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Young people's conceptions of political agency in relation to climate change

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how young people conceptualise political agency in the context of climate change. Drawing on a Reflexive Thematic Analysis of 22 focus groups with 154 young people living in Portugal, aged 13 to 35, we identified four conceptions of political agency: transformational collective agency, proto-political collective action, individualised action and disempowered action. Our findings indicate that young people who identify as climate activists view oppositional and disruptive actions as the pathway for achieving transformational social change. In contrast, non-activists tend to favour proto-political collective action or individual approaches as means of gaining political influence. For some young people, disempowered action reflects a limited sense of political agency, which constrains their perceived role in addressing climate change. Overall, we suggest that young people's political agency regarding climate change is shaped by both motivating and inhibiting factors, a desire for political influence and perceived power to bring about transformative change.

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KEYWORDS Political agency; climate change; youth climate activism; power; collective action

Introduction

Climate change affects countries, communities and social groups unevenly, often hitting those least responsible the hardest. This has led many to advocate for a climate justice approach which requires 'paying attention to how climate change impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as redressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways' (Sultana 2022, p. 118). Young people are a clear

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example of a group that is unfairly and disproportionately affected by climate change. Today's young people and future generations – particularly from ethnic minoritised, racialised and Indigenous communities and/or from countries in the Global South – are set to experience the most devastating impacts of climate change, some of which are already unfolding (Mugeere *et al.* 2021, Deivanayagam *et al.* 2023). Recognising climate change inequities, young people worldwide have demanded political action and responsiveness while calling for climate justice and societal transformations (Neas *et al.* 2022; Pickard *et al.* 2020, Trott 2024).

Despite being among the most critically impacted groups, young people are largely excluded from decision-making processes (Thew 2018, Kapeke *et al.* 2023), both in governmental bodies and international summits related to climate change. Structural and contextual factors, such as poverty, discrimination, and citizenship status, often interfere with young people's political agency and limit their actions (Fernandes-Jesus *et al.* 2012, Fernandes-Jesus *et al.* 2015, Malafaia *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, young people are exposed to social subalternization (Walker 2020, Wood 2020), adultist biases (Malafaia 2022) and other structural constraints that may hinder their political engagement (Walker 2020). Often dismissed as inexperienced by adults and adult-centred institutions, young people may feel pessimistic, reluctant to engage in activism, or lack confidence in their ability to effect change (Feldman 2021). These challenges are further intensified when intersecting with social factors like gender, age, and ethnicity, which may further constrain young people's climate activism. Despite these hindrances, young people are playing a central role in global climate activism (Walker 2020, Pickard 2022). They have been contesting the lack of effective climate policies and creating their own repertoires of activism (O'Brien *et al.* 2018, Börner *et al.* 2021, Malafaia 2022). Young people are raising their voices to defend their right to a just future (Pickard 2019, Malafaia 2022) through demonstrations, strikes, direct action and everyday forms of environmental activism (Henn *et al.*, 2022; Sloam *et al.* 2022). In the 2018–19 wave of youth-led climate mobilisations, young people have escalated the confrontation with governments, companies and international authorities, employing tactics like school occupations, roadblocks, die-ins, disruptive theatrical performances and other forms of direct action (Richardson 2020, Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024). These mobilisations reflect young people's efforts to radically reshape our climate futures – defined as potential climate outcomes characterised by uncertainty and imaginative components (Lawrence *et al.* 2021). In challenging existing power dynamics and overcoming barriers to climate action, young activists may transform politics and invigorate democratic engagement (O'Brien *et al.* 2018, Sloam *et al.* 2022), while becoming key players in climate politics.

Despite the growing literature on youth climate activism (Neas *et al.* 2022), there has been a lack of focus on political agency. Additionally, research often overlooks the perspectives of young people from marginalised groups and backgrounds, focusing instead on activists from more privileged backgrounds and milieus (Neas *et al.* 2022; Walker 2020). By looking at political agency from a bottom-up perspective and through the lenses of a diverse group of young people, our study contributes to understanding how and under which conditions young people engage with climate-related issues and how they see their role in helping to deliver changes. Specifically, we explore the following: How do young people conceptualise their roles in relation to climate change? Which conceptions of political agency underpin their ways of dealing with this issue? To address these questions, we conducted a qualitative study involving 22 focus groups with 154 young people, both climate activists and non-climate activists. By approaching these matters from the perspectives of young people, this article critically examines how different conceptions of political agency shape their responses to climate change.

