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Language and Social Justice in US Climate Movements: Barriers and Ways Forward

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Climate movements increasingly conceptualize the climate crisis as an issue of social injustice, both in terms of its root causes and its present and future effects. Climate justice calls for participatory decision-making within climate movements, which, as communication scholars have pointed out, necessitates inclusive and accessible communicative practices. Within sociocultural linguistics, a growing body of research has explored sociolinguistic justice, or marginalized groups' struggle for self-determined language use. This analysis interweaves these two research areas, applying the theory of sociolinguistic justice to climate communication in organizing contexts. Drawing on 67 semi-structured interviews and 112 online surveys with climate activists from organizations across the United States, the analysis finds that sociolinguistic injustice impedes frontline community members' participation in climate movements. Specific barriers include: (1) English-only communications; (2) the combination of incomprehensible jargon with a dry, emotionless register; (3) the use of Dominant American English in prescriptive climate communication materials such as phonebanking scripts; (4) language policing of discourses of environmental justice and environmental racism; and (5) a form of linguistic ventriloquism in which adult organizers pressure youth to express climate grief in their stead. Climate activists' insights are synthesized to propose countermeasures to each of these problems of sociolinguistic injustice. The results suggest that sociolinguistic justice can be a useful lens for understanding climate justice communication within climate movements, and provide guidance to climate organizers and educators who wish to align their communications with the inclusive, anti-racist, and decolonial values of climate justice.

Keywords: climate justice, climate change, climate action, sociolinguistic justice, social movements, United States

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the climate crisis has increasingly been recognized as a social justice issue. Organizers and theorists of climate justice have observed how our current state of climate chaos both originates in and compounds the injustices of colonialism, structural racism, and extractive capitalism (e.g., Novotny, 2000; Harlan et al., 2015; Weil, 2020; Common Dreams, 2022; Honor the Earth, n.d.; NDN Collective, n.d.; Sunrise Movement, n.d.), with those least responsible for the climate crisis feeling its effects “first, worst, and longest” (Bullard, 2022). In response to these problems of social injustice, social movements have articulated the need for multiple aspects of climate justice, including distributive justice, or the fair allocation of climate benefits and detriments; recognition

justice, or fair representation of the views of marginalized groups; intergenerational justice, or the responsibility of current generations to provide a liveable climate for future ones, and to support youth through climate action; and procedural justice, which Newell et al. (2021:4) define as “fair, accountable, and transparent” decision-making processes.

Fair, accountable, and transparent decision-making processes rely on accessible communication. As Roosvall and Tegelberg (2020:1) note, climate justice communication should therefore “place overlapping emphasis on how climate (in)justice is communicated about and on whether such communication is done justly in itself.” That is, climate justice must be integrated not only in the conveyed content, but also in the forms and contexts used to convey it. As Newell et al. (2021:4) argue, just climate decision-making—and communication—must include those impacted by the climate crisis. Inclusivity is not only an ethical imperative, but a practical means of achieving the systemic changes necessary to halt the climate crisis: in the words of Naomi Klein, “To change everything, we need everyone.”¹

However, climate movements are not yet accessible and welcoming to everyone. Currently, many climate organizers who are marginalized in society in general are also marginalized within climate movements. UK-based campaigner Suzanne Dhaliwal describes this experience of marginalization as “the struggle within the struggle,” sharing that, as a queer woman of color, she has experienced racism, violence, and exclusion due to “the oppressive approach of the movement itself” (ACT for Inclusivity: Artivism, Community, Transformation, n.d.). Language is central to Dhaliwal’s experience of marginalization; for instance, she highlights the need to center Indigenous frontline voices.² To address “the struggle within the struggle,” climate justice communication must not only emanate from climate movements, but be practiced within them.

Toward more just, inclusive, and accessible communication within climate movements, this analysis draws on the framework of sociolinguistic justice to examine climate activists’ experiences of exclusion and erasure. Bucholtz et al. (2014:145) define sociolinguistic justice as “self-determination for linguistically subordinated individuals and groups in sociopolitical struggles over language.” Two concerns of sociolinguistic justice that are particularly relevant to this analysis are linguistic access, or the degree to which speakers of minoritized languages are granted access to the same services as others, and linguistic legitimation, or validating the use of stigmatized language varieties in varied social contexts, including formal and institutional contexts (Bucholtz et al., 2014). Each of these concerns considers not only the choice of languages (for instance, English vs. Spanish), but also the choice of communicative varieties (for instance, the use of regional dialects and communicative practices).

The analysis focuses on insights from 67 interviews and 112 online surveys with U.S. activists who described themselves as working toward climate justice (termed “climate justice organizers”). Though the initial goal of this research was to

investigate strategies for having climate conversations, rather than to examine sociolinguistic injustice, many participants brought up the topic of sociolinguistic injustice in the course of the interviews and open-response survey questions, and the analytical focus was adapted accordingly. One commonly mentioned issue is the lack of climate communication in languages other than English. Another problem is that, even when climate communication is provided in audiences’ native languages, the use of climate science jargon and a dry, emotionless tone make it difficult for audiences to absorb and engage with the content; while previous work has cautioned against the use of jargon in climate communication (e.g., Somerville and Hassol, 2011; Sterman, 2011) the role of tone in contributing to inaccessibility is less well-studied. In addition to these barriers of linguistic access, prescribed climate communication—that is, instances where organizations suggest how members should communicate, as is common during outreach efforts such as phonebanking—is also often exclusionary, as it is typically reliant on Dominant American English (a standardized form of English associated with Whiteness and White language). Still more overt is the problem of language policing, which seeks, for instance, to prevent marginalized climate organizers from talking openly about environmental racism. Finally, the analysis finds that adult organizers pressure youth to publicly talk about their climate grief despite being unwilling to do so themselves—a form of ventriloquism that is at odds with intergenerational climate justice. This work is intended as a constructive critique that will enable climate movements to become more accessible and accountable to frontline community members.

