RESEARCH ARTICLE

Prefigurative Politics and Cultures of Care in the Portuguese Youth Climate Strike Movement during School Occupations

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ABSTRACT: Young climate activists draw inspiration from diverse social and political struggles and use several tactics and strategies of collective action to build their movements. Extant scholarship on youth climate activist groups such as the *School Strike for Climate* have focused on how young people organise and set up their political priorities to tackle the climate crisis. However, there is still a lack of research on the inner dynamics and relationalities that sustain youth-led climate movements. To better understand how young climate activists mobilise during collectively intense and demanding periods of protest, it is important to explore their everyday practices and modes of conviviality. This article offers a contribution in this regard, drawing on an ethnographic study conducted in May and November 2023, with the goal to examine the interconnections between prefigurative politics and cultures of care. The study took place before, during and after the occupation of five high schools and seven universities in Lisbon by the Portuguese chapter of *School Strike for Climate*. Our findings show that youth climate movements are shaped by cultures of care and political aspirations that help create more hopeful futures for young people. Prefiguration is used both as a tool and an activism practice that helps to forge and actualise the movement's claims and purposes.

KEYWORDS: youth climate activism, prefigurative politics, cultures of care, ethnography, *School Strike for Climate*

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1. Introduction

Research on youth climate activism has shown manifold political enactments taken by young people around the globe to respond to the climate crisis (Bell, 2021; Booth, 2019; Harms, 2022; Neas et al., 2022; Nissen et al., 2021). The global activist movement *Fridays for Future* – also known as *School Strike for Climate*[1] – founded by Greta Thunberg in 2018, inspired many young people, particularly high school and university students, to create their own local chapters around the world. The process of organising and sustaining contextualised versions of the *School Strike for Climate* involved the experimentation of diverse modes of engagement with climate action (Belotti et al., 2022; Friberg, 2022; Harms, 2022; Marquardt, 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019). In Portugal, there was an initial surge of more than twenty local chapters of *School Strike for Climate* in 2019, but only a few of them are still active today (Carvalho et al., 2022). The Portuguese chapters mainly comprise high school and university students who see themselves as key players in a worldwide struggle to defend young people's right to a future (Pickard, 2022; Wahlström & Wennerhag, 2013). In the cities of Porto, Lisbon and Braga, among others, young activists have been organising demonstrations, debates, conferences and direct actions to raise awareness about the climate crisis (Kowasch et al., 2021). In 2022, the Lisbon chapter of *School Strike for Climate* joined the global movement *Just Stop Oil,* scaling up their non-violent civil disobedience through the occupation of high-schools and universities (Buzogány & Scherhaufer, 2023). The Lisbon chapter of School Strike for Climate has since organised three periods of school occupations: November 2022, May 2023 and November 2023. During these endeavours, dozens of high school and university students joined the movement and crafted, for each occupation, communal ethics, activist purposes and standards of conviviality. In this article, we delve into the internal dynamics, to understand the interconnections between prefigurative politics and ethics of care within the youth climate movement. Despite some literature highlighting the relevance of nurturing an ethics of care within climate movements (e.g., Bond et al., 2020; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Westwell & Bunting, 2020; Hurtado et al., 2024), there is still a lack of research examining its interconnections with prefigurative politics within youth climate groups. We looked into existing literature on youth climate activism (e.g., Bowman, 2019, 2020; Friberg, 2022; Malafaia & Fernandes-Jesus, 2024; Sloam et al., 2022), prefigurative politics (e.g., Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021; Westwell, 2020; Yates, 2015, 2021) and ethics of care in activism (e.g., Bond et al., 2020; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Gardner et al., 2024; Woodly et al., 2021; Wrigley et al., 2024), to examine the interconnections between prefigurative politics and ethics of care within the Portuguese youth climate strike movement. How do young climate activists cultivate care within their movement? In what ways do the movement's culture and ethics of care interconnect and shape young people's political prefiguration? To answer these research questions, we conducted an ethnographic study in the Lisbon chapter of *School Strike for Climate*, one focus group discussion and one paired interview with young people involved in the occupations. Our study offers novel contributions to the understanding of the internal dynamics of youth-led climate groups, with a particular focus on prefiguration practices and the ethics of care sustaining climate activism. This is particularly relevant considering the commitment, effort and endurance that occupations – along with other repertoires involving direct action and civil disobedience – demand from both the individual activists and the collective structure of any social movement. As will be fleshed out, the combination of prefiguration and care theories translates into a potentially valuable analytical lens regarding how social movements manage to uphold prolonged disruptive actions, which includes but is not limited to occupations. The empirical context of this article is framed on a worldwide extended campaign – 'End Fossil: Occupy!' –, which encompassed a wave of blockades and

