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Co-envisioning the social-ecological transition through youth eco-activists' narratives: toward a relational approach to ecological justice

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on qualitative data collected during the first phase of an intervention-research, this study explores the concept of "social-ecological transition" (SET) from the perspectives of youth eco-activists. As a multi-level approach to intersecting social and ecological crisis, this notion has yet been examined from a social work viewpoint and limited knowledge is available regarding how it is being appropriated and envisioned in non-scientific spaces. Considering the need to increase youth participation in ecosocial work and climate governance, youth eco-activists from Canada (*N* = 10) were interviewed to explore their definitions of the SET and to better understand youth-specific issues related to climate change and climate action. A focus group was conducted with five of those same youth and aimed to foreground their experiential knowledge to collaboratively refine the ecosocial component of a sport and nature-based program, implemented at a subsequent phase of the research. Findings show that youth focus especially on socio-cultural elements of the transition, therefore expanding current understandings of the SET. Three main components are mapped-out (Intersectional climate justice, Intergenerational allyship, Place-based connections) and reveal that collaborations, solidarities, and connections are at the heart of eco-activists' narratives. Key considerations for ecosocial work practice are discussed by centering youth voices, thus showcasing the need for increased experiential learnings to (re)connect with nature and community. The concept of relational ecological justice is proposed to capture a nuanced, non-dichotomic position concerning the ecocentrism/anthropocentrism debate, an approach that invites to renegotiate the ontological boundaries of ecosocial work.

Introduction

This empirical study examines the experiences of youth eco-activists to enrich current understandings of the "social-ecological transition" (*henceforth*, SET) (Laurent & Pochet, 2015, p. 7). A multilevel and multiaxial change process, the SET ultimately aims to unlock sustainable and equitable pathways for healthy

futures through purposive, transformative social-ecological innovation strategies (Huntjens, 2021). While the concept has gained relevancy in various professional fields, no unified theory exists to clearly define it, and little is known about how it is being shaped and defined in nonscientific spaces. Notably, the SET has yet been explored in relation to ecosocial work, an emerging paradigm in social work that seeks to challenge modernist assumptions and worldviews to create space to move toward transformative change (Boetto, 2019) and ecological justice[1] (Rambaree et al., 2019).

The intent of this paper is to fill a gap in literature by foregrounding the voices of youth eco-activists to understand how the SET if being defined and negotiated *from the ground up*, by youth grappling with situated intersecting crisis and determined to pursue viable futures. Specifically, the goal is also to strengthen ecosocial work's conceptual and practical apparatus through collaborative and youth-inclusive endeavors by asking the question: How can youth eco-activists' knowledges inform and broaden current definitions of the SET and how can their experiences and narratives provide new pathways for ecosocial work's ontological and practical basis?

Previous research has highlighted the need for increased youth participation in ecosocial work (Schusler et al., 2019) and in climate leadership (Barraclough et al., 2021). As bearers of both insider and experiential knowledge (through their experiences facing a degrading world and involvement in the climate movement), youth perspectives are imperative to create a more equitable and cohesive society (Gatera & Pavarini, 2020). Turning to non-dominant voices also resonates with ecosocial work's epistemic objective to foreground the knowledges of those who are not typically considered experts to redress ecological injustices, reshape social and environmental policies (Teixeira et al., 2019) and repoliticize transition processes (Scheidel et al., 2018). Hence, youth eco-activists are herein positioned as valuable change agents and key stakeholders to enhance shared decision-making in ecosocial work and beyond.

Qualitative data was collected by consulting with 10 youth eco-activists from Canada through individual interviews and focus group (with five of those same youth). Representing the first phase of a multi-sited intervention-research (Duchesne & Leurebourg, 2012), the broader objective of this study was to collaboratively refine (with the youth and other social actors) the ecosocial component of a sport and nature-based program designated for young people (Larocque, 2022). A transdisciplinary overview of literature will set the scene by examining how the SET is framed in the scientific field. To provide conceptual structure to data analysis, four main interacting pillars of the SET (economical, political, environmental, and socio-cultural) are identified to situate the narratives of youth eco-activists within a broader transition discourse. A hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was employed to analyze scientific and

empirical data. This method is especially relevant to explore complex, multi-layered problems or processes (Proudfoot, 2022). Findings reveal that youth eco-activists are especially concerned with the socio-cultural pillar of the SET. Three main themes (Intersectional climate justice, Intergenerational solidarity, Place-based connections) are mapped out and show that youth eco-activists envision a version of the SET that is fundamentally driven by relational elements such as collaborations, solidarities, and connections. To concretely integrate youth voices in decision-making processes, the discussion section centers on eco-activists' recommendations to discuss implications for ecosocial work practice.

Examining the social-ecological transition

Intertwining with multiple fields, the SET is a complex concept that can be disentangled only by moving beyond discipline-specific articulations. As such, a transdisciplinary overview of literature is presented to provide a socio-historical and transversal understanding of this emerging construct. This approach highlights the multiple discourses, contradictions, and key pillars that make up the linkages and fabric of the SET.

Constructing "transition" discourses

Rooted in environmental sociology, the concept of SET can be linked to the "Just Transition" approach which emerged in the 1970s as a radical response to neoliberal politics but faded in the 1980s (Kreinin, 2020). The terminology "transition" reemerged in the early 2000s mainly from European ecological economics and energy management literature (Kemp et al., 2007), producing systemic transition theories which focused primarily on technocentric ecological solutions (Kreinin, 2020). Simultaneously, the field of environmental sociology evolved to tend to contemporary global issues, therefore leading to the development of specialized fields, such as *Sustainability Transition Studies* and *Ecological Modernization Theory* (Mol & Sonnenfeld, 2000). Reflecting the economic motives of industry-driven approaches, these fields produced an array of keywords upholding normative aims, such as "sustainable development," "adaptation" or "resilience" (Felli, 2014). Diffused widely as market-based instruments, these terms make paradoxical promises, including the unlikely harmonization of ecological wellbeing and economic growth, as well as the lack of concern for ecology and, more broadly, for life on Earth (Bourg, 2012). These market-based solutions typically leave out issues of power, cultural context, and social relations (Boudes, 2017). In response to these contradictions, new economic models focusing on degrowth (Bonaiuti, 2012) emerged progressively. Building on these alternative types of economies,

the "transition approach" was reignited by British activist Rob Hopkins who initiated the transition movement in 2005 (Smith, 2011), shifting the focus from technocentric solutions to holistic and practice-based expressions of sustainability.

