The weight of emotions: exploring how young activists feel about their identity, agency and political participation

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Original Article

The Weight of Emotions: Exploring How Young Activists Feel About Their Identity, Agency and Political Participation

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Abstract

This article explores young people's emotional associations with activism in relation to their social identity, sense of agency and activist participation. Focusing on three activist topics—climate change, anti-racism, feminism and LGBTQ rights—the objective is to analyse emotional nuances both within and across these. Building on socio-political development theory, emotions affect the sense of (in)justice and participation in activism and are also central to how young people view their own agency. The focus group research in the United Kingdom showed that different emotional associations drove motivation for political action and that social identity influenced interest in and experiences with activism. While activism represented the self-actualization of values, identity-rights activism came with the added burden of pressure and personal risks for some. The findings highlight the complexity of emotions motivating activism, the significance of identity and values for finding belonging, and the intersectional dimension of one's sense of agency.

Keywords

Youth participation, activism, young people, marginalization, climate change, identity, Black Lives Matter movement, LGBTQ youth

Introduction

Understanding the factors that drive young individuals towards active participation is crucial for comprehending the current landscape of youth-led movements against

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climate change and towards social justice. Emotions affect young people's engagement with political issues and activism. There is vast literature on the variety of emotions influencing people's motivations to become politically engaged and how activism can evoke feelings of group belonging (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Curtin et al., 2016; DeGagné, 2018; Kleren & Wettergren, 2017; Nabi, 2018; Walis & Loy, 2021). Yet, less has been published on the different emotional associations with specific themes of activism, especially on how young people's feelings about their personal experiences may be linked to their interest in particular topics and how their perceptions of agency may differ in relation to their social identity. Social identity includes the subjective process of identification with values, beliefs and other people, and the social context of being ascribed multicategorical membership, based on demographics, relationships or roles (Deaux et al., 1995).

This article reports on focus group research with young people in the United Kingdom, aged 16–24, who were politically active for different topics. These topics included (i) environment and climate change, (ii) anti-racism activism and the Black Lives Matter movement and (iii) feminism and LGBTQ rights. Drawing on sociopolitical development theory (Watts et al., 2003), this article explores the emotions young people associate with their activism across these three distinct topics concerning their motivation, sense of agency and activist participation. Following recent elaborations of sociopolitical development theory which emphasize the role of social identity in the interplay of injustice experience and emotional response (Hope et al., 2023; Watts & Halkovic, 2022), the aim is to contribute to the academic discourse on emotional associations within youth activism by addressing the following research questions:

- Which emotions affect one's motivation for political activism and how do they relate to one's social identity?
- Which emotions characterize young people's sense of agency?
- What are the emotions evoked by participation in activism?

The objective is to depict different emotional expressions and nuances within the three specific themes of activism, with no intention of attempting to prescribe how and what young people should be feeling. Instead, this study provides a unique comparative and reflective analysis of the emotions elicited in young people by engagement in activism.

Emotions as Triggers of Activism or Outcomes Thereof

Emotions can be understood from a multitude of perspectives. In relation to social movements and activism, emotions have often been regarded from a sociological perspective, emphasizing that they are 'collectively shaped complexes' (Bosco, 2006) and that they can 'serve as triggers for activism' (Brown & Pickerill, 2009, p. 26). The following overview of literature illustrates commonly identified emotions associated with political participation, frequently framed as either the origin or outcome of activism. These emotions can be negatively coined, such as dissatisfaction, anger and fear, or have positive connotations, such as hope and empowerment.

Studies have framed young people's alienation from political institutions as a result of low levels of institutional trust and the perception of being 'unable to influence

governments' (Hart & Henn, 2017, p. 11). Such dissatisfaction with politics is exacerbated by the perception that issues which concern young people at large, for instance, climate change, are not taken seriously by politicians (O'Brien et al., 2018; Pickard et al., 2020). While general disinterest in politics results in political apathy, being dissatisfied with and alienated from politics stems from feeling powerless or perceiving that one's concerns remain unheard (Harris et al., 2010). Although political alienation is a contributing factor in young people's abstinence from voting (Henn et al., 2005), it may, however, affect increased engagement with 'unconventional' forms of political participation (Dahl et al., 2018).

Dissatisfaction can induce emotional responses of both anger and fear. Specifically, anger has proven significant for young individuals engaging in feminist activism (Charles et al., 2018), advocating for global justice (Zackariasson, 2009) and reacting against racist and anti-immigrant policies (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Anger is a reaction to experienced or witnessed injustice (DeGagné, 2018; Rodgers, 2010) and can lead to 'taking action against normative principles being breached' (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017, p. 514). The expression of anger by '[n]aming something an injustice, for example, simultaneously instructs others that anger is appropriate and social change is necessary' (Schrock et al., 2004, p. 64). In contrast to anger, fear represents another common emotional reaction to experienced or witnessed injustice (Kemper, 2001). Fear can be paralysing, representing the limitations of agency, and serves as a catalyst for participation (McGreer, 2004). Studies have shown that worrying about climate change fosters anxiety and affects psychological well-being (Ojala et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2020). Researchers have also looked into measuring 'climate change anxiety' and its potential impact on lifestyle change and activist engagement, but no conclusive results were found (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Zamponi et al., 2022). Another study found that anxiety only represented a weak predictor for intending to 'engage in public-sphere climate action' (Geiger et al., 2021). The authors theorized that climate activism may represent a coping strategy for experienced anxiety and highlighted that anxiety may feed into psychological factors, such as perceptions of self- and collective efficacy.