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[1] As many other international chapters of the global movement Fridays for Future, Portuguese youth groups adopted the name "School Strike for Climate" in 2019. We will refer to the movement as School Strike for Climate, as a translation for the Portuguese "Greve Climática Estudantil".

occupations that led to the shutdown of twenty-two institutions across Europe, with Lisbon having been considered the place where the most radical actions took place (see Gayle, 2023[2]).

This article is organised as follows. First, we examine existing literature to explore the interconnections between prefigurative politics and ethics of care within activist movements, in general, and, more specifically, within youth climate activist groups. Then, we describe our methodological approach in detail, including the ethnographer's positionality. This is followed by a presentation of our findings organised around two themes: *1) Inspired by just futures: cultivating care within climate activism*, where we describe young activists' practices, experiences and interactions shaping internal ethics of care, and 2) *Crafting new coexistences to sustain the climate struggle*, in which we examine how *School Strike for Climate* activists engage with prefigurative politics, sustained by an inner culture of care. Finally, we discuss our main findings, limitations and implications for future research. We argue that young climate activists' practices and ethics of care foster empowerment, emotional connection and mutual support and enable the prefiguration of new ways of relating with one another that ultimately aim at a societal transformation towards climate-just futures.

2. Interconnections between prefigurative politics and ethics of care in climate activism

Prefigurative politics have been examined from multiple angles, including its relationship with either the informal sphere or state-based apparatus (Westwell, 2020), the leadership challenges it poses in contemporary protest movements (Lin & Liu, 2016), its institutionalisation in dominant organisations (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021), and its strategic role in multi-goal-oriented movements (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Literature on social movements (e.g., Boggs, 1977; Gravante, 2023; Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021; Lin & Liu, 2016; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Polletta & Hoban, 2016; Westwell, 2020; Yates, 2015, 2021) conceptualises prefigurative politics – or prefiguration – as the strategies and practices employed by activists to embody alternative futures in the present, reproducing social relations and *modus operandi* that help them make sense of communal aspirations and political priorities. Prefiguration was initially defined by Boggs (1977) as 'the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.' (p. 100). Since then, a prefiguration framework has been vastly employed to study a variety of political movements, including women's liberation groups, anarchist groups and alter-globalisation movements, during the 1970s and 1980s (Lin & Liu, 2016). Westwell's (2020) book offers a contextualised and historical discussion of the emergence of prefiguration as both a concept and practice – tracing its development from 19th-century anarchist movements to anti-racist, feminist, and anti-colonial movements. This work highlights not only the potential of prefiguration for imaginary enacting but also the relational components that sustain those processes. This points to the importance of looking closely at the binding dynamics of collective action that animate the possibilities of political prefiguration within social movements. The literature, however, remains scarce in that regard, even though Christie Nicoson (2024) proposes a climate transformation model anchored in a feminist ethics of care, in which prefigurative imagination comes as one of the many elements driving actors' care for the future. But how cultures of care, within collectively organized movements, are fostered and sustained, turning into politically prefigurative practices of new modes of being together?

