

There is a life before activism: embodied emotions during the childhood and youth of activists related to gender, racism, and climate change matters in Portugal

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What is the influence of early life trajectories, filled with experiences, encounters and emotions, on young to-be activists? Based on qualitative research done for the project “ArtCitizenship – youth and the arts of citizenship: creative practices, participatory culture and activism” (2019-2022), this article looks into individual trajectories, during childhood and youth, of 30 activists in Portugal. The collected data presents a set of “before activism” categories that reveal the importance of including early-life experiences to better understand future involvement with activism and social movements. One is not born an activist, actions for a given cause are a response to cumulative interactions and emotions felt from very early years.

KEYWORDS: before activism, childhood and youth, early life trajectories, embodied emotions, new social movements.

Há uma vida antes do ativismo: emoções incorporadas na infância e juventude de ativistas envolvidos em causas de género, racismo e alterações climáticas em Portugal ♦ Partindo das trajetórias pessoais nas primeiras duas décadas de vida, repletas de experiências, encontros e emoções, quais as suas influências nos jovens ativistas em devir? Com base na investigação qualitativa realizada para o projeto “ArtCitizenship – juventude e as artes da cidadania: práticas criativas, cultura participativa e ativismo” (2019-2022), este artigo analisa as trajetórias durante a infância e a adolescência de 30 ativistas em Portugal. Emergem um conjunto de categorias “*before activism*”, que revelam a importância de incluir as primeiras experiências individuais e coletivas como pilares estruturantes do envolvimento futuro no ativismo e em movimentos sociais. Não se nasce ativista, as ações por uma determinada causa resultam de reações a interações e a emoções vividas desde a infância.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *before activism*, infância e juventude, trajetórias de vida, emoções incorporadas, novos movimentos sociais.

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INTRODUCTION

This article enquires into early individual trajectories leading young people to be involved with activism.¹ The focus is set on the role of childhood and youth, including its social contexts, as the bodily-experienced ground from which people gather emotions and develop agency towards activism. The data and findings derive from a three-year qualitative research project in Portugal (2019-2022), named “ArtCitizenship – youth and the arts of citizenship: creative practices, participatory culture and activism”.

Based on social movement and activism literature I start this article by setting the angle from which I look into activists’ trajectories before they got involved with activism. The second section describes the methods applied to collect, analyse, and code 30 interviews with activists in Portugal. The third section presents the data and findings, divided into nine categories that emerged from coding the semi-structured interviews. In the last section I discuss the findings arguing that to better grasp the experiences that motivate and the ties that bind activists to a given social cause, we must go back to its origins during childhood and youth.

I turn to individual life stories of young activists to reveal the roots of their interests. For those who get into action, collective or individual, data shows that it is more than an “interest”, most often it is a personal need, driven by previous physical experiences and emotions. The socio-political causes chosen by the 30 young people I have interviewed are diverse, as well as their strategies and tactics, but common ground can be found in the origins of such commitments. The results show that individual experiences contributing to possible future activist actions start happening long before one grasps political concepts or joins social movements.

DEFINING AN APPROACH: TRAJECTORIES BEFORE ACTIVISM

Recent research on social movements is closely related to research on activism, with literature interconnecting them (Earl, Maher and Elliott 2017; Filieule and Accornero 2016; Tilly and Wood 2019). The “social” in “social movements” implies a focus on the collective. Literature insists on “collective actions” for understanding what leads people to join or form a group in pursuit of a shared goal. Daniel Cefaï (2007) offers a review of collective action

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theories to explain and move away from rationalist and utilitarian theories, proposing instead to direct the efforts towards a cultural and micro-sociological approach. However, faced with an overwhelming task of historical and theoretical analysis, his book diverts from accomplishing its proposed empirical objective, dwelling on the collective rather than focusing on the individuals that constitute it. In its concise form, this article attempts to do precisely that.

Jonathan Horowitz (2017) draws on activist identity formation as “role-based” (Stryker 2000) and “category-based” (White 2001), enhancing the possibility of “shared injustices” being the locus around which activists congregate. This has been verified during my fieldwork, however, the focus of this research precedes Horowitz’s interest in legacies, in the consciousness of boundaries, or even in openness towards moral and ethical factors. Based on a biographical analysis of protesters during adulthood, Horowitz frames the discussion part of his article with the question, “What is an activist identity?”. Instead, I propose to focus on the following sociological query: what is the influence of personal trajectories during childhood and youth on the development of a future activist identity?

