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Young activists, intergenerational allyships and the participatory root system

Key words: *young people, activism, intergenerational relations, participation, DIO politics*

Abstract: *The increase in civic engagement among young people in Poland (2019–2021) revealed tensions related to their role in public life. The article explores how young activists perceive themselves and their ways of negotiating intergenerational relationships. Based on the interviews conducted, it is visible that young people's understanding of activism and intergenerational relations goes beyond the dominant discourses of exceptionalism and generational conflict, inviting a redefinition of young people's civic engagement as an organic, networked process, which is described through a metaphor of the participatory root system.*

Introduction

The intensification of a certain "dissent climate" in Poland between 2019 and 2021 led to a previously unseen surge in young people's[1] political engage-

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[1] Considering different definitions of "young people", "youth", and "teenagers", our focus is on those under the age of 18 in accordance with Article 1 of the UNCRC, where they are referred to as "children". Additionally, Sara Pickard's definition of "young people" is utilised, which was put forth in relation to the period of time when political socialisation is most intense, namely those between the ages of 14 and 24 (see: S. Pickard, *Politics,*

ment, from protests against educational reforms (criminalising NGO-provided sexual education programmes, over-ideologizing curricula, and continuing LGBT+ student discrimination) through demonstrations against the curtailment of women's reproductive rights and homophobia in the 2020 presidential campaign to climate school strikes. The presence of large numbers of assumedly inactive, me-generation (Twenge 2006) youth taking to the streets has generated interpretational challenges, often addressed through a dichotomous narrative of generational clash and by positioning young people as either a social problem, discrediting their civic engagement, or as heroes and hopeful figures, ensuring a better future for all. This ambivalence about understanding youth political participation and activism seems symptomatic of social mythology regarding youth's general place in politics[2]. Given its pervasiveness, this study aims to explore young activists' perceptions of their roles and activities, as well as their negotiation of intergenerational relations, moving beyond the dichotomous representations of young people's political engagement in media discourse.

Caught between dichotomies: understandings of young people's participation and activism

Young people's involvement at all sorts of frontlines of conflicts in modern complex societies (be it education, climate change, women's rights, minorities' voices, economic crises or many more) has been observed globally from some time now. Interestingly though, apart from examining young activists' biographies and participatory practices or paradigms employed to achieve youth's political engagement[3], a more systematic analysis of how engaged youth see,

Protest and Young People, Political Participation and Dissent in 21st Century Britain, Palgrave Macmillan 2019, p. 29). In the article, this definition is limited to young people who are not yet able to exercise their full civic rights (voting, taking up for office), and as such, are subject to the UNCRC's interpretation of (children's) human rights.

2 See e.g., E. F. Cohen, *Neither Seen Nor Heard: Children›s Citizenship in Contemporary Democracies*, «Citizenship Studies» 2005, vol. 9(2), p. 221–240; D. Bühler-Niederberger, *Introduction: Childhood Sociology – Defining the State of the Art and Ensuring Reflection*, «Current Sociology» 2010, vol. 58(2), p. 155–164; B. Milne, *The History and Theory of Children's Citizenship in Contemporary Societies*, Springer 2013.

3 E.g. J. Fullam, *Becoming a youth activist in the internet age: a case study on social media activism and identity development*, «International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education» 2017, vol. 30(4), p. 406–422; E. Bishop, *Becoming activist: Critical literacy and youth organizing*, New York 2015; A. Harris, J. Wyn, S. Younes, *Beyond apathetic or activist youth: "Ordinary" young people and contemporary forms of participation*, «YOUNG» 2010, vol. 18(1), p. 9–32.

understand, and negotiate their own activism still awaits a more profound exploration[4]. How young people want adults to be present in their activist spaces is also important to explore, alongside a more recognised idea of adult presence being beneficiary[5] or – on the contrary – implying adultist perspectives[6]. It seems especially important, given that young people's activism is inherently set in the context of intergenerational relations (of adults' power as well as solidarity between generations and young people's agency[7]), and that these relations are described in the media discourse as mostly dichotomous or even mutually exclusive, designating young activists to operate within an ambiguous liminal sphere of being at once seen, heard, and (un)welcome.

The issue with the "seen, heard, and (un)welcome" activism of young people appears to stem from their political engagement extending beyond "children/youth-only" concerns, such as education, to encompass wider (though anticipated given the history of youth activism), domains including climate change, environmental justice, human rights, and political injustice. This led to children and adolescents being prominently visible in the public sphere, often perceived as "out of their place"[8], which complicated the comprehension of this abrupt increase in civic involvement among young people and their underlying motivations.

