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What difference does it make? Exploring the transformative potential of everyday climate crisis activism by children and youth

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ABSTRACT

Given the enormity of the climate crisis, the transformative potential of 'everyday' activism is often questioned. In this theoretical discussion, I explore the real-world significance of everyday activism by children and youth. First, I emphasize the need for top-down policy change as well as bottom-up cultural shifts. Next, I describe the significance of young people's everyday activism through the lens of countercultures, while highlighting agency-limiting practices common in present-day formal educational settings. Lastly, I call for participatory and arts-based approaches in facilitating youths' everyday climate crisis activism, noting its potential micro-level benefits and its relationship to macro-level social change.

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In addressing the climate crisis, modifying 'everyday' practices can easily be dismissed as futile when considering the tremendous scale of necessary change. As the argument goes, how could the individual efforts of people – or even the combined efforts of communities – really matter when their real-world impact is infinitesimal compared to industrial-scale carbon pollution? Those who grasp the staggering scale of global sustainability crises rightly emphasize the need for structural and policy shifts to bring changes at the scope and scale necessary to avert the changing climate's worst effects. But what is the transformative potential of everyday activism, especially by children and youth? As ecosystems continue to destabilize around the globe and as young people increasingly take their place in the public discourse, are emissions reductions the only meaningful metric to assess progress towards a more sustainable future?

This theoretical discussion explores the real-world significance of children's everyday climate crisis activism. First, I discuss the need for – and reciprocal relationship between – 'top-down' (e.g. policy) and 'bottom-up' (e.g. cultural) shifts in bringing global transformation to sustainability. Next, through the lens of countercultures, I offer a critique of dominant cultural narratives that limit children's participation in society and often thwart the transformative potential of children's climate change engagement in formal educational settings. Finally, I emphasize the need for alternative, action-based engagement models, especially participatory and arts-based methods, that empower children's climate change awareness, agency, and action as they are invited to envision and enact a sustainable future.

Changing policies versus changing cultures

*Everyone can shape the world. We can talk with our friends
and we can talk about how to change the world. – Miguel, age 10¹*

Everyday environmental activism has been defined as 'individual and collective efforts to change, adapt or disrupt one's own and others' everyday practices in response to concerns about the negative impact of these practices on the environment as it is known, valued and imagined' (Walker 2017, 14). In this article, youths' everyday climate crisis activism involves interrupting and altering one's own – and influencing others' – actions according to their perceived climate impact. Examples of such activism range from behavioral modifications with direct environmental impact – such as altering one's consumption patterns – to actions with a more indirect environmental impact – such as discussing the climate crisis with family and friends. Importantly, youths' everyday climate crisis activism encompasses individual as well as collective efforts that, rather than being determined solely by choice, are variously enabled and constrained by institutional and structural forces (Evans and Jackson 2008). A key distinction between traditional activism (e.g. via protest) and everyday activism is that, in the latter, climate-relevant routine behaviors and social practices are the direct target of change, with a perhaps less direct impact on larger-scale public policies. Moreover, youths' everyday activism takes place within young people's personal spheres of influence (e.g. family and peer networks), rather than in the public sphere.

As mentioned, the significance of these sorts of behavioral shifts is often discounted when considered against the sheer scale of the sustainability crises we now face (Kenis and Mathijs 2012; Shove 2010). Or, if not entirely written off, everyday activism is valued for its symbolic meaning: sustainability-focused lifestyles and projects may *represent* what the world needs more of, but their real-world impact by and large ends there (Taylor 2019). Until mandated or facilitated by policy, the argument goes, everyday actions are merely voluntary acts of virtue. A related critique is that, if youth derive a sense of agency from their everyday activism, they are sorely misguided or (perhaps worse) sorely misled by the adults who encourage their action. As this argument goes, because their actions are clearly not enough, it is disingenuous to tell children that they are making a difference.² Finally, and perhaps most discouragingly, everyday activism is sometimes perceived as a distraction from truly consequential, transformative change that is the exclusive domain of structural-level and policy shifts (Kenis and Mathijs 2012; Schild 2016; Waldron et al. 2019). By burdening young people with a sense of personal responsibility to 'solve' the climate crisis through their own actions, this argument goes, today's adults are adding insult to injury while abdicating their own responsibility for decisive action in the swiftly-closing window of time left to possibly do so. In arguments discounting the utility of everyday activism, there is usually a comparison made between the relative value of private- versus public-sphere behaviors alongside a merited critique of neoliberal ideology and its 'privatization of responsibility' for the climate crisis (Huckle and Wals 2015; Schindel Dimick 2015, 390; Trott and Weinberg 2020; Waldron et al. 2019).