Centering the "social" in the ecological transition

Recently, scholars have turned their attention to the social dimensions of ecological transitions to provide a global and multiaxial understanding of transition processes. In the mid-2010s, the term "social-ecological transition" emerged in literature to describe a transition deeply rooted in social processes. In Europe, the SET developed from the field of political economics, bringing attention to macrosocial and structural elements of climate solutions, and highlighting the interplay between the dynamics of social systems and the health of natural systems to promote a more egalitarian model of wealth distribution (Laurent & Pochet, 2015). The sociology of ecological transitions (Audet, 2015) simultaneously emerged in Canada and offered a complementary lens through which transition processes could be analyzed by centering on the micro-dynamics and social determinants of local transition innovations. While these socio-centric approaches provided new conceptual and discursive pathways to re-envision the SET, they remain primarily concerned with the wellbeing of humanity while obscuring the needs and rights of the more-than-human realm, therefore producing anthroponormative socio-ecological solutions.

As a response to these human-centered formulations of the SET, the concept of "transformative social ecological innovation" recently emerged to account for the societal changes required to "contribute to sustainability, health, and justice in all social-ecological systems" (Huntjens, 2021, p. 86). This approach coalesces with the transformative and ecocentric endeavors of ecosocial work (Boetto, 2019) as it recouples social and ecological systems while also focusing on the needs of humans and Earth-others (Coates & Gray, 2019). Fundamentally, "a SET approach to multiple crises' includes new visions of society and the "good life" past current consumption and material-based expressions of living well [...] where human emancipation and needs, not want, are met in line with biophysical boundaries" (Kreinin, 2020, p. 7). Moving toward this transformative ideology demands that underlying ontological drivers are revisited and involves a radical paradigm shift, away from market logic, self-interest, and profit to move toward regenerative models of governance, ecological stewardship and ecological justice and security (Huntjens, 2021). However, in contemporary western societies, powerful social and political forces stand as obstacles to the change processes warranted by these transformative models.

Four pillars to the social-ecological transition

In the face of its pluralistic quality, conceptualizing the SET remains challenging. Positionality in terms of discourse on transition (whether techno or sociocentric), epistemology (anthropocentric/ecocentrically framed narratives) observation scale (micro/macrosocial), sector of analysis (social, agricultural, energy, political, environmental, and economic) (Favreau, 2017), geographies and socio-historical context complexifies the intricate networks involved in the change process (Kemp et al., 2007). Ideally, a multiscalar, global approach to the SET requires macrosocial change across various fields as well as the modification of political and economic behaviors of western societies which affect the poorest countries and degrade ecosystems. At the micro-level, local transition initiatives are influenced by how people and communities experience their place of living and by the "complex interplay between a dominant (or 'incumbent') regime and a set of competing niches" (Fischer-Kowalski & Rotmans, 2009, p. 3).

To simplify the SET kaleidoscope and construct a flexible structure to data analysis, the concept can be examined according to four main interacting and interwoven pillars (Political, Economic, Environmental, and Socio-Cultural), viewed as spaces where the transitions unfold. Figure 1 illustrates these pillars and shows the types of processes involved. These were identified by inductively finding common themes in literature and reinforced by empirical data where the narratives of youth eco-activists confirmed the relevancy of certain processes within each pillar. The arrows indicate the multi-level approach inherent to the change process. In view of SET literature, economic and political factors weigh more heavily on decision-making processes (Bourg, 2012), therefore holding dominance over environmental and socio-cultural concerns.

What these pillars entail regarding how they are appropriated in social spaces remains unclear. In this context, turning to tacit forms of knowledge provides a nuanced understanding of a concept constructed mainly through a top-down, scientific viewpoint.

Methodology

Research context

This paper presents data from the first phase of an intervention-research, a transformative and collaborative research method (Duchesne & Leurebourg, 2012). Data collected at this stage (autumn 2020) aimed to understand the SET according to youth eco-activists' viewpoints and investigate how their knowledges and experiences could enrich the ecosocial component of a sport and nature-based therapy program, implemented in a forest-setting during the second phase of the research (autumn 2021) (Larocque, 2022).
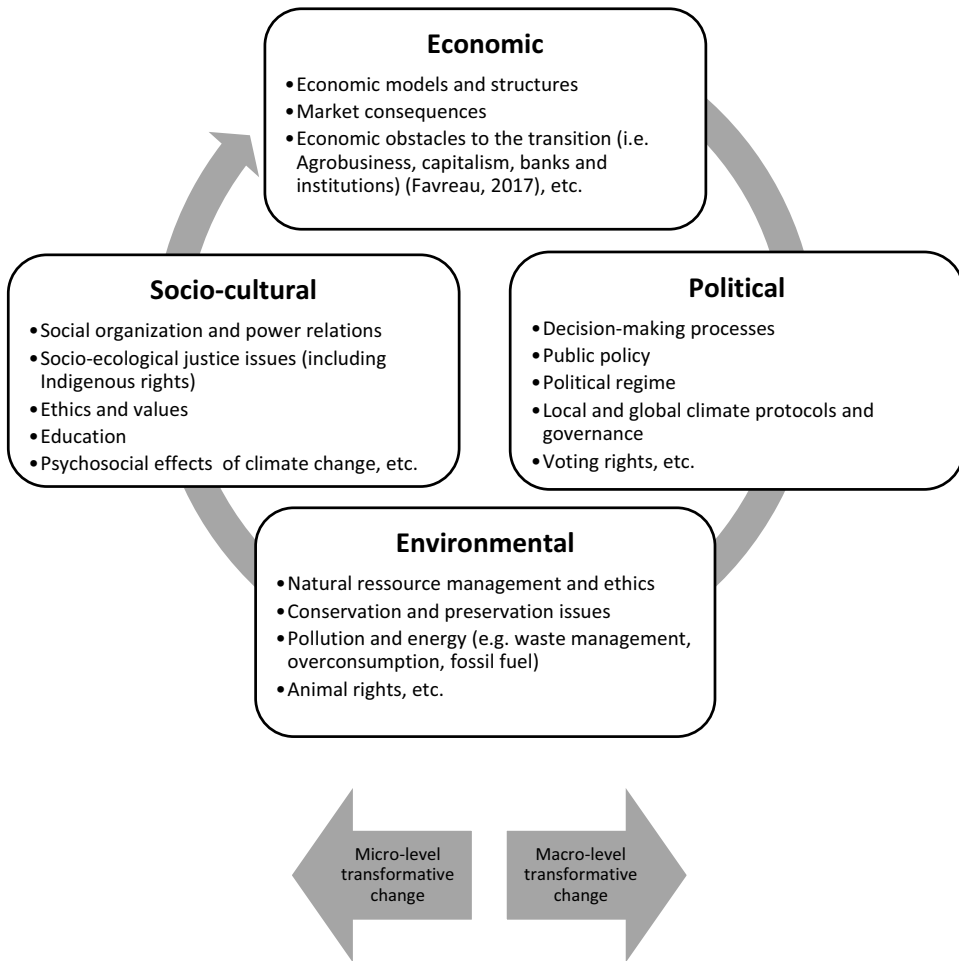
Economic
- Economic models and structures
- Market consequences
- Economic obstacles to the transition (i.e. Agrobusiness, capitalism, banks and institutions) (Favreau, 2017), etc.

