of it, so that nobody gets hurt if we do any kind of tug war there. (Elisa, individual interview, 38)

Besides that, activists were advised to organise a rescue lane (Elisa, individual interview, 138; Michaela, first individual interview, 56), jump away from cars as soon as they recognise they actually try to run them over (Elisa, individual interview, 140) and search for eye contact with car drivers: "to stay as non-violent as possible […] we always want to build up eye contact with people and I usually did it" (Elisa, individual interview, 142). As we will show later, not all interviewees always follow this approach strictly.

Rules were established in blockade training courses organised by other *Letzte Generation* members (see also Kaufer & Albert, 2022, pp. 5–6). In these courses, the activists simulated a blockade situation together. They tried recreating a situation where they were cursed, yelled at, and perhaps removed by force (Elisa, individual interview, 152) to get used to the setting and learn to react passively and non-violently. Participation in the training was mandatory prior to being part of a blockade. Besides that, there was some theoretical input about violence, peaceful resistance, and protest. *Letzte Generation* attempted to develop a (group) understanding of peaceful resistance, protest, and related rules, as well as ensure that only those people who are suitable become activists (Katarina, individual interview, 82).

However, interviewees also told us that there are limits to the rules. In some cases, the risk of getting attacked increased or an actual attack still occurred. For example, Elisa told us: "but we cannot do more" (Elisa, individual interview, 38; Michaela, second individual interview, 18); "but some people look in your eyes and still try to hit you with their car" (Elisa, individual interview, 142). The risk of getting hurt still existed and was often reliant on individuals enacting the rules during a blockade. Besides that, emotional and mental stress caused by participation in blockades seemed to be a problem (Elisa, group discussion, 67; Katarina, individual interview, 68) as well as the risk of criminal persecution, namely fines and convictions. There were also uncertainties about whether *Letzte Generation* could take on the consequences of the blockades, such as financial penalties (Paul, group discussion, 146). This created permanent tension between personal priorities and resources and collective rules.

*Potential Tension between Individual Needs and Collective Demands*

As explained before, there was an overall conflict between the desire not to get hurt or convicted and the group's aspiration for efficient protest, which often required highly visible incidents during blockades, state repression, and violent civilian attacks, as these events tend to attract the most attention and support of the group (Elisa, individual interview, 30; Paul, group discussion, 91). Even being spit on or punched and being expected not to counteract may be a fundamental conflict between individual and collective goals, at least for most people.

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[9] Rucht (2023a, pp. 191–194) also mentioned these references about civil disobedience in the *Letzte Generation*. However, he describes this rule as less strategic than we do. While interviewees expressed to be convinced by the concept of (peaceful) civil disobedience, they often refer to (scientific) proof for success of this kind of protest.

When these conflicts occur, activists often draw on collective rules to orientate themselves. They internalise the rules to solve these conflicts in certain situations. One could summarise the most prominent internalisation with the sentence *What's bad for me is good for the Letzte Generation*. This sentence can be illustrated with a few quotes. When asked how to accept imprisonment, Katarina said:

> […] they get locked up [...] and that's exactly what we want to evoke again and for me that means that I'm afraid of it and would prefer not to do it, but if it helps to wake people up and also to wake up politics, then I'll do it. (Katarina, individual interview, 68)

During the group discussion, Paul said: "it's of course extremely bad for the people concerned because what they are doing really hurts […] which of course also has a mobilising effect." (Paul, group discussion, 124). These quotes show that harm was internalised to mobilise the public by the activists. The sentence *What's bad for me is good for the Letzte Generation* also reflects the utilitarian logic that underlies this internalisation. Elisa explained a conflict between her personal desire for a break and the groups' plans for certain blockades and thereby showed the inner tension, caused by this form of internalisation:

> [...] the phase would endure a few weeks and during this time I initially thought I needed a break […] I did not make a complete break in the end since I still went there but, yes I think I need to settle a bit now and a big burden fell from my shoulders when I thought about […] not having to pay costs for police and court. (Elisa, individual interview, 93)

She tried to navigate her financial resources, her future aspirations (which require not getting convicted for any crime), her emotional health,[10] and their collective goals, which require as many activists engaged in blockades as possible. Ultimately, she tried to fulfil both, as she accompanied the blockades with media work but did not directly participate.