Young people's political agency and climate change

Processes of social change often entail the political engagement of young people (MacDonald and King 2021, Sika 2021). Such engagement depends on multiple factors, including perceptions and beliefs, that shape young people's political agency (Sloam *et al.* 2022). Agency can be defined as the ability of individuals and groups to think about and act upon their needs and interests (Pettit 2012). Political agency is then the ability to exercise such agency within a given socio-political structure, which includes formal and informal rules, social relations, norms, cultural practices and beliefs that can either enable or constrain engagement (Haggard and Tsakiris 2009). In an interlinked process, the sociopolitical structure itself is also shaped by individuals' internalisations of those rules, norms, beliefs and cultural practices (Pettit 2012). Political agency requires a capacity to take an active part in the conflictual dimension of political lives – i.e. by assuming a political positionality (Mouffe 2005). It is, therefore, related to modes and contexts of political participation and to how people interpret views, claims and positions through their socio-political performances and lived experiences.

There are innumerable expressions of political agency, reflecting varied understandings of power, influence, autonomy and choice (Börner *et al.* 2021, Wamsler *et al.* 2022). Power seems, however, to be central to all (Sanchini *et al.* 2019). Lukes (2005) argued that individuals' sense of power is shaped by perceptions, cognitions and preferences that determine whether 'they accept their role in the existing order of things' (p. 11) or if they exert their agency to express other preferences. Hence, perceived power can influence how people behave and express desires and interests (Hayward and Lukes

2008). Since power may constrain or enable action (Hayward 1998), individuals may challenge their socio-political contexts by fostering *empowerment*, that is, by developing their ability to influence desired transformations. Empowerment, as a process, amplifies people's ability to meaningfully participate in society despite – or circumventing – existing power relations, thus shaping their own political futures (e.g. Eyben *et al.* 2008, Pettit 2012). Importantly, empowerment has a strong relational nature (Christens 2012a), with social relationships helping to motivate young people to become engaged with political issues (Cargo *et al.* 2003). Through shared experiences that may include formal and informal forms of participation (Christens 2012b), young people develop perceptions of influence (Wamsler *et al.* 2022), negotiating power relations as they position themselves to make claims, express their voices, and shape their political identities (Häkli and Kallio 2018).

Recent studies have demonstrated that climate change has the potential to mobilise young people to become more politically engaged (Firinci Orman 2022, Pickard 2022) and stimulate aspirations for societal transformation (O'Brien *et al.* 2018). More than just 'having a voice', young people have been expressing their desire to shape alternative social realities and political dynamics (Punch and Tisdall 2012). Despite structural binds (Barnes 2021), young people manage to organise innovative initiatives, adopt political stances and make politically conscious lifestyle choices as ways to bring about social change (Lennon 2014, Walker 2020, Börner *et al.* 2021).

Following the 2018–2019 wave of young people's climate activism and its mediatisation (Navne and Skovdal 2021), studies have begun exploring its most visible facets (Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024), such as the *Fridays for Future*[1] movement (e.g. Wahlström *et al.* 2019, Friberg 2022). Those forms of activism are widely considered political, in line with Skovdal and Benwell's (2021) concept of *big-P* politics. However, there are also less visible forms of activism – defined as *little-p* politics (Skovdal and Benwell 2021) – such as cleaning school grounds, taking action to preserve local woods and beaches, or protecting local species of plants and animals. While those actions respond to environmental concerns and represent modes of young people's engagement, they are often disregarded by researchers (Percy-Smith 2015). This article adopts a comprehensive perspective on political agency, one that encompasses multiple modes of engagement. We argue that, on the one hand, the performative nature of doing-it-ourselves (DIO) for the planet (Pickard 2019) can foster young people's political agency. On the other hand, when young people are confronted with the shortcomings of climate governance and other obstacles, a sense of powerlessness to engage with this issue may prevail. Recognising these multiple possibilities of engagement and non-engagement with climate change (Walker 2020, Navne and Skovdal 2021, Börner *et al.* 2021), we examine how political agency is enacted by young people from diverse socio-political backgrounds.

Method

As part of a large research project examining young people's narratives and political imaginaries, between October 2022 and April 2023, we conducted 22 focus groups with young people in five Portuguese cities: Lisbon, Porto, Braga, Faro and Olhão. Our goals were to explore young people's perspectives on climate change, their perceived political agency and modes of engagement with this issue. As inclusion criteria, we considered engagement with climate activism (both climate activists and non-climate activists were included) and being in the age range of 15 to 35. While the United Nations (UN) defines youth as those aged 15 to 24, definitions vary across European countries and policy documents due to legal-historical precedents, cultural norms, and educational systems that differently shape national policy frameworks (Perovic 2016). Moreover, socio-economic and contextual factors need to be considered. Notably, young people in Southern Europe, including Portugal, have been affected by multiple socio-economic crises, leading to a prolonged transition to adulthood (Jurado and Galindo 2023). By including individuals up to 35 years old, we sought to capture the experiences of both students and young professionals, who often face additional socioeconomic obstacles – that may constrain their political engagement – such as lack of access to employment and housing (Reis and Sousa 2017). Thus, we opted for an inclusive age range, reflecting the Portuguese socio-economic reality and the diversity of experiences that define youth nowadays.

