3.6 Focus group interviews with professional groups

As the concept of climate cultures synthesised by this comprehensive media analysis attracted wide interest and proved particularly fruitful, I chose to continue to work with it. Here, the occupational context presents a promising further analytical frame as most adults invest a large portion of their lifetime into gainful employment. Furthermore, work environments often remain stable over longer time periods and the group of staff or work team embodies one of the social subuniversa this study is particularly interested in. This way, societal regularities and power relations related to climate change and –action could be filtered out and made visible.

Therefore, as a second *relational* method, focus groups were chosen. By means of "decoding certain patterns of social practice" (Bremer, 2004, p. 12), this shifts further attention onto the importance of social space. Each social group's respective social space and the naturalised social practices that habitually and conventionally occur within it have a substantially underappreciated influence on public reception and collective practice in the context of climate change and –action: "The relationship between an individual and her social context is complex and is shaped and constituted by social, cultural, economic, political, legal, historical, and structural forces […] [and] this relationship is multidirectional, co-constitutive and constantly in formation and the multi-layered influences in which the individual is embedded are often beyond the level of individual consciousness" (Burke et al., 2009, p. 66S). Over time, people develop certain types of *habitus* according to the different social groups they are surrounded by in their daily lives. In contrast to individual interviews, focus groups thus allow the analysis of social interaction and thus enable insights in relation to "the joint construction of meaning" (Bryman, 2008, p. 501) in the form of, for example, social norms. In this way, "the more latent, less cognitively controlled schemata can better be discovered. In this sense the method is actually more suited to the exploration of habitus as [individual] interview techniques" (Bremer, 2004, p. 105).

From this perspective, travelling long distances by plane (especially for pleasure) is no longer perceived as a 'lifestyle choice' but instead as a socially and culturally specific practice (Shove, 2010, p. 1280) that carries with it a whole battalion of further motives (perceiving oneself as cosmopolitan and widely travelled as in some circles this brings high social valuation) besides the initial one merely related to mobility. These socially initiated and internalised, 'embodied' (Olsson and Lloyd, 2017) and often subconscious meanings constitute, it is argued, some of the missing pieces in the hitherto incompletely remaining explanation of why nudges and individual calls to action related to climate action still remain far behind what is needed.

Professional environments as social space

As one of the social networks mentioned above, the work team or group of staff embodies and apt starting point for the investigation of social space. Here, the focus group as a method is uniquely suited, since it enables the witnessing of a more natural discursive flow (than individual interviews) similar to everyday conversations. As Elke Pirgmaier states in relation to this:

> As social beings, people continuously communicate with each other. (…) Language is a powerful medium of communication but as soon as we choose words, we provide a one-sided description of reality. As soon as we pin something down, we leave other aspects of reality out. Theories – stories we tell each other about the world – are therefore always biased. This matters, because word as a medium of communication and work as acting on the world are united in praxis – both in the old-to-be-transformed and the new-to-come-into-being. The choice of language and framings is therefore key for reproducing and reshaping reality.
>
> 2019, p. 281

Therefore, as a third empirical step, seven focus group discussions were carried out between July 2019 and February 2020. Each conversation lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was held with already existing social groups, namely work teams, in and around Munich. The focus of the investigation lay in the participants' collective stances, again, vis-à-vis representations of climate change and –action, particularly to whom in society they ascribed responsibility for climate action and whom they perceived as influential in this regard. Moreover, it was examined where the groups stood collectively with respect to the creation of knowledge and information about climate change and –action and whether (and if so which) denial tendencies could be identified as a consequence of what was being said.

The focus groups, like the experts for the individual interviews, were partially recruited via the researcher's own network and partially via internet research and subsequent cold call. Generally, one person was contacted initially and then asked to recruit his or her own social group. Therefore, recruiting was undertaken via snowball sampling (making use of existing social ties and networks) and not according to a random methodological scientific strategy. Working with already existing social groups instead of using a random sample increased the probability that conversations could be experienced that actually resembled the commonly practiced discourses in each social group (Fox, 2014, p. 85). The stances and convictions that are taken for granted and passed on over time in certain circles (and that embody the aspects the present study set out to capture) only come to the surface when working with such natural groups (cf. Fox, 2014). Therefore, access to these aspects that lie

at the core of this study cannot be gained when samples are randomised. From this follows that investigating participants' social milieus is simply incompatible with randomising samples.

Arguably, this type of sample facilitates the uncovering of how group members that are familiar with each other collectively approach climate matters with the help of routine (discursive) practices, classifications and dispositions that characterise their respective social space (cf. Fox, 2014). Consequently, the present study is concerned with how climate action measures resonate differently in the public, by investigating of how these appeals (*calls to order* in Bourdieu's terms) in relation to climate action are received in each focus group (cf. ibid., p. 11), whether they are even noticed initially, whether they are then taken up and internalised and lastly and most importantly, whether people report to actually act upon them.

For example, the use of 'collective expression' (Callaghan, 2005, cited in ibid., p. 85) and 'embodied information practices' (Olsson and Lloyd, 2017) both hint towards how it is normally spoken in each setting. Although the conventional group-specific discourses will be influenced by the contribution of each participant (and to an extent the researcher and will in turn influence the rest of the group), they resort back to references that connect the group to the wider community or field (Callaghan, 2005, cited in Fox, 2014, p. 85): "Under such circumstances the focus group may act as a *portal* to the social space within which much of the participants' life is unfolding" (Fox, 2014, p. 85, my emph.).