In experimenting alternative practices and modes of political engagement, activists are sustained by ongoing communal support and shared values such as equality and horizontality (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021; Lin & Liu, 2016; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Westwell, 2020). While not explicitly linked, these practices seem to be aligned with an 'ethics of care', as originally coined by feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan (2018), to refer to a

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[2] Gayle, D. Students occupy schools and universities across Europe in climate protest, in *The Guardian* (May 5, 2023), available at https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/may/05/students-occupy-schools-universities-europe-climate-protest

gendered notion of mutual responsibility and interdependence in communal relationships. Furthermore, within solidarity movements, such as the refugee support networks created in Europe after 2015 (see Milan & Martini, 2024; Della Porta & Lavizzari, 2022), care often acquires a political connotation and a prefigurative character. By developing communal relationships, activists try to maintain and repair their world, which includes their bodies, their selves, and – in the specific case of climate activists – the environment (Tronto, 2013). Referring to the role of care in climate activist movements, Hurtado and colleagues (2024) stated that care helps to create symbolic and affective identifications which enable members to unite around common counter-hegemonic political alternatives. In this sense, the relationalities established within an activist group bear influence on the collective's prefigurative politics. Perceived as a powerful tool for 'undoing and building new political horizons' (Woodly et al., 2021; p. 891), care can be an effective way to cultivate relationships that attempt to counter oppressive social regimes and neoliberal policies (e.g., Della Porta & Lavizzari, 2022; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Held, 2018; Tronto, 1995; Westwell & Bunting, 2020; Woodly et al., 2021), by opposing the structural conditionalities that contribute to social injustices. Held (2006) underlined that two of the most relevant features in the practices of care performed within activist movements were being attentive to others (in the group) and meeting their needs. As such, providing and receiving care is part of the 'glue of solidarity' that upholds political engagement and the mobilisation for a common cause' (Juris, 2008; p.6). As stated by Tronto (1993), care protects activists from 'extraordinary incursions of violence or other forms of disruption' (p.104) by fostering sensitivity to the needs of others. In this sense, care, in activist movements can be understood as a building block of democratic ideals (Gottschlich & Bellina, 2017), once people 'care with' each other rather than 'for each other', as in traditional – gendered and racialised – notions of care, based on hierarchical and paternalistic relations of power (Woodly et al., 2021). Social movements oppose traditional care by reclaiming it as an active tool of mutual responsibility and solidarity, helping activists to undo or challenge structural inequalities (Della Porta & Lavizzari, 2022; Santos, 2024; Woodly et al., 2021).

Among climate activist groups like *Extinction Rebellion*, *Last Generation* and *School Strike for Climate*, fostering an ethics of care has been incorporated into the everyday practices of political mobilisation (e.g., Harms, 2022; Westwell & Bunting, 2020). Much like in other social movements that engage with political struggles (see Santos, 2020), the activities and interactions that take place during climate mobilisations are nurtured by the movement's own rituals of care and solidarity, which convey mutual encouragement and moral support among members. Over time, these rituals provide members with a sense of community and shared values, where they can identify with each other as peers (Santos, 2020). Thus, care helps to foster members' commitment to political actions and collective goals (Santos, 2020, 2024) and implies adhering to a set of shared values (e.g., Mulligan & Garriga-López, 2021). This is particularly meaningful within the climate movement, as members are often deeply connected with the ideals of sustaining life and transforming societies towards climate justice and climate-just futures (Harms, 2022; Mulligan & Garriga-López, 2021; Westwell & Bunting, 2020). For instance, *Extinction Rebellion*'s approach to climate activism includes an internal culture of regeneration and restoration of humans' relationship with the planet, tentatively implemented through the practices of care prefigured within the movement (Gardner et al., 2024; Harms, 2022; Westwell & Bunting, 2020).