Our recruitment strategy also sought to reach diverse perspectives and experiences. We contacted several schools, institutions and local community organisations across different regions, aiming to recruit young people of different ages and contexts. We included participants from historically deprived neighbourhoods, which are often affected by high levels of unemployment and poverty and limited access to public infrastructures and services (Raposo 2019). We also reached out to young people outside of Lisbon, as other regions are traditionally neglected due to centralisation of political power (Coelho 2022). Some of our participants were from Roma communities, a group historically marginalised and excluded in Portugal (Ie and Ursin 2022). Others were of African descent or young immigrants from countries such as Angola and Brazil. We reached out to the diaspora and immigrant communities as the literature identifies those groups as facing several barriers to civic and political participation (Fernandes-Jesus *et al.* 2015).

In total, 154 young people with a mean age of 20 participated in this study. Despite our defined age range (15–35 years old), two participants were 13. We decided to consider their participation as they expressed interest in the study and were part of one of the organisations helping to organise the focus group. We conducted 5 focus groups with activists ($n = 26$) and 17 ($n = 128$) with young people who were not engaged in climate activism, although some of these ($n = 18$) were involved in LGBTQIA+ rights, women's rights, and

anti-racism social movements. While we did not explicitly ask participants to report their ethnicity, we have purposively conducted focus groups in diverse neighbourhoods. Thus, seven focus groups ($n = 55$) included participants from marginalised groups, such as immigrants, racialised individuals (e.g. African descent) and/or young people living in underserved peripheral neighbourhoods. Five groups ($n = 26$) included only climate activists from the following groups: *Scientist Rebellion Portugal* (a chapter of the international movement *Scientist Rebellion*, led by young climate scientists and civil society allies); *Comunidade Lidera* (a community of youth leaders with diverse professional backgrounds) and *School Strike for Climate* (hereafter SSC), including Lisbon, Porto and Braga chapters (adherents of the international movement *Fridays for Future*, led by high-school and university students). In Table 1 we present the profile of each focus group.

Table 1. Focus group and participants' socio-demographic profiles.

				Gender			
FDD	N	Group profile	Age range	M	F	Other	Location
FGD1	8	Roma and migrant high school students, underserved neighbourhood.	15–29	3	5		Lisbon
FGD2	9	Portuguese and migrant vocational school students, underserved neighbourhood.	17–19	2	7		Porto
FGD3	10	Portuguese and migrant high school students, underserved neighbourhood.	15–18	6	4		Porto
FGD4	5	Portuguese and migrant youth, university students.	22–28	3	2		Lisbon
FGD5	6	Portuguese and migrant university students and professionals.	26–34	3	3		Lisbon
FGD6	5	Portuguese and migrant university students and professionals.	18–21	3	2		Porto
FGD7	8	Portuguese and migrant university students.	18–20	2	6		Porto
FGD8	6	Portuguese climate activists.	21–31	1	5		Braga
FGD9	5	Portuguese climate activists.	15–28	1	3	1	Porto
FGD10	10	Migrant university students and professionals.	18–30	7	3		Porto
FGD11	5	Migrant university students and professionals.	22–34	0	5		Porto
FGD12	8	Portuguese high school students, marginalised neighbourhood.	15–20	4	4		Porto
FGD13	6	Portuguese university students and professionals.	17–31	6			National
FGD14	9	Portuguese high school students.	13–24	4	5		Olhão
FGD15	9	Portuguese high school students.	16–29	3	6		Faro
FGD16	4	Portuguese university students.	21–28	1	3		Lisbon
FGD17	5	Portuguese high school students.	17	0	5		Porto
FGD18	10	Portuguese high school students.	16–18	2	7		Lisbon
FGD19	4	Portuguese climate activists.	17–23	0	2	2	Lisbon
FGD20	10	Portuguese high school students.	17–18	4	6		Lisbon
FGD21	7	Portuguese and migrant climate activists.	28–32	2	5		Lisbon
FGD22	4	Portuguese and migrant climate activists.	27–34	1	3		National
Total	154		20 (mean)	59	92	3	

*FGD = Focus Group Discussion; N=number of participants; Location= refers to the scope of the group's activities.

Data collection and recruitment

All focus groups were held in Portuguese and were co-facilitated by two members of the research team, following established recommendations (e.g. Cyr 2019). To facilitate the discussion, create rapport and generate a friendly and open environment (Walstra 2020), we used a photo-elicitation exercise. Participants could either bring one picture or pick one from a selection provided by the moderators. They were invited to present the selected image, explaining how it represented their relationship with climate change. Aiming to understand participants' views and actions to tackle climate change, we developed a semi-structured focus group guide (see supplementary material, https://figshare.com/s/fc6e753b87f2dc1010c4), including questions such as: How would you describe your involvement with climate change? How is society addressing this issue?