COMMUNICATION AND CLIMATE JUSTICE ORGANIZING

Previous work on communication in climate justice organizing has examined both discourses about climate movements and discourses within climate movements themselves. In the former vein, one body of work has critically analyzed media representations of climate justice and climate movements. Examples include Laksa’s (2014) analysis of British news coverage around the U.N. climate summits, Schmidt and Schäfer’s (2015) study of climate justice discourses in Indian, German, and U.S. print media, and Das’s (2020) research on framings of climate justice in Indian newspapers. In the latter vein, several studies have focused on climate organizers’ discursive contestations of climate injustice. For instance, Endres (2009) analyzed how the Skull Valley Band in Utah challenged outside discourses that labeled the desert southwest as a “wasteland” in which nuclear waste should be stored. Gorsevski (2012) examined how Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai used emplaced rhetoric—a type of communication that emphasizes embodied experiences with the physical world and the natural environment—and kinship metaphors—such as speaking of humanity as a family who must care for the earth—to encourage reforestation and postcolonial peacebuilding. de Onís (2012) focused on intersectional framings of climate justice in relation to reproductive justice in a

¹<https://web.archive.org/web/20160118074926/>

²<https://act.leeds.ac.uk/interview-suzanne-dhaliwal-on-climate-change-and-the-politics-of-activism/>

publication by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, showing how these framings disrupted the conceptualization of climate change as an environmental problem removed from social issues. Through their detailed attention to language, each of these studies unveiled the ways in which individuals and social movements advance the ideologies and practices of climate justice, providing useful insights for further climate organizing.

Ethnographic work has also closely attended to the role of language in climate organizing, often highlighting Indigenous contestations of neocolonial discourses of climate change. For example, Pouchet (2021) drew on her ethnographic research to critique “participatory conservation” in Tanzania at the Amani Nature Reserve, explaining that foresters dismissed the concerns of village leaders while pretending to engage in an open, even-handed dialogue. Castro-Sotomayor (2019) discussed his work with the Gran Familia Awá Binacional, an Indigenous organization active at the border of Ecuador and Colombia, finding that Awá people transform the abstract language of global climate change (e.g., terms such as “ozone cape”) into locally meaningful observations of changes to *katza su* (Awá territory). Tensions between neocolonial and Indigenous conceptualizations of climate change are also evident in global climate negotiations. For instance, Roosvall and Tegelberg (2015) analyze interviews with Indigenous activists to examine the exclusion and minimization of Indigenous perspectives at the 2011 U.N. climate summit. A second example, also in the context of a U.N. climate summit, is Grosse and Mark’s (2020) analysis of how the summit marginalized Indigenous youth climate activists through inadequate translation services, complicated technical and bureaucratic jargon, and dehumanizing framings of the climate crisis. These studies reveal that all forms and aspects of language use—including discursive context, conversation structure, translation, and language choice—can serve as resources for reinforcing or challenging neocolonial discourses of climate change.

In light of the connection of climate justice to decolonial, anti-racist, and feminist intellectual traditions (see, for instance, McGee and Greiner, 2020; Whyte, 2020; Sultana, 2022), which have criticized dominant paradigms of academic research, scholars have also turned their analytical gaze inwards to address best practices for research on climate justice communication. Roosvall and Tegelberg (2020:1) call for a consideration of whether climate justice communication is itself carried out justly. They extend this principle to research on climate justice communication, encouraging researchers to “self-reflexively ask what contribution a research project can make to enhancing climate justice communication, and how such research can be conducted in a just manner.” Raphael (2019) proposes engaged scholarship, which includes oppressed community members in the full research process, as one appropriate framework for work on environmental justice communication. Although this study is not fully participatory, since participants did not determine the research design, it shares the critical insights of marginalized climate activists and provides the basis for these same participants to design an upcoming phase of participatory research.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC JUSTICE: ISSUES AND INTERVENTIONS

The theoretical framework of sociolinguistic justice emerged from a tradition of linguistic work on and for social justice (Charity, 2008; Bucholtz et al., 2014). Sociolinguistic justice is achieved when linguistically marginalized people are able to define the sociopolitical roles of their language varieties on their own terms; it is defined according to local goals rather than top-down ones (Bucholtz et al., 2014). Recent work has applied the framework of sociolinguistic justice to Latine and Indigenous youth’s experiences of linguistic discrimination (Bucholtz et al., 2018), bilingual and heritage language education (Mendoza, 2021), and youth language brokering (Lopez, 2018). I take a broad view of sociolinguistic justice, augmenting the body of research that explicitly references sociolinguistic justice with related work on language and social justice.

Aspects of sociolinguistic justice that are relevant to the data discussed in this analysis include linguistic access, silencing, language policing, and standardization. Work on linguistic access has examined, for instance, the degree to which hospitals provide adequate multilingual signage (Schuster, 2012) and the barriers faced by Deaf students enrolled in e-learning courses (Mohammed, 2021). Linguistic access in this sense is a problem for climate communication because most academic articles and other climate-related media are produced in English (Hunter et al., 2021), a language that over 80% of the world does not speak.³ In extreme weather events such as hurricanes and wildfires, lack of multilingual communication is potentially life-threatening for people who do not speak English (Yoder, 2021). Even when the danger of climate change is less immediate, lack of multilingual climate communication presents a serious injustice, as the communities most impacted by climate change often face the most barriers to accessing to information about it. Organizations such as Climate Cardinals are working to address this problem by translating climate media into languages other than English.⁴ Most work on linguistic access is concerned with this kind of cross-language intelligibility, asking whether a service is provided in all languages necessary for users to understand it. However, linguistic access is not guaranteed even when communications are provided in the language(s) intelligible to a given user. As I will demonstrate in the analysis, the use of a cold, jargon-filled register makes climate communication difficult for people to engage with and understand even when information is presented in languages they speak.

Of equal concern to linguistic access, which may be understood as people’s right to understand what is said to them, is people’s right to make themselves understood. Silencing and language policing present obstacles to making

³ According to *Ethnologue*, there are ~1.5 billion speakers of English (including native speakers and second-language speakers) worldwide. The U.S. census’s population clock estimates the world population as of May 2022 at ~7.9 billion. Thus, ~19% of the world’s population speaks English.