Although negatively framed emotions have been identified as strong indicators for desiring change, emotions with more positive connotations also impact social movements and activism. Feelings of hope, a sense of empowerment following the self-actualization of values, and—particularly in social settings—feelings of commitment and belonging can stimulate political participation or be the outcome thereof. Hope, bearing the expectation that things will or can improve, is linked to fear and can be regarded as individual engagement with perceived threats (Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Nabi et al., 2018). It constitutes 'a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)' (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 287). Hope transforms fear into action and has been found to be related to levels of efficacy (Feldman & Hart, 2016). It may also result from a process of collective action: As Nairn (2019) has shown, hope can be 'generated by the prospect of sharing the burden and collectively drawing attention to climate change' (p. 447). Equally, Pickard (2022) described how young environmental activists drew hope from gathering together for collective actions 'reflecting the values and issues they care about deeply' (p. 16).

Engaging in actions that reflect one's values contributes to feelings of empowerment. Empowerment represents a psychological construct 'integrat[ing] perceptions

of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment' (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 581). It is a complex term that is difficult to measure due to its psychological dimension. Scholars have theoretically linked it to the aforementioned feeling of hope and the notion of agency (Watts & Halkovic, 2022), and empirically approached the concept by examining related factors, such as perception of efficacy and self-esteem (Ozer & Schotland, 2011). While empowerment is generally considered a positive outcome of young people's political participation (Cicognani et al., 2015; Corral-Verdugo, 2012), undergoing this process of empowering oneself by becoming politically active can place individuals at risk of personal threats, (micro-)aggressions and further injustice—especially individuals who are already experiencing marginalization due to their identity (Anyiwo et al., 2020). Thus, a critical perspective on empowerment must reflect the circumstances that 'individuals cannot be fully empowered until intersecting oppressions themselves are deconstructed and eliminated' (Banks et al., 2022, p. 104).

Social Identity and Belonging

Participation in activism is socially driven and normatively framed through social networks. For young people, political participation is often influenced by the activities of peers, especially the activities of friends. A survey study on the motivation of young people to participate in the *Fridays For Future* movement showed that in-group identification on the basis of personal values strongly impacted participation in climate protests (Wallis & Loy, 2021). Sharing similar emotions and values could initiate a process of social identification within activist groups, evoking a sense of belonging (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). Such a sense of belonging creates a feeling of togetherness, which can overcome fear and empower individuals to act. Developing this sense of belonging is particularly important for young people as they navigate the transition from youth to young adulthood. Finding communities of belonging can have a formative impact on their development of political interest (Furlong, 2016).

Social identity, a term originating in psychology, refers to a person's identity in relation to groups, encompassing a wide range of potential characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality, as well as affiliations and relationships (Deaux, 1993). Due to its dependency on social contexts, social identities are multi-faceted and can shift or be negotiated over time. There is a growing body of research on the influence of and the interrelation between personal and collective identities in relation to activist participation (Curtin et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2016). Activist identity, for instance, has been defined as a behavioural identity of people who participate in a particular action (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015). This means that self-perception impacts behaviour, for example, identifying oneself as an 'environmentalist' (Dono et al., 2010; Furlong & Vignoles, 2021). The identification with nature and space also plays a central role in various indigenous cultures and shapes young indigenous activists' engagement in climate activism (Nairn et al., 2021; Ritchie, 2021).

Social dynamics are crucial for marginalized groups, for whom activism may be an essential tool for survival and resistance. Yet, engagement in activism could potentially heighten the vulnerability of individuals who do 'not fit the norm of being White, heterosexual and masculine' (Coe, 2022, p. 463). The process of bonding over shared identities and experiences holds particular importance in activism advocating for

specific group rights, such as workers' rights and LGBTQ rights (Louis et al., 2016). For minoritized groups, participation in activism may not merely be a choice but constitutes a form of 'resistance as a matter of survival' (Linder et al., 2019, p. 540), meaning that individuals feel obliged to engage in identity-rights activism as a responsibility towards themselves and due to external expectations. As a result, marginalized groups often experience greater emotional taxation for engaging in activism (Pepin-Neff & Wynter, 2019), which highlights the need to consider the diverse experiences within activist communities. In this context, it is also important to recognize the complexities of 'allyship' activism, as it can both support disadvantaged groups yet perpetuate problematic power structures and privileges (Droogendyk et al., 2016). When individuals from outside a marginalized group participate in identity-based activism, it can lead to conflicts and resentment within the group, potentially altering the group's representation to the outside world (McGarty et al., 2009; Thomas & McGarty, 2009). The potential dichotomy of in-group vs. out-group participation in activism underlines the importance of social identity in activist participation, as it demarcates how agency is not distributed equally and unconditionally.

Understanding Young People's Activist Participation as Part of Sociopolitical Development

A theoretical perspective on young people's activism which considers a sense of agency as essential to participation is sociopolitical development theory. Sociopolitical development theory represents a psychological approach to understanding young people's engagement in a particular issue by theorizing that participation is the result of becoming aware of an issue of inequality or injustice and developing critical consciousness. The theory originally conceptualized sociopolitical development as a five-stage process, outlining activist participation as the outcome of a process of becoming aware of inequality and developing a critical consciousness towards rejecting adaptive behaviours and participating in actions towards liberation (Watts et al., 2003).