The “individual” has been one of the gateways to the study of activism and social movements. Olivier Fillicule (2001) writes about “individual engagement” and operationalizes the classical concept of “career” (Becker 1963) to address the steps a person takes in the evolution of their life as an activist. When teaching his students to overcome the fear of writing, Howard Becker explains that writing starts long before opening a blank page on the computer.² Adopting that point of view, I argue that the career of an activist starts before they have any notion of social movements. There is a life before activism. It must be integrated into social science research since it might contain some of the rooted experiences that create and reinforce the strength of the “ties” with activism (McAdam and Paulsen 1993).

Having chosen to focus on the “individuals”, I am interested in their early “everyday life” (Pink 2012), namely as an angle for approaching the activism to come (Dave 2012). The article “Talking politics in everyday family lives” (Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss 2017) is a fine example of such a quest. It makes use of a socio-behavioural approach based on longitudinal ethnographic research, in which the authors operationalize Michel de Certeau’s (1984) “practice of everyday life” theories to better understand the relationship between childhood and public life, namely the practice of talking politics, revealing how “agentic” children can be (Taft 2019). Concerning the

2 Howard Becker at France Culture. Two-hour interview by Sylvain Bourmeau for the radio program *A voix nue*, March 16th, 2015. Consulted at: <<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/voix-nue/howard-becker-15>> (last access May 2021).

social actions of a human being, it clearly shows the importance of taking a “bottom-up” approach, with research paying attention to actors at a very young age. However, for this particular article, I wish to open the spectrum from interactions in family political talk by including other experiences resulting from social encounters (Goffman 1961) and interactions (Blumer 1986) at a young age. I argue that the constant intersection between different sorts of social experiences (*e.g.*, talking politics at home and being bullied at school) contributes to defining the possible direction and the commitment to future activism.

Brazilian social science journal, *O Público e o Privado*, recently published a themed issue entitled “Emotions in action” (Brandão e Siqueira 2020). Of the seven articles that delve into the possible agency based on emotions, one is written by Louis Quéré, a dissident disciple of Alain Touraine. Quéré cites John Dewey: “A problem must be felt before it can be stated” (Dewey 1939: 70). In this article, I intend to take the meaning of “felt” seriously, researching how emotions come about and how they “work” (Quéré 2020) on a person. Emotions participate in building personality, exerting a key influence in actions and reactions towards the self and the collective, creating personal dispositions for being “moved” (Gould 2009) by a cause.

Such dispositions result from lived experiences, “negotiated” from a very early age as agency starts in infancy (Toren 2008: 106; Ingold 2008: 113). The socialization processes are filled with what Bernard Lahire called “biographical ruptures” (2010: 46), in which François Dubet’s “juvenile trials” may be included (2018), akin to rites of passage having different levels of emotional impact. Such ruptures and trials can be expected but are often undesired if they mean trauma or suffering. Their effect depends on how they resonate in each person, in a given time and space. Data and literature show that such resonance reaches its full potential for the young to-be activist when there is continuous alignment between an “individual emotional frame” and a “socio-political frame”, led by a group of peers, filled with emotions, concepts and actions (Snow *et al.* 1986).

The conjunction between particular biographical experiences may have a triggering effect on young to-be activists (McAdam 1988). Notwithstanding, in this article I don’t pretend to prove any direct and constant causality between biographical experiences and becoming an activist. To access such complexity, longitudinal research involving several complementary social sciences would be necessary. For now, the more feasible contribution this article hopes to make is to integrate young activists’ early biographies, being receptive to the intersection of life experiences during childhood and youth for a better understanding of individual steps towards activism.

RESEARCH METHODS

I have collected the data for this article in the context of a three-year research project titled “ArtCitizenship – youth and the arts of citizenship: creative practices, participatory culture and activism” (2019-2022). This project was led by a team of social science researchers from four major Portuguese academic institutions.³ The broad goal of the project was to explore how different youth protagonists engaged, individually or collectively, in different social, cultural, and political causes, used certain resources and “creative grammars” as a form of political expression and activism in the public sphere (Campos and Sarrouy 2020; Sarrouy, Simões, and Campos 2022).

The material discussed in this article is based on data collected through qualitative research methods. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted between July 2019 and May 2020 with persons involved in different social causes and who self-identify as activists.⁴ Interviewees were initially found among acquaintances ($n = 6$) but rapidly moved into snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), attentive to the need for diversity. All the interviews were conducted individually. Twenty-three of them were face-to-face interviews in private or public places, seven were conducted virtually via Zoom’s videoconference due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.