Since Elisa was also part of the group discussion, it was interesting to look at another of her quotes from before the interview. During the group discussion, Elisa shared the internalisation of the collective rules as well as their utilitarian logic, but in her negotiation, she turned this logic into a new image:

> So it also took me a long time to come to a decision [...] because at the beginning I thought [...] I don't care if I'm going to be seized and I'll end up there and I've paused the semester anyway […] but at the same time I'm not just doing activism with the Letzte Generation anyway, but with the hope that it will work and that at some point we'll be in a society where we can say […] I think we've done enough now (1) so of course that's still a long way […] at the moment, but you do it out of a certain hope and so of course I don't want to throw away my future […] (Elisa, group discussion, 142)

Based on her description, we can identify a development. Initially, Elisa did not contrast the internalised demands with her own needs. She then added the hope for a better life to make her efforts more meaningful. For that, she had to take care of herself more. Paul responded to her by saying that, in the future, their activism might be an advantage in a job interview (Paul, group discussion, 144). Katarina also used abstract hope as a supplement to the collective rules (Katarina, individual interview, 106).

Paul explained: "and it's effective if you get people (...) back into action and not if after one time they say (((someone: TRAUMATISED))) traumatised […]." (Paul, group discussion, 139). Maintaining utilitarian logic, Paul advocated a form of activism that the individual can sustain. By linking it to utilitarian logic, the demand for sacrifice is combined with the need to care for oneself.

In other cases, activists solved the conflict in a more collectively oriented manner. During the group discussion, Ben was mentioned, who was later interviewed together with his girlfriend:

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[10] As Conner et al. (2023) state, "burnout is a commonly reported cost of activism" (p. 139). This supports the assumption of mental stress.

> […] uhm. he didn't move his legs and the car almost ran over him because the other guy didn't move him far enough off the road [...] and erm he also says [...] but these are the pictures we need and if someone punches me in the face then it's even better. [...] not everybody does that and it's up to each one […] but yes in the end [...] he is right. That's the images we need that's the press (Maria, group discussion, 131)

We can see Maria's struggle, but she agreed with Ben's logic. Ben seemed to follow the collective rules and utilitarian logic completely, regardless of personal harm. This is particularly interesting in the context of the sequence in which he evaluated violence towards himself or his girlfriend differently. As mentioned, he also decided not to follow the collective rule to avoid cars to ensure his safety.

As we have seen, activists must constantly navigate between individual and collective priorities. Interestingly, Schweinschwaller (2020, p. 395) describes engagement of persons at *Extinction Rebellion* as an act of self-efficacy, of coping with negative emotions during the climate crisis and of participation. However, our interviews showed a more ambivalent side of clashes between different priorities. Fear of violence and state repression are a central feature of these conflicts. Often, activists apply utilitarian logic to do so. This is inspired by *Letzte Generation's* shared beliefs. It is internalised through rules, courses, presentations, and collective action during blockades and other activities, which constitute conjunctive knowledge of group members. It leads to activists solving internal conflicts of individual vs. group in a utilitarian-inspired manner.

While the success of the *Letzte Generation* required activists to engage actively and participate in many blockades, the danger of getting convicted was a possible consequence. This posed a threat to general everyday desires like employment and financial security. Elisa elaborated on this struggle:

> Of course, I still think that it pays out and is right […] but with regards to state repression I mean convictions etc. […] I am quite young, and I do not know a hundred percent what I want to do and then I do not know how serious a conviction may be. (Elisa, individual interview, 6 & 8)

In the group discussion, Elisa talked about a person who took pictures of her during a blockade to publish them on Facebook: "Yes, I would actually say that's the only thing that REALLY stuck in my mind because I saw it like that and I thought ok, that's just a – so that's just public hostility […]" (Elisa, group discussion, 44). The boundary between the activism and her civilian life had blurred with pictures of her being published on Facebook and insults on the platform. Hate, especially on social media, is also reported to harm activists' mental health (Conner et al., 2023, p. 136).

In her interview, Katarina told us that her limit was the garnishment account. This was why she did not take part in specific actions. When asked by the interviewer, she confirmed that she also wanted to be able to lead a normal life. This cropped up again later when Katarina mentioned that she would have more free time if she stopped working for *Letzte Generation* (Katarina, individual interview, 70–74 & 108). In this case, we can see that Katarina has learned to take her personal needs into consideration, which clashes with the priorities of collective demands.

Many activists are stuck in a clash between future aspirations and being law-abiding citizens and the necessity of collective engagement for climate policy change. Tensions arise especially from the conflict between activists and state enforcement which may be characterised as a "dynamic field of fight" (von Dömming & Pichl, 2023, p. 253) and come with different expectations.