In a recently reworked conceptualization of the theory, Watts and Halkovic (2022) moved away from the five-stage description but reinforced the focus on participation as an outcome of becoming critically aware of social injustice and developing the capacity for political action. They argued that there is a relationship between social identity, one's sense of agency and sociopolitical engagement, and this is embedded in systemic structures which can offer participatory opportunities and uphold oppression at the same time. Within these systemic structures, the perception of injustice and inequality and the lived experience of marginalization of young people are dependent on both individual trajectories and societal structures (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Wray-Lake & Ballard, 2023).

In this context, the sense of agency refers to 'the extent youth believe they can affect change as an individual or as part of a collective' (Hope et al., 2023, p. 486). It can be regarded as a perception of relative control or political confidence and, in the sociopolitical development process, 'a possible antecedent to sociopolitical engagement under the assumption that a person must believe they have the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in change efforts' (Hope et al., 2023, p. 488). Although emotional capacities are deemed a key part of the sociopolitical development process (Fernández & Watts, 2023; Watts & Guessous, 2006), few studies have explicitly examined the emotional

associations young people have concerning their social identity, sense of agency and political engagement. This article provides an exploratory analysis of young people's emotional associations with their topic of activism in relation to their social identity, their sense of agency and their activist participation. Drawing on the growing body of literature on sociopolitical development theory, the analysis addresses a less-explored aspect of the theory: how social identity imprints on the perception of agency and subsequently impacts activist behaviour.

Methodology and Data

This article uses qualitative data from an original mixed-method study consisting of an online survey and subsequent focus groups with young people aged 16–24 in the United Kingdom. Ethical approval for the study had been granted by the School of Social Work & Social Policy ethics committee at the University of Strathclyde. Eight focus groups were held in May and June 2021 with young people who described themselves as politically interested and active. The participants were recruited via the preceding online survey ($N = 948$). Interested survey respondents were invited to join a focus group on one of three topics of activism, (i) environment and climate change, (ii) anti-racism activism and the *Black Lives Matter* movement and (iii) feminism and LGBTQ rights. These topics had been identified by the survey as the most relevant at the time. Centring the discussions around a specific activist topic was a deliberate choice to have a common ground for participants to express their views and feelings about the topic and their activist experience.

In total, 30 participants took part in the focus group research, distributed over the topics of climate change (13 participants), anti-racism activism (6 participants) and feminism and LGBTQ rights (11 participants; see Table 1). The relatively low number of participants in focus groups on anti-racism activism resulted from the difficulty of finding participants. There was a distinct discrepancy between the

Table 1. List of Focus Group Participants. Names Are Pseudonyms.

Name	Age	Gender	Residence	Social Class	Ethnicity	Focus Group
Adrian	20	Male	England	Middle class	White British	Climate
Anne	19	Female	England	–	White British	Anti-racism
Carol	18	Female	England	Working class	White and Black Caribbean	Climate
Charlotte	16	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Climate
Chloe	18	Female	England	Working class	White and Black Caribbean	Feminism and LGBTQ
Clara	17	Female	England	Working class	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ
Elena	16	Female	England	Working class	Asian/Asian British	Climate
Ella	18	Female	England	Working class	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ

(Table 1 continued)

Name	Age	Gender	Residence	Social Class	Ethnicity	Focus Group
Felix	23	Male	England	Middle class	White British	Climate
Frankie	16	Gender-nonconforming	England	Middle class	White and Asian	Anti-racism
Gertrude	16	Female	Northern Ireland	Middle class	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ
Hailey	17	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Climate
Heather	24	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ
Jane	16	Female	England	–	White British	Climate
Jasmine	18	Female	England	Middle class	Any other White background	Feminism and LGBTQ
Jayden	17	Male	England	Working class	White British	Climate
Jennifer	18	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Climate
Josephine	18	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Anti-racism
Katherine	17	Female	England	Working class	White British	Climate
Lena	18	Female	Scotland	Working class	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ
Lindsay	17	Gender-nonconforming	England	Middle class	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ
Lynda	17	Female	England	Working class	White and Black Caribbean	Climate
Madeleine	16	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ
Megan	19	Female	England	–	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ
Naomi	17	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Feminism and LGBTQ
Paula	16	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Anti-racism
Sadie	24	Female	England	Working class	Other ethnic background	Anti-racism
Shirley	17	Gender-nonconforming	England	Working class	White British	Climate
Theresa	17	Female	England	Middle class	White British	Climate
Yolanda	16	Female	England	Working class	White British	Anti-racism

strong expression of interest in the Black Lives Matter movement by survey respondents and participants volunteering to speak about this issue in a subsequent group discussion. This is assumed to be related to the sensitivity around the subject as well as a reflection of the survey sample. This leads to limitations of the data gathered on this particular activist topic, especially since 4 of the 6 participants also identified as White. Therefore, the discussion of findings contextualizes the views of these participants specifically. Since the focus groups took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were held online. The discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim before the data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach was chosen to allow for an open-ended exploration of emotional associations with activism.

Emotions Associated with Motivation, Agency and Participation in Activism

During the focus group discussions, participants described engaging in various individual actions, including online activism, sharing political content online and making politically motivated consumerism and lifestyle choices. Collective actions involved participating in protests and joining social justice groups, spanning from school or university discussion groups to organizations such as Extinction Rebellion and Amnesty International. A minority of participants discussed employing direct actions like establishing protest camps and tree-sitting for political activism. In addition to these non-electoral actions, participants talked about more conventional participation, for example, voting and contacting politicians.