Socio-cultural
- Social organization and power relations
- Socio-ecological justice issues (including Indigenous rights)
- Ethics and values
- Education
- Psychosocial effects of climate change, etc.

Political
- Decision-making processes
- Public policy
- Political regime
- Local and global climate protocols and governance
- Voting rights, etc.

Environmental
- Natural ressource management and ethics
- Conservation and preservation issues
- Pollution and energy (e.g. waste management, overconsumption, fossil fuel)
- Animal rights, etc.

Micro-level transformative change

Macro-level transformative change

Figure 1. Four interacting pillars of the social-ecological transition.

Author positionality

To account for my own biases and to acknowledge the value of this practice in decolonizing processes (Deranger et al., 2022), I first locate my positionality. I am a mother and self-defined forest-lover who is particularly sensitive to the natural world. As I grieve the massive loss of forests in my local community and beyond, I am deeply concerned for the well-being of my children and of future generations. I am also a white settler social worker, climate activist, and non-youth doctoral student based in Algonquin Anishinaabeg unceded territory.

From a youth-inclusive perspective, my objective herein is to bear witness and carry forward the voices of young people in ways that best reflect their opinions. As such, this article was shared and validated by respondents. Some chose to use their real names while others decided to keep a pseudonym.

Importantly, complex themes are discussed, such as intersectionality, decolo-nization, and Indigenous knowledges, none of which I am an expert (in lived or academic experience). In honoring youth perspectives, I present these themes according to the significant space they held in interviews and hope it will trigger openness and constructive criticism to engage in dialogues that will help co-create a purposive, transformative vision of the SET that aligns with the concerns raised by youth.

Recruitment

A youth eco-activist was defined as an individual aged between 18 and 25 years old involved with at least one environmental organization for a minimum of one year and who self-identified as an eco-activist. Following the procurement of an ethics certificate from the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity from the University of Ottawa, a snowballing approach (Naderifar et al., 2017) was under-taken for recruitment by sending e-mails to a total of 23 Canadian not-for-profit ecological organizations or university-based coalitions from Ontario ($n = 11$), Québec ($n = 6$), British-Columbia ($n = 4$) or operating nation-wide ($n = 2$). These mostly grassroot organizations either offered a youth climate ambassador program, were youth- or Indigenous-led, or were supporters of the *Fridays for Future* movement. Ten organizations responded and shared the recruitment information with their members. A total of 10 youth from six of these organiza-tions (highlighted in bulk – Table 1) contacted me by e-mail. Youth were provided with a consent form and informed of the specific and broader research objectives, thus establishing they would be invited to partake in a focus group and contribute as guest speaker/mentor to a sport and nature-based therapy program.

Overview of participants

As shown in Table 1, youth were aged 18 to 23 years old ($M = 19$ years, $SD = 0.75$ years) and nine identified as *she/her* and one as *he/him*. Their geographi-cal locations included: Ottawa ($n = 3$), Montréal ($n = 3$), Québec ($n = 3$) and Vancouver ($n = 1$). Four had immigrated to Canada at a young age, three identified as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and one as neuro-divergent. Most described having middle-class status and attended college or university full-time. Youth dedicated an average 8.1 hours ($SD = 3$) per week to climate activism and nine participants were involved with more than one ecological organization or committees.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted between September and November 2020. Informed consent was reinstated at the start of the

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Pseudonym/name	Age	Pronouns	Ethnic background	Geographical Context (Province)	Ecological affiliations	Hours of activismper week
Mariam	18	She/Her	Canadian	Québec (urban)	1. **ENvironnement JEUnesse** 2. Green Committee (college)	3
Lina	19	She/Her	Algerian/ Canadian	Québec (urban)	1. **ENvironnment JEUnesse** 2. Green Party Canada 3. Environmental committee (municipal council) 4. Amnesty International	3
Jade	23	She/Her	Chinese/ Canadian	Ontario (urban)	1.**Ecology [name of city]** 2. UN Chair secretary 3. [name of city] Environment Technology Network 4. Hidden Harvest	8
Florence	19	She/Her	Canadian	Québec (urban)	1. **Student Coalition for an Environmental Transition (CEVES)** 2. Extinction Rebellion 3. Green Committee (college)	25
Jasmine	23	She/Her	Philippines/ Canadian	British Columbia (urban)	1. **Shades of Sustainability**	6
Avril	20	She/Her	Canadian	Ontario (urban)	1. **Climate Action [name of University]** 2. Gaïa Protection	6
Carine	18	She/Her	Canadian	Ontario (suburban)	1. **River Keepers** 2. Climate Justice [name of University]	6
Vincent	19	He/Him	French/ Canadian	Québec (rural)	1. **CEVES** 2. Sustainable development committee (college) 3. Front Vert (Cégep)	10
Chloé	18	She/Her	Canadian	Québec (rural)	1. **CEVES** 2. Québec solidaire	10
Marguerite	18	She/Her	Canadian	Québec (rural)	1. **CEVES** 2. Front vert (Cégep) 3. Friends of Wetlands	4

interview, which lasted between 75 to 90 minutes. A flexible semi-structured interview guide composed of open questions was designed to explore (1) definitions and appropriations of the SET and (2) youth-specific issues related to climate change and climate action. Questions and observations were organized around six main themes (Social background; Ecological trajectory; Frames of references; Definitions of the SET; Climate change, SET, and activism-specific issues; Tools and practices for an ecosocial intervention). All data was collected and recorded using the online platform Zoom.