⁴ <https://www.climatecardinals.org/>

oneself understood. Silencing can refer to interactional processes of preventing someone else from participating in a conversation, as in Eades (2000) analysis of how legal professionals limited Australian Aboriginal witnesses' contributions through interruptions and other tactics in New South Wales. Silencing can also refer to omission and underrepresentation of marginalized groups in media portrayals, as in Dragojevic et al. (2016) study of the underrepresentation of foreign-accented and non-standard American-accented characters on American primetime television. Both of these forms of silencing are relevant to climate justice communication. One notable example of media erasure as silencing is an incident in which the Associated Press cropped Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate out of a group photo of five climate activists, leaving only White activists in the photo (Rafaely and Barnes, 2020). In this analysis, I also discuss activists' experiences of being silenced in interactions within climate movements.

Language policing is closely related to silencing. Rather than preventing someone from speaking, however, language policing constrains what is said and how. Often, language policing refers to the policing of which language variety is used: for instance, Phyak (2015) discusses how Nepalese Facebook users set norms as to which languages should be used on the platform (e.g., Nepalese vs. English), and Cushing (2021) analyzes the privileging of "correct" speech in two schools in England. These forms of language policing stem from the monolingual ideology, or the idea that it is natural or desirable to speak only one language in a given society or social context, and the standard language ideology, or "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, non-varying spoken language that is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions" (Lippi-Green, 2004:293). I extend the concept of language policing to capture policing of word choice and content even within standard language varieties, aligning with what is popularly referred to as "tone policing" (see Davis and Ernst, 2019).

Though less confrontational than language policing, language standardization—the elevation of one language variety over others for use as an official language—also poses problems for sociolinguistic justice. Language standardization is often used to describe large-scale processes such as selecting spelling conventions and language varieties for use in pedagogical materials like dictionaries (e.g., Johnston, 2003), but it can occur in more covert, local ways. Here, I consider the use of prescribed climate communication materials (e.g., phone banking scripts) as an instance of language standardization, as they are usually provided in Dominant American English.

Also relevant to the present analysis and to sociolinguistic justice, though less discussed in sociocultural linguistics, is the concept of ventriloquism. Ventriloquism refers to a process in which one actor—such as an individual, institution, or corporation—expresses their views in such a way as to make it seem as if they are coming from another actor, similarly to how a ventriloquist "throws" their voice so as to make it seem that it is coming from a dummy. This tactic is often used by climate skeptics and fossil fuel industry interests to stymie climate action. For instance, Bsumek et al. (2014) examine how the Appalachian

coal industry used public relations campaigns to create the illusion of a broad base of support for coal, a phenomenon also termed "astroturfing" (since it artificially mimics legitimate grassroots support). I examine ventriloquism within climate movements, describing how adult activists "throw" their voices through youth activists in order to avoid vulnerably sharing their own emotions.

Researchers have also analyzed—and enacted—interventions to promote sociolinguistic justice. One such counterstrategy is linguistic legitimation, which asserts the appropriateness of stigmatized language varieties in a range of contexts. For example, Bucholtz et al. (2016) encourage the legitimation of Spanglish (a mixed language variety influenced by Spanish and English) as an appropriate language for academic presentations. In this study, I propose linguistic legitimation as a counterstrategy to standardized climate communication materials that only use Dominant American English. Another counterstrategy relevant to climate justice communication is listening. While researchers across disciplines have noted the usefulness of listening to people affected by climate change for mitigation efforts and other purposes—termed "instrumental listening" by Dudman and de Wit (2021)—some have also emphasized the importance of "receptive listening" (Dudman and de Wit, 2021), which seeks to understand cultural knowledge and is open to collaborative dialogue. Others refer to this kind of listening as "deep listening." As Fraude et al. (2021) argue in their analysis of spaces for reflexive dialogue at climate summits, deep listening originates in a genuine interest in other perspectives and facilitates mutual learning. Receptive or deep listening is foundational to relationship-building, which is increasingly recognized as a need for just climate work of all kinds, including partnerships between non-Indigenous researchers and Indigenous communities (see Montgomery and Blanchard, 2021). I draw on the concepts of linguistic legitimation and listening as counterstrategies to oppressive ways of engaging with frontline communities.

In this analysis, I examine U.S. activists' experiences of sociolinguistic injustice in climate movements. I find that activists experience language barriers, silencing and policing of discourses of environmental injustice, erasure of the agency of frontline communities, over-standardization of climate communication outreach materials, and pressure (particularly for younger activists) to voice climate grief. I further discuss activists' recommended counterstrategies, which include improved language access, linguistic legitimation, and listening. The results clarify key issues of sociolinguistic injustice in U.S. climate movements and suggest ways of addressing these issues.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data consist of hour-long, semi-structured interviews with 67 climate organizers and online surveys with 112 climate organizers working in regional organizations (and hubs of national organizations) across the U.S. Participants were given the choice to participate in both the survey and the interview, so there was overlap between these two groups, with 49 people

participating in both the survey and the interview. Participants were contacted through organization websites, email listservs, forums, social platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit, and snowball sampling. The research invitation was open to all people engaged in climate justice organizing, broadly defined, who lived in the U.S. and were at least 13 years old; therefore, the sample includes grassroots organizers, staff members of non-profit climate organizations, and several climate communication experts known as narrative strategists.⁵ Priority was placed on including organizers of color and those directly affected by the climate crisis. The design of the interview and survey questions was informed by preliminary conversations with climate organizers, as well as by Goldberg et al. (2019) work on the frequency and outcome of climate conversations, Chapman et al. (2017) critical overview of research on emotion in climate change communication, Mackay et al. (2021) work on the role of social identity in partisan polarization of climate change, and Pearson et al.'s (2017) work on the role of non-partisan factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic class in determining climate change attitudes. The interview and survey questions are included in **Annexes A and B**.

The initial goal of the data collection was not to analyze sociolinguistic injustice in climate movements, but to examine conversational strategies of climate justice organizing. Each interview was a one-on-one conversation with a climate organizer, with each climate organizer participating in one interview. According to the conventions of semi-structured interviews, I did not proceed linearly through a fixed set of questions, but used a conversational style and asked questions in response to the interviewee's contributions (see Raworth et al., 2012:1 for more information on semi-structured interviews). Example questions included, "Who do you usually talk to about climate change?" "What goals do you have for these conversations?" and "In your experience, what strategies are effective for talking to people about climate change?" Interview data were analyzed using content analysis in ATLAS.ti in order to code for common discourse topics, including mentions of sociolinguistic (in)justice. Although I did not directly ask about language and social justice issues, they emerged as a theme across the interviews. This unforeseen focus illustrates how semi-structured interviews can offer opportunities for responsive data analysis and serendipitous findings (see also Åkerström, 2013).