The analysis of the discussion transcripts aimed to explore young people's emotional associations across the different activist topics from three perspectives: first, the emotions which have had a motivating effect on young people's engagement in activism, that is, how young people perceived and experienced issues of injustice or inequality and their emotional responses to that; second, how young people felt about their own agency and sense of empowerment, that is, how they viewed their own capacities to act on an issue of perceived injustice or inequality; and third, young people's emotions evoked by participating in activism and witnessing other people's activism. Informed by sociopolitical development theory, these perspectives correspond to the concepts of social identity, sense of agency and the act of participation itself.

'It's a Personal Thing': Feelings Contributing to Young People's Interest in Activist Topics

When discussing the motivations behind their interest in activist topics, participants offered a diverse range of reasons. A strong motivation shared in the climate discussion groups was dissatisfaction with political institutions. Many felt let down by the lack of action and urgency displayed by political leaders in addressing climate change. The feeling of being failed by the political system reinforced a desire to take (self-perceived) control of the situation and advocate for change. Participating in environmental activism was regarded as a way to not only express concerns but also to demand accountability from political institutions, according to Adrian (20):

> It's really important to talk about [climate change and the environment] because I want to show that the people who are responsible for making these decisions… that people do care and more than anything, it's about holding them accountable. Ten years down the line, people can say, 'well, it's not as if you weren't told', so that, hopefully, one day, we can look back on this period and say, 'well, they tried to hold our leaders accountable'.

Young people perceived climate change as an all-encompassing and human-made issue, affecting every individual on the planet. This recognition of its universal impact not just created a sense of unity among young activists but also resulted in a perceived connection to other people. Some participants recognized that the consequences of climate change affected people unequally, with people with lower economic resources or living in particular areas of the world affected more severely than

people with greater economic security and predominantly living in the 'Global North'. Hailey (17) said:

> The reason why I feel climate change is an issue that's really connected to me is that feeling of it being a human issue, that it is affecting people. It will affect us all, ultimately, and it's causing a lot of people to not have sustained livelihoods anymore. It just feels unjust that those people contributing to [climate change] the least are suffering the most, so it's this injustice that has made me feel like you can't help but care about that.

Thus, young individuals showed awareness of the intersectional dimension of climate change, which also related to the belief that mitigating its consequences should not be placed upon those who suffer the most, but rather on those responsible for environmental damage. This concept of 'climate justice' has also been part of the academic discourse around climate change (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022; Sultana, 2022). The young climate activists showed concern for their future and the well-being of both humanity and the planet and expressed fear of already witnessed and projected environmental catastrophes, with many stating that the prospects of the future caused them anxiety.

Participating in activism was seen as a way to demand mitigation of climate change and also served as a mechanism to cope with these feelings of fearing environmental impacts. Some participants reported that taking part in individual actions granted them a sense of responsibility, for example, shopping habits or recycling. Others said that they believed in the power of collective actions, especially those demanding political and economic actors to implement meaningful change to reduce carbon emissions and decrease the use of fossil fuels. Thus, the motivation for activist participation stemmed from a desire to turn concerns about their future and the livelihoods of other people and the planet into meaningful and mitigating actions. Hope was a central theme when focus group participants were speaking about their activism and their intention to make a difference.

In the case of anti-racism activism, participants reported being dissatisfied with society's insufficient response to racial discrimination. After two Black US citizens were killed by the police, the Black Lives Matter movement re-emerged in the States and protests against racial injustice began spreading globally in the summer of 2020. In light of this, young people began scrutinizing racial injustice in the United Kingdom. Participants criticized how racism in Britain was often being relativized and ignored as a societal and political issue. Individuals, especially those from White ethnic backgrounds, said that the re-emerging Black Lives Matter protests in the United States had been an eye-opening experience to them in recognizing existing issues of racism and the heritage of colonialism in the United Kingdom:

> For me, when the murder of George Floyd happened, and all the protests [were] going on in America, it seemed to highlight the racism that everybody already knew was there in America to begin with, and then it took a while – I think, for me, anyway – via social media and everything to travel to the UK and to start picking up on the UK racism, rather than just focusing on America. (Josephine, 18)

For the two participants who described themselves as non-White, personal experiences of othering, discrimination and racism played a significant role in their motivation, as they felt they had no choice but to at least cognitively engage in the greater

issue of racial discrimination. Feelings of pressure and personal risks characterized their activist participation. These feelings were founded in the lived experience of growing up as a non-White person at the risk of discrimination and racism, including incidents in which individuals were subjected to verbal or physical racialized abuse. Frankie (16) recalled that the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 evoked a mix of emotions in them:

> It's more of a personal thing because I'm mixed race. When it all came up, it was very per-sonal, and it was weird because I have these experiences of, I guess, racism. It was really good that conversations were opening up, and I find it important because it is something that has affected me and my family on a personal level.

