

The Beginnings of Activist Careers in the New Youth Environmentalism. An Actor-based Interactionist Perspective

*El inicio de carreras activistas en el nuevo ecologismo juvenil.
Una perspectiva interaccionista desde el actor*

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Key words

- Political Participation
- Youth
- Social Movements
- Climate Activism

Palabras clave

- Participación política
- Juventud
- Movimientos sociales
- Activismo climático

Abstract

This paper analyses the beginnings of the activist careers of the young people who engaged in protests against the climate crisis following on from the mass-mobilisation events in 2019. The notion of career, as a succession of objective and subjective changes, provides an understanding of the involvement, stabilisation and conditions for continued commitment. Participant observation and in-depth interviews in the organisations Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion were used to show the individual (cognitive, emotional and relational) transformations experienced during the early activist careers of the new environmentalist generation. Two key explanations stand out. First, the new frames of perception and emotions produced by the activist experience sustain engagement; second, the affinity between the participant and the predominant norms, strategies and profiles of the collective fosters either involvement or self-exclusion.

Resumen

Se analiza el comienzo de las carreras activistas de los jóvenes que protestaron contra la crisis climática a partir de las intensas movilizaciones de 2019. La noción de carrera, como sucesión de cambios objetivos y subjetivos, permite comprender la involucración, estabilización y condiciones para el compromiso continuado. Mediante observaciones participantes y entrevistas en profundidad en Fridays For Future y Extinction Rebellion, se muestran las transformaciones individuales (cognitivas, emocionales y relacionales) en los inicios de las carreras activistas de la nueva generación ecologista. Se destacan dos claves explicativas. Primero, los nuevos marcos de percepción y las emociones que produce la experiencia activista sostienen la implicación; segundo, la afinidad entre el participante y las normas, estrategias y perfiles predominantes en el colectivo favorece la involucración o la autoexclusión.

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INTRODUCTION¹

A new generation of environmental activists

In 2018, teenager Greta Thunberg took time off school every Friday to sit outside the Swedish parliament and protested against the inaction on the climate crisis. Her action soon went viral and hundreds of students joined her. In March and September 2019, thousands of young people in Spain and around the world took to the streets, organised by Fridays For Future (FFF), the movement founded by Greta (Jacobsson, 2020). On 7 October 2019, activists from Extinction Rebellion (XR) cut off the Paseo de la Castellana in Madrid and began a campaign of civil disobedience, emulating similar actions that had taken place in London. In these protests, a new generation of climate activists started their own cycle of mobilisation, with specific strategic and discursive characteristics (Maier, 2019; Jacobsson, 2020).

Both FFF and XR are composed of young people, although FFF is notable for the young age of its participants, many still in secondary school (De Moor *et al.*, 2020). Both are international collectives with horizontal and open local structures. While FFF is assembly-based and has a commitment to collective dialogue and consensus-building (Revilla *et al.*, 2023), XR relies on interconnected but independent working and affinity groups (Berglund and Schmidt, 2020). Both use virtual tools (Soler-i-Martí, Ferrer-Fons and Terren, 2020) to organise and disseminate a new discursive

framework: climate crisis, reliance on science, disengagement from institutional politics and an eco-social justice that includes gender and colonial conflict (Belli *et al.*, 2022; Maier, 2019). Moreover, they omit the transformation of the ecological *habitus* and forms of consumption, one of the strategies of the environmentalist movement (Haluza-DeLay, 2008), and focus on political pressure and systemic changes in production.

The main difference between them lies in strategy. FFF engages in sit-ins, strikes and demonstrations with hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of young people; while Extinction Rebellion is committed to *Acción Directa No Violenta* (Non-violent Direct Action). NVDA is peaceful civil disobedience to disrupt everyday life: it includes road blockades, boycotts, sit-ins and performances. It allows small groups to achieve dissemination, while it entails facing severe repression (Berglund and Schmidt, 2020; Hayes, Doherty and Saunders, 2020).

The aim of this article is to describe the beginning of the activist careers of FFF and XR members. The study of activists with only a few years of experience does not allow for an extensive longitudinal analysis, but it provides an excellent window into initial involvement and long-term engagement. It will yield insight into how profile and social predispositions shape participation, what transformations activists undergo and what relationship the organisation establishes with its members.

The beginning of an activist's career

In 2001, Fillieule presented a new answer to the classic question: why does someone participate in a social movement? He took the notion of career from Howard Becker's (1963) interactionist work on individual commitment and proposed a "processual analysis of commitment", as opposed to explanations based on the actor's rationality or the search for profit.

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Fillieule viewed a person's career as a series of objective and subjective non-linear changes—an open sequence of interactions between the world and the individual. This process unfolds through a chain of causes and effects rather than a fixed trajectory where initial causes drive the actor through obscure mechanisms (Fillieule, 2001; Agrikolianski, 2017). Social determinations and predispositions, shaped by the actor's position within the structure, do not determine outcomes on their own, but interact with the environment and are manifested in concrete behaviours. Thus, “why” is replaced by “how” in the analysis, including the effect that predispositions in the Bourdieusian structural approach have on the processual logic of symbolic interactionism (Agrikolianski, 2017).

The study of activist careers covers long periods, as it encompasses the time “before, during, after and between” social movements. However, studying the initial point of engagement is important, both in terms of ascertaining its triggering forms and identifying its long-term effects: experience in movements is a major cause of continuity or abandonment (Corrigall-Brown, 2011; Fillieule, 2005). The literature has already provided some key aspects about the initial process.