My positionality is shaped by my experiences as a White woman who has participated in the climate movement for the past 3 years through organizations such as the Sunrise Movement, Citizens' Climate Lobby, and Extinction Rebellion. I have, on the one hand, observed the implicit centering of White, middle-class experiences of climate change in some organizing contexts, and on the other hand, encountered discussions of how to decenter Whiteness and support frontline communities through allyship. The following analysis is limited by my White and Anglophone privilege and by my partial understanding of climate change, i.e., having felt its impacts

mostly at the psychological level. The analysis identifies how the predominance of similarly privileged positionalities in U.S. climate movements results in various forms of sociolinguistic injustice, and offers strategies for adopting more just practices.

Fifty-seven percent of the 67 interviewees identified as White; 16% identified as Black, African American, or North African; 10% identified as multiracial; 8% identified as Asian; 6% identified as Latine; and 3% identified as Indigenous, Indigenous and Chicana, American Indian, or Alaska Native.⁶ Fifty-two percent identified as female, 29% as male, and 19% as genderqueer, non-binary, or agender. The most common age groups were 18–24 (25% of participants), 25–34 (22% of participants), and 55–64 (14%). Four youth interviewees in the age range of 13–18 were also included. The median age group was 25–34. This reflects the high level of engagement of youth and young adults in climate movements. The sample included interviewees across 24 states. Most interviewees lived in California (14%), New York (10%), Arizona (8%), or Washington (8%). The sample was almost entirely politically progressive: 78% of interviewees identified as "very progressive," 12% as "somewhat progressive," 2% as "somewhat conservative," 2% as "very conservative," and 7% as "other" (including "radical," "Progressive Republican" and "Communist"). The median annual income was \$25,000–\$49,000, likely reflecting the fact that many interviewees mentioned that they were students or retirees.

To determine the representativeness of the sample, the interviews contained questions about interviewees' experiences of climate impacts and the extent to which they belonged to marginalized groups. Sixty-five percent of interviewees said they had been personally affected by climate change. Forty-six percent said their community was not well-represented in many environmental movements. Forty percent said their community was disproportionately impacted by climate change. Thirty-eight percent said that if a climate disaster occurred where they lived, they would probably face financial difficulty. Twenty-two percent said that if a climate disaster occurred where they lived, they would probably be in more danger than others.

Interviewees were given the choice to use their real name in publications or select a pseudonym. All real names present in this study have been used with permission. In view of this analysis' focus on English-only bias, it is important to note that the research has been conducted and published in English; this reflects the dominance of English in academia (see Sowards, 2019), and is a shortcoming. However, to make the analysis accessible to English-speaking climate organizers, who are one of the primary intended audiences, the findings have been circulated in zine format to each of the organizations involved in the study, as well as in social media climate action spaces.

⁵Narrative strategists identify and intervene in societal discourses, or "stories," about the climate crisis and other social issues. Many work with climate movements in an advisory capacity, helping them craft campaign messages.

⁶Interviewees' demographic information is discussed above because interview data is the main focus of the analysis. Survey participants' demographic information is included in **Annex C**.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES IN US CLIMATE ORGANIZING

In the following sections, I begin with a discussion of problems of linguistic access in U.S. climate organizing, including English-only climate communication and the predominance of a jargon-filled, affectless communicative style. I then extend a similar critique to prescriptive climate communication materials such as phonebanking scripts, showing that these materials likewise privilege Dominant American English over the diverse language varieties used by climate activists. The next section deals with broader communicative barriers, focusing on how colonial research frameworks erase the agency of frontline communities, leading to the exclusion of frontline communities from climate adaptation and mitigation projects. I further analyze climate activists' experiences of language and policing and silencing in interactions outside and within climate movements. Finally, the last two sections examine issues of representation, first discussing how climate storytelling often foregrounds privileged experiences of climate change, then examining how older, more privileged activists ventriloquize vulnerable climate emotions through younger ones. These sections also include considerations of possible counterstrategies to address each barrier of sociolinguistic justice.

Linguistic Access

Problems of linguistic access can occur between or within languages. The following sections discuss English-only bias, which presents a barrier to speakers of other languages (such as Spanish), and the use of a jargon-filled, affectless communicative style, which presents a barrier even to English speakers.

English-Only Bias

Several activists noted that a predominance of English-only climate messages impedes access to climate action for people who prefer another language. One survey respondent noted, *Climate science has been gatekept by professionals and academics, we need to be making climate science language for the people, including people without degrees, non-English speakers* (emphasis added). Another observed, *[The] Climate Crisis is not an English-only historical event*. Interviewees likewise stressed the harms of English-only climate communication. Andréia Coutinho Louback, a Humphrey Fellow at UC Davis with experience organizing in Brazil, comments that “the language is a barrier to understand more, because a lot of good articles and a lot of good events are in English, so if you don’t speak, it’s one more limitation to deep dive, and to make the discussion more accessible.” Mr. Jordan, a diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion specialist, similarly observes that English-only materials act in concert with technical climate science terms to exclude audiences who are not White and affluent (1).

(1)

If we talk about geothermal and we talk about the ozone layer, we talk about a lot of these things, some people might understand it, but I know that for myself, growing up, I didn’t understand

what those terms are. So think about how many people there are out there. I think from a communication aspect, the reason why it seems like it’s more of a White affluent community that is involved in the climate justice initiatives, it’s because it’s being spoken in a language that speaks to that audience, and it’s not being relayed in a language that speaks to the audience for the people that I come from. Specifically, even when we look at it being in Spanish, there’s an assumption, if you live in the United States, that you speak English. Well, a lot of people don’t. And even if they do, there’s still a preference as to what language they would like to receive information in. What I’ve seen up to this point is a lot of the material, a lot of the things that are really targeted, are only in English. So you have to kind of translate yourself. [...] That’s why I’m trying to make myself a resource for the individuals that I work with, so that way I could explain it to them. And I’ve built relationships, and I’ve built trust, so that people realize that it’s bigger than the polar bears, tree-hugging and Al Gore.