All the interviewees lived or work in either one of Portugal’s two main cities (*i. e.*, Lisbon and Oporto). Twenty-three were born in Portugal, six were born abroad and one was a foreigner not yet legalised. Four of the activists of foreign origin were from the former colonies of Portugal. Concerning the remaining two, one was from Chile and the other from Turkey. Fifteen of the interviewees were male and 15 were female. Two were transgender and in the process of transitioning. In terms of race and ethnicity, 23 self-identified as white, five as black, and two as having Latin American indigenous origins. All interviewees were between the ages of 14 and 35. Seven were over 30 years old, 21 were between 18 and 30 years old. Two were minors and needed parental consent for the interviews. The fact that we have included interviewees aged over the usual youth gap in the literature (15 to 25 years old), is a conscious choice of the ArtCitizenship research team. We have involved activists aged between 25 and 35 years old (not the majority) but focusing on the analysis of their childhood and youth. All of them are self-named activists nowadays. Our aim is twofold: to integrate their experience of the

3 Universidade Nova de Lisboa (leading team), Universidade do Porto, Universidade de Lisboa, ISCTE. Official website of the research project: < www.artcitizenship.fch.unl.pt > (last access in June 2022).

4 To obtain a broad view of this universe, it has been defined four areas of civic action, depending on the type of advocated causes: (a) ethnic and cultural identities; (b) gender and sexuality; (c) ecology and environment; (d) social inequalities and political issues.

2008-2013 economic crisis in Portugal; to compare their answers with younger activists on experiences that have triggered embodied emotions leading to activism.

The guide for the semi-structured interviews was developed by the ArtCitizenship Project research team and kept evolving in its deductive enquiries and its inductive possibilities. I have given special relevance to the inductive opportunities of semi-structured interviews, meaning that the pre-constructed guide must have space and allow chances for the interviewees to express themselves freely and in unexpected directions. The interview guide was divided into three broad sections, each of them with sub-parts to deepen the content: (1) biographies: personal trajectories towards activism; (2) practices: what do they do? How? With whom? Where?; (3) representations: personal-collective and local-global. I will focus on the findings resulting from section 1 of the interview guide. The activists interviewed showed self-awareness and reflexivity when sharing intimate biographical details related to personal experiences, troubles and suffering, joys and hopes, and the resulting emotions and actions. For this reason, their identity shall be anonymised by using pseudonyms.

For the 30 young activists, who tend to be focused mainly on present action for future goals, a look at the past proved to be both challenging and stimulating. On average, the semi-structured interviews lasted one hour and 45 minutes. After transcribing the 30 interviews verbatim, I manually coded all the content related to key biographical experiences leading to future activism.

CATEGORIES EMERGING FROM EARLY BIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES

When coding the transcriptions, nine categories emerged that related to biographical experiences contributing to explaining why the interviewees were disposed to engage in activism. To structure the presentation of this data the categories are divided into three broader sections. There remained extensive data and categories for another section titled “Family and friends: the first circles towards activism”, but I decided to exclude it for now since it has been a well-worked theme in the sociology of social reproduction and it would largely corroborate what has already been established by youth activism researchers (Jasper 1998; Kaplan and Shapiro 1998).

In this section of the article, I deliberately use the allowed space for revealing the thoughts of the interviewees rather than analysing or confronting them with the existing literature. I intend to deploy categories that have been less taken on board by researchers but are part of the interviewees’ biographical discourses as rooted reasons for their activism. Still, it is important to keep in mind that the emerging categories do not exist isolated from each other although they might appear so in such a neat classification.

The body: being and (re)acting

A person's body serves as the main instrument for absorbing and expressing social information. We act and react according to daily inputs. Encounters with others and with our surroundings greatly influence one's way of thinking about the world and responding to it. The activists interviewed spoke about their social ecosystems and the way they impacted them. From this, three main categories emerged concerning the body.

The first category was "race still matters". Two of the interviewees spoke at length about the impact of their black skin and African origins on them, mostly perceived through social interactions.

Neusa, a performer and art educator, is a black woman who came to Portugal from Cape Verde with her parents at the age of six. She is active in antiracist and afro-feminist movements. Her – "I am black and I am proud" – consciousness was delayed due to a previously complex process of colourism and whitening effect that, according to her, has origins in the fact that Cape Verde has "difficulty in accepting that it is part of Africa". She grew up with an unconscious denial of her ethnic history until, at age of 22, she went to Salvador da Bahia, the region of Brazil with the largest afro-descendent population: "It made me feel like in Cape Verde. [...] Things I didn't remember, memories that were kept in my body. But what I felt, and this has to do with my work, with my research and everything I do nowadays, was like being home. I needed to reconnect with something related to land. I needed myself". At the same time, she was joining afro movements from Bahia, getting information, gaining consciousness, and defining a path for her future activism.