Political participation among young people appears to provide a useful interpretive framework for understanding their current civic engagement. However, this is frequently an overly narrow perspective since it places too much focus on formal political tools and engagement venues, such as youth councils, voting turnout, youth wings of political parties, and so on[9]. Civic engagement is not limited to understanding the rules and laws of representative democracy or to partisan political activity. Judging it by these standards (as joining official political bodies, institutions, and channels) may result in mis-

4 See: A. Clay, *The hip-hop generation fights back: Youth, activism and post-civil rights politics*, New York 2012; H. R. Gordon, *We fight to win: Inequality and the politics of youth activism*, New Brunswick (NJ) 2009; J. K. Taft, *Rebel girls: Youth activism and social change across the Americas*, New York 2011.

5 S. A. Kwon, *Uncivil youth: Race, activism, and affirmative governmentality*, Durham (NC) 2013.

6 H. R. Gordon, *We fight to win*…; J. K. Taft, *Rebel girls: Youth activism*…

7 H. R. Gordon, *Allies within and without: How adolescent activists conceptualize ageism and navigate adult power in youth social movements*, «Journal of Contemporary Ethnography» 2007, vol. 36(6), p. 631–668; H. R. Gordon, *We fight to win*…; J. K. Taft, *Rebel girls: Youth activism*…; J. K. Taft, *"Adults talk too much": Intergenerational dialogue and power in the Peruvian movement of working children*, «Childhood» 2015, vol. 22(4), p. 460–473.

8 See M. G. Wyness, *Contesting Childhood*, London 2002.

9 See e.g. C. A. Flanagan, *Teenage citizens: The political theories of the young*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 2013.

leading conclusions. Viewing young people's civic involvement, or perceived lack thereof, through narrow political lenses seems to promote diagnoses such as democratic deficiency[10]. Distrust in government is considered one of its markers, along with a lack of understanding of how government and partisan politics work and a lack of faith in the political system[11]. The democratic deficit and professed political indifference of young people indicate that youth are in crisis. Assumedly apolitical, they must therefore be deliberately shepherded into politics by adults, who (often in top-down relationships) play an important role in young people's political socialisation.

Civic education serves as a legitimate impetus for engaging youth and facilitating their political participation; however, emphasising formal political contexts as the primary arenas for young people's political involvement neglects two significant considerations. Advisory participation often fails to translate the voices of young people into tangible political impact, especially in empowering disadvantaged groups that are typically under-represented. This is largely due to the appointment of advisory body candidates by adult gatekeepers. Another challenge is that these adult-oriented forms of formally recognised political engagement often align with the state's political objectives and tend to be less controversial, critical, or oppositional to the status quo. This approach is both restrictive and future-oriented, emphasising the engagement of young people to safeguard the future of democracy while allowing minimal recognition of their current civic agency.

The logic and dynamics of recent protests – characterized by innovative online-offline forms, unexpected alliances, and practices of collective care – suggest that the issue lies not with the youth being in crisis, but rather with the inadequacy of accessible forms of engagement beyond strictly partisan and representative democracy-based tools. It thus invites to look closer to everyday strategies and activist practices of young people in order to produce a more nuanced understandings of their engagement[12].

Another intriguing tension in examining young people's civic engagement appears to stem from the collision of two perspectives that serve as frameworks for understanding youth participation in political life: the previously

10 V. Schneider, *Democracy and legitimacy in the European Union Revisited: Input, output and "Throughput"*, «Political Studies» 2013, vol. 61, p. 2–22.

11 H. R. Gordon, J. K. Taft, *Rethinking youth political socialization: Teenage activists talk back*, «Youth & Society» 2011, vol. 43(4), p. 1499–1527.