*Social Roles vs. Activist*

Social roles are a "bundle of behaviour expectations towards owners of certain social positions" (Bahrdt, 2003, pp. 67–68). These expectations can be various, as people fulfil "a variety of social positions and roles in their life" (Pries, 2017, p. 89). Robert K. Merton (1957) described the heterogeneity of roles and expectations toward behaviour which results in conflicts. According to his theory, the existence of role sets can be assumed. This leads to the assumption that roles and their expectations may differ from role to role for one person. Therefore, individuals need to navigate between "different, perhaps even contradictory expectations" (Abels, 2019, p. 118) and

their own individual expectations. Loosely inspired by role theory,[11] we want to elaborate further on expectations as perceived by members of the *Letzte Generation*. These role conflicts were often related to the experience of harm during the group's protests. Since they were at the intersection of the relationship between individuals and the *Letzte Generation* as a group, they also referred to the group's self-understanding, behaviour expectations, and rules of the *Letzte Generation*.
Additionally, a central point of the conflict about climate policy is "its value […] as well as the implementation of efficient climate policy" (Müller-Salo, 2020, p. 10), which concerns many different social groups. The urgency of the issue is fuelled by apocalyptic future scenarios (ibid., p.47),[12] which lead to high tensions between different social groups and their expectations. These tensions may contribute to the role conflicts prevalent in activists' narrations.

There were many situations in which expectations of other persons in activists' lives clashed with those of the activists. Conflicts arose between being a mother or wife *and* an activist, being a work colleague *and* an activist, being a family member (e.g., daughter or son) *and* an activist, being in school *and* an activist, and so on. This usually happened in the context of time allocation for activism and other activities or duties. Another contested aspect was possible harm to oneself or the family or differing opinions about climate policy of the activists and other reference persons due to it being a contested political issue (Rucht, 2023a, p. 196). In all of these cases, the expectations towards being an activist clashed with those of being a responsible mother, daughter or son (e.g. healthy, safe, without any convictions and with enough time to care for the children), a work colleague (again, e.g. without convictions, but also without conflicting opinions about political issues), a successful student (e.g. devoting enough time to school and not to activism) etc. Because all interviewees were still engaged at *Letzte Generation*, it is not surprising that conflicts were often solved in favour of the collective expectations, meaning in favour of *Letzte Generation*. This was often justified with the aforementioned utilitarian logic, which weighed the advantages of collective action and peaceful resistance and the necessity to fight climate change against any other disadvantages.

However, there were also situations where compromises were found or limits of the group's strategy were discussed. Lotte, for example, talked about her mother being a role model for her activism (Lotte, paired interview, 14). Ben and Lotte also talked about the connection between activism and their relationship. As mentioned before, they agreed that it was much worse to see your partner being hurt than to be in that situation yourself. The roles of activist and partner then became blurred. Lotte is Ben's girlfriend; he wanted to protect her from any harm. At the same time, she was an activist who had decided to take part in blockades. Although this reinforced negative feelings, it also offered the opportunity to recognize problems that they no longer perceive themselves.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This research project is an explorative study of young climate activists' perception and (re)processing of violence. We did not define violence beforehand but rather explored the interviewees' understanding of the term and how it reflected in the evaluation of their personal experiences during their protests. In total, six individual (4), pair (1), and group (1) interviews were conducted with eight German participants who have been active in the *Letzte Generation*. To return to our three central questions, we can summarise the answers obtained as follows:

*What forms of violence manifest in the activists' stories and experiences?*

This initial question served to describe and categorise the interviewees' recounts in terms of violence, as well as embedding their narrated experience in a theoretical framework to explain it from the antagonistic society's point of view. We identified verbal violence, physical violence, state repression, and media violence as the four types of experienced violence mentioned throughout the activists' narrations.

*How do activists perceive and process violence in the context of their activism?*

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[11] See Mead, 1975 [1934] for general foundations of sociological role theory.

[12] Apocalyptic scenarios are a distinctive feature of the discourse. However, climate scientists agree that "climate change poses […] a big threat for humans" (Müller-Salo, 2020, p. 13, see also p. 77), so these scenarios should not be seen as unjustified in general.

The participants show very similar patterns of recounting their experiences of violence throughout all interviews. They often recount personally experienced instances of both physical and verbal violence in a nonchalant, sarcastic tone. The frequency of the insults and assaults is considered normal under the given circumstances. Contrastingly, the witnessed violence against other members of their group must have had a very different effect, as the interviewees changed drastically to a more emotional, empathetic, and serious tone during these recounts. The perceived increase in violence from passers-by and state institutions throughout their campaigns is accredited to biased and polemic reporting across different media. Consequently, this increase led to anxiety in numerous participants, which not only held them back from certain protest campaigns but also interfered with their everyday lives. In processing these experiences and their after-effects, we identified problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-oriented coping strategies. The *Letzte Generation,* as a group, organises and implements preventive measures and follow-up strategies alike. The problem-focused trainings, in which activists learn to stay calm and non-violent during blockades, is frequently mentioned as helpful preparation for the actions. Emotion-focused support strategies such as Emo-Support, where the activists are connected to psychologists, or collective processing during group discussions are mentioned as core components of the *Letzte Generation's* support strategy. Nevertheless, the analysis of the interviews also showed that the above-mentioned normalisation of the activist's personal experiences of violence reflects emotional suppression not as a deliberate but even more powerful coping mechanism. In a meaning-oriented way, the participants also mentioned that they find strength and resilience in their higher goal of climate justice and in the hope of persuading more people of their cause, which has also been nurtured both individually and as a group.