Is everyday activism alone sufficient to address the climate crisis? Obviously, it is not.³ But is it so futile, misguided, and burdensome as to be abandoned entirely? For numerous reasons that frame the remainder of this paper, I would argue that surely it is not. What all of the above critiques have in common is a justified sense of urgency around *top-down* policy shifts that enable sweeping change in the immediate term over *bottom-up* shifts in culture that enable sustainable change over the long term. In fact, both are necessary to address the climate crisis. As noted by van Kessel (2020):

... many humans hope for (and seek) a technological fix for climate catastrophe—carbon capture, and so on—but many of these do not address the underlying problems arising from worldviews (e.g. economies based on perpetual growth, land as containing resources for exploitation), and thus such responses are incomplete at best, and at worst would perpetuate the problem in a different way. (135)

The above critiques assume a dualism – or mutual exclusivity – between political and 'personal' activism, as if actions not directed at policymakers and powerholders are of no significance. But the worldviews, values, customs, and actions of individuals (in aggregate) are what make up *culture* – and culture matters.

As an anthropological concept, culture encompasses ‘all that we mean when we talk about norms, values, assumptions, traditions, and practices’ (Packalén 2010, 119).

The everyday actions and routine practices of individuals – particularly in the global North⁴ – are a main driver of the climate crisis (Roy and Pal 2009). In a consumer society, consumption is less about consuming specific goods and services and more about ‘the consumption of *meanings*’ (Baudrillard 1970; Evans and Jackson 2008, 18 [emphasis added]). For too many people, ‘the good life’ is defined by a culture of over-consumption and excessive waste. In the global transformation to sustainability, consumerism is a cultural condition that must be addressed (Kagan and Burton 2014). To be more precise, what is needed are diverse and creative ways of living and interacting in the world that confer a sense of meaning and well-being while respecting planetary boundaries (Hayward and Roy 2019; Rockström et al. 2009).

Moreover, culture matters because cultural norms, values, and their shifts over time are the lifeblood of policy shifts – variously affecting whether policies will be imagined, demanded, drafted, enacted, embraced, enforced, or abolished (Solnit 2016). What are policies but formalized social agreements? Policy and culture – the ‘top-down’ and the ‘bottom-up’ – are in dynamic, reciprocal relationship to one another in an ongoing process of mutual constitution and change. Not only does micro-level change figure into the potential for macro-level change, but also grassroots social change takes on added significance in the absence of top-down leadership (Ehrenfeld and Hoffman 2013; Trott 2016). From this perspective, everyday activism by an informed and engaged public, including children and youth, equates to real-world social change in action (Brown 2017; Nissen, Wong, and Carlton 2020; O’Brien, Selboe, and Hayward 2018). As captured in the quote above by ten-year-old Miguel, there is a role for everyone in ‘shap[ing] the world’ through everyday interactions. In brief, everyday activism is *culture shifting*, changing the social landscape upon which non-sustainable practices take root, flourish, or wilt – with direct and indirect consequences for the climate crisis.

Countering cultures of youth exclusion and inaction

I think that you can change the world.