12 T. O'Toole, *Beyond Crisis Narratives: Changing Modes and Repertoires of Political Participation Among Young People*, [in:] K. Kallio, S. Mills, T. Skelton (eds.), *Politics, Citizenship and Rights. Geographies of Children and Young People*, vol. 7, Springer, Singapur 2015; S. Pickard, *Politics, Protest and Young People, Political Participation and Dissent in 21st Century Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan 2019.

mentioned diagnosis of democratic deficit and the relatively new counter-diagnosis of generation Z (otherwise defined as "the Anthropocene generation"[13] as a socially conscious, engaged, and immanently activist-prone[14]. Growing up in a world of tremendous changes and extreme turbulences – from natural disasters to cultural warfare – and with an unclear future ahead of them, they appear to have no other choice but to be involved. The widespread use of social media, often criticised as slacktivism relative to the tangible revolutionary efforts of earlier generations and simultaneously lauded for its ability to circumvent conventional political gatekeepers and directly engage audiences, contributes to their increased focus on intersectionality. When events, processes, people, and logics are seen as interrelated, it becomes clear that the fight for equality and justice cannot be reduced to a single cause. In this framework, it also makes sense to examine youth activism through social network perspectives, utilising notions such as connective action[15] that moves between online and offline contexts and logic of affinity[16] focused on decentralised networks of support and care, which enable a more nuanced understandings of young people's political engagement.

Methodological note

The aim of this study was to analyse how young people perceive their identities as activists and the influence of intergenerational relationships in their endeavours. The primary criterion for sample selection was the activist experience of the youth. A deliberate sample selection was employed due to the subject matter. The participants' names were replaced with initials, and all qualitative data from the interviews was anonymised. The study was conducted in the third quarter of 2021. Ten online interviews (IDIs) were conducted

[13] B. Lack, *The Children of the Anthropocene*, Penguin Random House 2022; A. Bryan, Y. Mochizuki, *Rethinking Agency, Affect, and Education: Towards New Childhood and Youth Studies in the Anthropocene*, [in:] J. Wyn, H. Cahill, H. Cuervo (eds.), *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*, Springer, Singapur 2024.

[14] E.g. T. Biswas, *Letting Teach: Gen Z as Socio-Political Educators in an Overheated World*, «Frontiers in Political Science» 2021, vol. 3.

[15] W. L. Bennett, A. Segerber, *The logic of connective action*, «Information, Communication & Society» 2012, vol. 15(5), p. 739–768; E. Korolczuk, *Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland: the power of connective action*, «Zoon Politicon» 2016, vol. 7, p. 91–113.

[16] R. J. F. Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, London 2005.

with individuals aged 15 to 17. Six males and four females participated in the study. The focus on compulsory school-age youth was due to their prominent and contentious role in the aforementioned protests, particularly regarding their demands for recognised citizenship and the influence of age-related power dynamics in the public sphere. Informed and voluntary consents that are legally binding were secured from both parents or legal guardians and research participants.

The following research questions were formulated:

1. How do young people define and understand the concept of activism in the context of their own social and civic experiences?
2. How do young people construct the meaning of intergenerational relationships in the context of activism?

The study thus focused on exploring the subjective perspectives, experiences, and meanings attributed by young activists to their engagement and intergenerational relations. Although no explicitly formulated hypotheses were proposed at the onset of the research, our analytical approach was nevertheless guided by a theoretical assumption. Specifically, it was assumed that lived individual experiences and relational entanglements are significantly more complex and internally diverse than suggested by the dichotomizing narratives prevalent in media discourse. Such narratives, often structured around simplified oppositions (e.g., "victim vs. perpetrator," "us vs. them," "good vs. evil"), tend to reduce the rich spectrum of actual experiences, motivations, and relationships to binary categories that fail to capture the nuances of everyday life and subjectivity. Our analysis was thus grounded in the premise of an experiential "density" – multilayered, and at times contradictory, meanings and significations that became visible only through close engagement with participants' narratives.

It is also worth noting that the analyses conducted were grounded in a specific point of reference, which guided the interpretation of the collected data. This analysis relies on the Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work as the primary legal framework governing civic engagement in Poland, with particular attention to the involvement of young people in social activities. While civil disobedience as such does not fall directly within the scope of this act, in Article 4, point 22 it includes within the sphere of public benefit activity "the protection of freedom and human rights and civil liberties." This provision provides a basis for interpreting the actions of young people advocating for their rights – even when carried out through informal, non-institutionalized, or non-legitimized means – as part of the broader landscape of civic and public activity. Furthermore, reference should be made to the Convention on the

Rights of the Child[17], which in Article 12 guarantees children the right to freely express their views in all matters affecting them, with due weight given to those views in accordance with the child's age and maturity. Article 15 of the Convention ensures the right of children to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. In this context, youth activism – despite not always being formally recognized within institutional frameworks – can be seen as an exercise of their guaranteed rights, and their civic participation as a vital component of contemporary public life.