Additionally, in order to present as broad a picture as possible, participants were included whose work did not directly relate to the topic in of climate change (teachers, craftsmen). Particular interest was paid to how such groups who may be further removed from climate discourses handled the topic. Besides, "the focus group method's interactive component offered a means of studying the micro dimensions of societal power relations and regularities in the development of climate change receptivity" (Fox, 2014, p. 86). Moreover:

> … the research moment is not an exchange of *rational* positions and perspectives. The goal of the research was never to merely record and input the claims of participants into the thesis. To do so would be an acceptance of the rational choice position on human beings.
>
> ibid.

Table 2: Overview of focus group discussions

Focus group	Craftsmen	Green startup	Local environ-mental NGO	Farmers	Industrial enterprise	Mobility provider	Teachers
Time of inter-view	08/2019	09/2019	11/2019	07/2019	10/2019	02/2020	07/2019
No. of par-ticipants	5	9	6	6	4	4	9
Sex	Male: 5	Female: 7 Male: 2	Female: 5 Male: 1	Female: 4 Male: 2	Female: 3 Male: 1	Female: 3 Male: 1	Female: 5 Male: 4
Age	heterogeneous	homo-geneous	heterogeneous	heterogeneous	homogeneous working students	heterogeneous mid 20s to late 40s	heterogeneous

The pitfall that focus group discussions are treated merely as a series of individual interviews was carefully avoided as this would once again yield only the attitudes and opinions of the individual. Instead, the aim was to gain access to the societal dynamics that unfold in the everyday lives of the focus group members through the interactions of the participants. Thus, attention was paid to what was collectively synthesised as a group and whether and how statements were perceived (i.e., sanctioned or welcomed).

Using vignettes

As an 'unobtrusive issue' (Schäfer and Bonfadelli, 2017, p. 2), climate change cannot directly be perceived with the human senses. Visualisations thus present a helpful means to make this abstract issue more tangible. For these reasons so-called 'vignettes' were applied to stimulate a conversation among group members. These were prompting *snippets* in the form of "short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond" (Finch, 1987, p. 105). This had the clear advantage that instead of being asked about their own contribution to climate action and how this potentially deviated from what they (morally) thought it should be, respondents were invited to judge how others (represented by the vignettes) behaved with regard to climate change and how their gap between conviction and actual daily practice could be apprehended. This helped to somewhat avoid the trap that is presented by *social desirability*.

This study used six of these vignettes: firstly, an open introductory question (what are your first thoughts when it comes to societal responsibility for climate action?), then four vignettes each corresponding to different societal actors (politics, corporate sector, single consumers, civil society) and their respective responsibility and efficacy and lastly one vignette related to the creation of climate related knowledge in society. These were presented to the respondents as pictures (as well as one short and one slightly longer video clip) within a PowerPoint presentation. "It is important that the stimulus is able to reach the core of the issue, for example by means of a provocative or challenging hypothesis" (Bremer, 2004, p. 104). The rationale behind the use of these vignettes lay in being able to assess, in this way, "whether there is agreement about 'the proper thing to do' in a given set of circumstances" (Finch and Mason, 2003, p. 12) within each of the different social spaces analysed. Ultimately, the goal was to draw some conclusions about how these different societal groups actually habitually behaved in relation to climate change.

As opposed to single interviews, here, the role of the researcher merely lay in the moderation of the discussion. Care was taken to contribute as little as possible as regards content. In certain situations, it proved however useful to play the role of 'devil's advocate', hence "to give the discussion new impulses through purposefully interspersing standardised teaser arguments" (Bremer, 2004, p. 104) that chal-

lenged what was being said. This was done in order to gain even deeper access into the thought patterns that existed in each group.

The method of the group interview allowed the identification of "some of the ontological hierarchies (what is valued within inner circles) that manifested within the focus groups" (Fox, 2014, p. 148). Climate change was habitually processed by means of these connections (ibid.). Apart from the industrial enterprise, recruitment of the groups proved unproblematic. This may again be attributed to the time of the research which was carried out in the year that the *Fridays for Future* protests were gaining considerable momentum in Germany and therefore climate change became the public issue that was by far most discussed. As with the expert interviews, it again appeared that where there was thematic overlap with the topic, people were eager to contribute to the research, whilst otherwise there was noticeable hesitation. The corporate entities approached for an interview on *responsibility for climate action* may therefore have feared that they would have to justify themselves. Two of the focus group discussions (teachers and craftsmen) unfolded in a somewhat unstructured way, since participants joint or left the interview at different stages, which could not however have been prevented by the researcher. Overall, each of the focus group discussions yielded an intensive and fruitful debate.

A commonly raised critique of the use of focus groups as empirical method lies in the fear that "the results obtained in a focus group may be biased by a very dominant or opinionated member. More reserved group members may be hesitant to talk" (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1998, p. 509, cited in Fox, 2004, p. 87). As Fox discusses, "these criticisms overlook the social basis of human existence and how conversations in daily life often feature dominant voices. Such voices can be indicative of the levels of interest in the issues under discussion and/or the differences in embodied capital which reflect power relations in a group setting, and in wider society" (2014, p. 87). Considering whether there were particularly dominant voices and if and how they were reacted to by the rest of the group thus served as an important way of gaining insight to the operating power relations in these social spheres.

3.7 Conclusion

The present pragmatic multi-method approach was chosen to gain as broad a picture of (collective) societal positions on climate change and –action as possible. Since the three separate empirical steps built upon each other, the findings could be integrated particularly well and therefore yielded coherent insights into the constitution of societal hierarchies. The application of two different relational methods ensured that collective stances were captured. The concept of climate cultures developed through the media analysis was subsequently tested by being applied in the context of the focus groups, which to a very large extent confirmed the findings