You can save the world, even if you’re a kid. Sarah, age 10

A counterculture has been defined as ‘a way of life and set of ideas that are opposed to those accepted by most of society’ (Oxford, n.d.). Everyday climate crisis activism by children and youth is countercultural on two important levels having to do with *what* young people are doing and *how* they are doing it. First, young people are challenging mainstream ways of life (e.g. materialism, overconsumption) and reimagining ‘the good life’ for the well-being of their own and future generations (Nissen, Wong, and Carlton 2020; O’Brien, Selboe, and Hayward 2018). Further, everyday activism by children and youth challenges dominant cultural narratives around the proper role of young people in society. In many Western cultures, including the United States, childhood is commonly considered to be a period in which children prepare for adulthood (Kellett, Robinson, and Burr 2004). In these cultures, early life is treated as a protected period during which children are considered ‘human becomings’ – rather than full ‘human beings’ – who must learn, listen, and absorb information from the sidelines of society (Qvortrup 2009). Viewed as ‘adults in waiting,’ young people are often left without a voice in consequential decisions and actions that affect their lives (Vaghri 2018). Everyday activism by children and youth challenges these norms by positioning young people as agents of change.

Dominant constructions of childhood are reified in the formal U.S. classroom where children’s lack of engagement with critical societal issues has garnered the criticism that the formal education system has failed to empower them as citizens (Freire 1972; Sadler 2009). In the U.S., there is no universal requirement or standardized curriculum to teach children about climate change, and most teachers spend very little time if any on the subject (Plutzer et al. 2016)⁵. Moreover, when

young people learn about climate change in school, the issue is often de-politicized (Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019). Specifically, the climate crisis is framed as a matter of scientific interest with primarily technical solutions rather than as a deeply human issue of profound global significance with multi-layered socioecological consequences (Feinstein and Kirchgasler 2015; Selby and Kagawa 2010). Treated as a topic for the science classroom, much of the research literature linking children and climate change has been pedagogical in nature, focused on effective teaching practices for students' comprehension and knowledge absorption (see Shepardson et al. 2011 for a review). A recent review of climate change educational approaches found that 'just the facts' teaching remained more common than 'also the actions' approaches (Monroe et al. 2019). In other words, normative approaches to climate change education are often an exercise in top-down information dissemination – while framing the issue as one with primarily top-down solutions – leaving little room for young people's active participation (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2020). Given that the formal classroom is the most likely setting where young people are intentionally engaged on the issue of climate change, this is a missed opportunity to support children's awareness, agency, and action on a pivotal issue.

Education is widely recognized as a critical pathway to a more sustainable future. However, instrumental approaches to education, by prescribing certain ways of thinking and behaving, seem to contradict foundational principles of education (e.g. to develop autonomous thinkers; Jickling 1992). According to Wals (2011),

... education should above all focus on the kind of capacity building and critical thinking that will allow citizens to understand what is going on in society, to ask critical questions and to determine for themselves what needs to be done. (179)

Given current trends in climate change education, which limit children's participation, there is a need for empowering pedagogies that, in bottom-up fashion, invite children to think about, connect to, and act on climate change in personally meaningful ways (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2020). In other words, there is a need for approaches that invite children to use their 'radical imagination' and to act on their ideas (Khasnabish and Haiven 2014). After participating in such a program (see Trott 2019), ten-year-old Sarah (quoted above) experienced a perspective shift such that changing the world became possible 'even if you're a kid.' More broadly, there is a need for a culture shift that urges adults to take seriously children's perspectives and experiences and to encourage their informed and active participation (Sanson, Van Hoorn, and Burke 2019; Vaghri 2018). Indeed, such a bottom-up culture shift would make possible the more widespread adoption of youth-centered practices through shifts in top-down teacher training and educational policies that center children's voices and actions.

Today, youths' everyday activism matters because it is showing us – educators, researchers, advocates – where adults are failing them, both inside and outside the classroom. After all, this is the purview of countercultural movements whose lifeways contrast so starkly with those of mainstream society as to highlight the questionable values, norms, and actions of the dominant culture. When considering the transformative potential of youths' everyday climate crisis activism, we must consider not just what young people are doing, but what their doing *does*.