Focus group

Five of the ten youth-activists who participated in the semi-structured interviews also contributed to a 3-hour focus group, held in December 2020. After explaining the main objectives of the intervention program, two questions guided the discussion: (1) Could you tell me a story about a meaningful experience that influenced your ecological trajectory? (2) What specific activities, interactions, or tools have transformed you or given you hope? By centering the questions around actions, youth eco-activists discussed a range of experiential and practice-based strategies to strengthen the ecological component of the program (phase 2).

Data analysis

To increase methodological rigor and establish trustworthiness of my qualitative work (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), summary sheets were created after each interview, facilitating identification of commonalities and differences between narratives. The interviews and focus group were fully transcribed verbatim and manually coded in NVivo-12, a data analysis program designed for qualitative data. A hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis strategy was employed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to explore how participants described and negotiated the boundaries of the SET. This method aims to enrich theories or generate re-conceptualizations by valuing the voices of participants and is especially relevant to engage with literature and empirical data by means of mutual reinforcement (Proudfoot, 2022). First, the transdisciplinary literature review allowed to inductively map-out four main interacting pillars to the SET, which were used as a conceptual frame to guide data analysis. Engaging with the empirical data confirmed the relevancy of the themes found under each pillar (as in Figure 1). Interviews were then coded deductively by referring to these four pillars to determine how they were being mobilized in youth eco-activists' narratives. Through an iterative process, sub-themes were inductively created under each pillar, resulting in a rich description of the socio-cultural pillar of the SET.

Findings

Empirical data highlights that youth activists' descriptions of the transition are elaborately transversal, accounting for each pillar of the SET, albeit with different levels of emphasis. What stands out is their predominantly socio-cultural understanding of the SET, where climate change and climate action are explained primarily as systemic issues embedded in social processes: "systemic change starts at the social level," says Carine, an 18-year-old activist from Ontario. Hence, even when discussing technocentric solutions, participants tended to link those back to social justice issues, as in Avril's description:

> The development of clean energy everywhere would be a main change [. . .] Moving away
> from oil in general. Not only because it has awful impacts on the environment but also
> because vulnerable communities, especially Indigenous communities, are taken advan-
> tage of, or their Land is used without consent.

Fundamentally, youth eco-activists position the socio-cultural pillar as the
driving force of the transition, therefore reconfiguring the pillars of the SET
by centering the socio-cultural elements, as in Figure 2.

Three main components of this pillar are inductively mapped out in the
sections that follow, thus providing a structure and "illustrative directionality"
(Amorim-Maia et al., 2022, p. 2) for ecosocial work research and practice: (1)
Intersectional climate justice, (2) Intergenerational allyship, and (3) Place-
based connections.

Intersectional climate justice

The first and most dominant dimension of the socio-cultural pillar is the
intersectional climate justice lens through which the SET is being appropriated
by youth eco-activists. All placed a strong focus on this component, conveying
how crucial the intersectional lens is to the development of a justice-led,
inclusive transition:

> Within this transition, almost all social causes can be linked together, whether it is
> racism, whether it is feminism; it is all those causes that we want to change. We want
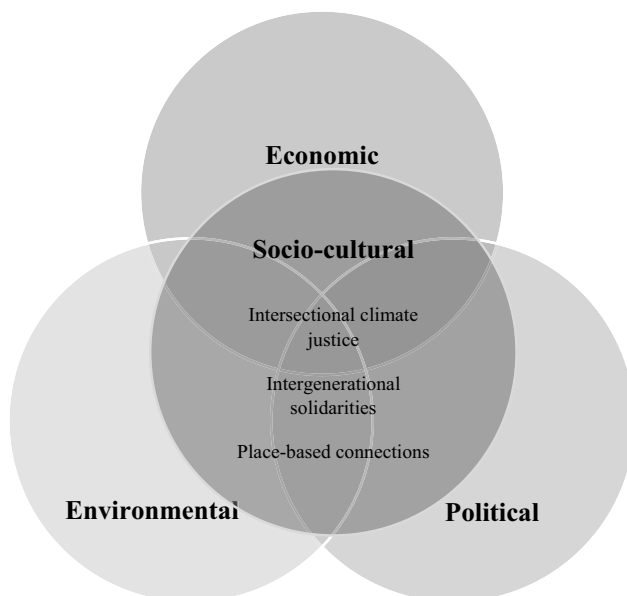> something more egalitarian in general (Chloé).

Figure 2. Reconfiguring the pillars of the social-ecological transition: centering the socio-cultural
axis.

> I think of the inequalities that are exacerbated by climate change. I think of the already present oppressions – if we look at Indigenous struggles, if we look at systemic racism – I think climate change has a different effect depending on where people live precisely, on the precise environment; but also on how we'll have to react politically, I think some populations will be left aside (Jade).

Observing the overlap between the various forms of social inequalities, their descriptions reinstate how social problems and disparities are embedded in broader power structures, as per Avril: "The climate crisis, it's so intertwined with other issues like racism and capitalism" and Chloé: "oppressions and injustices take root in the same system." Three mechanisms inherent to the embodiment of an intersectional climate justice lens are identified in youth discourses: (1) Recognizing privilege (2) Diversifying the climate movement and (3) Bolstering solidarities.