Jordan names Spanish as an example of a non-English language that would increase the accessibility of climate communication, remarking that even when Spanish speakers understand English as well, they may prefer to be addressed in Spanish. The lack of Spanish-language accessibility is a problem given that Latine people are disproportionately affected by climate change (Shonkoff et al., 2011; Méndez et al., 2020; Castillo et al., 2021; US EPA, 2021) yet are more concerned about the environment (Pearson et al., 2017) and more active in climate organizing than White people (Ballew et al., 2019). From a strategic perspective, in areas where many Latine people live, conducting climate outreach in Spanish can mean the difference between achieving policy change or not: for instance, Grosse (2022) describes how an anti-fracking measure in Santa Barbara failed to pass because it did not garner the support of the Latine community. To address this problem, climate communications should be made available in all languages spoken by the target audience, even if this is a matter of language preference and not unintelligibility.

Jargon and Affectlessness

Another linguistic access concern is the unintelligibility of climate communications even to English speakers, which compounds the problem of linguistic access for those who prefer another language. This unintelligibility can be traced to the use of jargon, or unexplained technical terms, and to the unemotional, “cold” tone of climate communication. As Louback comments, not simplifying the jargon around climate science, policy, and action constitutes a “social justice fail” (2).

(2)

ANDRÉIA COUNTINHO LOUBACK: Sometimes the words, the terms, and sometimes the events, the discussions—there are a lot of keywords that you need to know what it means to understand the center of the discussion. What are the efforts to simplify and at the same time to raise the discussion, but try to make it more accessible for all, not just for me or you or other students, but for all people from all fields? When we cannot simplify the language, this is a social justice fail, because if we need to communicate with the territories, and with the vulnerable places, we need to be aligned to their reality, to their vocabulary, to their backgrounds of vision and language.

Louback ascribes the problem of unintelligibility primarily to the use of unexplained and unsimplified keywords. To address this issue, climate communicators should use clear plain-language explanations as well as or instead of technical terms. In addition, Louback suggests that it is necessary to align with the “backgrounds of vision and language” of people in vulnerable places, suggesting that avoiding technical jargon is necessary but not sufficient.

One way in which climate communicators must be aligned with audiences is at the level of emotional tone. Erica Jensen, a climate justice educator who supports and trains youth organizers, describes climate science communication as “unemotional,” “cold,” and “straight-up inaccessible,” pointing out that this emotionless style is inappropriate to a life-or-death situation (3).

(3)

Climate science has become so unemotional and even just like straight-up inaccessible. The reason why I don't really find myself reading about a lot of climate science is because I don't know what it's saying half the time. It feels very cold and not like we're talking about the end of ecosystems. You know, people are dying because of climate change.

Jensen's critique recalls Besnier (1990:431) observation that Western academic writing is not truly unemotional—as Western folk beliefs hold—but instead suffused with “the emotionally distinctive aura of affectlessness.” Besnier further comments that academics' social capital is contingent on the ability to produce this affectless style of discourse. In the context of climate change communication, climate skeptics have accused climate scientists of alarmism in order to undermine their credibility, prompting climate scientists to understate the dangers of climate change (Dunlap, 2013:694). Faced with the specter of climate skepticism, climate communicators more generally may be tempted to avoid expressing emotions about climate change in order to access the credibility granted by the affectless register of science communication. In fact, some audiences—such as, in the U.S., men and Republicans—reportedly prefer climate messages that do not include overt expressions of emotion (such as “I feel heartbroken that, in the last century, we're causing sea levels to rise...”) (Bloodhart et al., 2019). However, a cold, supposedly unemotional discourse style renders climate communication inaccessible to many would-be activists, particularly youth and frontline community members. To engage these audiences, communicators should express emotion when talking about climate change. This can be achieved not only through overt statements of emotion (e.g., “I feel” statements) but also through descriptions and narratives that implicitly evoke emotion, as well as through tone of voice, eye gaze, and gesture.

The above recommendations raise the further challenge of identifying what a given audience will find clear and emotionally relatable. Accessible climate communication therefore relies on an in-depth understanding of the audience's priorities and communicative norms. Chris Gaynor, the northeast regional organizer of the Climate Reality Project, calls on climate communicators to ask, “What is the language *you're* speaking,

and how can I meet that?” and recommends communicating “the narrative story that allows people [in grassroots or frontline spaces] to connect [climate justice] to their lives” (4).

(4)

It's my job, as the academic, or the person in power, or the leader in these spaces, to [be] like, “What is the language *you're* speaking, and how can I meet that?” rather than, “This is the language I'm speaking, let me bring you here.”⁷ [...] When folks are in certain positions, especially in grassroots or frontline spaces, they do not have the time or energy nor ability at times to access this information that we've created *via* resources or all these informative things that are trying to move the needle on climate. My view is that all these resources were to educate the educated, to galvanize that support of those who we're trying to speak about. As I said before, you bring up the carbon cycle in a conversation, people get bored. They're not interested. And our difficulty has been, especially in the scientific and climate community, we spend a third to half the time talking about the science. The past 4 years, I've been saying, “We need to stop.” We have put enough information out there and there's been enough people talking about it. If the science is not understood, we need to change the conversation. It's not that your data's not great, it's just as science communicators we are not communicating the narrative story that allows people to connect that to their lives.

Gaynor's recommendations parallel the commonly cited advice to “meet people where they're at” in climate communication. For instance, in her ethnographic work with youth climate activists in Santa Barbara, Grosse (2022) documents activists talking about the importance of not overwhelming audiences with climate-related information, but meeting their areas of interest and expertise. Therefore, accessible climate communication does not only necessitate clear, emotionally rich explanations of climate issues, but must also be grounded in a thorough understanding of a given audience's priorities, interests, and preferred communicative style. This understanding can be achieved by community-based, participatory ethnographic research and by supporting climate communicators from frontline communities.

Putting (the Wrong) Words in People's Mouths: Over-Standardization of Prescriptive Climate Change Communication

Just as climate communications are less accessible and effective when they are not targeted to audiences, guidelines for climate communication are hindered by a lack of adaptability to sociocultural contexts. National mobilizations, because of their scale, are prone to generating phonebanking scripts and climate conversation guides that are not adapted to regions or social groups. This standardization of suggested climate communication typically privileges hegemonic language varieties such as Dominant American English.