Participatory process: change from below

To save the world, you don't need a superpower. You don't need anything like that. All you need is yourself and others to support you. That's all you need. –Bill, age 12

The classroom, however, is not the only arena in which children are learning about climate change. Research shows that young people's exposure to climate change takes place through a variety of other sources such as on the internet and television, in news media and magazines, at museums and zoos, and through books and movies (Kelsey and Armstrong 2012). These sources are less likely to leave out the distressing social and political dimensions of the climate crisis.

Psychologically, children and adolescents report feeling worried and anxious about climate change, including feeling like ‘no one cares,’ leading some to experience depression and hopelessness (Strife 2012; Tejada, Nisle, and Jenson 2020, 89). Beyond its cultural significance, youths’ everyday activism matters because it can operate as an antidote to despair, an important coping strategy allowing young people to ‘shift perspectives between a focus on the abstract global reality and a focus on the importance of concrete actions performed in daily life’ (Ojala 2007, 742). Even small actions can serve the important function of offsetting the negative psychological consequences of climate change awareness. Moreover, young people’s experiences with action can begin to challenge internalized messages – ubiquitous in the dominant culture – of their inability *as children* to be competent knowledge-holders and capable change-makers in society (Trott 2019). Research has documented that the everyday actions of young people may allow them to develop an individual sense of competence, while their combined efforts may confer a collective sense of competence – both of which build a foundation for further engagement (Chawla 2020; Chawla and Cushing 2007). After participating in a youth-led climate action project (see Trott 2019), twelve-year-old Bill (quoted above) came away feeling confident that people working together can make a difference.

While any opportunity for action is better than none, prescribing actions to people can limit their sense of autonomy and motivation to engage (Palm, Bolsen, and Kingsland 2020). What is needed, rather than top-down directives, are empowering, agency-building opportunities that encourage young people’s leadership and active participation (Riemer et al. 2016; Trott 2020; Trott, Even, and Frame 2020a). Participatory methods are especially relevant in this regard. Participatory methods ‘enable ordinary people to play an active and influential part in decisions which affect their lives ... [meaning] that people are not just listened to, but also heard; and that their voices shape outcomes’ (Participation Research Cluster 2020). For example, participatory methods could be used to invite young people to think critically about climate change and how they relate to the issue, imagine alternatives, and decide how to act – giving them ownership of the process and allowing them to observe the ways in which their actions can be influential (Ojala 2016; Öhman and Öhman 2013; Trott 2019). Typically, participatory methods are applied with groups of young people who design and implement action-focused research projects or carry out collaborative community-based projects, with tangible benefits to young people and their communities (Peek et al. 2016; Trott, Even, and Frame 2020a). When these kinds of bottom-up initiatives are self-determined by young people – or collectively determined by groups – they are more likely to be effective and to last over time.

In combination with participatory methods, arts-based engagement can be a powerful way to facilitate young people’s meaningful climate change engagement (Bentz 2020; Derr and Simons 2020; Peek et al. 2016; Rivera Lopez, Wickson, and Hausner 2018; Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2020; Trott 2019; Trott et al. 2020b). The climate crisis is notoriously complex and multidimensional – with historical, geographical, social, political, ethical, economic, and cultural dimensions. Yet to date, the sciences have dominated youth engagement frameworks (Monroe et al. 2019). Whereas the sciences can offer an important anchor point around which to conceive of the problem and its multifaceted solutions (i.e. helping us to understand ‘what is’), the arts can support critical reflection and creative expression, allowing young people to envision alternative and preferable futures and how to get there (i.e. helping us to imagine ‘what if?’; Trott, Even, and Frame 2020a). After all, the arts are a powerful cultural force that have historically played an important role in sparking social change. We who are compelled to work with young people for a sustainable future must expand beyond narrow science-focused framings and top-down engagement styles to recognize the necessity of change from below. Doing so requires that we first recognize the global shift to sustainability for what it is – a radical global movement aiming to transform our systems and redirect our everyday realities towards modes of being and seeing that support the functioning – indeed flourishing – of societal and ecological systems.