Participant activation is associated with abandoning previous interpretative frameworks and adopting new ones. It entails *hot cognition*, a cognitive process accompanied by intense emotions (Gamson, 1992). One example is the so-called moral shock: the indignation produced by a transgression of the moral norm that breaks previous frames of perception (Jasper, 1997). Through anger, hope and other emotional reactions, ties to power are broken and relationships with society, the media and other collectives are re-configured (Flam, 2005).

In fact, each stage of involvement is linked to different emotions (Woods *et al.*, 2012). These transform each other through collective action and propel the participant

into new actions, relationships and situations. Emotional chains occur where pain is overcome through the hope produced by protest, or shame transforms and becomes collective pride through the anger experienced (Williamson, 2011).

In this process, different spheres of life compete for personal availability, offering different motivations (McAdam, 1989; Gottraux, 1997). Protest provides, among other things: the hope of benefiting from sustained demands, emotional expression, or the positive self-perception derived from fighting for something considered good or just; making history, engaging in social networking and the adrenaline of confrontation (Jasper, 1997). It can also be attractive because it constitutes new rules and hierarchies, creates liminal spaces and invents forms of subjectivity (Pleyers, 2016).

Motivation is also generated by “the work of the institution to produce attachment” (Fillieule, 2005, p. 40). Ritual interactions (Collins, 2005), through affective synchronisation and a common focus, give rise to shared “emotional energy” and group solidarity among participants. Movements have intense “ritual interactions” where this “emotional energy” is distributed among members, binding them to the collective and to each other, although it must be renewed periodically (Collins, 1975). In what Goodwin calls “libidinal economy”, affective ties with the movement or peers compete with external relations, leading to continuity (1997).

METHODOLOGY

Production of research materials

An ethnographic study of Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion was carried out from September 2019 to July 2022. This consisted of 30 participant-observation sessions (see Table 1) and 27 interviews (see Table 2) in total.

TABLE 1. *Participant comments*

Date	Event	Place	Group
2019-09-21	Assembly	Madrid	FFF
2019-10-09	Symbolic camp-out	Madrid	XR
2019-10-15	Assembly	Madrid	FFF
2019-10-17	Assembly	Zaragoza	FFF
2020-01-31	Assembly	Madrid	FFF
2020-04-10	Assembly	Madrid (online)	FFF
2020-05-08	Assembly	Zaragoza (online)	FFF
2020-05-16	Assembly	Zaragoza (online)	FFF
2020-05-16	2020 Meeting	State (online)	Both
2020-06-05	5J Mobilisation	Zaragoza	FFF
2020-06-13	Assembly	Zaragoza	FFF
2020-08-21	Assembly	Zaragoza	FFF
2021-09-24	Repsol demonstration	Madrid	Both
2021-12-10	Online Creativity Meeting	Madrid	XR
2021-12-19	Welcome Meeting	Madrid	XR
2022-01-28	Assembly	Madrid	FFF
2022-02-04	Repsol action	Madrid	Both
2022-02-05	Rebellion for Climate	Madrid	Both
2022-02-20	Working picnic	Madrid	XR
2022-03-14	Choral group	Madrid	XR
2022-03-25	Global Strike	Madrid	FFF
2022-03-28	Demonstration	Madrid	FFF
2022-05-07	NVDA	Madrid	XR
2022-06-03	Paint Street	Madrid	XR
2022-06-04	Training	Madrid	XR
2022-06-09	Non-violence debate	Madrid	XR
2022-06-10	Assembly scientific rebellion	Madrid	XR
2022-06-23	Prado Action	Madrid	XR
2022-06-26	Demonstration against NATO	Madrid	XR
2022-06-27	Queen Sofia Action	Madrid	XR

Source: Prepared by the authors.

TABLE 2. *Interviews*

PARTICIPATION AT THE TIME OF THE INTERVIEW				
SPORADIC	SETTLED	EXPERIENCED	DROPPED OUT	AGE
E17 Female. Madrid. Was not previously convinced about Ecologistas en Acción. XR	E20 Male. Madrid. In the process of completing a high-level vocational qualification. Previous history of activism in different areas. XR	E11 Male. Madrid. FFF	E27 Male. Zaragoza. FFF	25-30
E23 Woman Madrid. Teaching qualification, employed. Studying Anthropology. Joined XR as part of a community living project.		E16 Male Madrid. XR		
		E21 Male. Madrid. Studied Environmental Studies and participated in several conflicts in countries in the Global South. XR		
	E4 Male. Madrid. FFF	E9 Male. Madrid. Tried XR, but preferred FFF.	E12 Female. Zaragoza. Started when studying for Baccalaureate. Came from the environmental movement, and has also aligned herself with the feminist movement. FFF	20-25
	E15 Female. Madrid. XR		E26 Female. Madrid. Will look for other associations given the political orientation taken. FFF	
	E22 Fluid gender. [Anonymised location data]. FFF	E2 Female. Malaga. University. Moved from recycling initiatives to activism. FFF	E7 Male. Madrid. FFF	
			E18 Female. Madrid. FFF	15-20
			E19 Female. Madrid. Participated in XR, but preferred an established CSO (Occupied Social Centre) in a neighbourhood. XR	
	E24 Female. Madrid. Came from a European country to study in Spain. XR	E14 Female. Bilbao. FFF	E6 Male. Asturias. Participating ever since studying for his Baccalaureate. Greenpeace activist. FFF	
E1 Male. Madrid. Secondary, no further involvement due to access difficulties. FFF	E10 Female. Madrid. FFF	E5 Female. Madrid. FFF	E8 Female. Madrid. FFF	15-20
E3 Female. Madrid. FFF			E13 Female. Madrid FFF	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Since an activist career entails a longitudinal approach, each interview and observation session was a tool to reconstruct itineraries (Fillieuele, 2001). Each interviewee was at a different stage and remembered the previous ones they had undergone. The semi-structured script progressed chronologically: primary and secondary socialisation, first memories of environmentalism, previous activism and first experiences as a member of the collective. Militancy over time, including dropping out of the organ-

isation, ran parallel to the other spheres: work, friendships, etc. Moreover, the observations sessions permeated the overall picture; they recorded experiences that would affect or be mentioned by the interviewees and help to understand their subsequent development.