Climate activists at *Extinction Rebellion* and *School Strike For Climate* often draw inspiration from historical social movements and decolonial approaches aiming at dismantling cisheteropatriarchy and abolishing racial and state-based forms of oppression and discrimination (Gardner et al., 2024; Woodly et al., 2021). Inspired by these earlier social movements, today's young climate activists are prone to build cultures of care inspired by ideas of non-domination and horizontality, aligned with an anti-capitalist imagination of the future (Belotti et al., 2022; Friberg, 2022; Marquardt, 2020; Woodly et al., 2021). Moreover, these activist groups have the potential to create opportunities for youth socialisation, empowerment, identity formation, peer-to-peer support and mutual care (Belotti et al., 2022; Bowman & Germaine, 2022; Bond et al., 2020; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1995; Woodly et al., 2021; Santos, 2024). The engagement with communal practices facilitates members' positive interactions, which in turn fosters young people's empowerment (Christens, 2012; Santos, 2024). By exploring

how ethics and cultures of care are created, developed and shaped within the wave of school and university occupations led by the Portuguese chapter of *School Strike for Climate*, we can better understand the interconnections between these practices and prefigurative politics.

3. Methodology

This study is part of a wider research project examining young people's narratives and political imaginaries of the future in relation to climate change. As part of the main empirical tasks, the first author conducted ethnographic fieldwork with the Lisbon chapter of *School Strike for Climate*, during the occupation of five high-schools and seven universities, in May and November 2023. The purpose of the fieldwork was to examine how activists cultivated care, within the movement and whether there were interconnections between care and prefiguration. We chose ethnography as a method, as we wanted to delve into the ordinary day-to-day realities of participants and their lived experiences (Beach, 2005). The ethnographer adopted a critical reflexive approach, following the recommendations of post-colonial scholars (e.g., Manning, 2016; Powell, 2022). This means that she occupied a subject position in the interactions with the participants and clarified her political stance on climate activism (e.g., she defined herself as an ally in solidarity with the movement's claims).

The core group (i.e., the organisers of the Lisbon chapter of *School Strike for Climate*) included approximately 26 young people, 14 women, 7 men and 5 non-binary people aged 15–23 years. All were white Portuguese students. Being a woman in her 40s, the ethnographer had a considerable age gap with the activists, which hypervisibilised her presence in the group and posed a potential obstacle to establishing rapport. To reduce this barrier, the ethnographer participated in regular meetings of *Climáximo* (a national climate activist group based in Lisbon), attended by members of the *School Strike for Climate*, as well as members of other climate activist groups with a wider age-range. *Climáximo*'s meetings allowed the ethnographer to introduce herself as a member of a research team and share the goals of our study, as well as her positionality. This helped to establish a relationship with *School Strike for Climate*'s organisers and, subsequently, to participate in key initiatives announced during *Climáximo*'s meetings, such as occupations, protests and debates. One organiser was, in fact, the ethnographer's *buddy* at *Climáximo*, i.e., the person who introduced her, as a newcomer, to the rules and internal dynamics of the movement.

Activist movements require prompt and decisive action from their members. One recurrent sentence during initial meetings and assemblies at *Climáximo* was, 'We don't need more observers, we need allies'. To make her presence useful, the ethnographer engaged in pragmatic tasks that were relevant to the movement (e.g., distribution of stickers and pamphlets). Through these actions, as well as through the participation in open *School Strike for Climate* meetings and assemblies, the ethnographer registered – through regular fieldnotes – relevant interactions that shed light on the networks, practices and ethics of care within the movement. The relationship with the activists comprised certain boundaries, however, established by the movements' organisers. Even though the ethnographer's presence was welcomed in most activities, she was not allowed in internal meetings, where the political tactics were negotiated.

A focus group with four members of the Lisbon chapter of *School Strike for Climate* and a paired interview with two organisers of one of the high schools' occupations, helped to further explore the meanings the young activists attributed to their practices and ethics of care. The paired interview was, in fact, initially intended to be another focus group discussion, but due to the lack of attendance of a recommended minimum of four participants (e.g., Carlsen & Glenton, 2011), it ended up being reconfigured as a paired interview. Both the paired interview and the focus group discussion explored young people's experiences of climate activism and young people's political imaginaries.