Elza is a 28 years old black woman, originally from Brazil. She is an artist and an illustrator, working mainly on gender and race issues. At the age of 13, she moved with her mother and sister to the suburbs of Lisbon, leaving behind a life that was very violent and unstable, both financially and emotionally. As an immigrant, her early adolescent years were no less difficult and influenced her activism. She was a good student in school but recalls: "My classmates thought I was doing something wrong, like paying somebody or cheating to get the grades. It could never be because of my capabilities". The aspect that she insisted on most as being an important influence, one that also serves as a key to understanding her personal development as an afro-feminist, is related to her hair. She grew up with a family habit imposed by her mother of straightening natural afro-hair. This was a way of looking "less black" in social contexts where the prejudice was latent and silent. She recalls: "At the end of adolescence, when I deconstructed myself, I became very angry at my mother for having done that, but I had to understand she lived in a much more racist world than mine and maybe she did it to protect us". Elza suffers from thrombophilia, a chronic disease. She has recurrent health problems and takes heavy medication which makes her hair fall out.

She once told her mother that when it grew back, she would not straighten it. She recollects the ensuing argument: “Mom, it’s enough! [...] I know there is nothing wrong with my hair, people who say my hair is wrong are ignorant, I am not the ignorant here!” Her hair grew, and she could finally flaunt the afro: “Then my mother did the same, she has a gorgeous afro now, I think it’s beautiful! Marvellous! This is something that has a great impact on our lives, [...] it’s such a liberating experience, it has contributed to my self-esteem a bit: I have hair, it’s mine, I am myself, I have the right to be here!” She concluded by saying: “I think a lot of the history of a black woman is in her hair, in the way she sees and presents herself to the world”. Nowadays, much of her activism is expressed through the arts, namely illustrations, having the fact that she is a woman, with black skin and a proud afro, as the main source of creation and confrontation.

The second category related to the body and that was very present in the interviews was “gender and sexuality”.

Fabi is a duo of homosexual musicians that play and sing one of Portugal’s traditional genres. Their live performances are inspired by the drag-queen scene and one of their video clips explicitly shows a relationship between a black man and a white man. The singer explains: “Our bodies got us to be political. As persons, we must have consciousness of the world we live in. With our identity, it would be nonsense to not be an activist”.

This idea, that one’s personal life is related to important and complex issues such as gender and sexuality, greatly influences the causes and activism to be pursued, is supported by 20 years old Lima, who was born female but never identified with this gender. She uses illustration as her artistic tool for activism. Lima, having begun the process of transitioning, said: “I started taking testosterone and things like that, now I feel happier, more comfortable, [...] all this process makes one more predisposed to do research on social matters and to participate actively because there is a very concrete fight that needs to be pursued daily. Participating in the fight for rights is also a matter of self-defence, for us and others”.

Adding to the racism which Elza suffered, she also experienced stigma because of her sexual choices: “Being a black woman and a lesbian brings double scrutiny because inside the LGBTQ community there is racism and in the black community there is homophobia”.

Naira, also a black lesbian, is a social worker in Lisbon’s suburbs and very active in gender-related associations. She insists on how she had lacked consciousness and vocabulary, although, paradoxically, she was part of a student organisation that talked about sexual issues to teenagers but only in a conventional and moralistic way: “I started dating this girl by chance when I was 20, I didn’t know what was happening, my life changed. What is this? I don’t know anybody who is LGBT, it didn’t even exist for me”.

A similar impression was formed by 23 years old Lusía, a musician and writer. Born with male sexual organs and in the process of transitioning, she explains that the very insular context in which she grew up did not contain any information about the variety of genders and sexual choices: “I didn’t know there were two people like me, only later I found the new world of LGBTQIA+.” When attending Art College in Lisbon, she applied some “counter-attack tactics” along with her friends: “Simple things, like when in someplace we see a group of heterosexuals making fun of us, instead of starting a fight we used to smooch each other, or even to go kiss one of the offenders. The idea was to arrive somewhere and not let anybody make us uncomfortable, so we were the ones to make them uncomfortable first.”

Interviewees spoke about some key moments during adolescence, in which their sensibility towards sexual and gender issues was developed. Six have transformed their struggles and pains into reasons for creating organisations or joining groups that are already well established in causes related to sexuality.

For Mauricio, a 23 years old gay dancer and choreographer, the questions raised in the search for his sexuality have structured his views today: “At a personal level, I think that from a very young age something had a lot of influence in my way of seeing things nowadays. I had a difficult adolescence due to matters of sexuality, obviously, and because of thinking out of the box”.