The ethnographic study focused on Madrid, as large metropolitan environments have proven to have more established organisations. Although most of the interviews took place in this city, activists from

Bilbao, Malaga, Asturias and Zaragoza also took part. Likewise, in FFF, the local node of Zaragoza was included in the observation sessions, as a strategy for comparison and contrast. For XR, the lesser city nodes were small, unstable and difficult to contact, so we opted to collect information through interviews. The research was more focused on Madrid, but it allowed for comparisons to be made between interviewees and observation in different locations, although there were few differences.

Some of the observation sessions happened in virtual assemblies, due to COVID-19 restrictions. These made it difficult to observe the bodies and the processes involved in joining the collective (which was completed later), but made it easy to contact local nodes, such as the one in Zaragoza.

Interviewees were contacted on the basis of relationships established in the observation sessions, both in Madrid and throughout Spain. Structural sampling was used. This method selects diverse cases that represent all the different types of activists in the groups studied, irrespective of their statistical weight and paying special attention to the ends (of the spectrum). Key to the selection was the degree of involvement of the interviewee, in line with Fillieule's approach, to which gender, age, education and geographical location were added. Therefore, a typological classification box (see Table 2) divided level of involvement into three categories from lowest to highest ("sporadic", "settled" and "experienced"), with an added category for "dropped out".

The process of structural sampling identified the profiles of the participants, with the aim of achieving maximum differentiation between cases. FFF members in their thirties, XR activists with no university education and non-binary people represented the most differentiated cases. However, both groups had a strong internal homoge-

neity, with the most relevant differences being the degree of involvement and drop-out rates or continued engagement with the organisations. The number of XR respondents was smaller than that the number of FFF respondents. This was due to the initial stages of mobilisation and observation, when new developments and participation seemed to focus on the latter.

The profile indicated by the interviews matched that reported by Revilla *et al.* (2023) and Hayes, Doherty and Saunders (2020). In the case of the FFF, the majority of its members were young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, white and Spanish, with a greater presence of women. They had a middle class background, with significant cultural capital; at least one of their parents had a university education. Most of them had a secondary education level or a university degree, usually related to the humanities or environmental sciences. They were inexperienced participants, with a discourse limited to environmentalism and no connection to politicised or counter-cultural groups.

In contrast, there was a minority of participants with an activist background in other organisations, who played an important role in the initial creation of the movement. They had experience and militant skills, such as moderating meetings or organising demonstrations, and their discourse included global criticism of the political and economic system. This article focuses on the activist careers of novices and not on these experienced activists.

XR activists had a similar profile, older, aged between twenty-five and thirty years old, with an equal number of men and women and a minority coming from European countries. They had completed a university degree and were taking their first steps in the labour market or completing postgraduate courses. They were cosmopolitan, few were originally from Madrid, many

had lived in other countries and did not rule out migrating again. For most of them this was their first stable experience of activism, although they had engaged in previous experiences: occasional participation in protests, socialisation in politicised spaces (discussing politics with peers, collaborating with occupied social centres, joining permaculture associations) or changes in their personal lives, such as their diet, work, reduction of consumption, etc.

Analysis of research materials

Interviews were the central tool for accessing activists' motivations and experiences. The observation sessions made it possible to study the social situations within the groups, especially the mechanisms for integration into assemblies and actions. They also helped us to select the profiles interviewed and understand the experiences they mentioned.

The materials were coded using the Atlas.ti programme. To highlight the processual analysis, groups of codes were constructed according to different stages of activism, including before and after. A process of coding respondent quotes was used to classify different group experiences and events, with the aim of finding out "how" participation had taken place. These relationships between events and moments were essential for reconstructing activist careers.

In addition to the chronological division, other sets of codes were created in order to delve deeper into some specific dimensions. The first of these was sociability and ritual interactions in activism, based on ethnographic notes. This was followed by the influence of different spheres of life and early socialisation, as predispositions activated at different points in the career. The reasons given by activists were also considered, understood as a justification (Fillieule, 2001).

Finally, it was key to make comparisons with cases and situations where involvement failed. This contrasting exercise meant that those who did not become integrated into or left the collective met the minimum requirements necessary to participate.

RESULTS

First, the predispositions in the environment and socialisation are presented. This is followed by a report of the initial instances of participation in the organisation. The last subsection addresses mechanisms of (dis) engagement from the collective.

This order represents a fictitious technique; connection does not follow a linear progression that results in ongoing participation in the collective. It may be sporadic or limited to specific actions, and it can also be temporarily or permanently discontinued. While the level of internal homogeneity allows for a linear presentation, certain distinctions between the two groups were identified.

Predispositions to participation

Laura had heard about global warming on television and, like other young people, she was not interested. Nevertheless, she was terrified when her friend Maria showed her some videos at school about the climate crisis, which she had found on social media. That Friday, they both attended a sit-in in front of the Spanish Parliament, where hundreds of protesters of the same age group shared the same fear. But what caused it?