In contrast, participants who identified as White reported that while racism may not be an experience they are at risk of being subjected to, their motivation to participate in anti-racism activism as an 'ally' stemmed from the intention to spread awareness about race-based discrimination, share Black voices and contribute to educating oth-ers. Their motivation was influenced by the desire to both help others and actively change their own behaviours. These participants admitted that there was a divide between anti-racism activists passing as White and those not passing: People whose existences were not being threatened due to being perceived as White had the oppor-tunity to 'opt out' of certain discussions and conflicts. Paula (16) who identified as White specified this divide:

> People who said to me they were not interested in being anti-racist tended to be white males who are never going to have their existence invalidated in the way that people of colour are going to have. It's such a luxury that some of us can just 'switch off' and not care about things, and our lives will not change. But not everyone has that luxury.

This sparked discussion among participants on the issue of 'White privilege' which in the context of activism meant that certain people could choose when to stand up for minority rights. In contrast, the non-White participants explained that people in their social network often looked to them to become active. As Frankie (16) described it, 'the white friends that I do have, … they can opt out if they want to, but if I opt out, that's like a statement'.

Identity as a main source of motivation was also evident among participants of the focus groups on feminism and LGBTQ rights. These groups were exclusively attended by people who identified as female, non-binary and/or queer. Individuals specifically pointed out that their own identity and life experiences shaped by such were central to their interest in speaking about women's and LGBTQ rights and their desire to become involved in activism. This was exemplified by Lindsay (17):

> I identify as queer and so just by that fact, I have to be interested in what's happening with my rights. And, also, looking feminine – feminism affects me, and a lot of my friends are part of the LGBTQ community as well.

What unified participants in the discussions of feminist and LGBTQ activism was their awareness of the ongoing struggles faced by marginalized groups. Participants considered women's rights and LGBTQ rights as fundamental parts of human rights,

but the accounts of their lived experiences demonstrated that they were living in environments where such rights were neither normalized nor consistently acknowledged. Their dissatisfaction addressed primarily British society which they perceived as generally failing in promoting women's rights and feminist issues. This created frustration as participants saw sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence as the reality for women and people who identify as non-binary or non-heterosexual. With regard to politics, individuals expressed concerns about debates around conversion therapy, laws affecting mental health and medical support for transgender-identifying persons, and the reproductive rights of women. The reference of these issues to personal identity stood out as a primary link between the individual and their motivation to become involved in political actions, as in Lena's case (18):

> I consider myself a part of the LGBTQ community and also a woman and that obviously makes you want to get involved more. You have to be interested in your rights because we live in – especially with this government – we live in a time when you have to care about it because it's unlikely that other people are going to do it for you.

Similar to participants in the anti-racism groups, personal identity and life experiences played a pivotal role in becoming interested and engaging actively in defending women's rights and creating spaces in which everyone is free to express their identity without fear of discrimination or persecution.

Between Hope and Fear: Young People's Sense of Agency

Young people's perception of their sense of agency was always situated in the context of their own identity and the activist topics they engaged in. This perception of the personal ability to act was characterized by a level of self-confidence and entailed elements of fear—fear of potential repercussions to activist participation and the increased risk of becoming more vulnerable to discrimination or personal attacks. While activist participation followed this sense of personal agency as an expression of self-actualization, the discussions across all three topics consistently highlighted structural barriers as limitations to empowerment. Key differences were the greater focus on collective efforts within environmental activism and the perception of an innate obligation to become politically active in the case of activism focusing on identity rights.

Environmental activists felt a sense of integrity as they engaged in both individual and collective actions out of the desire to care for other people and to actively create a more sustainable future. Their sense of agency was shaped by the recognition of human responsibility for the environment and a positive belief in the effectiveness of collective action. Katherine (17) was one of several discussants underlining the importance of collaboration to address climate change:

> No one can escape the effects of climate change. It's important to not be in denial, so people can start working together and putting everything aside to help stop the effects of climate change and reverse these effects altogether.

The majority of young participants in the climate change focus groups associated engaging in activism with a sense of hope. However, there were differences in how

young people conceived of being hopeful and what they considered as 'success'. Some focused strongly on partaking in protest actions with the intent to pressure economic and political actors to implement countermeasures against global warming, fossil fuel use and emission output. For Adrian, disruptive protests and media attention were signs of impact. He spoke about being engaged in the 'Kill the Bill' protests. These protests were directed against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, a proposed new law in the United Kingdom equipping the state with greater powers to clamp down on protests. Other people, such as Jane, primarily engaged in implementing lifestyle changes, such as recycling and shopping second-hand, actions which made them feel better about themselves and induced hopeful feelings about the future.

> It can be disheartening when you see people who are pushing you to have the perfect sustainable lifestyle. And, if you ever buy a plastic bag, once, because you forgot your bag, you are a terrible person and you're the worst person they've ever met and it's difficult. To me, it always feels like there's something more I could be doing and I'm never doing enough. But at the end of the day, I'm doing something, and a lot of people aren't, so I need to focus on that and be hopeful that other people will do things, and it will get better. (Jane, 16)

For the participants of this study, climate change was largely perceived as an externalized threat, rather than part of their own identity. Therefore, they regarded agency more as a responsibility to care for other people and the planet. Discussants in the anti-racist and queer feminist groups described their participation often as a reaction to either experienced or witnessed marginalization and discrimination. Thus, their activist behaviour represented a longing for validation and reassurance of one's identity. For some participants, the lack of role models and growing up in environments in which their identities were either subject to exclusion or not recognized influenced their desire to engage more cognitively with information around their identity. Individuals explained that their sense of agency stemmed from wanting to make a change for themselves and others facing similar situations, while simultaneously owing it to their younger selves to contribute to normalizing diverse identities.