Lima, the 20 years old illustrator, was raised as a girl until he was 16, and then came out as a male transsexual. He explains: “The long period being socialized as a girl made me understand better the oppression in female socialization and what the feminist cause must be”. For others, such as Carol, a writer and singer passionate about musicals, the discovery of her bisexuality came as a surprise, but the process was “quite natural”, she said, which did not make her feel “valid”. She thinks there was no real “coming out of the closet” since bisexuality in females is generally more accepted than in males. Surprise was followed by “guilt” because she compared her experience with those of her black bisexual friends or with the testimonies of struggles in authoritarian countries: “I’m in a free country, I won’t go to prison because of this. I feel my sexuality loses legitimacy. I feel like there was not enough struggle to make me entitled to join the fight, it’s horrible. And in my case, it’s as if nobody took this bisexuality seriously”. Nowadays she compensates for such feelings with a flow of actions, joining several movements, having a blog, a series of interviews on her YouTube channel, and making critical contributions through plays.

The third category related to the body “bullying”. The two activists⁵ Júlia and Elza live in Lisbon but were born in Brazil. Both talked about how their phenotype was a reason for being the targets of stigmatization and violence.

5 “Artivism” is a neologism, uniting art with activism. It is employed to signify the persons, activists, that use their artistic creations as instruments and tools for activism.

Júlia is a feminist white woman, working with theatre and poetry-slam. She was raised in a middle/high-class Brazilian family in São Paulo. Júlia explains that generally, in Portugal, people treat her differently before and after she speaks: “Due to my phenotype, in the beginning, people treated me as if I am Italian (which she credits to her Italian ancestry), and then when I would start speaking, I become Brazilian to them, it changes everything. We are in a very xenophobic country, even more so now”. Elza, the illustrator, originally from the northeast of Brazil, spoke about several experiences of bullying. She reported having to hear things such as “you are black, you are ugly”, or a teacher who said “go back to your country”, and children in her Portuguese school laughing at her Brazilian accent whenever she had to read a text out loud. During the interview, she repeatedly mentioned having very low confidence and self-esteem that she attributed to bullying, which she also had to endure in her own family: “My evangelical aunty calls me a sick person, because of my drawings and the things I say”.

Lusía, the 23 years old transgender woman who liked to dress like a girl in her childhood, also endured bullying inside the family, in this case from an older brother. As a gay adolescent, the singer Fabi suffered from physical and psychological bullying in the form of children mocking his femininity and homosexuality.

All this bullying has an impact on the bodies and minds of the young activists, originating deep pain but also a capacity for resilience, urging them to act as a matter of survival.

Social environments during childhood and youth

Interviewees were asked about the physical and social context they grew up in. Four categories emerged. Keeping with the count, we get to the fourth category, “being raised out of Portugal’s major cities”. Of the 30 interviewees, 20 grew up outside of Portugal’s two main cities, Lisbon and Oporto. Fourteen of those 20 moved to Lisbon to study and live, one moved to Oporto and the other five stayed in their childhood territory.

Moving to a metropolis is often seen as an opportunity for education, freedom, adventure, and challenges. Tiago, Lusía, Mayra, and Lima verbally expressed how “bored” they felt where they grew up. Lusía, a transgender performer, originally from a town in the Algarve, in the south of Portugal, spoke of how she envisioned Lisbon: “An enormous curiosity, a need to go and know the city. When I arrived here at 18, it was like being reborn. Going back to my town was horrible because it was as if friends and everything that happened in Lisbon were my secrets, a parallel world”. For Daniel, a 28 years old publicist and satiric writer who grew up on the border of a deprived neighbourhood of Setúbal, moving to Lisbon and living there had a special meaning: “After I rented my flat in the posh area of Lapa in Lisbon, I invited all my friends

from the ‘hood’ to smoke and celebrate. They looked at the flat and said, ‘You made it!’”.

For Sara, a climate change activist originally from a small town in the north, moving to Oporto was a need but also a wake-up call: “I wanted so much to go there to study art, but on arriving I was surprised by all of its concrete, which made me think about climate issues and later influenced my work”. She said that Oporto became a space of “experiences, teaching me about DIY, which I ended up taking back to my town”.

For others, such as anti-capitalist musician Alex, the first years in Lisbon were a “disillusion”. It was difficult to find references and friends with whom to share the challenges and questions raised by this transition. The solution he found was applying to the university’s journal team and taking his double bass to improvised music jam sessions around town. Lisbon needed to be conquered, it involved a lot of effort and resilience to make friends and have access to collectives.