In social movements research, a distinction is made between demands-based approaches, which appeal to external actors (e.g. authorities) for desired changes, and action-oriented approaches, in which movement actors – as agents of change – exercise their own power to directly reach their goals. Whereas the former is typified by protest politics, in which identity- or issues-based groups appeal to powerholders for rights or recognition, the latter encompasses *prefigurative politics*, which is characterized by an ethos of ‘not asking, just doing’ in order to create desired change in the here and now (Trott 2016). Rather than requiring others’ action for change to occur, a prefigurative approach to social change seeks to create a new and better world ‘in the shell of the old’ by constructing alternative institutions and modes of interaction that reflect a given movement’s desired social transformations (Yates 2015). Whereas young people’s climate crisis activism through public protest is making demands for necessary actions by today’s adults, youths’ everyday activism prefigures a more just and sustainable world by enacting change in the present moment. Like policy and culture, rather than competing with or offsetting one another, both kinds of shifts – top-down and bottom-up – are meaningful and necessary in building a sustainable future. In fact, each lends power to the other.

Conclusion

As climate crisis activism by young people becomes increasingly visible through global protest, a much larger movement is taking place outside of the spotlight. Young people – particularly those in the global South – have long been taking action to respond to environmental degradation in their everyday lives (Walker 2020). Moreover, the same children whose amplified voices are making demands for policy change are simultaneously experimenting with ways to live more sustainably and to use their voices and actions to inspire change among friends, family, and community members in the places where they live. And other young people around the globe, inspired by their protesting peers, are making changes in their own lives, however small. In the U.S., younger generations are more likely to see climate change as a personally relevant issue, more willing to engage in climate activism, and more likely to feel a sense of collective efficacy that their actions can make a difference (Ballew et al. 2020).

So, again, are emissions reductions the only meaningful metric to assess progress towards a more sustainable future? I have argued here that it is not. Children’s everyday climate crisis activism counts in ways that are perhaps not best captured or quantified using carbon calculus. As children take up the climate fight socially and relationally through interactions with family and friends, they are also taking on this fight *within* themselves, emotionally and psychologically. Youths’ everyday activism plays out in meaningful ways on both micro- and macrolevels. First, everyday activism by children and youth allows them to develop a sense of agency to accompany their troubling awareness, to feel that they themselves are capable of contributing to the widespread transformation that is necessary and to feel a part of this collective shift. On a macro-level, the everyday actions of young people amount to something powerful but diffuse – a global conversation taking place in many languages about why we live the way we do, what better to live for, and how.

Notes

1. Quotes are from post-program focus groups with children who participated in *Science, Camera, Action!* an after-school program I designed and implemented with ten- to twelve-year-olds. The program combined climate change education with youth-led participatory action (yPAR), the arts with the sciences, and youth-designed ‘everyday’ action plans with collaborative community-based action projects (see Trott 2019, 2020).
2. My own work has been subjected to this particular critique. On the other hand, my yPAR work was driven by a frustration with the predominance of the ‘ABC’ model (i.e. attitudes, behavior, choice) in psychology, which too often overlooked the need for structural change (Shove 2010).
3. The actions of humans are critical to averting the most devastating impacts of climate change. The climate crisis is, after all, a consequence of human decisions and actions. However, systemic change is necessary. I

agree with Alisat and Riemer (2015) that the climate crisis requires youth engagement that encompasses 'intentional and conscious civic behaviors that are focused on systemic causes of environmental problems and the promotion of environmental sustainability through collective efforts' (14).

4. Following Hayward and Roy (2019), I use the terms 'global South' and 'global North' not in the geographic sense but in terms of "social designation[s]" for politically, environmentally, and economically vulnerable communities that include socioeconomically underprivileged communities in rich nation contexts, while similarly acknowledging at times "global North" may include highly privileged communities in poor nation contexts' (158).
5. Among the reasons given were science teachers' lack of confidence in, and lack of training to teach about climate change. For some, climate change was not covered in their college training and the report called for more professional development opportunities for these teachers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). The work described in this manuscript complies with ethical standards.

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