> I went to a Catholic school, and we weren't even having sex education about heterosexual people …. I didn't like boys and was told by this teacher that the Catholic institutions did not think that [homosexuality] was right. So, teachers would not teach us about it, and that was probably one of the most prominent of all their displays of religious homophobia. Basically, as an LGBTQ woman, I didn't even know that what I felt was normal in a way. (Ella, 18)

> I know that younger me would have wanted to have someone out there to be able to make a change, or at least seem like they're making a change. But also, part of me is just like 'it's not my responsibility', and there's only so much I can do and that's what's difficult. I would be betraying myself by not getting involved, but also by getting involved, I'm putting all this extra strain on myself. (Frankie, 16)

These statements show that experiences of marginalization, even if not overt discrimination, fuel insecurities about personal identity and belonging. The discussions in the anti-racism and feminism and LGBTQ groups also indicated that experiences of marginalization due to identity and identification were often associated with childhood and

young adulthood experiences in less urban, more rural areas. One example was Gertrude's (16) impressions of living in the countryside of Northern Ireland:

> I think, for me, part of it is that Northern Ireland, where I'm from, is very backwards. Abortion was only legalised in March last year [2020], and they've recently banned conversion therapy, which was massive stuff for Northern Ireland. But it's mainly in schools that issues are still there, with racism and a lot of sexism, which has made me more passionate. I was passionate before, but now it's just kind of amplified my desire to make a better place, so that's my reason for being here.

For many participants, activism was a reaction against the experienced and witnessed experiences of marginalization in the hope of protecting both legal identity-based rights and normalizing ethnically diverse people, women's experiences and people identifying as LGBTQ. These experiences of othering did not necessarily include overt discrimination and participants were able to contextualize their own situation within wider issues of discrimination and structural barriers. Sadie (24), who described herself as mixed-race Latina, explained:

> Because I am from an ethnic minority, but I am not Black or not readily identifiable as such, I don't get the alt-rights slurs. This is something I've been talking about with friends who are Asian or Native American or South American or even African. It's a whole different treatment for people who are sometimes born here for generations, but are Black and will be treated more as an outsider than I am. For me, it's more of a structural thing because it is not random people that I experience racism from but from institutions.

Although activist participation evoked a sense of empowerment in most of the participants, many of them also expressed that they had feelings of fear and anxiety, often as a consequence of their activist participation. Most prevalent in the climate change discussions were worries about personal safety during protests following the potential reduction of democratic rights by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. In addition to personal safety concerns, the risk of catching Coronavirus added to the issue of safety in an unprecedented way. Young people who lived with their parents also reported that their families showed varying levels of support for their children's activist participation. Parents' lack of support could be rooted in general disapproval and in caring, as Hailey (17) described her situation:

> My parents are incredibly supportive, but not fans of direct action in any sense of the word. There's an element of them worrying about me. We live near Bristol, and I know how some of the protests have gotten out of hand and become a bit dangerous for some people who are protesting. It's just they don't want me to be in those kinds of places, because they are obviously…they care about me, so that can be a real conflict of interest.

Beyond worrying about the potential consequences of taking part in protests and the imminent threat to the right to protest through legislation, some participants associated feelings of stress, often related to the realization of the limitations of Fridays For Future protests and personal actions. Shirley shared that identity-rights activism, such as feminism, felt more successful to them, due to its more direct and interpersonal dimension, than environmental activism, which could feel insignificant in light of the overwhelming phenomenon it was trying to avert.

> I was part of some of the *Fridays For Future* marches. I live in a small town, there's not a lot of engagement. But I went down to London a few times, and I was involved in the ones where there were thousands of people on the streets. … Doing environmental work can be a lot more depressing than other forms of activism, things like feminism or anything that is social justice related; [in that] you can feel like a human impact. But when you do everything you can as an individual for the climate, it can be really depressing because you subconsciously always wonder whether it's enough. (Shirley, 17)

Feelings of depression and resignation also mixed with cynical views of politicians, resulting in disappointment, frustration and anger. For young environmental activists, their sense of agency appeared to be caught between the momentum of hope and action and the paralysis of external structures and the anxiety caused by powerlessness as individuals. Climate change activism, thus, simultaneously evoked feelings of empowerment and demarcated its limitations. Although some felt the need for more radical action, they showed an aversion to more aggressive acts:

> Protest, saying things online, or a petition isn't going to do something. So, it feels like if that won't do something, you have to go in a more radical direction. But then, if you go in a radical direction, violence has an instant backlash of 'no, too far, it's not right'. (Jayden, 17)

Negative feelings associated with activism also included fears over personal safety, specifically tied to their personal characteristics. Relating to the aspect of not having a choice in activism, young women expressed their shock about the murder of Sarah Everard, a young woman who was abducted, raped and killed by a police officer in London. This crime, which made headlines in the British media, was referred to by participants as 'the incident'. Jasmine (18) shared how she felt the need to send her location to her friends when she was visiting another city:

> I have to, as a person, this is my responsibility to keep myself safe, but I don't think it's true; it's everyone's responsibility to make sure that everyone in society is safe because I shouldn't be the one to blame at the end.