However, regional speech styles and communicative norms are important tools for relational organizing. Sasha Irby, a staff

⁷These and other italics present in transcripts were added at the time of transcription to mark points of emphasis expressed by the speaker.

member of the Power Shift Network, provides the example of a preferred conversational structure in the Gulf South (5).

(5)

People would assume, being in the south, it is always talk forever. Lots of small talk before you ever make an ask. But then you can get, in parts of the Gulf South region, this idea of being like, “I’m a real straight with you,” very upfront, and then make sure that you give lots of space for back and forth. You don’t necessarily have to load up some of the pleasantries on the front end, but you need to make sure there is lots of space for them to ask questions. [...] You need to make sure there’s time for storytelling, and all of that. And then you can circle back, return to things in the beginning, touch back on things. Like, “I’m just calling you to let you know that there’s something going on. I’m calling everybody in the neighborhood. But right now, Cassandra, I want to hear about what’s going on with your roof.” And then you tie back into it, but they already knew it was coming, so it doesn’t feel like they’re getting tricked.

Irby’s comment reveals that region-specific communicative styles are vital to interpersonal relationship-building: the risk of not following the preferred conversational structure of the Gulf South is that the interlocutor may “feel like they’re getting tricked.” Relatedly, other research has found that mentioning shared experiences of living in a particular area can increase the success of climate conversations. For instance, a case study of a deep canvassing program in Trail, British Columbia found that canvassers could effectively build rapport by discussing their experiences with local climate impacts like heat waves (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2022). Using regional communicative styles is an implicit way of building a similar kind of rapport based on shared rootedness to a place (Reed, 2018).

Academic researcher and divestment organizer Theo LeQuerne likewise connects standardized climate communication advice to inauthenticity (6).

(6)

It has to be authentic to the person themselves. Those kinds of rigid categorizations of “Do this, don’t do that” is not necessarily helpful. When I’ve done phone banking, for example, I’ve found that I’m much more effective moving people to take the action I want them to take when I’m not going off the script, and I’m kind of adapting the script to my personality. People can hear that you’re speaking from a script, and react badly against it for the most part.

LeQuerne’s comment highlights that not only regional, but also individual variation in communicative styles is necessary to convey authenticity. Individual variation includes idiosyncratic characteristics, such as humor and ‘personality,’ that have been argued to be important for earning trust (Goodwin and Dahlstrom, 2014). While it would be possible for climate organizations to provide scripts in multiple regional speech styles and ethnolects (for instance, African American Language and Chicano English), it is likely prohibitively difficult to provide scripts tailored to categorizations as fine-grained as

individual communicative styles. Instead, organizations could consider acknowledging which language varieties scripts are written in, encouraging people to adapt them to their own style of communication, and providing real-world examples of how the scripts could be customized. Alternatively, instead of using preformulated scripts, organizations could suggest topics to cover and provide prompts for members to write their own scripts. For instance, Climate Generation offers a storytelling prompt activity to help people narrate their own climate stories.⁸

Erasing the Agency of Frontline Communities

The previous sections discuss the erasure of diverse forms of language use in favor of a one-size-fits-all, English-dominant paradigm which is seen as the most general or appropriate form of communication for use in climate organizing. This erasure implicitly links White, middle class identity, which is associated with Dominant American English, to climate activism. Relatedly, climate movements sometimes make frontline community members visible only as victims of climate injustice, and not as agents of climate action.

One instance of this erasure of agency is failing to consult with community members before making research, organizing, and policy decisions. For instance, public health expert and organizer Dr. Monica Unsel comments, “So many times, I’ve seen presentations and the community is like, ‘That’s not what we’re concerned about. Why didn’t you ask us before you went and got that money?’” Unsel recommends consulting with community partners before formulating research questions and hypotheses. Similarly, Power Shift Network staff member Sasha Irby cautions outsiders against coming into impacted communities with “grand ideas of how to fix things” (7).

(7)

People come in with grand ideas of how to fix things and know nothing about the terrain. There’s a great anecdote about people who live like right on the water, and people who don’t live here will be like, “Why is your house so close? Wouldn’t it be better if it was further back away?” But down here, the way that the terrain works, often the land closest to the riverbank or closest to the water is the highest ground, just because of the way that the terrain works over time, and sedimentation. And so they’re like, “Yeah, okay, insurance company from, you know, Missouri or Maine. That’s not how the terrain is here.” You can think about that as a metaphor for the communication terrain. Don’t assume that you understand how to approach it. Just listen to how people communicate. People want to tell me stories. They want to be able to sit there. There’s gold in those stories. They’re telling you something. It’s just having the patience and receptivity, and also not coming up empty—being willing to tell stories yourself too.

To remedy the erasure of community members’ agency and resulting communication breakdowns, outsiders interested in working with impacted communities should (1) approach communities at the outset of potential projects and (2) honor community expertise in determining how the project will

⁸<https://www.climategen.org/take-action/act-climate-change/climate-stories>

develop. Unfortunately, this structure is not yet the norm in Western academic research. Teaching decolonial and otherwise anti-oppressive research methods, such as Smith's (2021) on decolonizing research methodologies, is one way to counter the colonial mindset that frames frontline community members as passive. In addition, granting agencies financing collaborations between impacted communities and outside researchers should provide funds for relationship-building and joint project development to ensure that there is support for these crucial initial steps.

Language Policing and Silencing

Another, more blatant way in which privileged groups erase the experiences and needs of impacted communities is through language policing and silencing. Often, detractors of climate justice police the language of those who aim to highlight the intersections between climate injustice and racial injustice. For instance, Unseld recounts how her organization resisted lawmakers' attempts to silence their observations of environmental racism (8).

(8)

Some lawmakers, they told us they didn't like the term *environmental justice* because it made people uncomfortable. So we pushed it and said, "Well, we'll call it environmental racism." Because it was like, we're not going backwards, we're going to keep pushing forward. They really didn't like that. So then we said, "Okay, well, it's genocide. We're just going to keep calling it what it is. We're not going to make it palatable, because we're dying." So in that aspect, it's empowering to say like, "No, you're not going to control how we describe what's happening in our communities."