Similarly to most participants, Maria (E8) and Laura (E5)² grew up in families who had

² To present the findings of the analysis, the authors have drawn on the narratives of two activists from Fridays for Future and one from Extinction Rebellion, whose journeys were seen as being paradigmatic.

reduced plastic consumption, talked about nature and politics and, of course, recycled. They took advantage of the opportunities provided by their environment and school and, on the verge of entering university or already in the first year of their degree, they had an extensive vocabulary about the subject, good expression skills and an outstanding ability to understand texts and data. They had also debated in class topics such as planned obsolescence, the meat industry and ecovillages.

[...] we have always recycled batteries, oil, apart from glass, paper [...], my parents have a compost bin [...] and I have been going to the recycling centre with them since I was a little girl. (E23. Female, XR. 25-30 years old).

At school they have always put in our heads ideas about paying attention to the environment [...]. That's where I became really interested in the scientific side, because it's all very connected, you have to be careful, and so on and so forth. That was the first time I said to myself that I was interested in that. (E4. Male. FFF. 20-25 years old).

Interestingly, what motivated Maria was a talk in which a message of fear and urgency was conveyed by a Swedish girl named Greta Thunberg. Fear of experiencing the effects of a global catastrophe; urgency to avert it before this becomes impossible. The quotes show the fear that overcame these young people, although this did not always result from listening to Greta. Others used social media outreach channels and many already had some knowledge through school or university.

The way that ecologism "hit" me was on Instagram one afternoon when I was bored, [...] I came across a video of Greta. It was that video that went so viral [...] I listened to a talk that I watched on loop, maybe three times in a row, until I almost memorised it. [...] It had a huge impact on

me! It had... I think it had less than five or ten pieces of information that had an impact: it was like wow, wow!! It was like a shock, I felt like... I spent the whole weekend with this feeling of real fear, kind of like, like something bad was about to happen. [...] And I spent the weekend looking for videos on the environment. [...] So, it was like okay, I'm not going to skip a single sit-in. (E8. Female. FFF. 15-20 years old).

But why did Laura and her colleagues believe Greta and other communicators? They believed them because environmentalist discourse disseminates scientific facts through videos and forums on social media: data, statistics, graphs, reports and videos that science communicators such as Jorge Reichman, Yayo Herrero and Carlos Taibo convey to the public. For her, this was the mark of verisimilitude, as an advanced student at a school oriented towards adopting a scientific approach to physical facts. Laura had learned that nature should be cared for and scientific arguments understood and respected. In addition, the audiovisual format used vivid images of degradation and ecocide to show what was happening. The affinity with the channel and the form of the message turned the content, that is, the climate crisis, into an unquestionable and palpable threat.

It's what the science basically says and I understand. António Guterres was scared when he gave a speech a week ago about the situation of the IPCC report, about how the attitude of the governments is criminal, isn't it? That it's really very serious, that we're risking everything, aren't we? (E21. Male. Madrid. XR).

So, there is no more time, as in general time is running out. And this is not me saying it, it is science saying it, it is the IPCC saying it, it is SAGE saying it [...], who is the chief scientific advisor to the UK government. (E21. Male. Madrid. XR).

The objective certainty about the catastrophic situation leads participants to break away from the political class. First, academia teaches that the exercise of power is legitimised by knowledge.

However, verbatim statements from various interviewees have been included in order to present the most illustrative quotes. All names have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the respondents.

Second, they expect the state to protect them from threats to life. Politicians are in breach of both precepts by ignoring science's warning.

I didn't take action because... in a way I felt, "well the rest of the people are seeing what I'm seeing, politicians, the people who have to make decisions, they won't ignore it, it doesn't make sense, how can they ignore it", but this is exactly what's happening! (E25. Male. FFF. 20-25 years).

[...] you are making an effort and you see that in some spheres they are not working as you think they should be working to face a global crisis such as the climate crisis. well, that's where there's some anger, yes, a certain amount of frustration, isn't there, a certain amount of frustration? (E17. Female. XR. 20- 25 years).

Although Diego (E16) is twenty-five years old, he shared Laura's concerns. His decision to break away from the "system" happened a long time ago; he connected the ecological crisis with the lack of democracy, capitalism, gender inequality and, in particular, the extractivism experienced by the Global South. He lived in a Latin American country and worked with a vegetarian consumer group in a CSO (Occupied Social Centre). He also attended FFF sit-ins, but he eventually dropped out and ended up participating in XR, as did others with a similar profile.

Laura and Diego experienced a sense of guilt. They felt responsible for the negative effects of their consumption: they reduced their ecological footprint through their daily efforts. However, sacrifice had limited effects and took time, money and will. The result was a sense of nihilistic guilt ("it does not make any difference") that led to apathy but could motivate activism, if it proved useful.

[...] individual actions, for me personally, have led me a little bit... to feel... well, a bit helpless, you know? OK, I take individual actions, part of my life is based on them, that is, I stop doing certain things, you know? [...] I can have various differ-

ent arguments with my family or with friends who tell me: "Oh, please, Leonor, we want to go to McDonald's for lunch and we can't go because of you" etc., etc. And then also, for me personally, it leads me to feel some level of nihilism, you know? (E17. Female. XR. 20- 25 years old).

Initial interactions

Laura and Diego only needed to know the time and place of one of the open calls to attend. The channels for information were: social media, traditional media, acquaintances and friends. Once there, by being on a contact list or meeting other participants it was easier for them to find out more and come back. Although Laura met her peers at the first sit-in, she found that the assemblies or meetings were more conducive to this connection.