Jasmine's experience illustrates that young people active for feminism and women's rights cannot escape their positions of vulnerability and risk of gender-based harm. Similarly, non-White people described how difficult they found it to be pushed into activist roles, when they had no active choice over it, like Frankie (16):

> [N]one of us have any qualifications, like the only qualification I have is that I'm not white. That's not viable. I haven't done a degree in this stuff. It's like getting someone who's been hit by a car to run a speed awareness course.

In other situations, being or passing as White also created difficult situations for some young people—situations in which family or educational staff made discriminatory remarks and young people were finding it hard to intervene due to existing power structures or disrupting family moments:

> I've had teachers saying discriminatory things, not necessarily towards a single person in the class, but like racist comments or sexist comments, and it's like 'Do I pick it up or do I get into trouble?' (Josephine, 18)

> It's like 'Do you want to ruin a family meal?' or just not bring it up and then I'll just rant about it later to my friends or something. (Anne, 20)

In activism tied to one's identity, a sense of agency arose from the confidence gained by helping others with similar experiences of marginalization, but this was also perceived as a burden by some and a responsibility which could not discarded. The differences between those people who could 'opt out' of taking a stance in certain contexts and those who had to be constantly aware of the situation around them evidence that empowerment, and more specifically feeling confident to act is not equal in any given situation, but very much dependent on specific circumstances, power dynamics and the characteristics of the individual. Non-White activists saw themselves under constant external expectations from other people, while also revealing that they felt an innate obligation to address ethnic-based discrimination. Young people who identified as female or LGBTQ had often been victimized from early childhood on and subjected to threats of gendered violence. Clara (17) criticized that occurrences of gender-based violence were often instrumentalized against women to reprimand behaviour and perpetuate stigma against victims:

> I feel like the narrative is on blaming women and not actually people asking 'Wait, why is this happening in the first place, what makes men do this, what allows them to get away with it?'. We as women – our whole lives we're told to control ourselves, so we don't get assaulted or have any of this happening to us.

The fear of potential harm, stemming from one's identity as a woman, non-binary individual or someone with a non-heterosexual orientation, impacted the socialization of young individuals. For some, this led to a decrease in their sense of agency, while also evoking both feelings of anger and fear, creating an emotional tension between the two. In previous research, anger has been linked to political action, whereas fear constitutes a rather paralysing emotion (Van Troost et al., 2013). The focus group discussions in this study showed that emotional associations with one's sense of agency can be more nuanced. Young people can be certain about their beliefs driving their activist participation, yet these feelings of confidence can coexist with fears about increased vulnerability due to exposure.

Activism as Acts of Self-actualization and Belonging

Engaging in activism was primarily driven by personal values and beliefs, as it provided a means to actualize and express these. As a secondary function, activist participation also served the desire for belonging and finding other people, as individuals sought a sense of belonging and acceptance by connecting with like-minded individuals who shared similar values, beliefs and lived experiences. Some participants reported that they were either active in local groups or had even founded their support groups at their respective schools. For some, these communities of shared identities and values represented networks of support and friendship. This tended to be the case for people engaged in identity-centred activism. For others, belonging to a community constituted a source of collective action, especially in the context of climate strikes and protests.

The desire for group affiliation, whether real or constructed, was also evident among environmental activists. In climate change activism, the collectivity stemmed primarily from taking part in collective actions, including protests, and other, more

community-based actions, such as organizing group activities or volunteering. Participants of the anti-racism and feminism and LGBTQ discussions said that their activism had helped them find supportive networks and allies and overall provided them with more pride and confidence in who they are.

> I've definitely found that there is solidarity within people, there is a sense of understanding. Even though I go to this ridiculously white school with ridiculously fancy people, there is a sense of understanding, people are listening. (Frankie, 16)

> In my experience as a woman and a member of the LGBTQ community, it feels very isolating to be a feminist and participating in the conversation actually helps you become more involved with communities. It feels like you're not alone in a way, so I think having that conversation can really help others who are struggling with that. (Lena, 18)

Although there were shared emotions among various forms of activism, there were distinct differences between those engaged in climate change activism and those involved in anti-racism and queer feminist activism. Environmental activism was characterized by dissatisfaction with political and economic actors. The central motivation stemmed from caring about others and the future of humankind. In the case of advocating for female or transgender rights, representing non-White ethnic groups, or supporting the LGBTQ community, engaging in activism was often experienced as a heavier burden or obligation. Individuals shared personal experiences of discrimination and racism, emphasizing that their activism also made them more vulnerable to discrimination:

> It can be so hard because you don't want to be the tone-changer in the room when everyone seems to think something's fine. A part of you wants to be the person that stands up and goes, 'hang on, it's not fun anymore; I'm going to stop this conversation'. If something is really hurtful and brought up, it's still hard to do it. (Heather, 24)

> Our [activist] group received so much criticism, some of it aggressive, that we were being 'over-passionate and don't let all opinions be heard'. When they say 'all opinions', they mean racist voices. I'm so fed up with hearing that sort of thing. (Frankie, 16)

Across all three activist topics, numerous participants expressed criticism towards their own generation of young people. One critique focused on the phenomenon of performative activism, where individuals engage in activism primarily for personal gain rather than genuine commitment to the cause, often through acts of virtue-signalling. Another critique highlighted the prevalence of in-group competition among activists, wherein participation is viewed as a competitive endeavour, with some individuals vying to demonstrate superior activism compared to their peers.