Before we started the discussion, ground rules (e.g. speaking one at a time) were established, and participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could leave at any point. To ensure data protection, participants' names and any other personal information were replaced with pseudonyms. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. This study was approved by the ethical committee of Iscte-Insitute University of Lisbon, one of the institutions involved in this research (decision 122/2022).

Analytical procedure

The analytical process involved conducting a Reflexive Thematic Analysis following the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). We started by familiarising ourselves with the data by reading and re-reading all the transcribed material. This was followed by coding all transcripts for general descriptive and analytical insights. MAXQDA software was used to support the coding process, facilitating the organisation of the material in different codes. The first coding round was done by the first author, while the subsequent rounds were discussed with the co-authors and a youth advisory committee.[2] As Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) recommend, coding took place at both levels, semantic and latent. Inspired by a social constructionist framework, we saw focus groups as an opportunity for the 'co-construction of meaning in action' (Wilkinson 1998, p. 329). We developed our initial themes using a bottom-up approach, which means that themes were mostly data-driven. Initial themes were discussed in line with existing literature, which helped us to make sense of the data. After a process of review and refinement, four conceptions of agency were generated. The findings presented in the next section address how young people conceive their role in

relation to climate change and the conceptions of political agency they articulate.

Results

Our analysis generated four themes, each representing a different way in which young people perceive their political agency in relation to climate change. Theme 1, 'Transformational collective agency: becoming activists to enact political change' addresses young activists' aspirations to change the status quo and transform the current political system. Theme 2, 'Proto-political collective action to craft political influence', describes how forms of pro-environmental action are perceived as useful to influence decision-makers and climate policies. Theme 3, 'Individual action: addressing climate change through setting an example', reflects a conception of agency based on individual choices, where young people aspire to lead by example (e.g. inspiring their peers, co-workers or families). Finally, theme 4, 'Disempowered action: powerlessness to engage with climate change', refers to a sense of lacking political agency due to perceived barriers and obstacles to engaging with climate change. Rather than viewing these types of political agency as mutually exclusive, participants made sense of their experiences by referring to more than one conception of agency. For example, some young activists identified with a sense of agency grounded on individual action while also sharing accounts aligned with a transformational collective agency. However, as shown below, some patterns of shared meaning were more prevalent in certain focus groups, indicating differences on perceived political agency according to participants' profiles.

Transformational collective agency: becoming activists to enact political change

Overall, transformational collective agency was more prevalent among those participants who identified as climate activists. They perceived themselves as aminority among their peers, moved by an unwavering commitment to 'do something' (Carlota, FGD8) about the climate crisis 'before it is too late' (Tatiana, FGD21). In the following excerpt, Anis, a climate activist from SSC Lisbon, reflects on his motivations for becoming a climate activist.

> **Anis:** I started to realise that it's not enough to talk for things to change; we have to act (. . .).

> **Moderator:** Right, and this photograph [image brought by Anis] is about stopping the extraction of natural gas, so is this cause that interests you the most or that you consider a priority?
>
> **Anis:** Right now, it's one of the targets of the climate justice movement here in Portugal. I chose this photo, specifically, because I think one of the important things is. . .we need to be confrontational (. . .). Confrontation is inevitable, at least if I'm actively addressing this confrontation, I have some power over what's happening. If I keep quiet, I have no agency over what's going on. (FGD19, Lisbon).

This participant seems to associate agency to forms of collective action that he is currently engaged in and frames as part of the 'global climate justice movement'. Using repertoires of confrontational action (e.g. Uysal *et al.* 2024), Anis found a way to gain some power over the climate crisis, an opinion shared by other activist participants. Forms of confrontational action – such as joining demonstrations and protests – are then considered by these young people as an empowering tool (Navne and Skovdal 2021, Sloam *et al.* 2022). As expressed by many participants, activism helped them to navigate existing socio-political barriers and develop a sense of power substantiated by social support, skills development, critical knowledge and hope for a better future.

Participants' place of residence inspired different perspectives about the value of protests and climate marches as tools for transformational change. Among the SSC Porto and SSC Braga participants, collective agentic power was impacted by a decrease in the level of participation in protests, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on the impact of past climate marches, these activists perceive large demonstrations as ways to wield collective power. The following excerpt illustrates these views:

> **Júlia:** I helped to organise some pretty big marches, bigger than the ones we have today, then things started to go downhill in terms of mobilisation during the pandemic and, in the meantime, we are now trying to rebuild, so to speak.
>
> **Jorge:** We felt that it was more important to have a demonstration with a lot of people participating and that this demonstration would be much more powerful than trying to close schools, for example . . . (FGD9, Porto)

On the contrary, other participants, particularly from the SSC Lisbon, arguedthat these actions made them lose rather than gain agentic power. To regain asense of transformational collective agency, SSC Lisbon members turned to direct action. The next interaction makes this idea explicit.