A similar emotion was expressed by Emília, a lesbian musician who, at the age of 17, went to study at Lisbon’s Hot Clube Music School. This sudden jump from the countryside to the capital created tensions resulting in a severe depression. The city proved to be a challenge, one that put her face to face with the notion of rural and urban, of local and global.

The following category is “learning an artistic form of expression”. Twenty-one interviewees talked about their artistic education and the impact it had on their being. The most recurrent art form among the interviewees was theatre. Nine of them started in theatre as actors at a very young age, mostly in school or local groups.

Climate change activist Mayra began at the age of eight: “I wasn’t an extroverted child, I think that’s why I liked it so much, the possibility of being different characters, of empathy, of living other lives, I am fascinated by feeling things that I would never feel just by being myself”.

Gender equality activist Carol, who has acted in plays and has sung in the conservatorium since a very early age, shares the importance of musical theatre in her life as a human being and an activist: “There is this Afro-American musical that has changed my life because of the way they use hip-hop culture and because of the historical message”. The play is a means to communicate important issues, motivating her to continue that legacy through her playwriting and singing.

Susana started in amateur theatre at the age of four. For the past 16 years, she has been acting in popular plays in the Azores, where she grew up. She applies the knowledge thus acquired in her activist actions as a young leader for climate justice: “Usually I am the one writing the speeches and the articles during the strikes. I am fully aware of what it is to talk to a crowd and get it to be moved. Theatre has helped me to express what I feel, it has given me a lot of techniques and tools that I need nowadays”.

Reading and literature were expressed as being fundamental for 14 interviewees. They insisted on the importance of books from an early age. Some cited a lot of authors during the interview. Five created blogs to share their writings. Daniel has published a sort of satirical fiction and Jorge has published his poetry. Josefa and Mayra expressed the crucial role of reading in articulating a speech and thinking in a structured way. For Alex, his passion for reading brought him to the worlds of political writings, fanzines, used-books stores, and an early passion for the beat generation. Lima spoke of a book on Marxism as a “trampoline for all [his] activism”. Climate change activist André identifies Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything* (2015) as a pivotal book for his ideas and actions.

Seven interviewees mentioned music as their first artistic means of expression. Most started at a very early age in regional philharmonic groups but later moved to other music genres that influenced what they would become later. Climate change activist Tiago is a 16 years old drummer in a local philharmonic group, but also enjoys punk and Portuguese rap. Carol, a 20 years old bisexual activist, insists that androgynous musicians such as Marilyn Manson (USA) and Cassia Heller (BR) were important for her development.

In the sixth category, “a key person in one’s path”, 11 interviewees expressed how a particular person has been crucial in their path as human beings and as activists later on. Most of them, seven to be precise, spoke of particular teachers as being that key figure. For three of them, it was their theatre and performance teachers who most respected and listen to them, accompanying them on their journey through adolescence.

For Lima, who was assigned female at birth but has always felt like a boy, the time and support given by his secondary-school geography teacher were fundamental when starting the process of transitioning and being involved in broader LGBTQIA+ activism. Five chose their parents as the role models that they followed.

Mayra, a climate justice activist, spoke of her father as the person that most stimulated her intellectually: “I used to share my thoughts with him and he would ask me difficult questions, I would contradict his ideas.”

Climate activist Ana, who was 14 years old at the time of the interview, spoke of her school as the “key figure” due to the quality of the teachers, the diversity of nationalities, and the number of projects she can be part of: “My school is interested in things”, she said.

The last category of this second section is “experiences of education or work in foreign countries”. Eleven interviewees spoke about experiences of this kind. Nine spent time abroad as students. Six of those also had professional experiences overseas, getting to learn about themselves, different cultures, and also about their own culture back home. Distance became an important lens. Seven of the 11 travelled to European countries and four to other countries

(i. e., Cape Verde, Brazil, India and Canada). Studying or working in different cultures had a profound impact. Neusa, a 34 years old afro-feminist performer said: “At the age of 22, after being in Salvador da Bahia [BR], everything changed. I started thinking as a black woman”.

Political muralist Beatriz speaks about two important issues: firstly, she explains that coming from a very mixed family she never felt the need to define her roots, but travelling abroad and fighting for causes related to cultural heritage put her in a position of having to answer to: “What are my roots?”; secondly, she shared the impact that a stay in India had had on her consciousness about caste-based societies and femicides. Elisa, a 19 years old climate change activist, insisted on how important it is to have experiences in foreign countries: “You get a global perspective, a broader vision about any subject; you don’t close yourself in a box, your bubble.”