Recognizing privilege

When reflecting on the SET, most youth verbalized that climate solutions disproportionally impact marginalized populations. Viewing micro-level climate action through the lens of privilege, most participants suggested that normative and institutionalized forms of individual ecological practices are embedded in unjust assumptions: "When we talk about small individual changes, not everyone has the privilege to opt for zero-waste lifestyle or to shop in bulk grocery stores" (Florence). All activists saw value in individual action – "we all have a part to play in this transition" (Lina); "action needs to happen at all levels" (Mariam) – but also highlighted a key contradiction in "push[ing] for individual sustainability when individuals are not the main cause of climate change" (Jade), thus questioning responsibility attribution:

> There's a lot of blame put onto individuals. [. . .] I don't think we should blame individual people for things that they may or may not be doing to help and we should instead turn the anger towards governments and corporations (Jade).

Bearing close relations to the anti-colonial lens (Bell et al., 2019), youth also accounted for the colonial logic and power imbalances that hide behind climate policy. A few suggested that decision-makers need to evaluate and minimize the consequences of transition initiatives and climate policies before implementing them:

> [. . .] the social consequences of 'saving the environment' should not be harmful. Saving the environment is worth nothing if, at the same time, Indigenous communities are being ripped of their Land because we want to install wind turbines to save the environment. The transition must be good for everyone. [. . .] The goal is not to harm anyone with this change process (Marguerite).

Embracing an "antiracist perspective," Jade considered the impacts of a changing economy on marginalized groups who face labor and wage

injustices in the name of capitalist structures, a process which can be linked to displacement and distributive justice issues (Krings & Copic, 2021):

> Learning about coal miners in Eastern Europe in the Balkan states and Eastern Germany, all those kinds of areas where there's all this tension between how to make sure that [...] their industry is gone but they still have a just transition into economic opportunities.

The disproportionate effects of environmental policies were also observed at the community level. Jasmine noted how BIPOC owned restaurants, "already struggling to make ends meet," may experience greater financial struggle than privileged groups when it comes to new regulations like elimination of single-use plastic. Hence, deconstructing policy is a crucial step in understanding inequalities and privilege (Deranger et al., 2022).

Access to nature is another area where privilege was considered, where Vincent spoke specifically of "democratizing access to nature." Jade suggested that this could involve increasing green spaces in low-income neighborhoods:

> I think nature is something that we both need to protect but need to allow everybody to get an equal chance to appreciate it. And now, I'm just thinking about how there tends to be better parks, more parks in neighborhoods where they're able to afford better property taxes [...].

For some, this process was established in relation to Indigenous rights:

> The Land we live on belongs to First Nation people, who were there before us and it's not our right to decide what belongs to us and to appropriate these resources. Because nature does not belong to us, those resources do not belong to us (Carine).

For others, recognizing privilege also meant using their voices to elevate other less privileged voices or strengthen a collective voice.

Diversifying the climate movement

Participants agreed that constructing a social-justice oriented transition involved working on the inclusion and diversification of voices within the movement for climate governance to better reflect the diverse realities of the climate crisis. As Vincent observed, "*bourgeoisie*" is over-represented in the climate movement. Jasmine's experiences exemplify the various impacts of BIPOC underrepresentation. Firstly, getting involved in climate action can be difficult "because we found that it was so white-centered, and that sometimes [BIPOC] voices were not being centered and they're not being heard." Secondly, she explained that low representation affects accountability in upholding BIPOC values in climate governance. Epistemic justice scholarship shows how climate change knowledge is primarily informed by western science "while the climate knowledge of those most impacted by the crisis, and those with the best track record for sustainable management of natural systems, is systematically devalued and excluded" (Deranger et al., 2022, p. 56).

Counterproductive to the diversification of perspectives, the solutions adopted at policy-level are derived from the same anthropocentric, colonial models responsible for climate change. Thirdly, lack of diversified voices can translate to difficulties connecting with certain concepts, which may not resonate across cultures.

> My family did have a sense of, like, ecological or environmentally friendly, sustainable concepts. But it wasn't labelled like that, it was just like a way of life, it was just a part of practice because they had low income in the Philippines [...] (Jasmine).

Connecting key concepts back to people's unique standpoints, cultures and backgrounds is essential, says Jasmine, who suggested creating safe spaces for dialogue to arise and reiterates the importance of "respecting BIPOC knowledge and voices."

Bolstering solidarity

Within endeavors to increase diversification of the climate movement to co-create a justice-oriented transition, youth explicitly verbalized the importance of increasing solidarities with various groups. Getting involved in the climate movement multiplied opportunities to interact with a wide range of people who fight for a common end-goal. These novel interactions create space to hear and share stories and allow young people to be moved and touched by these stories, therefore fostering a sense of togetherness and community that transcends differences. For example, Avril described being "very emotional" as she listened to Indigenous speakers sharing their stories of stolen Lands: "I was angry, I was empathetic, but then it was also the feeling of community and banding together to do something. It was so powerful." Participants also expressed great value in taking a learner's stance to open the mind to new types of learnings and worldviews. Carine mentions how precious it was that her water-stewardship organization collaborated with Indigenous people: "One coordinator was Algonquin, so she gave us so much in terms of learning opportunities. She offered a different viewpoint, a different perspective in relation to water, to our relationship with nature and with the river." This knowledge-sharing opportunity was invaluable to "reflect on this point of view and realize we live in our bubble sometimes [...]. Some environmental issues are important to me, but maybe other people have other priorities."

In sum, departing from a unidimensional and surface-problem analysis, youth eco-activists' narratives conceptually shift toward notions such as privilege, decolonization, and alliances, thus challenging the dominant hegemonic system and offering strategies to address the fundamental drivers of ecological injustices (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022).

Fostering intergenerational allyship

Intergenerational relations were expressed by activists as both problematic (feeling mocked or silenced by adults) and helpful (finding powerful role models and adult allies).

"Our voices aren't heard:" from dismissal to burnout

The main issue voiced by youth activists was feeling their voices aren't heard or taken seriously. Most shared at least one experience where they felt undermined: "To infantilize activists, it happens often [. . .] I get called "Miss" when I go buy a coffee but in a municipal assembly, I get called "sweety" [by a deputy], like, hold on a minute!," says Marguerite. Getting adults to listen can be challenging, as Jade evokes: "Sometimes, trying to get people to respect you, to even be willing to listen to you is a lot harder when you're talking outside of your own generation, I think, especially when you're talking to older generations." This difficulty can be attributed to "adultist systems" which tend to "limit youth agency" (Liou & Literat, 2020, p. 4667). Most eco-activists felt obligated to take a confrontational approach to self-expression: "your parents are an authority, school is another authority, you feel like you're always trying to convince while it's just so obvious to us. It gets discouraging" (Mariam).