> **Isis:** *Fridays for Future* is still stuck doing marches, since 2018, it hasn't been re-evaluated, it hasn't evolved, the narrative continues to have the same problems: doing generic and fluffy things (. . .) things that don't attack specific targets, that don't make any specific proposals . . . they can't do anything. . . so, it seems like it's a movement . . . built from a very emotional point of view (. . .)

> And that's it, there's no real concept of strategy. In other movements, for example *End Fossil*, [who are] doing occupations of schools internationally... I already see more concern with strategy, but a lack of... realism, like, people still think that we're going to win this fight without our criminal records being affected [laughs] that's just historically false.
>
> **Moderator:**Any other movements that inspire you or a course of action that interests you the most?
>
> **Isis:** Lützerath?
>
> **Anis:** Lützerath is really cool.
>
> **Frederica:** Oh yes, yes.
>
> **Isis:** Yeah, I think it's one of the best examples of the new direction that the climate justice movement is taking, and I hope that it inspires a lot of people because it's a very direct action. Literally, this mine doesn't expand because we say no... and that has a huge social impact, in addition to mobilising a lot of people, thousands of activists internationally went there to defend it... the struggle for climate has to really happen along those lines... (FGD19, Lisbon)

As we can see in the interaction presented above, participants were inspired by social movements that aim at profound political transformations (Wielk and Standlee 2021). The example of Lützerath (a small village in western Germany), refers to a group of activists that, between 2020 and 2023, resisted the eviction and destruction of the village for a coalmine. While they were eventually evicted, they were able to inspire and mobilise international support by weaving together alliances of climate movements in Europe and beyond to collectively experiment with new tactics of non-violent direct action (Tesserea, Urban Social Research, 2023).

By adopting a conception of transformational collective agency, and through experiences of climate activism (e.g. demonstrations, direct action), young people developed a conception of agency legitimised by the need to confront and change the *status quo*. Aligned with a disruptive dissent approach, as described by O'Brien *et al.* (2018), their activism is mainly oppositional. Our participants spoke of an 'intentional upholding of harmful systems to the planet' (Telma, FGD21, Lisbon), explicitly referring to capitalism and neoliberal policies as the 'system' that needs to change. Recognising the power of such an intricate system has motivated youth climate activism. Young people's conception of political agency is thus centred on the aspiration to achieve global climate justice while being influenced by local socio-political contexts.

Living in Porto, Braga, or Lisbon made a difference in how young people perceive their ability to enact political agency. Perhaps due to the historic

centralisation of power in the Portuguese capital (Coelho 2022), young activists from other Portuguese cities perceive more limitations on the resources and tactics they can manage. All participants who belonged to a climate activist group share, nonetheless, a common understanding about the need to enact a radical transformation of the current socio-political system.

Proto-political collective action to craft political influence

Several participants who were not involved in the climate movement discussed other forms of collective action centred on improving policies rather than radically changing the system. Such experiences align with previous definitions of everyday environmental activism (e.g. Walker 2020) or *little p* (Skovdal and Benwell 2021) and involve localised forms of collective action and environmental protection (e.g. cleaning local beaches or woods). Interestingly, participants' discussions around such forms of collective action seem to reflect a tension between wanting to trust the state and its institutions, while realising that these actors might not be doing enough to tackle climate change. This tension is addressed by some young people through engaging in collective action, to influence political actors and institutions. In the next excerpt, three high school students discuss this idea.

> **Josefa:** We can't do it alone (. . .). My desire was to change the world tomorrow, but I saw that it wasn't possible (. . .)
>
> **Gastão:** The Youth Parliament[3] is a way to talk directly to people who have some influence in the political world, not only about this issue of climate, other issues as well.
>
> **Moderator:** And how do you think politicians can help?
>
> **Gastão:** Maybe, like, making decrees, I don't know, proposals, amendment of the constitution or something like that, legislation, to prevent and combat climate change.
>
> **Moderator:** So, do you trust this partnership? [between politicians and the youth]
>
> **Gastão:** Yes, because there are opportunities to reach them [Youth Parliament].
>
> **Josefa:** I know the Youth Parliament very well, it's a program that I love and in which I've been involved for a few years now (. . .) I went to Lisbon with this topic, and it made a difference because we proposed measures, a list of 20 measures, and they actually took a day to see those measures, and to do something about them (. . .)

Bento: Yes, because, when it's young people speaking up, it has more effect on the rest of the community. (FGD14, Olhão)

The excerpt above suggests that these young people (as others in our study) trust the work of politicians and believe they can politically influence them by proposing policy changes via institutionalised channels. However, as pointed out by several participants, this does not mean that the voices of young people are effectively considered. Politicians are still perceived as the leaders of societal transformations, responsible for putting forward appropriate legislation and measures that the rest of the citizens can advise and support. In this sense, political agency is seen as something that is gained by crafting political influence and becoming more visible to institutional political actors. Engagement seems to implicitly reflect an aspiration to 'be a part' of the system and participate in it rather than change it, an idea explored further in the following interaction between a group of young people from an underserved neighbourhood.