(Self)defining activism

While the beginnings, areas of engagement, and outcomes of each individual story varied significantly, our young respondents consistently identified a central theme in their activism: an emphasis on action, regardless of scale, and a commitment to effecting change. The focus on engagement and the direct effects of participation arises from young people's awareness that, although their voices are acknowledged, this alone is inadequate. This understanding of activism as a cause-oriented, affectively invested, and challenging the existent decision making's status quo action is reflected in literature on youth activism[18].

> *I would say that yes, our voice is heard, but is it taken into account? I would say it is audible, but it doesn't pay off to listen to it. I would say, it is considered a burden that everyone is aware of, but they are just afraid to face the fact, that we are actually right* (L., 16).

From the young activists' responses, several leitmotifs in their narratives emerged. Firstly, anyone can become an activist. Activism does not require heroic or extraordinary actions, nor does it necessitate involvement in a formal youth organisation. Activism entails the exercise of one's right to dissent, organise, and demonstrate concern for others. Young activists' awareness of rights may, to some degree, be a generational trait. This assertion aligns with the increasing body of literature regarding how youth activism transforms the comprehension of children's and young people's participation[19]. Activist

[17] Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989, Dz.U. 1991, Nr 120, poz. 526, https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19911200526 (12.08.2025).

[18] See e.g. E. K. M. Tisdall, P. Cuevas-Parra, *Beyond the familiar challenges for children and young people's participation rights: the potential of activism*, «The International Journal of Human Rights» 2022, vol. 26(5), p. 792–810.

[19] See e.g., N. Mattheis, *Unruly kids? Conceptualizing and defending youth disobedience*, «European Journal of Political Theory» 2022, vol. 21(3), p. 466–490; A. Daly et al., *Climate*

claims move participation beyond simple having a say and a right to be heard (CRC article 12), and towards the "freedom rights" – of expression (CRC article 13) and of association and freedom of peaceful assembly (CRC article 15), that are often overlooked in the context of children and youth, and are at times subject to criminalisation.

> *I think activism, even if you do it just by yourself, alone, and you show the world that you just don't agree with something, is an important step forward, a drop in the ocean but still, it is like that often, that people will follow, they will dare to do something as well, instead of just standing by and watching. We have seen this during the strikes – at the beginning, there were often just a few people, but with each new day more and more showed up and were ready to speak loudly about what they disagree with* (K., 16).

The second intuition suggests that the type of activism discussed in the interviews is intricately integrated into everyday life. In various contexts, activities such as making soup, engaging in conversation with classmates, reading, or tending to a garden exemplify acts of activism. This concept represents a broad mode of existence rather than a limited set of actions. Alongside advocating for the cause, it is essential to assist one another and establish affinities.

> *We have been discussing this lately quite often, you know, that we want not only to stop the climate catastrophe, but we also want to work towards a different, alternative culture of being together, of communicating with each other and with others* (S., 16).

Thirdly, activism encompasses diverse formats, thereby requiring and allowing for varying levels of participation. This highlights the importance of connective action in shaping contemporary frameworks for youth social and political engagement, aligning with the concept of transitioning between online and offline contexts of activism. Connective action[20] highlights the role of communication in the formation of structures and activities in both online and offline contexts. The framework is constructed upon flexible, customisable action frames and tailored participation.

Thus, activism is something that is not only potentially accessible to everyone but also takes many forms, resulting in a messy and dense network of political performances (some of the young intervieewes started out as activists in the youth wings of political parties, while others were involved in artistic collectives, non-governmental organizations, or school-based organizations), civic disobedience (such as sit-ins and peaceful protests), circles of empathy

Action and the UNCRC: A 'Postpaternalist' World Where Children Claim Their Own Rights, «Youth» 2024, vol. 4, p. 1387–1404; Ch. McMellon, E. K. M. Tisdall, *Children and Young People's Participation Rights: Looking Backwards and Moving Forwards*, «The International Journal of Children's Rights» 2020, vol. 28(1), p. 57–82.

20 W. L. Bennett, A. Segerber, *The logic of connective…*; E. Korolczuk, *Explaining mass protests against…*

(people would unanimously emphasize the importance of emotional work in activism, the quality of communication, practicing skills like de-escalation of conflicts, inclusive communication, radical empathy, and ethics of care), and finally – "tending one's garden" – being both aware of the need to keep oneself in good mental health (wellbeing, awareness of activist burnout etc.) and the need to undertake small actions and do small things in one's environment to feel instant agentic gratification (such as food sharing, dumpster diving, taking down circus leaflets, talking to people at school about how they can also contribute). While culture often portrays activism through dramatic lenses of protests characterised by loudness and boldness, the activism revealed through the interviews is predominantly of a more ordinary character, emphasising learning and teaching – particularly peer teaching – and community building in both offline and online contexts.