Unseld's observation that the term *environmental justice* "made people uncomfortable" suggests that discussions of racial injustice—however oblique—threaten White comfort. According to (Roth-Gordon et al., 2020), White comfort is generated in part by avoiding overt mentions of racial conflict. Constraining climate communication to an abstract scientific register is a strategy for White climate communicators to divert attention from the climate violence faced by people of color.

Unseld's experiences reveal that, in the case of climate discourses, White comfort is also supported by a consumption-oriented frame that reduces climate action to environmentally responsible purchasing decisions (9).

(9)

On the flip side, it can be frustrating because you do see amongst White people, middle, upper class, they gaslight communities because they're all about, "Well, you know, there's a single use plastic ban, or just don't buy that, just buy this." And when you try to tell them that we need to do policy work and systemic change, they just laugh and they're like, "No no, all you need to do is just—it's a consumer thing." [...] That population, you know, White middle upper class, [...] has the] time to write blogs about how they are personally saving the planet. They kind of have that, I don't want to say dominance, but the media is paying more attention to *them*, and how *they* decide what climate work is, how *they* decide what we need to be doing as a society, and they're

completely ignoring the Black and Brown communities who are like, "Hey, it's a genocide, but I'm working three jobs and I don't have time to write a blog and make my own makeup or make my own deodorant the way you are." And that's frustrating, because I feel like we just need to get them out of the way. The White people with the blog. We've just got to get them to be quiet, because they're dominating the conversation, and people are dying.

Unseld observes that the environmental actions proposed by White, middle- and upper-class people (such as writing blogs and making one's own deodorant) require an abundance of free time, making them unattainable for working people. The "White people with the blog" have the wealth, and therefore the free time, to dominate social media discourses of climate action, indirectly silencing people of color. Silencing can therefore be understood in this context as a multi-pronged approach consisting of (1) direct tactics such as language policing and (2) indirect tactics of media erasure.

Silencing occurs within climate movements, as well. For instance, one organizer described how her supervisors (the leaders of the organization) discouraged her from naming the root causes of climate change—"colonialism, capitalism, [and] overconsumption"—in a report about the impacts of climate change on a primarily Black and Brown city (10).

(10)

ORGANIZER: I showed it to my supervisors and even though I know they agreed, like, "Oh yeah, this is interesting information," and even, "Yes, this is true," they still said, "Oh, I think this might be a little too academic, too theoretical, too high-level. We just need to tell them greenhouse gases lead to the Earth warming. That's all we need to say." Later, I talked about it with the other person of color on our staff and I asked her, "I don't know, what do you feel about that?" and she brought up how "every time anyone tries to bring up the hard facts like that, the ones that make people feel a little uncomfortable, the fact that every single time it's like, 'Oh this is not the time,' making it so that it's never the time and we never get around to actually talking about it." It's not enough that the people who work on this in this field know it somewhere in the back of their mind. It needs to be something we're constantly saying, constantly being explicit about, because otherwise we also just look hypocritical. We lose trust with our audience because then we look like we are part of the problem and we're just covering up for major polluters by being like, "Everyone recycle more."

The organizer's supervisors' stated concern that the mentions of colonialism and capitalism were "too academic" and "too theoretical" could be a valid insight, in light of the need to minimize jargon in climate communication. This issue could be addressed by providing explanations of these and other relevant *isms* and how they connect to climate change. However, another staff member of color at the organization suspected that mentions of capitalism and colonialism "make people feel a little uncomfortable" due to the White-dominant culture in professional spaces, which stigmatizes naming uncomfortable truths as being "indecent" or "not for the public space." The organizer further noted, "I don't believe by any means that

my coworkers were trying not to talk about those issues, but rather that they, themselves, simply did not know when and how to bring it up.” Whatever the supervisors’ intent, the outcome was that the organizer felt complicit because she was not permitted to engage in open discussions of climate injustice. This example underscores the need to challenge White-dominant organizational cultures by taking care not to silence people of color who wish to discuss climate injustice, and instead supporting them in explicitly naming the connections between climate change and racial injustice.

When to Be Silent: Considerations for Climate Storytelling

Related to the problem of “White people with the blog” dominating climate discourses is the issue of representation in climate storytelling. Climate storytelling has been embraced by many organizations, and is particularly popular with youth organizations such as the Sunrise Movement. However, as these movements increasingly recognize, care should be taken to ensure that the stories of those who have been less directly impacted by the climate crisis do not drown out the stories of those who have been more directly impacted. Narrative strategist Patrick Reinsborough, co-founder of the Center for Story-based Strategy, reflects on these problems of representation in climate storytelling. He describes how Marshall Ganz’s work on public narrative, which arose from the context of United Farm Workers union organizing, inspired White, college-educated youth climate activists in the 2010s to tell the story of the climate crisis from their perspective, commenting, “The fact that we had thousands of White, middle-class, college-educated 21-year-olds that told the story of the climate movement based on their own lens, their own story of self, did *not* necessarily help pull in other constituencies.” Reinsborough notes that narrative strategy for the climate crisis requires not only telling one’s own story, but also lifting up the stories of others who are more directly affected (11).

(11)

[...] I think from a strategic movement-building lens, the truth of it is, not all stories are created equal. [...] It’s about, how do you help elevate the stories that really show the broader [picture]—it’s sort of the difference between a portrait and a landscape. Personal stories are the tried and true way to connect, but when we’re talking about scale, when you’re talking about not just organizing but actually spreading these stories at a large level, that’s where the strategy piece comes in. That’s why we always say, it’s not just about storytelling, it’s about story *changing*, and that’s why you need a strategy. Part of that really represents, who are the characters in the story? A lot of times, as organizers, we have to recognize that we’re not the main characters of the story. That means our organizing has to be more about lifting up other folks’ story.

While Reinsborough acknowledges the value of climate stories as “the tried and true way to connect,” he warns that it’s important to consider whether to center one’s own experiences or share someone else’s narrative. In other words, by encouraging “young, White, college-educated folks” to share their climate stories

when older people, people of color, and non-college-educated people do not have the opportunity to do so, organizations can inadvertently reinforce perceptions of climate action as elitist and foreground climate activists who are not widely relatable.

As Reinsborough observes, representation becomes more of a concern at scale, when an organization shares climate stories widely. While individual organizers should feel free to use their climate stories to conduct relational organizing with those close to them, institutions—including climate organizations and others—should carefully consider concerns of representation when deciding which climate stories to share.