Indeed, the disparity between how young people and older generations feel about the climate crisis can be quite divisive. Ultimately, counter-hegemonic discourses may not resonate for adults who are rigid or "stuck in their ways" (Chloé). Adult priorities may be different than youths' who experience significant ecoanxiety about their future and worry about the inaction of adults in power positions, as expressed by all participants. Adult inaction was described as "unbearable" for Lina and a source of frustration, anger, and indignation for others, thus solidifying the storyline that adults have caused the problem but are unwilling to enact social change:

> I know that a lot of older people obviously care [. . .] but they care more about the money. Because they're not going to experience the effects, and it's not their children . . . it's my kids who are going to experience the biggest consequences. So I do think that they caused the problem mostly but don't want to offer solutions (Avril).

In this context, participants expressed feeling like they carry the burden of the climate crisis and feel a sense of moral responsibility to educate and convert household members, communities, and especially political leaders. Florence, at one point, was investing over 50 hours per week in raising ecological awareness and "still felt like I wasn't doing enough." Jade warns of the potential consequences of feeling misunderstood and dismissed and, more broadly, of this lack of intergenerational collaboration:

[…] There's a lot of anger and frustration that often leads to apathy and even just burn out. And this is not just climate activists, but a lot of young people I know get very exhausted because it seems like often, our voices aren't heard or that, you know, older people automatically dismiss you as a person who doesn't understand how the world actually works […].

Reflecting on her own feelings of exhaustion caused by intergenerational tensions, Mariam "can't stress it enough" that young people need adult solidarity and support: "It's not because we fight on our own that we want it to be that way." In fact, most would prefer a dialogue approach, as Florence, who states: "We must talk to each other. It should be that everyone is constructing this [transition] together." Indeed, participants elicited adult allyship as a key factor in the SET but also in their ability to sustain their activism.

Bridging the generational gap: constructing youth-directed adult allyship

Reflecting on their ecological trajectories, many youths recalled meaningful conversations and relationships with adults that supported them or influenced their journey into activism. While intergenerational collaborations were deemed "difficult" (Mariam), adults were are also viewed as potential allies and support systems: "Older people are not a homogenous, uniform group and it's nice to know that people came before us and fought for the same things" says Mariam, who finds it important to create space for reciprocal learning opportunities. Jasmine, whose activism includes extending "ecological conversations with older [BIPOC] folks or folks' family members," gives adults the benefit of the doubt and tries not to take for granted the accumulated knowledge they hold.

Youth eco-activists' experiences reveal three strategies to promote meaningful intergenerational solidarities. First, openness to change was mentioned by many as an important facet of in-home conversations. Beyond openness, witnessing the impacts of their life choices on adults in their close social circles (i.e., parents, teachers) was meaningful to increase their sense of empowerment, as described by Jasmine: "if you start from home, you can eventually get bigger and bigger to make these changes." Others found that adult participation in the climate movement was validating and "a relief" (Mariam), showing that young people are not alone in this fight for climate justice.

Second, participants shared that "even small changes" (Chloé) at the policy level are viewed as proof that their voices matter to adults in power positions. The response young people obtain from adults can indeed influence their perception of their own agency, as Jade recounts:

When you're able to talk to someone and have a real conversation, often about the issues with something […] it can be frustrating at first, but when you get your point through, and they understand where you're coming from […] it's very satisfying.

A third strategy to promote intergenerational collaborations involves rethinking the "dominant code" in knowledge transmission, where youth find themselves having to "code-switch into adult norms" (Liou & Literat, 2020, p. 4674) to be taken seriously. Marguerite explained the pressure to adopt adult-normative communication codes when speaking outside her generation: "I have to carry my academic baggage to be able to bring myself up to an equal level." A few activists mentioned self-expression strategies that may not fit institutionalized forms of knowing but were considered meaningful and powerful. Florence suggested that arts-based activism, where expressions such as graffiti, impacts the collective imagination: "Even little kids who are drawing graffities or putting posters or messages in washrooms, I think there's importance in that." Chloé, a musician, and singer sometimes politicized her compositions by transforming budgets or official reports into songs as a strategy to share her message with a broader audience.

To summarize, young people at the forefront of the climate movement experience frustration, anger, and indignation in the face of adult inaction and silencing practices. They are also pleading for help and allyship, a request that should be taken seriously and proactively by social workers who wish to engage with a social-justice oriented SET.

Place-based connections

Intricate to the narratives of youth activists is the theme of connections. Behind the first two components, intersectional climate justice and intergenerational allyship, lies the idea that nurturing human bonds through dialogue, solidarity and finding common ground are intertwined with the social dimension of the SET. Relationship to place, nature, and community, appears as a third component to consider when co-envisioning the SET.

The nature-to-community connection

The healing qualities and ecoanxiety reducing effects of spending time in nature was mentioned by most participants. Florence, who struggled to put words to this "almost spiritual" experience explains:

> It feels like all the world's problems and all the shit that's around . . . when you see a tree, when you see all that life that is thriving despite everything, it's like, I don't know, almost reassuring. Plants are so powerful.

Youth explained that interactions with nature, whether in wilderness or urban green spaces, evoked unique feelings, bodily sensations, emotions, and spiritual gains that can't be acquired elsewhere: "it gives you a particular energy," says Chloé. Jade reasons: "People who get a taste of nature taste the sentiment to it. [. . .]. Unless you've experienced it you don't really understand it. But once you do, you can't really get that same

experience from other things." Even Mariam, who did not particularly enjoy wilderness, "nature bores me" she says, described a connection to proximal, urban natural spaces. She mentioned daily outings in urban parks and felt most connected to nature when it rained because "it feels like the world stops." These moments have led her to the realization that nature significantly impact our lives: the world takes on a different meaning, surpassing one's own individuality. Expanding on this perspective, Marguerite, on her part, feels that connecting to nature serves as a gateway to deepen community connections:

> When we reconnect with nature, we also reconnect with a community because an individual bond is created, and you also learn new knowledges from nature … she's there for a purpose. It goes beyond your individuality. You're part of community, you're part of an ecosphere, and to learn to understand and get to know this ecosphere allows you to get involved in [that] sphere.