Yet, becoming involved in activism was seen as a means of assuming responsibility, particularly in response to the perceived lack of accountability exhibited by the government and politicians. Despite harbouring substantial dissatisfaction and disappointment with institutionalized politics, the participants did not outright reject the democratic system itself. Rather, they were frustrated by the inadequate attention given to the issues they cared deeply about. Many young individuals recognized that achieving lasting impacts would require structural and collective changes. In this context, some young activists also expressed their discontent with being framed as

'changemakers' as this narrative shifts the responsibility from those with political and economic power to an apparent homogenized generation of 'youth'.

Discussion

This study explored the emotions young activists associated with their interest and involvement in three different topics of activism, climate change, anti-racism and queer feminist activism. These emotional associations largely align with findings from existing literature on emotions in youth activism, especially on the motivational drivers of activist participation (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Pickard et al., 2020). Drawing on the central assumptions of sociopolitical development theory, this study specifically mapped these emotions—ranging from dissatisfaction, anger and fear to hope, empowerment and belonging—onto specific aspects of activism: motivation and social identity, a sense of agency and activist engagement.

The focus groups identified one common driver across the three topics to be deep dissatisfaction with the state of politics and society. While young environmental activists expressed dissatisfaction primarily with institutional politics and economic actors, young people involved in identity-rights activism discussions addressed societal structures as main contributors to patriarchal and post-colonial power dynamics, disadvantaging women, people identifying as LGBTQ and people of colour. There were also underlying tones of anger and disappointment among activists across all three topics. Climate activists in this particular study reported being driven by their values of caring about the planet and other people. Anti-racism and queer feminist activists were equally driven by values but related these specifically to their personal experiences of marginalization or the witnessed discrimination of others. These insights illustrated that young people's understanding of themselves—the way they saw their own social identity—contributed to their motivation to become politically active. In line with the literature, conceptions of social identity included identifying with other young people based on their concerns for the environment (Wallis & Loy, 2021), as part of a particular identity group (Louis et al., 2016) or as an activist ally in identity-rights activism (Droogendyk et al., 2016).

Influenced by feelings of dissatisfaction and anger, young people began to critically engage with issues they perceived as injustice and considered their agency in responding to such. Participants expressed feelings of pride and confidence over acting on their values and drawing on their own adverse experiences of marginalization to support others and add to the normalization of specific identity groups. However, as highlighted by the different narratives of the individuals involved in this study, empowerment is not a concept which can be used without considering its intersectional dimensions. Those engaged in activism relating to their identity felt that they were at a greater risk of social exclusion and feared repercussions in response to their activist engagement. This finding does not imply that these intersectional factors do not apply to environmental activism. It does, however, underscore studies that show that the perception of agency is dependent on socially constructed power dynamics and that activist participation takes place in the context of personal identity and intersectional inequalities (Banks et al., 2022; Wray-Lake & Ballard, 2023).

Young people showed a sense of pride and confidence by engaging in activities which expressed their values. Engaging in activism was marked by a desire for self-actualization and belonging, reflecting the literature on aspects of empowerment and community (Cicognani et al., 2015; Pickard, 2022). Especially for those in anti-racism and queer feminist activism, participation in political activities provided reassurance of their own identity and lived experiences. Despite being overwhelmingly positive about political participation in general, young people across all three topics also shared some critical reflections, including concerns about in-group competition and performative activism. Young environmental activists, in particular, criticized the public emphasis on individual behaviour over structural reasons for global warming, while participants involved with identity-rights activism explained that the external expectations of representing and advocating for one's (own) identity could be burdensome at times. This also involved feeling at a greater risk of unsafety and experiencing emotional stress as a result of activist engagement (Coe, 2022; Pepin-Neff & Wynter, 2019).

Conclusion

This study provided insights into the emotional complexities of young individuals' engagement with activism and applied its findings to central concepts of sociopolitical development. Despite variations in experiences, the emotional associations among the different activist groups were not dissimilar. The trajectory from dissatisfaction and anger to active participation in activism represented a hope-response driven by the desire to make a positive impact. Yet, while young people exhibited a sense of agency, it was not uniformly accompanied by a sense of empowerment. Instead, it was intertwined with notions of self-actualization, the desire for belonging and perceived burden and vulnerability. Nuanced differences in emotional associations also existed in the reasons behind young people's inclination towards a particular topic of activism.

How young people saw themselves and how they were being viewed by others imprinted upon their perceived agency and, thus, had consequences for their participation in activism. First, their social identity primed their interest in specific topics. There was an overlap between identifying as part of a specific group and advocating for this group's rights, albeit this is not a deterministic relationship. Secondly, taking an intersectional perspective, young people's sense of agency was influenced by the various aspects of their identity, including gender, race, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Therefore, engaging in activism does not represent a uniform process for all, as empowerment is constrained by the recognition and perception of one's agency for effective action (Watts et al., 2003).

The findings emphasized the significance of identity-related experiences and personal values for finding belonging and the intersectional dimension of agency. This remains important to consider for researchers when working with individuals and groups whose participation may have been affected by how they perceive their agency. Those who do not participate may be deterred because of the presented personal risks that come with it. Thus, this study is also relevant to organizations working with young people on civic and political issues, as they can help create inclusive and supportive spaces for young people to develop a sense of agency

without the fear of repercussions. Due to the study's specific demographics and activist topics, future research could focus on emotional nuances in youth activism to include different participant groups, varying by geographical location and other characteristics, and extend to further political causes.

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