> *This may sound weird, but to me, it is important to do always something that brings immediate results and gives you a lot of joy, so it's like you not only focus on political stuff but, I don't know, have time to tend your garden to take care of your mental health* (W., 16).

Fourthly, for the young individuals interviewed, activism represents both a deeply personal and cause-oriented endeavour, as well as a novel means of socialising, fostering communities, and establishing affinities. Young activists demonstrate a clear understanding of the intersectionality of discrimination, leading to a natural convergence of various agendas, including LGBT+ rights, climate change, reproductive rights, and education. This exemplifies the "logic of affinity" articulated by Richard Day[21], contrasting with the earlier "hegemony of hegemony" model of social resistance. Hegemonic struggles often prioritise a singular form of oppression, such as class, and necessitate the organisation of others to achieve overarching objectives. In contrast, the logic of affinity emphasises the establishment of alternative structures, addressing oppression within these frameworks, and extending solidarity to others. This approach aligns with Day's concept of "non-branded politics and tactics"[22], fostering connections among diverse communities through non-hierarchical, non-universalizing relationships grounded in mutual aid and shared ethical commitments. Young activists perceive the seemingly distinct fields of activities, issues, and problems – such as the education system and animal rights – as interconnected. This perspective arises from their belief that these just claims collectively form the framework for a world they consider worth living in.

> *It's natural and obvious to me to see these things together. It's like a reflection of my vision of reality, my vision of my country and us as the nation: secular, with animals having rights*

21 R. J. F. Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist…*
22 Ibidem, p. 6.

> *that enable them to live with dignity, and of course human rights, so that each and every one of us can live as they want, be in charge of their bodies. It seems unbelievable to me what is happening now when most basic and natural human rights are being taken away from us* (O., 17).

> *to me the best principle of action is that everyone in XR can focus on issues related to the climate catastrophe, and also the ones that are important for them. Like, it can be LGBT+ rights, women's rights, like, like, all the matters that are important to us* (E., 15).

The inclusive and intersectional nature of activist engagement among the young individuals interviewed provides them with a sense of safety. This broad umbrella encompasses various important issues, including those related to sexual minorities, education, and climate change. Under this framework, they feel understood and are less likely to censor their beliefs or feel ashamed of their activism, particularly when the issues align with the values of more liberal or leftist youth.

In *Politics, Protest, and Young People* Sarah Pickard presents the concept of DIO (Do It Ourselves) politics[23] to characterise a novel form of political engagement among young people. While connective action integrates online and offline communication and activities, DIO politics emphasises that political actions are closely associated with friendships and mutual care within affinity groups. One respondent stated:

> *I want to think that I did everything I could to make things better somehow. So I do what I do for myself. I do it for all the people who are with me, for my friends, my family, my loved ones. So the question is not is it worth doing, the question is how to do it effectively* (M., 16).

Do-it-ourselves politics involves the expansion of conventional protest methods, including online viral videos, memes, daily consumption behaviours, and performances, alongside the normalisation of street protests. It is protagonist, bottom-up participation that involves both lifestyle choices and collective actions. As Pickard puts it: *These usually operate outside formal political institutions and are often enabled by digital technologies that create a sense of belonging, which is important to young people's sense of identity*[24].

Additionally, young activists perceive that systemic, large-scale social change is achieved through microsocial activities and relationships. This perspective contrasts with neoliberal logic, which attributes individual responsibility for global conditions to personal agency. Instead, young activists emphasise the importance of focussing their efforts on affinity circles, interconnected individuals, and community building. This challenges the idea that young indi-

[23] S. Pickard, *Politics, Protest and Young People*…
[24] Ibidem, p. 3.

viduals are naive in their assertions, as their claims, though seemingly ambitious, are evaluated in relation to the resources, energies, and capacities at their disposal. This may elucidate their simultaneous involvement in multiple cases – the cumulative effect of minor actions. Understanding how teenagers conceptualize their own activism is a key step in understanding their cross-generational activist cooperation.