*What role do group dynamics within the Letzte Generation play in the perception and processing of violence?*

For strategic and safety reasons, the *Letzte Generation's* accumulated conjunctive knowledge encompasses a fixed set of rules and maxims, particularly the credo of absolute non-violence and passivity during protests. This approach helps to normalise experiences of violence, diffusing the immediate need for action in scenarios that might otherwise call for retaliatory acts. While it is unambiguous, it is also oftentimes unnatural in the blockade settings where the activists are provoked and attacked, thereby leading to a high tension between the set of collective rules and goals and the individual, personal priorities of the activists. Based on the interviews, several of these tensions concerning the exposure to violence were identified. Being an activist, which encompasses pressure to adhere to the group's collective rules, conflicts with other individual interests. The possibility of financial, public, or legal consequences especially results in the young activists' fears of obstructing their future aspirations. Private roles, such as mother, work colleague, student, or family member, clash with the role of the activist. Interestingly, the group dynamic seems to dominate these discords across all interviewees: As the strongly internalised conjunctive knowledge gives a clear utilitarian guideline of behaviour and morale, it also serves as a guideline to negotiate contradictions and role conflicts. The established collective in the background is a quite reliable, accountable, and possibly sanctioning authority to back up their negotiations of tensions with any other personal or collective demand that might interfere. Still, quite a few interviewees also reflected on these mechanisms and drew personal conclusions, such as a restricted manner of participation in the protests.

Reflecting on the scope and limits of our research, it is crucial to emphasise that, by nature of the means of narrative interviews, it has not been possible to analyse the actual degrees of violence in terms of physical injuries and psychological harm. We, therefore, were unable to determine to what extent the interviewees exaggerated or downplayed the actual experiences. Consecutively, it is not possible to deduce from the material whether and, if so, why the activists precisely depict certain forms of violence as part of their agenda.

The complex roles of the activists were interpreted as generally conflicting, leading to further distress and psychological and social pressure for the activists. Even though we did not explicitly analyse the material from this angle, it should be considered that these concurrent roles may not only be a source of conflict but also a source of motivation and strength. Roles of mothers or partners, for example, appear to motivate the fight for a better future for one's respective families. A further dive into this angle of interpretation may certainly illustrate the ambiguity of these role conflicts.

Since qualitative interviews offer many challenges (Misoch, 2019, pp. 229–242), require certain levels of trust, especially if they are recorded (Höpfner & Promberger, 2023), and are based on interviewees' subjective accounts of events (Misoch, 2019, p. 2), the findings should be understood as explorative. They offer first insights into activists' experiences, which must be elaborated further. Interviewees may have concealed certain experiences if they were criminal offenses, traumatic, otherwise sensitive or did not fit into the interview setting, e.g. in a group discussion or pair interview. Follow-up interviews or longer field research could have contributed to a more intensive trust-building and more detailed insights. Furthermore, our number of interviews is limited, and a broader study would help to compare and enrich the findings from our cases.

The group discussion also turned out to be fruitful: it helped to understand activists' actions and perceptions in the context of their belonging to social groups, which is usually prevalent in group discussions (Kühn & Koschel, 2011, p. 298). However, we naturally analysed the interviews through a socially similar lens. In terms of our own socio-structural characteristics that were similar to those of our interviewees, such as age, education and political alignment, we mostly sympathised with them, which could lead to a certain bias in our interpretation. Additionally, our group work method had us divide the interviews among us. Even though we repeatedly circled back to contrast, consolidate and correlate our findings, this inevitably led to a loss of some possible interpretations and findings.

Still, the conclusions drawn from interpreting the interviews may lead to further research questions worth exploring: The long-term psychological effects of this form of climate activism and its challenges might be evaluated, as well as the effectiveness of the different coping strategies. Furthermore, the effect of the role conflicts and group dynamics on the suppression (or other ways of processing) of the experienced emotional distress may be helpful to research, to better understand group dynamics in general. Motivations and life courses that led activists to engage at *Letzte Generation* may also be a topic of interest for qualitative research. To that end, a longitudinal study of the *Letzte Generation* could encompass researching the development of role conflicts and their influence on conjunctive knowledge, especially regarding former activists' understanding of their role in hindsight. A broad approach to research about these aspects could benefit from multiple methods, e.g., interviews and group discussions, participant observation, media and content analysis.

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**About the Author(s)**

The authors are a group of master's students from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Ruhr-University, Bochum. The research group was formed in the context of an empirical course focusing on research of violence in different contexts. All authors participated in conceptualization, fieldwork, analysis and writing of this study. The article is based on a longer research report which is available on request.