Previously, in the fourth category, some of the interviewees expressed how challenging it was to go back to their original towns after spending time in Lisbon or Oporto as students. The same experience was reported by some of the interviewees referred to in the last category: after spending a whole year in London studying stage arts, Carol said: “Coming back to Portugal was extremely hard, I didn’t want to leave but I was out of money; I was pissed-off because I felt I had missed my activist engagements, so when I arrived here [Lisbon] I decided to get involved with many organisations to avoid having time to think.”

Res publica: first experiences

To conclude this series of three sections, I propose a set of categories that represent their first concrete steps into activism. These are more of the key experiences moving a young to-be activist from feeling to passive consciousness, to concrete action in the *res publica*.

The eighth category, shared by 28 interviewees, is “living through the 2008-2013 financial crisis in Portugal”. Only Leon and Júlia were in foreign countries during that period. For the rest, it was a time that marked their families and memories. Francisco, a climate change activist, was ten years old when the crisis began. He recalls the salary of his mother, a public-school teacher and a single mother, being reduced. For André, also a climate change activist, the financial crises “created a hole in [his] family”, contributing to the already difficult relationship between his parents. Daniel, writer and *provocateur*, mainly remembered seeing the effects of the crisis in the lives of his close friends from an already poor neighbourhood of Setúbal. For Rui, leader of a climate change organisation, who was 25 years old at the height of the crisis and had a stable job, it was a key moment of consciousness and a pivotal period of his life. He witnessed and participated closely in the street demonstrations that had brought over a million Portuguese (10% of the population) into the streets,

and got involved with its main promoters, who would go on to create the very active organisation called *Academia Cidadã* (Citizenship Academy).

Alongside the financial crisis in Portugal is the experience that constitutes the “joining the school’s student organisation” category. Seven interviewees mentioned their participation in a student organisation during high school. Mayra was even elected president, an important step for an afro-descendant adolescent girl living in a small town in Portugal’s interior. Nowadays, she is strongly involved with climate justice activism and is flirting with the idea of joining a political party.

Neusa, an afro-feminist performer and educator, entered her school’s student organisation at the age of 15. She was inspired by the Cape Verdean Organisation that her parents were members of. As for André, he joined the student organisation as well as a national movement called Youth Parliament and the Portuguese Association for Environmental Education. At 27, he is currently an active member of two Portuguese climate justice organisations named Climáximo and Art for Change Collective.

As for LGBTQI+ activist Naira, while in secondary school she co-created an organisation called *Beco com Saída* (Alley with Exit) that informed fellow students about topics related to sexuality, she was also a candidate for the student organisation but lost: “I wanted to change the school system and I was already making inquiries and organising debates”.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: THE RELEVANCE OF “BEFORE ACTIVISM”

The data and findings resulting from 30 semi-structured interviews show that the emotions leading towards activism are deeply rooted in early embodied experiences. The nine identified categories are part of the reasons why a person becomes “biographically available” for activism (McAdam 1988; Olivier and Tamayo 2019). I have sought to reveal individual social experiences and encounters that set the stage for that physical and emotional availability. Still, each experience is personal, resonating in a specific body at a given time and space. Therefore, I don’t pretend to prove a straight causality or to make generalisations. Nonetheless, some common factors among the interviewed activists can be enhanced: the impact of emotional experiences since early life stages; the body as the main receptor and creator of emotions leading to an urge for political action; the intersectionality between lived experiences that entail suffering and sadness as well as happiness and hope; the existence of key moments and encounters that reveal social realities and possible actions to fight for or against a cause.

In his book *Why Things Matter to People*, Andrew Sayer writes: “Without careful evaluative descriptions, that, for example, identify the presence of

various kinds of suffering and flourishing, social science cannot develop adequate accounts of social life” (2011: 10). Embodied emotions being at the core of the data collected for this article, each interviewee made links between their psychology and social ecosystem. The interest in everyday life and the body as the main activator/receptor of information has proven to be essential for revealing the bridge between day-to-day interactions and the emotions urging for activism (Jasper 2011; Flam and King 2005; Paes and Sarrouy 2022).

Activists are not born but are socially made; they are a cumulative response to all the emotions felt through the years as “incorporated pasts” (Lahire 2002: 47). For most, becoming an activist is not optional, it has been imposed on them by society’s treatment of their body and their life choices (or lack of them). In the words of one of the interviewed queer activists: “Our bodies got us to be political.” Social interactions can create a set of embodied “grievances” (Pinard 2011; Quint 2019), and activism may serve as an important tool to face and overcome them. This also goes to show that there is more to activism than we see in the iconic figures full of charisma and leadership (Weber 1968: 1112) at the demonstration’s frontlines. Recognizing “common culture” (Willis 1990) and personal “everyday creativity” (Hallam and Ingold 2007) contributes to studying a larger number of individual and collective actions, those made daily at a more discrete but concrete level nonetheless (Fish, King, and Almack 2018).