Elvira: (. . .) We restored a wall, huh, in a dirty place, like, in bad conditions, (. . .) and we transformed it into something beautiful, and all the people noticed.

Alice: Oh, we did a lot of things like that.

Elvira: Yes, and also, we tried to reduce prejudice towards people in our neighbourhood, so that people outside knew that living in our neighbourhood is not SO bad, as they might think.

Moderator: Interesting, and how did you make this campaign?

Elvira: We brought important people here, [um] to our neighbourhood.

Moderator: Who?

Teresa: The secretary of state [for social affairs].

Elvira: (. . .) Hum, we also brought the president (. . .), the mayor of Montijo [city nearby Lisbon].

Armando: Yes, the one from the Parish Council and the one from the City Hall.

Alberto: That's important! (FGD1, Lisbon)

As illustrated above, participants engaged with politicians as a way to influence their views and perceptions of local communities. Notably, these young people live in a neighbourhood affected by everyday forms of discrimination – most of them are Roma people, a group identified as the most discriminated ethnicity in Portugal (Ie and Ursin 2022). Yet, they considered that allying with institutional political actors – rather than confronting or opposing them – could be an effective way to reduce stigma and prejudice

towards their community. While not trusting authorities completely, as they have been perceived to fail in their duties toward the neighbourhood (e.g. by not allocating public sweepers), participants attempted to rebuild their relationship with those actors. At the same time, these young people built collective empowerment, believing that it was possible to raise their community's political influence (Cargo *et al.* 2003). In this perspective, collective action can create opportunities to develop political agency, particularly among minoritised youth constrained by powerful structural binds.

Aligned with a dutiful approach to political dissent (O'Brien *et al.* 2018), this conception of agency sees collective action community-based action (e.g. neighbourhood clean-ups) as opportunities to influence political and institutional actors.

Through localised and everyday forms of environmental activism (Walker 2020, Skovdal and Benwell 2021), participants expressed agentic power grounded in forms of collective action that foster dialogue and indirect influence rather than confrontation. Remaining reliant on the leadership of political actors and decision-makers to implement the necessary societal transformations, young people who shared this conception of agency sought to manage political influence through engagement with pro-environmental initiatives at the local level (e.g. community park clean-ups) or through institutional channels (e.g. Youth Parliament). In proto-political collective action, the power to bring about social change is thus attributed to institutional political actors, while young people are deemed to play a role in influencing these actors, via non-confrontational forms of action. Interestingly, this conception of agency was more prevalent in focus groups with participants from marginalised groups (e.g. underserved communities, Roma people, etc.), which suggests that structural power dynamics do shape perceptions of political individual power and agency.

Individual action: addressing climate change through setting an example

Our third conception of political agency is focused on how young people see individual action as a way to tackle climate change. Many participants mentioned individual actions such as recycling, giving up meat consumption, and travelling more conscientiously (i.e. reducing fossil fuel emissions), among other personal choices.

> **Matilde:** Last year, I decided to go vegan, both for my own health and also for political and environmental reasons (. . ..).

> **Cátia:** In addition to recycling, at home, which is worth what it's worth, and I think nowadays. . .almost everyone does it, I, for example, buy a lot of things in bulk to avoid packaging. . . (FGD5, Lisbon)

As illustrated in the excerpt above, some participants see their individual actions as driven by political and environmental motivations. This highlights the importance of looking at lifestyle and overall everyday life as possible spaces of politicisation (de Moor 2017, Fernandes-Jesus *et al*. 2018). Nevertheless, it should be noted that while most participants (including activists and non-activists) acknowledged taking some form of individual environmental action, several were ambivalent about its efficacy, and some stated that these actions were insufficient. Those realising that there needs to be a more systemic approach to address climate change expressed frustration at the political and societal inaction on this issue, as well as with the excessive responsibility that has been placed on individuals, as shown in the next excerpt.

> **Artur:** I feel that there is blaming of individuals, for a problem that has been caused by a global system, like, oh, you bought those clothes, they were produced using slavery, you are complicit! Sometimes, we have the tendency to create a bit of that and maybe people don't have other options.
>
> **Leonardo:** Yes . . .
>
> **Artur:** It's difficult, but, of course, individually, we have to do something, but maybe it's not enough.
>
> **Rita:** Yes, because, in the end, we don't change anything (. . .) we can avoid it a little [environmental impact], but no one can do it 100%. (FGD4, Lisbon)

In this interaction, participants reflect on the shortcomings of individual actions, noting that, although important and relevant, these might be ineffective. Nevertheless, they see the relevance of continuing to do something at the individual level. They incorporate intentional individual actions to inspire others around them, thus setting an ethical example for their peers, communities and even companies. For example, Dinis, a 34-year-old young professional, frames his veganism in the following way:

> **Dinis:** We can vote with our little cross, and we can vote with our wallet. Being vegan, for me, is one of the things that is most important, even for a sense of coherence, (. . .) it's a small step, but we are part of a society where companies make a profit by exploiting the planet (. . .) so we have to do our part and put our money into companies that are doing things differently. (FGD5, Porto)

This participant understands individual action as ultimately insufficient to address the global challenges of climate change, but he values the sense of 'coherence' and personal empowerment derived from such actions (Lennon 2014, Fernandes-Jesus *et al*. 2018). Thus, individuals' everyday choices, such as veganism and vegetarianism, may be considered legitimate political expressions of young people's political, ethical, or moral values (Micheletti and McFarland 2020).

Other young people in our study, lacking trust in international decision-making structures, like the COPs (Conference of the Parties), believe in the power of information and climate education. By improving their understanding of the systemic injustices behind climate change, they see themselves as empowered advocates among their peers and communities. Leonardo, a 24-year-old university student from Lisbon (FGD4), emphasised the importance of climate education: 'I try to inform myself as much as possible about what works better (. . .) I think that being well informed (. . .) is important to be able to act in a more informed way and with greater impact.'.

Many other participants discussed the importance of being informed, and some felt empowered by their knowledge, using it to take certain ethical choices and individual actions they hoped could inspire others. Simultaneously, participants showed hesitation about the effectiveness of individual action and were concerned with the socioeconomic inequalities preventing some people (e.g. in the Global South) from partaking in similar choices.

In sum, 'individual action', shifts the focus from collective action to more individualised forms of engaging with climate change. Both activists and non-activists participating in our study mentioned examples related to this conception of agency. Nevertheless, it is among those who do not see themselves as activists that individualised action seems to be related to a sense of empowerment through their own lifestyle choices (Lennon 2014). For those participants, influencing social change is possible by setting an example to others (e.g. peers, co-workers or families) through individualised forms of action.

Disempowered action: powerlessness to engage with climate change

Some participants, particularly non-activist young people living in smaller towns, expressed a sense of powerlessness to engage with climate change. Although recognising climate change as a pressing issue, they perceived to have lack of knowledge, resources, or ability to influence meaningful political change. Brenda, a 17-year-old high school student (FGD15) from a village near Faro, established a direct link between her inability to become involved with climate change and her lack of resources: 'I would like to be involved, but how can I explain it, it's very difficult for me to find a way, because I don't have the means.' Likewise, Marta, a 31-year-old young professional (FGD13) living in a remote rural area, shared similar obstacles: 'We have more practical issues, like. . .lack of access to spaces, lack of access to resources, lack of access to community.' By including 'lack of access to community' among the gaps identified, this participant highlighted the importance of social relations in their perceived agentic power. Both social barriers and lack of resources are crucial factors in shaping young people's political engagement with climate change (Walker 2020, Barnes 2021).

Among non-activist participants, there were numerous other expressions of disempowerment that contributed to a broader sense of lacking political agency. In the next excerpt, participants discuss the absence of a space for political discussions in their everyday lives.

> **Renato:** I think we do have a voice, but only in this kind of meetings [referring to the focus group], in general we don't have much of a voice, at least not an impactful one. . .
>
> **Moderator:** So, are you saying that young people do not have enough power to discuss this issue?
>
> **Renato:** That's it! No power of representation among. . . our generation.
>
> **Moderator:** Do you agree, Mariana?
>
> **Mariana:** You know, in the place that I live (. . .) I never had much time to think about these topics (. . .). I think schools are more concerned with sending people to university. They want to maintain. . . the same state of mind. . .for the state to have people to work. I guess they don't really want to know our opinions about issues like this.
>
> **Ruben:** As if we were just robots.
>
> **Manuel:** Made to work and earn money. . . (FGD6, Porto)

In this interaction, participants highlighted several implicit barriers to political agency, including the perception that young people lack enough political representation to access and influence the climate debate. They also suggested that this exclusion and lack of influence may be intentional, that is, that schools, as extensions of the state, may contribute to excluding youth from participating in political discussions. Other reasons pointed out by our participants, were the shortcomings of global political actors and the broader perception of societal inaction. Notably, among participants who identify as climate activists, these were considered 'reasons to act'. In contrast, in groups composed mainly of non-climate activist youth, they have repeatedly been described as unsurmountable barriers.

'Disempowered action', represents a lack (or limited) sense of agency in relation to climate change. Several participants felt powerless to fight climate change and perceived themselves as constrained by socio-political, material and personal hindrances. The barriers mentioned by our participants have been previously identified in the literature and range from resources to opportunities and from individual to structural factors (e.g. Walker 2020, Wood 2020, Malafaia 2022, Rebelo *et al.* 2024). In this sense, young people's disengagement from climate-related concerns may be a response to the powerful barriers that often exclude them from decision-making processes (O'Brien *et al.* 2018, Thew 2018, Kapeke *et al.* 2023).