When to Speak: Emotional Ventriloquism

The above critiques focus on a common dynamic in which privileged people silence those who are most directly subjected to the impacts of the climate crisis. However, when privileged people encourage impacted people to speak out about the climate crisis, this dynamic can also be fraught. For example, Johannah Blackman, executive director of A Climate to Thrive, discusses how adult climate advocates pressure youth to vulnerably express their climate emotions when they themselves hesitate to do so (12).

(12)

I’ve seen [...] a pattern in which young people are expected to bear this responsibility of fighting for their future and are asked to show up very vulnerably because there’s this professionalism that older generations feel like they need to operate under. You know, “We’re not supposed to be showing our emotions about climate change, but it’s okay for young people to do that.” So they come into let’s say for example a town meeting to demand a declaration of climate emergency, and are expected to be vulnerable and talk about why this is important to them, and this is their future. In some horrible cases, they are dismissed. In other cases, adults tell them that they’re proud of them and that they give them hope, and yet meaningful enough action doesn’t follow. That’s a very strong pattern. And when young people bring that up that, you know, “You said you were proud, you said that this is important, why aren’t things changing?” they’re told that they don’t understand why it is difficult to make this change happen.

In the context Blackman describes, youth activists are encouraged to bare their grief and fear about the climate crisis, only to be patronized by policymakers who tell them they don’t understand the obstacles to climate action. Adult advocates act as ventriloquists, using youth as dummies through which to voice their climate grief, anger, and fear. Co Griffin, a youth organizer with Ohio Youth for Climate Justice, reports being patronized by decision-makers in such situations, saying: “The most frustrating one is when [city council members] just shake my hand, like, ‘Oh, you’re so inspiring, you’re so young, and I’m not gonna do anything about it.’ Like, [clasps hands] ‘Oh, the young people.’” In these instances, adult allies could better support youth climate activists by offering to accompany them in vulnerably sharing their own emotional experiences of the climate crisis, advocating for bold climate solutions, or perhaps jointly consider a different strategy altogether. In general, to avoid pressuring more directly impacted people to speak about climate issues, allies should ask

those people whether, when, and how they wish to share their experiences and views, and when they would prefer for allies to participate as well.

CONCLUSION: STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCING SOCIOLINGUISTIC JUSTICE IN CLIMATE MOVEMENTS

In this analysis, I have brought considerations of language and social justice to bear on the ongoing search for ways to bring climate movements into alignment with the ideals of climate justice. I have identified several mechanisms of exclusion and silencing, including an English-only bias, the use of a jargon-filled, emotionless register in climate communication, over-standardization of prescriptive climate communication texts such as scripts, language policing of environmental racism discourses, and cooptation of the emotions of affected communities. While some of these barriers to accessibility have been discussed in the climate communication literature, the present analysis clarifies how climate organizers have experienced them and provide realworld examples of counterstrategies. In addition, some barriers—such as the inaccessibility of the emotionless register of climate science communication and the process of ventriloquism through which adult organizers use youth to express vulnerable climate emotions—have previously received little scholarly attention. The results further suggest that the following counterstrategies can aid in making climate justice communication more inclusive, particularly to frontline communities.

Improving Language Access

- 1) Make communications around climate science, climate justice, and climate action available in all the languages spoken by a given frontline community.
- 2) Use communicative styles that are clear and relatable within a given context, as determined by community members in that context (for instance, through participatory ethnographic work and deep listening). For example, in this analysis, a climate organizer in the Gulf South noted that in this region, it is important to use an upfront and flexible communicative style by first stating the purpose of the conversation, then making time for storytelling and other topics.
- 3) Use emotion-rich climate communication rather than the cold, emotionless style associated with many forms of climate science communication. Emotion-rich climate communication includes overt statements of emotion (e.g., “I feel infuriated that. . .”), terms that evoke emotion [e.g., Solnit’s (2015) description of climate change as “Extreme, horrific, long-term, widespread violence”], and communicative style (e.g., tone of voice, gaze, and gesture).

Resisting Over-Standardization of Prescriptive Climate Communication Materials

- 4) In materials to be used in canvassing and other organizing contexts, suggest themes—for instance, ending a conversation

with a call to action—and overall strategies—for instance, rephrasing what the other person said to check for understanding—instead of providing word-for-word scripts.

- 5) If scripts are necessary, aim to provide them in all the languages and dialects spoken by the people who will be using them, or (at minimum) encourage speakers to adapt the scripts to their communicative styles, including overall conversational structure as well as word choice.

Acknowledging the Agency of Frontline Communities

- 6) Use research frameworks such as engaged scholarship and community-based participatory research to develop research and organizing goals with frontline communities, rather than viewing them only as sources of data. Advocate for funders of participatory research to allocate funding to relationship-building and collaborative project development.

Resisting Language Policing and Silencing of Environmental Justice Discourses

- 7) Openly discuss environmental racism and other climate justice issues, and support others to do so. Resist attempts to silence discussions of climate injustice by insisting on using terms such as “environmental racism.” Create intentional spaces for discussions of the systemic causes of climate injustice, rather than indefinitely postponing such conversations.

Improving Representation in Climate Storytelling

- 8) Consider carefully whether to share your own climate story or uplift someone else’s, and encourage other climate organizers to do so. For instance, organizers with less direct experiences of climate injustice could share the stories of those more directly affected, particularly when communicating to a wide audience (in smaller-scale relational organizing, however, it may be helpful to share your own personal experiences of the climate crisis even if you do not consider yourself to be a frontline community member).

Countering Climate Ventriloquism

- 9) Recognize and disrupt climate ventriloquism within climate movements. Do not pressure others to express climate-related emotions or views that you are unwilling to express yourself (for instance, because you are concerned about appearing overly vulnerable).

Several of these suggested counterstrategies present challenges in their own right: more work is needed, for instance, on how to incorporate emotion into climate communication, how to make climate communication multilingual and multidialectal in accordance with community needs, and how to navigate concerns of representation and tokenization. By examining these challenges, researchers can contribute to accessible climate communication, and in so doing, make climate justice movements more hospitable and accountable to frontline community members.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found at: Harvard Dataverse (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/27FO2A>).

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of College of Saint Benedict and St. John's University. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s), and minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin, for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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