Within Marguerite's narrative is the idea that learning about your ecosphere can trigger place-based stewardship (Gallay et al., 2020), which strengthens sense of place and responsibility for local ecosystems. Florence echoes this realization: "I think having a certain knowledge of nature, a love of nature, it gives you the desire to protect it." Marguerite also highlights that connection to nature fosters a relationship between people and "foodways" and, more broadly to Land itself:

> Just having this relationship to nature, to know where my food comes from, how I can make it grow […]. Many lose this relationship with food […]. We become centered on our human side of reading, learning, and it's cool, we learn all sorts of knowledges but it's almost like it separates us from our material universe that's right there.

Interestingly, in terms of local transitions, the theme of food sovereignty was prominent in both urban and rural participant's narratives. Imageries of community gardens, green spaces, urban agriculture, collaborations with local farmers, and intergenerational knowledge on regenerative, sustainable agriculture permeated the imagination of eco-activists when reflecting about the SET. Lina talked about instilling "specks of color in her everyday cemented life," and Florence, a self-described city girl, imagined collective hubs and gardens everywhere:

> I think I have this dream to see the city becoming an oasis full of vegetables that grow in parks, that big metropolitans are gone, but that boxes of vegetables have been built on top of them, and it's flooded with flowers and vegetable gardens.

These insights reveal how interactions with nature can provide a sense of well-being and foster a profound sense of connection that reaches inward (body, mind, spirit) and outward (community, Land, people). Nature-connections can therefore be broadened to place-based connections, where participant's geographical locations impact the types of solutions being emphasized, thereby calling for a territorial approach to the SET.

Discussion

Following ecosocial work's endeavors to amplify disenfranchised voices in decision-making processes (Schusler et al., 2019), the discussion is complemented by the recommendations of focus group participants. As an attempt to prioritize youth activists' voices over my own analysis, each component is revisited by drawing lessons from youth where they insightfully translate conceptual abstractions into actionable ecosocial work practices.

Youth-led implications for ecosocial work practice

In co-envisioning the SET, much can be learned from the "deeply intersectional climate justice" lens (Malin & Ryder, 2018, p. 1) put forth by youth eco-activists. Finding shows that critically examining policies and practices is an essential step to align transition initiatives with the realities of the concerned people and communities. Indeed, participants heartily advised taking a community approach to the development of ecosocial work interventions by involving community members and citizens in decision-making processes to understand their concerns and diverse realities. For ecosocial work practice, this could mean organizing a community assembly or consulting with local youth-led organizations prior to designing a program, as suggested by Marguerite. Echoing previous research, pragmatic strategies need to be implemented to reduce "structural barriers to participation" and enhance "culturally responsive practice principles" (Krings & Copic, 2021, p. 163). Another question raised by activists concerned how to engage with decolonizing practices (Deranger et al., 2022) which, according to them, included finding ways to increase solidarities with local Indigenous communities. All activists expressed a keen interest in learning about Indigenous traditions but approached the subject cautiously. They questioned the collaborative process itself (how do we go about it respectfully?) and highlighted key issues such as "cultural appropriation, tokenism" (Jade), "heterogeneity of Indigenous viewpoints" (Marguerite), and the "potential ephemeral effects of a single interaction" (Vincent), referring to the risk of instrumentalizing or essentializing traditional knowledges. Despite these queries, activists insisted on the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges when envisioning a fair and just transition. For ecosocial work, this could translate as being mindful of the aforementioned issues but also by taking a learner's stance when "reaching out to local Indigenous communities" (Marguerite), an approach that resonates with solidarity practices such as building authentic relationships and supporting Indigenous-led action (Dennis & Bell, 2020). Considerably, eco-activists discussed the link between learning about alternative ways of interacting with the natural world and the importance of engaging with principles of decolonization and reconciliation (Deranger et al., 2022).

In terms of intergenerational solidarities, youth experiences inform us of the importance of showing, by concrete actions, that their voices are being heard. One strategy to uphold youth voices in decision-making processes would be to favor collaborative and participatory approaches and interventions (Schusler et al., 2019). Engaging more strongly in climate activism and focusing on community and macro-scale initiatives, and less on individual solutions or problems, is another way to share the burden of the climate crisis and assert a youth-led vision of the SET. From an epistemic perspective, findings from this study shed light on the importance of legitimizing youth-codes for knowledge creation and diffusion. Extending the boundaries of self-expression is a step in valuing the diverse ways to read the world (Nyachae, 2021) and to honor youth experiences. Opting for creative ways to communicate, share knowledge, and self-express during intervention programs was deemed essential by activists. Florence and Vincent suggested integrating modes of reflection and expression that are relevant to young people, such as Land-art, music, metaphors, and storytelling. Lina proposed that increasing intergenerational allyship could also be accomplished by involving parents or significant adults as co-learners in ecosocial work programs, a strategy that may facilitate change beyond the intervention context. Ecosocial work could also be thought of a space to multiply opportunities to generate interactions with community members who embody transformative change and inspire alternative interpretations of the good life or to collaboratively develop multi-generational activities, such as a tree planting program or community garden, that aim to promote place-based stewardship. Significantly, these suggestions reflect socio-ecological innovation strategies that focus not only on adaptation and resilience, as most technocentric solutions would, but prioritize preventative and regenerative practices.

Finally, data from the focus group revealed interesting strategies to nurture placed-based connections in ecosocial work programs. Building attachment to place and enhancing knowledge *of* and *from* the Land through experiential learnings and immersive practices were viewed as essential to the change process. Florence, for example, expressed feeling powerless in the face of her ignorance regarding the natural world and Marguerite, on her part, felt she missed important knowledge transmission to confidently build a self-sustainable lifestyle. To enhance confidence but also to foster hope, it was suggested that ecosocial programs could focus on integrating practices that allow people to learn about local transformative innovation strategies (Huntjens, 2021) by, for example, connecting with local farms that favor permaculture or regenerative farming (Marguerite).