In contrast, Diego attended several sit-ins with FFF, but soon gave up. Only months later he was back in action, in an XR-designed NVDA, at the suggestion of a friend from his former ecovillage. Participating was more complicated: he received training and took legal and physical risks. Unlike FFF, many were recruited through previous contacts in affinity groups, which encouraged ensuing collaborative efforts. Why did some young people prefer one or the other kind of activism? And, above all, why did some never return or only returned sporadically?

Firstly, the movement's situations and actions are rewarding in many different ways. For example, Maria enjoyed discussing and learning about environmentalism, as well as socialising and participating in something historical. However, all of them (both in FFF and XR) shared one motivation, to feel that they were engaged in fighting the climate crisis.

[...] to feel that we have power, we can take part in activities, we can do things". (E24. Female. XR. 20-25 years old). [Regarding her first action] a

little bit that my energies about activism and vindicating, well, they escalated a lot, you know? Of course, this can be done and it's cool to do it as a group, because individually talking or taking the ignition off the car, you don't do much, right? like in that sense, and it was cool to feel that strength and that sense of togetherness and so on. (E23. Female, XR. 25-30 years old).

"Strength" is not a generic motivation; it requires experiencing anxiety and fear about the climate crisis. Its effectiveness lies in the fact that it provides a sense of control and agency, the perception that they are not helpless, and therefore it reduces anxiety. It also reinforces anger against politicians and businesspeople. As a result, it displaces the guilt that Diego and Laura felt. The group's discourse explicitly underlined that the solutions do not lie in individual consumption habits.

[...] obviously we have some responsibility, but it is not all on us. [...] And to go further means to stop beating yourself up, to say: God, I'm not getting anywhere, and go after those at the top. (E12. Female. FFF. 20-25 years old).

Different actions offer different motivations, and this explains the differences between the participants of the two groups. Like many XR members, Diego believed that sit-ins and demonstrations were insufficient and merely symbolic. Because of his previous experience and political views, he was wary of putting pressure on the political system through conventional strategies. He wanted to become more strongly involved, taking actions that would enable a few people to have a major effect, whereby the sense of agency and adrenaline could be heightened.

[...] our fellow peers in Bolivia are doing blockades that cause some movement; so here, the bourgeois struggle of having a demonstration with a little banner and things like that seemed to me totally insufficient. It didn't seem to be the responsible thing to do, with what was happening, you know? Then I saw that at least XR was involved in civil disobedience and I saw that it was my

place, that they were serious about it. (E21. Male. Madrid. XR).

Others only found motivation in protesting, perhaps in the preparation process, but not in the day-to-day logistics. Action provides a clear objective and highly social opportunities; thus, both groups would grow and shrink from one call to action to another.

Secondly, Diego and Laura adapted to the rules of the organisation. Laura, who had the most conflicts, explained the initial shock of adapting to the assembly system. The following quote could represent dozens of assembly attendees who never returned. Assemblies require specific knowledge, use of non-verbal gestures, understanding and conveying complex arguments and enduring hours of discussion. In the end, Laura accepted and understood the rules; otherwise, she would have given up.

It was an assembly. There were about ten people. They were talking, and they were saying things like I didn't feel I was able to respond to anything they were saying, because I [...]. So they were saying: "We will stage a sit-in on this day", and the assembly would go, "do you think we should do this?" And I didn't feel I was able to say anything. [...] And since we brought out the assembly they said: "OK, so now you have to say how you feel about the movement, about the climate". So I said: "A sunny morning", or something like that. But that was kind of the first thing I said, and I really felt very much like an outsider. (E5. Female. FFF. 15-20 years old).

The language used during assemblies also required modulating and adapting forms of expression, which can drive out neophyte attendees. However, the quotes also show that these very mechanisms can be inclusive for those who accept them and are able to participate in them; they produce a sense of inclusiveness and that everyone can be a member.

At the first assembly, Maria said to me: “Be careful, they don’t say climate change, they say *crisis*”. [...] Climate crisis I had already internalised. But I find it very difficult to use the feminine form when speaking. [...] I thought I didn’t care, but I like it. I think it’s really awesome, I guess it’s because of the contrast. Not so much to use the feminine form, but to say: “We are refusing to use the masculine form only”. This is just awesome. To be taken into account. You feel more included... (E5. Female. FFF. 15-20 years old).

[Talking about the horizontality in the assembly] already at that moment I felt a sense of group where, no matter where you come from, you can participate and do your bit. (E4. Male. FFF. 20-25 years old).

Thirdly, they observed how the others spoke and what they talked about, what their aesthetic and gender expression was, and even how they moved. Laura and Diego thought that they were similar to them, which made it easier for them to interact and feel that they could also participate. Maria, on the other hand, “admired” them; instead of identifying with them, she wanted to be like them. She wanted to develop ways of being and abilities that she had not yet been able to achieve and that she found in the group. In both cases, there were basic similarities in tastes and dispositions, which were either by shared or aspired to. The basic similarities reveal how this operates and its significance when it is absent:

I felt like I identified myself as... I mean, as I am a person of faith [religious] because, well, I don’t know if they knew that or not, but as I have a background that is [a religious congregation] [...]. I don’t have a shaved head, I don’t have anything physical that externally characterises me as anti-capitalist or something like that, right? I mean, I don’t have a left-wing image as it is usually seen, which identifies you in some way, you know, like having a different profile, maybe even the way you speak or whatever. But the thing is that I noticed there was a tension like, “she is different or she doesn’t fit in with us”, you know? Or I didn’t feel included in that... (E18. Female. Madrid. FFF).