Intergenerational relations

In addition to exploring individual understandings of activism, it was important sought to learn how young people perceive, comprehend, and assess intergenerational relations within an activist context. While they clearly recognised the dominant narrative characterising generations as having troubled relationships, it was identified as a challenge to be addressed rather than an immutable reality. Interviews indicate that intergenerational disputes and disagreements do not motivate the actions of young individuals. Conversely, they appeared to be both impatient and fatigued by the taxing nature of these conflict frames, particularly given the extensive workload at hand.

Two categories of adults were identified as points of reference for young people. First, adults in general, a part of the generational ordering equation, a specific type of adult audiences watching their civic engagement (and here the stereotypical ways of seeing young people were called up – like their confinement to either family 'were are their parents?' or education spaces 'why aren't they at school?'). Second, the actual and potential adult allies, the ones who actually operate in similar or neighbouring settings.

> *Of course, generally we can speak of some generation clashing, people who were born already in XXI century and are now coming of age and they simply live in a world that looks very much different than the one the older generations were growing up in, it makes a lot of room for tensions. You know, they were brough up within more conservative framework, or very neo-liberal one, with focus on capitalism, whereas we are generally more left-wing-oriented. It is definitely a challenge to work something out together, but it's not impossible* (O., 17).

The generalising view on conservative vs. progressive generational differences is also telling in the context of the self-stereotyping of young people interviewed, possibly due to their intense experiences in specifically politically charged activist spaces. One of them described young activists as: *colourful, brimming with energy, happy, free. Free, first and foremost. And also coexisting in a way that we just are together, connected and interdependent.* (L., 16) However, the reality, somewhat overlooked by our respondents, is that political activity and agitation are not exclusive to leftist youth.

The issue of age-based power dynamics within activist settings was widely acknowledged, with adults often asserting authority over the definition of genuine activism versus mere "pretend-play", and young people struggling to discard their own prejudices. Overall, the notion behind young activists' views was that, while adultism, ageism, and mutual stereotyping occur at the outset, they must be rejected and revised at the level of specific actions. And, at a more intimate, affinity-based level of relations with adults, they actually give way to like-minded people cooperating in various contexts.

> *I think that there is an intergenerational solidarity, I just think it needs to be promoted more. It can occur, when we understand that our own well-being depends on other generations, that we need each other. What makes it difficult is when we hear: 'oh, these youngsters know nothing', and we say 'oh no, these boomers cannot be our allies'. If we could only drop these prejudices, we could do so many wonderful things* (L., 16).

> And another person adds: *climate change for example is not an ideological issue, it will affect us all* (N., 15).

Several concepts regarding intergenerational ties emerged from our interviews, all grounded in the understanding that the landscape of young people's political engagement and potential generational roles in these diverse contexts is intricate. Most interviewees became politically engaged not due to top-down adult agitation, but rather because they personally encountered a point of disagreement from which there was no return. However, their entry points into activism varied, as did their relationships with adult allies. For N. (15) it was a theatre group collaborating with Extinction Rebellion on performance protests, while M. (17) identified it as a young branch of a political party.

> *Being a part of a leftist political party gave me a better motivation to engage, because I knew that I am not by myself, and that there are others with me who are like-minded. And it was of course much easier to do things as a part of young left, because it is all well organised within party structures* (M., 17).

At the same time however, politicians were generally approached with suspicion and distrust as possible true allies.

> *Politics is govern by a specific internal logic. Like, it is known that a lot of things are media creations, whereas in reality they look different. To be honest, there were only a few adults who supported us for real, and many only wanted to shake our hands on tv to show how much they invest in the youth, how great young people we have in politics, whereas their actual support was non-existent* (M., 17).

In the context of valuing and understanding intergenerational relations, young people strategically utilise age and age-related privileges in their activist engagement. They leverage generational resources, such as the authority of adults, which is often perceived as a natural source of power and voice in

various contexts (O., 17). They value the access to institutional and financial resources, benefit from the long-term experience and activist knowledge of older generations, receive legal support from adult lawyers who assist like-minded young activists pro bono during protests, and create opportunities for mutual learning by contributing their youthful energy and "biographical accessibility" to the cause. Intergenerational allyships were also understood as build upon a reciprocal exchange of human resources, involving participation in other organisations' rallies, marches, and meetings, as well as inviting activists to collaborate on workshops, debates, or lectures.