Jade called on ecosocial work to create space for collective climate action in programs which could help deepen social bonds and sense of agency in youth while also building knowledge of local climate issues. At the individual level, Florence spoke of the healing qualities of natural spaces and advocated for

meaningful, reflective, and slow practices to absorb the effects and teachings of nature through the body and the senses. In relation to decolonizing processes, Vincent noted that ecosocial programs should aim to generate alternative ways of interacting with the natural world . The concept of reciprocity was implicitly advanced by Florence as she reflected on the unidirectional relationship between humans and nature:

> I was picking daisy buds, and I said to myself 'I'm picking daisy buds in the field, with wild herbs, but what do I give back to those herbs?' [...] So, like, reflecting about what I take and what I give, that could be awesome.

Cultivating compassionate and reciprocal relationships to nature in ecosocial work would indeed assist in challenging extractivist, colonial logic (Dennis & Bell, 2020), thus progressively moving toward ecocentric practices.

Ontological contributions: towards a relational *ecological justice*

Evidence from this study shows that youth eco-activists envision the SET through deeply relational climate solutions: from intersectional climate justice and intergenerational allyship, to place-based connections. Crucially, their accounts also highlight a key tension observable within ecosocial work and in nascent SET studies: the anthropocentrism/ecocentrism debate. Individual interviews revealed that youth focused mainly on the human condition despite their emphasis on decolonization, a process linked to ecocentrism, an ontological position founded on kinship-based relationships between humans and Earth-others (Jones et al., 2022). While concerns for the natural world varied according to geographical location (rural activists tended to be more concerned with biodiversity issues), their generally anthropocentric *leitmotiv* may be explained by the social context and key events that struck the collective imagination at the time of the interviews, conducted six months after the global COVID-19 pandemic was declared. On the social scene, the #BlackLivesMatter Movement was triggering world-wide protests, calling for eradication of racism and white supremacist hegemonies and various Indigenous resistance movements were concurrently growing stronger in Canada, exposing injustices, discriminations, and threats to Indigenous sovereignty. Avril points out how current events seeped into the discourses of climate activists:

> There seems to be more of a focus on the justice aspect of climate change. And that's probably just because there's been a ton of discourse about that this year. With everything going on in the U.S. and everything going on with Indigenous rights and resistance here in Canada as well.

Considering that youth narratives are embedded in a situated temporal and geosocial context but also recognizing youth as prominent leaders in the

climate movement, time will tell if the banners of climate activists will shift as the discourse around planetary health and the social-ecological transition evolves. In view of the recent United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP-15) (December 2022), where youth from around the world took center stage to take position for the wellbeing of global ecosystems, youth eco-activists' agendas appear to be shifting toward a broader vision of climate justice that articulates values of obligations to Earth-others by means of deconstructing hegemonic and colonial ideologies. While this observation is based on my personal involvement with the climate movement, future research will reveal if the new generation of youth eco-activists are more nature-focused and uphold a stronger ecocentric view of the SET.

To move beyond the anthropocentrism/ecocentrism debate in ecosocial work, I propose turning to Jasmine's description, which centers on the relational aspects of the SET:

> [. . .], everything we do is relational and if you do have a relation to the Earth, to other animals and living things, that could be a part of your ecosocial movement and activism. But also, if you have a relation to your community or specifically having a sustainable allyship relationship with the Indigenous communities, that's also related to the ecosocial movement. So, I feel like they all hold importance that way.

From this nuanced and non-dichotomic viewpoint, perhaps speaking of *relational* ecological justice would allow us to envision climate action, the SET and even ecosocial work *as being of service to both the human and the more-than-human world*. In proposing this youth-led concept, ecosocial work could, conceivably, focus more easily on (re)building relationships to self, others, community, and nature to create pathways for regenerative, restorative, relational research, and practices.

Conclusion

This research centralized youth eco-activists' lived experiences to examine how this singular population, disproportionately affected by a myriad of intersecting crisis and at the forefront of the fight for climate justice, defines the concept of "social-ecological transition." Youth narratives revealed a rich conceptual and experiential landscape to reconfigure the boundaries of the socio-cultural axis of the SET. Empirical data led to the identification and development of three main components of the socio-cultural pillar (Intersectional climate justice, Intergenerational allyship and Place-based connections), therefore providing novel structure to enhance ecosocial work's conceptual apparatus. Moreover, adopting an intersectional and intergenerational lens to formulate climate solutions fills an important gap in SET literature which, until recently, had largely overlooked the power dynamics and colonial

forces involved in social change and in local transition initiatives. In view of eco-activists' emphasis on the importance of disrupting colonial and hegemonic ways of knowing, ecosocial work is well-equipped to assist in redressing the structural and systemic issues highlighted in this paper. However, to accomplish this, I suggest that further social work involvement in advocacy and activism *with* youth and disenfranchised communities is needed to reorganize the SET around egalitarian-focused policies *from the ground up*. From an epistemic viewpoint, this study confirms the indispensability of tacit knowledge in building bridges between academic and real-life knowledge systems to construct a SET and ecosocial work practices that center on voices that are woefully, but unjustifiably absent from political and institutionalized settings. By mobilizing a collaborative and youth-centered method to co-envision the SET, this paper provides a strong case to increase youth-inclusive studies in ecosocial work.

Significantly, findings show that collaborations, solidarities, and place-based connections are at the heart of youth eco-activists' aspirations, therefore shifting the focus from technocentric to relational climate solutions. Inspired by their narratives, the youth-led concept of *relational ecological justice* is proposed to capture a nuanced, non-binary vision of ecological justice which invites to renegotiate the ontological boundaries of ecosocial work to bolster relational and solidarity-focused practices and research.

Note

1. Whereas "environmental justice" is described as human-centric and anthropocentric as it highlights the disproportionate effects of climate change on humans, "ecological justice," akin to ecocentrism, offers a broader view by including the needs and rights of the more-than-human world (Rambaree et al., 2019, p. 2).

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Due to the nature of the research and for ethical reasons, supporting data cannot be shared publicly and therefore, is not available.

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