The affinity in terms of motivations, norms and participants explains the high level of internal homogeneity in the profile of each of the groups. Those who did not belong to the middle classes with high cultural capital were expelled because of their difficulties related to decision-making, assembly processes or regular interaction. Even agency in the face of the climate crisis (the primary motivation for action) is more often found among those with a stronger affinity to academia, as it requires the scientific underpinning discussed above.

Identification with FFF was difficult for those with profiles more traditionally masculine. The same rules that produced a sense of belonging had the opposite effect on those with a classic masculine profile. In addition to there being a female majority in the organisation, there were some men who engaged in minor transgressions, such as having painted nails or wearing make-up, displaying emotional and non-aggressive forms of expression, or playing aesthetically with clothing. There were also some transgender or non-binary people among the activists.

We go back on the underground, and the guy starts talking. I know him from picketing student strikes years ago. He didn’t like the assembly very much and we had a bit of a discussion [...]: “And you want to confront the police with these people? Unless they don’t do one of those rounds to say how they’ve been feeling... They won’t be able to cope”. I gather he was referring to the round in the assembly where people shared how they were feeling [...] (Fieldwork note 2020-04-10).

In XR the similarity between profiles was more specific and included more areas. In addition to the preference for NVDAs, they found they had a common background: countercultural aesthetics, shared political ideas, travel or study experiences, ethical consumption, etc. As mentioned above, what mattered was not only what they already shared, but the desire to experience the potential that the organisation offered.

Experimentation, a game, I can try this, I can try this, trying things with people and things like that. Because, for example, being [vegan] in my new school [collective] is super easy, because there are so many vegetarian or vegan people that all the time people are...: we make suggestions about going to a restaurant. Will it be vegan? Naturally. It helps a lot to feel normal, included, I feel much better and it has helped me to develop that ecological awareness because I can share ideas, thoughts without feeling different, without feeling bad. (E24. Female. XR. 20-25).

This affinity was also found in organisational forms. In XR, each working group makes its own decisions; they coordinate their actions based on mutual trust between them. The final decision does not rest with an assembly. General meetings include a picnic, games and other proxemic situations. In FFF, assembly strategies are focused on broader profiles, with large numbers of participants; the feeling of one XR member who had approached FFF beforehand was one of displeasure; chaos and noise.

[...] I felt like it was very argh...! abstract, ambiguous, very disorganised, I felt chaos, I felt chaos and when confronted with chaos I kind of distanced myself [...]. The only thing we do is this continuous chaos of a huge WhatsApp group, you know? (E16. Male. XR. 25-30 years old).

(Dis)engaging dynamics

Laura and Diego worked in some specific tasks in their respective groups, after participating in some assemblies and actions. Laura designed the poster for a call to action and Diego prepared a training-talk on how to block a street, but it was not easy for either of them. Laura was unaware of the visual design used by FFF, whether using images of politicians or the word “anti-capitalism” was appropriate, or whether she should upload the poster to social media or photocopy it for distribution. Diego did not understand what the training was for, who it

was aimed at or who would do it, and it was impossible for him to propose changes, as he did not know who to reach to propose them to. The excerpt below taken from the fieldwork journal shows the importance of engaging the participant in collective work and the important role of the “welcomer”.

Irene and Saul went through the whole list of tasks resulting from the picnic, requesting volunteers or asking directly. They asked for someone to list places that had military conflicts due to Western extractivism. Irene says: “Let [Researcher] do this” and looked at me. I agreed. After the assembly I was told who to ask for reports, that I should use Excel and which columns to include. She also liaised with someone else, who turned it into a world map that would be used by the social media group and displayed on a banner. (Fieldwork note 2022-02-20).

The quote shows that Irene was a “welcomer”, a role that may be formal or informal, held by a single person or by several people, and had different names in FFF and XR, respectively. They teach how tasks should be done, why they are done, and the language of the group, and they ensure contact with the rest of the organisation. Irene distributed and coordinated tasks, integrated into workflows. The rest of the group was confident that the work assigned to the researcher would be done, thanks to her. In Laura’s case, the person responsible for social media who was expecting to receive her poster did not know her: would she know that the deadline was one week, would she disappear like others, or would she draw a poster that was not appropriate? Was it better to do it before she did? Laura had to adapt and the others had to trust her and give her the opportunity to do, a bridge built by someone who had a higher degree of integration in the organisation. Those who did not contribute their work as requested or did not find this niche ended up leaving.

Over time, Laura and Diego would understand decision-making and the role of

each participant and learn skills such as poster design, moderating, public speaking and campaign design. When entering into the work dynamics, each of them had a role: managing social media, facilitating the talk group, coordinating collective work, taking care of and mediating in internal conflicts, etc. While this role may be unofficial, the allocation of duties gave these positions a more formal nature. After a while, they became skilled at those tasks and the other participants saw this: they had a role in the organisation.

Let's say we work in committees, like any group, but I do think that I tend to bring the more strategic planning perspective. I also believe that I have contributed a lot to the management of the group. These are all participatory methodology tools, the design of participatory workspaces that allow all voices to be heard or agreements to be reached. (E11. Male. Fridays For Future. 25-30 years old).