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined how young people from multiple contexts and groups, including climate activists, conceive their political agency in relation to climate change. The four conceptions of political agency that we have identified reflect different forms of understanding, addressing and engaging with climate change, ranging from confrontational action (e.g. direct and disruptive actions) to disempowered (lack of) action. In this sense, our proposed conceptions of agency can be seen as a typology of political agency. Altogether, these conceptions reveal that young people develop and construct their sense of political agency in relation to climate change through contextualised lived experiences (Punch and Tisdall 2012), relational dynamics (Christens 2012a), and perspectives on individual and collective power (Lukes 2005, Hayward and Lukes 2008). Therefore, how young people perceive their power to act and bring about social transformation in relation to climate change shapes their modes and repertoires of climate activism. For example, confrontational collective action is nurtured by visions of transformative change and associated with a sense of political empowerment. The experience of being an activist is particularly connected with this conception of political agency. Young climate activists believe they can bring about change through confrontational political action. In turn, community-based forms of action and institutionalised forms of participation are aligned with a desire to craft political influence. Young people that engage with such forms of action have the sense that political influence can only be achieved by cooperating with political actors and institutions. The power to make substantial changes is thus placed at those in positions of power. Nevertheless, marginalised young people in our study built a sense of collective power through community-based forms of action. Additionally, some participants favour more individualised forms of action as means for engaging with climate change. While many see individual action as limited and insufficient to achieve social change, they seem to be discouraged from collective action by a (perceived) lack of power to overcome existing structural and intersectional barriers.

Discussion about barriers were particularly widespread among young people from marginalised groups and communities who did not identify as activists (Rebelo *et al.* 2024). Nonetheless, some of the barriers identified (e.g. lack of climate education, lack of resources) were also mentioned by participants who were climate activists or had other experiences of collective action. Interestingly, while a perception of societal inaction and lack of political will to address climate change were understood as barriers for some participants, those who identify as climate activists saw these 'barriers' as 'reasons to act'. Through climate activism, young people contest and overcome socio-political barriers and build a sense of power. This reflects key aspects of young people's social and political lives, such as the

widespread subalternisation they are exposed to (Bowman 2020, Walker 2020) and the mechanisms of resistance and dissent they face (O'Brien *et al.* 2018). It also reflects how a sense of power can be constructed both through collective and individual action. Thus, perceived political agency can influence how young people express wants, desires, and interests (Hayward and Lukes 2008) and how they challenge existing barriers and hindrances through individual and collective empowerment.

While this study offers significant contributions to the understanding of the complexities involved in young people's political agency in relation to climate change, there is a need for future research to explore the conditions under which young people can overcome the hindrances that constrain their sense of power to act. Another aspect that could benefit from further research is the influence of different sociopolitical contexts and social locations on young people's ability to engage with climate change. Although our study included participants from diverse contexts, future studies should more closely examine how social contexts and territories shape the construction of political agency. Furthermore, intersectionalities created by gender, age, citizenship, and socioeconomic class were not fully considered in our analysis. For example, future research could explore how young people's conceptions of political agency are shaped by social and structural issues such as discrimination, racism and classism. Disaggregating data by gender, ethnic background, or age would make the type of structural barriers constraining young people's engagement with climate action more explicit.

In conclusion, our analysis highlights that different conceptions of political agency shape young people's forms of political engagement with climate change. Young people's agentic power helps them overcome structural barriers, negotiate political influence and define individual and collective roles in the climate change space. However, existing structural barriers can constrain and shape their sense of political agency, leading to disempowerment and lack of action. As conceptions of political agency are not static, young people's agentic power can be encouraged through initiatives and opportunities for political engagement with climate change (Carvalho *et al.* 2016). Yet rather that expecting that young people express their voice and political power in certain ways it is crucial to acknowledge young people's experiences in their own terms (Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024). As our analysis demonstrated, youth-led experiences of climate activism are spaces where political power can be developed, and structural barriers overcome. As the political power of those most affected by climate change is key for climate justice (e.g. Sultana 2022), future efforts towards climate justice should acknowledge the dynamic nature of political agency. This requires looking at the role of structural and contextual dimensions in shaping youth climate activism while acknowledging the multiple and complex ways in which young people are relating to climate change.

Notes

1. International youth climate movement founded by Greta Thunberg, also known as 'School Strike for Climate' (SSC) in many countries.
2. The youth advisory committee was composed of four young people from Lisbon, Porto and Braga, each one representing different youth climate activist groups.
3. Yearly initiative by the Portuguese Parliament, aiming to give voice to young people representing high schools around the country on one specific topic (e.g. climate change, mental health, etc.). Young people are invited to make political proposals and speak directly to political representatives.

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