Secondly, the alliances and solidarity between young activists and adult allies were often somewhat unintentionally intergenerational, as they were primarily founded on shared worldviews, social capitals, and experiences of belonging to common social bubbles of activist engagement. Respondents would assert that our alignment or divergence in practice and concrete actions is influenced more by individual identity and values than by generational age. Shared values and worldviews, rather than merely shared biographical trajectories, constitute the foundational elements of a generation or tribe. This view presents a compelling case against the media's focus on age as the exclusive factor accounting for differences between youth and adults regarding social issues that merit protest and discussion.

Another significant issue identified by our respondents in the context of intergenerational relations was family dynamics. In numerous instances, the journey to activism commenced at home, where social issues central to their later actions were openly and vigorously debated with parents. Alternatively, they may have inherited their parents' commitment to social justice, their social networks, alternative cultural resources, and adult allies that facilitated their initial involvement. Additionally, parents were identified as sources of not only emotional support, but also of security and co-responsibility, as one of our respondents candidly admitted:

> *(…) well, you know, if you want to engage in civil disobedience at 15, you definitely need to somehow discuss this with your parents. Because on many occasions you will need them. When you are at certain age, it is your parent who need to pick you up from the police station if it happens so that you get arrested. And then they need to be present in court during hearings and such. So, generally if we want their much needed support, we need to actually have our parents' permission to perform civil disobedience* (E., 15).

Therefore, adult allies are not just any adults; they are caring adults who create a mutually understanding platform by sharing identities and experiences with young people. Furthermore, the value of their support is founded on more than simply institutional, specialised, or material resources; it also stems from acknowledged solidarity, relational, affinitive support,

and an understanding of the emotional labour that young people put into activism.

One of the young activists recalled – in the context of praising mutual intergenerational support and cooperation – that they were very often confronted with adult activists exclaiming along the lines of: *'oh wow, you are 15 and already in the XR, I didn't have any political awareness, when I was your age'. That would always perplex me* (W., 15). And this seems to be something of a challenge for many young activists, especially the ones active and present in areas of political life considered more "adult", like reproductive rights, presidential campaigns, or even climate change.

Marah Gubar introduces the concept of "aetonormative amnesia" or the effect of age-related social norms on silencing, demeaning, and disempowering young people. She argues that aetonormative amnesia is another form of forgetting:

> *When a member of a particular age group accomplishes something that seems at odds with the stereotypes associated with that group, their achievement is often regarded as exceptional and then is promptly forgotten… This kind of forgetfulness allows our preconceived notions to remain intact: our beliefs about people in particular age groups persist, despite the existence of many, many exceptions*.[25]

Aetonormative praise and a specific "discourse of exceptionality"[26] are both based on the previously mentioned notion of youth in crisis, which appears to be a prevailing narrative that interprets young people's political engagement. Characterising youth activism as exceptional and rare undermines the extensive history of young people enabling social changes. Emphasising the spectacular, media-worthy forms of engagement neglects the organic and continuous nature of grassroots activist efforts aimed at improving social life. The numerous references to interdependence and cooperation in interviews with young activists in this study appear to serve as a counterbalance to this narrative. Positioning young people's activist engagement as exceptional is ultimately counterproductive, as it may discourage others from participating due to concerns about not meeting societal expectations or feeling inadequate. Additionally, this perspective can be patronising, implying, *Wow, as for young people, you are doing quite well; good for you!* (K., 16), as though the issues the youth struggle for were mere trivial exercises in civic engagement.

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25 M. Gubar, *Seen and Heard: Remembering Children's Art and Activism*, «Los Angeles Book Review», https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/seen-heard-remembering-childrens-art-activism/ (11.07.2024).

26 H. R. Gordon, J. K. Taft, *Rethinking youth political socialization: Teenage activists talk back*, «Youth & Society» 2011, vol. 43(4), p. 1506.

When they say 'wow, you are young, and the future is yours, change the world', I am like 'well, you can contribute as well, it is the future of your children who are my age now' (K., 16).

Intergenerational relations and allyships should therefore be rooted in solidarity, interdependence, and mutual support, and the following quote makes an appropriate illustration of this understanding:

I would love to see newspapers' headlines screaming in bold letters that: 'One hundred teenagers and one hundred grandmas were arrested today for fighting for their rights' (E., 15).