The relationships that were established in assemblies and while completing tasks surprised new members: they were different from those in other settings, such as family, school or work. The members decided what the group was like and the rules promoted respect, and facilitated participation and ease. In XR, the rules explicitly mentioned prefigurative politics: the very world that participants aspired to must be built along the way, which translated into radical horizontality and inclusivity. Laura and Diego established strong affective relationships, intensified by these dynamics. Bonds in this space bring feelings of trust, equality and freedom that differentiate them from those in other spheres. They developed strong friendships and affective-sexual ties, and even built a group of friends. All this facilitates the work in the organisation and can also be a motivation.

There is no place in everyday life where you feel so comfortable with this culture of care that we have here [...] that generates a general feeling of belonging, a lot of nice things, you know? There are many people who feel that they are being

saved from life traumas too because suddenly you find yourself included in places where you are normally excluded [...] (E16. Male. XR. 25-30 years old).

Shared tastes and life projects are interwoven with collective and personal life, tempering the conflict with other spheres of life, which also place demands on participants' time and can lead to drop-out and reduced participation. The overlap between areas occurred faster for Diego, due to the strong affinity between profiles in XR. He found consumer groups and legal support in housing or employment disputes and lived with some of his peers. Others developed practices or explored areas they had not yet experienced.

In the most involved cases, participants tried to link the work sphere to the activist sphere: they refocused their professional career, worked in an environmental organisation, or even quit their job to focus on climate activism, as was the case for some XR activists. In this group, some changed their job or even their place of residence to larger cities to continue their engagement, believing that this was the only way they could be effective. Militancy became professionalised and provided social capital, either symbolic or monetary: respect for social leadership, presence in the media, contacts, publication of articles or paid work.

Community and activist practice also affect discourses and emotions about the climate crisis and political power. Laura expanded her ecologist discourse. Science remains an argument, but ceases to be a truth external to politics. Anger towards the ruling group increases and environmental issues are linked to feminism, energy poverty, class exploitation and, in particular, the Global South. Laura defended an eco-social justice with anti-capitalist or, rather, degrowth overtones. Her discourse was already similar to Diego's and other early participants in XR, but they all gained

greater knowledge and the ability to deploy arguments.

When people join, the first thing we are already clear about is anti-capitalism and all those things, and it's like, without saying it, people already understand it through the message we share, the way we speak, the assemblies, you know? I think it's cool, that there's no need to state things as such because when people work, they just realise those things. (E12. Female. FFF. 20-25 years old).

In addition, some key emotional tension emerged. Successful actions produced a sense of agency, decreasing anxiety and displacing personal guilt. In return, they surrounded themselves with stimuli that reminded them of the climate crisis, whether at protests, with their peers or on social media. Their increased knowledge of the issue amplified the fear of socio-environmental catastrophe. The polarity between anxiety and relief sustained participation; it relieved distress, but also produced it.

This attached great importance to the collective outcome of the actions undertaken by the organisation. These may be the positive reward for participation that counteracts the fear or anxiety generated, but if they fail, they will also reinforce the helplessness and pain of an inevitable catastrophe.

And when, all of a sudden, they tell us at a demonstration that there are a hundred and fifty thousand of me, it was like we wanted to get..., well, there were a couple of them who started to cry with joy. And, then, it was super amazing. Although it's been a tough start to the year, in terms of motivation and impact, and maybe the average secondary school kid, between fourteen and eighteen, doesn't give a shit about the demo [reference to a previous comment about his failure to organise a demonstration at his secondary school], but there are many people who do and there are many people who will support you, even if you get demotivated and all that. So it's been a tough start to the year, but I'm coping a bit better now. (E8. Female. FFF. 15-20 years old).

[In the face of the predicted failure of an action]. So I felt really helpless. Kind of like nothing we do really has an impact. Like, totally empty, because I had the feeling that people weren't paying any attention to me. (E5. Female. FFF. 15-20 years old).

If the action does not live up to expectations or the participant no longer identifies with the group, the cycle of positive nurturing is broken, and negative emotions push towards other paths. In the case of FFF, the progressive loss of communication centrality from 2019 onwards led some activists to move to other, usually more disruptive, organisations and strategies. Several of them started to participate in XR or at least to engage in NVDAs. In the case of smaller nodes, as in the case of Zaragoza, this practically resulted in the disappearance of the organisation in 2022. On the other hand, some XR activists abandoned the path of social conflict, returning to the life project and the construction of small sustainable worlds.

[...] I think that when [the movement] started to go down or when... Because I participated in these movements and then I left, I became eco-anxious. [...] It's like when at the end of COP25, there were statements by Teresa Ribera telling them: "but what did you expect?" [...] We are a huge movement of people, we could look for alternatives that do involve the institution, you know? It's like... Obviously, there won't be any change at the top. [...] you have to eat, but you have to eat in a group consumption group because this is the anti-capitalist and ecological thing of doing things in a group and sharing; so starting from there seems much more important to me. (E19. Female. XR. 20-25 years old).

If the involvement continues, the role and emotional ties can become crystallised into identifying as an activist. The participant includes into their self-identity the recognition originally provided by the organisation and their affective group, which developed in taking action together with them. They considered that being activ-

ists was part of who they were. Identity was based on relationships, daily tasks and self-image as an environmental activist, not on membership of XR or FFF. In fact, there were people who moved between these organisations, facilitated by relationships and job sharing.

[...] I have felt very well treated, highly valued, even loved. That is, I assume that I have some virtues and some shortcomings and some abilities and disabilities [...] for me, as I said, activism is something kind of really natural; not natural, that is, it is very much part of my environment, discourses, the logic of... There is a social problem and we take social action against that. (E20. Male. XR. 25-30 years old).