Sociologist Saskia Sassen proposed the idea of the “before method” (2014), a sort of emotion instigated by epistemic indignation which provokes academic researchers to think and act, even before managing all the methodological tools available. The findings of this research support a similar idea, a “before activism”, as a set of interconnected experiences from daily interactions resulting in social indignation starting before activists are acquainted with key concepts or know about social movements, protest strategies and tactics (Boyd and Mitchell 2012). For the young activists interviewed, memories of such experiences are vivid. Most are painful recollections that amount to a sort of “moral shock” (Jasper 1998: 409) that have been somatised, then intellectualised and transformed into action. Negative emotions are powerful (Hochschild 1975: 298; Jasper 1998: 414), they cling to bodies and minds, urging (re)action. Responding to this need with resilience combined with a deep sense of self and knowledge about their social context – products of working on their emotions in their youth – serves as a prompt to activism.

My insistence on considering the events that create early emotions echoes with fundamental contemporary literature on activism and social movements (Accornero 2019; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001). I chose to address the roots of emotions sustaining and informing activist choices, more than the emotions themselves. The data reveals them to be deeply bodily-inscribed and cognitive, resulting from social interactions (Jasper 1998: 399). Searching for

emotions in narratives implies taking them seriously, just as Dewey, above cited by Queré, did when stressing the word “felt”. To explain the strength of the attachment to a certain social cause, it is fundamental to go back to each person’s roots at a social and emotional level. For example, this may prove to be useful to tackle the reasons behind the fact that the stronger the involvement in collective activism, the less of a “free-rider” one might be (Olson 1965).

Going to the roots of the emotions felt by young activists in their childhood and adolescence may also be important for bringing abstract social problems back to a palpable and personal reality. This is evidenced by the data on the case of racism in school (Yuri, Elza), gender inequality (Lusía, Lima), and climate change (Sara, Susana), to name a few of the interviewees. The causes that these young activists struggle for are not something they have simply adhered to. They have been felt in their bodies and minds as human beings growing up in a specific social ecology (Ericksen 2011). The daily incorporation of experiences and encounters has left impressions on them that drive their activism. As shown by the semi-structured interviews, a body’s phenotype, gender, sexuality, and ethnic origins are among the first elements to be subjected to social judgement, making it political. But the step to action is not linear nor an assured consequence. Activism may be triggered by a lived emotion and a key figure in one’s path, creating a connection to a cause or a social movement organisation, but it requires a complex conjunction of factors to assure the active step from consciousness to concrete actions.

Such a quest for the biographical sources behind activism in individuals may also be useful to address the classical notions of “frame” in social movement literature. Drawing on Ervin Goffman, Snow *et al.* (1986) demonstrated the connections between “individual frame” and “collective frame”. They insisted on the need for an alignment between them to ensure maximum resonance and guarantee effective involvement. The data I have collected may be mostly placed in the formation of an “individual frame”. It contributes to understanding what are the lived experiences that have participated in the creation of each to-be activist’s frame, a non-static one but with some personal ever-present “corners”. Since childhood, a person’s biographical path creates a bodily “habitus” (Bourdieu 1979; Mauss 1950), to which the surrounding propositions of actions might dovetail. Consequently, the possible conjunction between the individual and collective “frames”, in a constant search for an evolving fit (Ryan and Gamson 2015), can be better explained when invoking individual childhood and youth trajectories.

In Portugal too, with the vast diversity of identity-based concerns among the new social movements, the possibilities of alignment have been raised through years of local and global struggles. This seems to be the case when there is a broader movement that has first gained momentum abroad, such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and Climate Justice, inspiring action at local

levels in Portugal. The symbolic as well as the very concrete “social barriers” that have been opening with these movements, set a path for more young people having lived oppressive experiences to vocalise and act alongside the concerned groups. Such new social movements, among others, have given a chance to align personal frames, often hidden ones, with more social and liberating frames. This invites further research and a possible theoretical engagement with “affect studies” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Garcia-Rojas 2017). Shared affects may emerge out of a relational engagement, heightening the need for public expression. Through continuous education, media, art and political action, resonating conditions may be created for an intersection between frames (individual-collective), both triggering each other to personal and shared activisms.

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