Participatory root system: looking into a messy nature of participation and intergenerational relations

The presented research offers only a preliminary analysis of young activists' self-perception and their understandings of intergenerational relationships. In different social domains of political involvement, young people and adults occupy specific roles and positions, dependent on their resources and capitals. There is a tendency to analyse these roles and relationships in binary terms, distinguishing between formal and informal modes of participation and engagement, hierarchical and non-hierarchical leadership and collaboration, as well as organic and strategic logics of action. Dichotomies, however, hinder the social imagination required to explore the rationale behind young people's civic engagement and the intergenerational relationships they negotiate and experience.

The analysis of interviews conducted with young activists offers a glimpse into a complex, multidimensional picture of contemporary youth activism and intergenerational relations within its framework. According to the respondents, activism is not confined to heroic acts or institutional affiliation; rather, it is a daily practice – a way of being and expressing care, both for social issues and for others. Young people emphasized the accessibility of activism, its emotional and affective dimensions, and the interplay between online and offline actions, reflecting contemporary concepts such as connective action and do-it-ourselves politics.

Activism emerges as a space for building communities, relationships, and values based on empathy, care, and mutual support, rather than solely as a battlefield against oppression. Young activists frequently combine various issues – from climate justice and minority rights to education – highlighting their interconnectedness and shared ethical foundations. This understanding aligns with the logic of affinity, opposing hierarchical and universalizing forms of action.

In terms of intergenerational relations, the young people interviewed demonstrate awareness of dominant generational conflict narratives, yet aim to move beyond them through collaboration, mutual respect, and resource-sharing. Their relationships with adults are not monolithic – while institutional politics and paternalism are often viewed with scepticism, adult allies who share values and offer knowledge, resources, and emotional support are highly valued. Affinity-based relationships – built on shared beliefs rather than age or formal status – play a key role.

Respondents also recognized the role of families and home environments as foundational spaces for developing social awareness and engagement. These relationships can be supportive or ambivalent. At the same time, they were critical of narratives that glorify their activism as "exceptional" or "extraordinary", viewing this as a form of marginalization that weakens the potential for collective action.

In light of these findings, youth activism should not be seen as an anomaly or transitional phase, but as a legitimate and integral form of social and political participation – deeply embedded in everyday life, relationships, and values. It creatively redefines not only modes of engagement but also the foundations of intergenerational solidarity.

Analysing the interviews made apparent the need for a convenient metaphor to encapsulate the complexity of activism and to consider the multi-layered and interconnected nature of various intergenerational and at times intragenerational relationships. Brian Martin employs the illustrative metaphor of an "ecosystem of activism". He posits that effective direct action is contingent upon a supportive environment, analogous to a flower's dependence on nutrients, roots, stems, pollinators, and sunlight. Successful activism thus necessitates prior knowledge, supportive group members, adequate resources, and effective communication[27]. This framework insightfully highlights the interdependencies that underpin successful activism but our aim was to address what lies beneath the visible ecosystem and to focus on the submerged levels of participation and activism. For this purpose, the metaphor of a *participatory root system* was chosen.

Root systems, especially in forest ecologies, form vast, entangled, and often invisible networks. Older trees share nutrients with younger ones; roots intertwine across species and distances, creating channels of communication, care, and resilience. Though invisible from the surface, these subterranean lifelines sustain and shape the forest's visible vitality. Similarly, youth participation and

[27] B. Martin, *Activism, Social and Political*, [in:] G. Anderson, K. Herr (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Activism and Social Justice*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks (CA) 2007, p. 22.

activism are often rooted in quiet, slow-growing forms of activism: everyday practices, intimate relations, subtle gestures, and diffuse solidarities that do not always erupt into spectacle but remain essential to political life. The root system metaphor invites us to reimagine participation not as a series of isolated acts or generational ruptures, but as part of a living, relational infrastructure that nurtures emergent forms of collective life.

This shift enables a more nuanced understanding of activism as a process of mutual cultivation across generations and contexts, a web of support and influence that unfolds beneath dominant narratives and temporalities of political engagement. It addresses the unseen: the affective labour, the tacit knowledge, the slow work of building trust and affinity. These underground pathways do not merely enable communication and nourishment; they also reconfigure the terrain of possibility, expanding spaces of social connection, belonging, and transformation. The root system thus encompasses the principles of connective action, affinity-based organising, and diverse forms of collaboration – across time, age, and social location. By foregrounding the root system as a metaphor, authors hope to offer a conceptual tool that not only captures the often-overlooked, grounded dimensions of youth activism, but also challenges dominant paradigms by illuminating how political participation is also cultivated through slow, entangled, and intergenerational processes of becoming.

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