Identity produces involvement in discussions in the social space. They find themselves in heated debates about ideology, organisational status, strategy, internal conflicts, morality and what it means to be an activist. These debates are heated because they affect their self-definition, the importance of their role and relationships with others.

Identity reinforces a sense of identification with collective achievements and setbacks; individuals feel both pride and responsibility towards them, emotions with a powerful capacity to mobilise. At this point, Laura spoke in the first person plural with regard to FFF. Like Diego, she felt obliged to strive for her group's goals, which also dignified and enhanced her own image.

And as I was reading it, it was the emotion of seeing so many people in Zaragoza, who were there for this, that I started to cry (laughs). [...] Yes, yes. I was crying, like: "Oh!" like he's my son or something. Like: "Oh, oh, he's reading" (they laugh). And seeing all the people and stuff, I don't know, very happy. (E12. Female. FFF. 20-25 years old).

[...] that's what also motivates me in this struggle, like it's my moral responsibility to do this and that I refuse to resign myself to the fact that it can't

be changed, because historically it has been shown that things can be changed. (E21. Male. Madrid. XR).

Identity, together with identification and responsibility, makes participation stable. A problem in interaction or a failed action breaks the positive reinforcement of activism and disconnects the occasional participant; or they may drop out due to pressure from other spheres of their life. But identity sustains the activist at these moments in time, provided that they do not last too long. These people are the core of the group's work and the ones who sustain it over time.

In short, coming to play a role, building an affective group and interweaving activism with everyday life reduces the effort required. In turn, the broadening of discourse and emotional tension motivate and reinforce activism. Finally, identity with the group sustains participation beyond the occasional incentive.

DISCUSSION

These results allow us to delve into two crucial elements at the beginning of the activist career.

First, the role of emotions, both in initial reframing and in sustaining participation. The ecologist frame must resonate—*frame resonance* (Viejo, 2008)—in the primary frame of these young people, defined by: verisimilitude grounded in science, legitimacy of science over political decisions, and a caring relationship with nature. This primary frame is a product of everyday family and academic interaction and a result of their social position as young urban middle-class students. It determines the plausibility structure, that which can be accepted as real (Jasper, 1997) and, in this case, provides credibility to the environmentalist interpretation.

As a result, these young people experience fear and anxiety, but also anger at the transgression of the values of their primary frame. Parties and companies are guilty of failing to heed scientific warnings and to fulfil their duties. These emotions, previously identified by Lorenzini and Rosset (2024) and Ojala (2012), cause a transformation of the young person's set of relationships with the state, the economic model and other social actors and encourage protest. Studying all this emotional activation makes it possible to show how it is specific profiles with certain predispositions that have an affinity with ecologist discourses that incite action.

In addition, emotions play another role: they maintain activism by using iterative dynamics. For environmental activists, fear and anxiety have an even stronger presence, but alternate with greater anger, responsibility, a sense of control and hope. Cycles and emotional tensions that sustain and engage them in participation. Jasper (2011) noted something similar with the "moral battery", the oscillation between positive and negative poles of emotions that sustain action.

As other studies have pointed out (Revilla *et al.*, 2023), the loss of power to mobilise people and to have centrality in media coverage caused by the pandemic broke down emotional efficacy. When actions prove ineffective, the moral battery may dissolve and anxiety, demobilisation and the search for alternatives may increase. As a result, some activists explore new, often more disruptive strategies, such as NVDAs, to regain the media spotlight; but others retreat to personal or community activities, moving away from public conflict or activism. In parallel with Goodwin's (1997) description of libidinal economy to refer to the competition between external and internal ties to the movement, it could be argued that a certain emotional economy also seems necessary; that the movement can offer motivations for action. In this case,

mainly a sense of agency, control or potential for change.

Secondly, although involvement tends to be centred on the activist, the importance of the group must be highlighted, in connection with the organisation's openness to various different profiles. In order to participate it is necessary to share the motivations offered by the group, accept its rules and feel affinity to the rest of the members, which involves the triggering of previous predispositions and socialisation. One example is the interest and the ability of young people close to the university to engage in assemblies. In addition, there is a need to adjust to existing teamwork and emotional relationships. The resulting unintended selection explains the high level of homogeneity in these groups (Revilla *et al.*, 2023). This research has shown how affinity predispositions facilitate the (self-)exclusion of other social sectors and the nearly exclusive presence of a single profile.

The survival of the movement requires the development of a group with strong emotional ties, based on daily work and shared affinities. These relationships produce identity and a sense of belonging that sustain participation when the movement loses effectiveness, or experiences failure or undergoes conflict. This also makes it possible for participants to cope with the pressures of other spheres of life, by doing a balancing act between them or assimilating them. Identifying as an activist seems to be the ultimate stabilisation point for involvement.

The analysis of the militant career becomes a chronological study or history of a particular group of activists, the new generation of ecologists. It starts with participants from similar social backgrounds with a common primary frame; it is specific sectors of urban middle-class youth that became active in 2019 that form the core of the mobilisation. The affinity process intensifies social selection, further narrowing the

profile through similarities in motivation, norms and profiles. Finally, it becomes crystallised into groups whose identities and sense of belonging are sustained over time. Although this analysis shows the importance of the interaction between subjective, collective and discursive processes, it does not exhaust other possible lines of analysis, which would provide key insights into activist dynamics and will be addressed in future research. In particular, the study of group dynamics in organisations is considered to be important, including the process of group formation, the configuration of group structures, internal hierarchies, and leadership and legitimisation mechanisms.

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