3.1. Ethical considerations and data collection

Both the ethnographic study and the focus groups were approved by the Ethical Committees of the authors' institutions. Regarding the ethnographic study, verbal consent (Nairn et al., 2020) was collected by the ethnographer in a meeting with *School Strike for Climate* organisers, establishing that she could participate in the public activities of the upcoming occupations. During the study, participants' confidentiality was assured by the pseudonymisation of their names in the fieldnotes. In each new attended activity, the ethnographer clarified her role, until the majority of the group was aware of her identity and the purpose of the study. This repetition was crucial to establish the ethical grounds of the research. Familiarity increased during the period of occupations, when the ethnographer participated in daily activities. The ethnographer used participant observation and fieldnotes as privileged data collection techniques. The study encompassed participant observation of: i) three debates on climate issues, ii) three meetings, iii) three open assemblies, iv) four direct actions. Fieldwork entailed taking part in as many interactions as possible during these activities, as well as introducing reflections and insights of the ethnographer in a fieldnote diary. We acknowledge fieldnotes as an interpretative product, shaped by the ethnographer's meanings and lived experiences (Manning, 2016) but also as a reflection of the activists' own views and experiences (Powell, 2022). Taking these features into account, fieldnotes included transcriptions of informal conversations that occurred during the occupations and were discussed with the research team to bring new perspectives into the analysis.

The occupations, *per se*, lasted approximately one week in each period (May and November 2023), with daily activities being organised in fifteen high-schools and universities. However, the carrying out of the occupations was preceded by extensive preparations, weeks before, including the recruitment and collective organising of students and allies of the movement (e.g., teachers, activists from other movements, schools' staff, etc). The recruitment of new activists was made possible through the dissemination of the purpose of the occupations, using pamphlets, social media postings, merchandise and open assemblies in public spaces.

Each occupation was set up and coordinated by its own group of organisers, in most cases local students recruited by *School Strike for Climate*, during the preparation phase. The occupations of two universities were documented more thoroughly by the ethnographer, through regular attendance of daily activities. Besides the activities described above, the ethnographer was added to six WhatsApp groups, where frequent messages circulated, particularly requests for support and mutual care. These virtual groups were also utilised to share pictures and outcomes of ongoing activities through daily updates. Furthermore, the ethnographer accompanied the preparation and development of one direct action that took place after the May 2023 occupations, in Sines (a city in the south of Portugal). This entailed the blockade of a liquified natural gas (LNG) station by approximately 200 students, from several cities in Portugal. Most participants were recruited during the occupations and travelled together to the site.

As to the focus group and the paired interview, we used a semi-structured guide. We included a photo-elicitation exercise, where participants were invited to explain how a chosen image (either brought by themselves or picked from a selection provided by the research team) represented their way of engaging with the issue of climate change. The facilitators used open questions to facilitate the group discussions, such as: how do you view the way society has been addressing this issue? how do you imagine that we could organise politically, to tackle climate change? To ensure data protection, pseudonymisation was used in the transcriptions.

3.2. Analysis

To make sense of the data, the first author started by reading all the fieldnotes (Flick, 2007), skimming through the activities and interactions that reflected the activists' everyday practices of care and interconnected

expressions of prefigurative politics. A first round of excerpts from the fieldnotes was selected and coded with candidate topics that helped to organise the data. Then, the research team proceeded with the triangulation of the ethnographic data with the analysis of the focus group and paired interview (Flick, 2007). More than a pragmatic combination of data sources, we used triangulation as a way to include diverse perspectives on the key issues under study. Analytical steps were discussed with co-authors, who contributed with suggestions on how to interpret and structure the findings. The interpretation of the data triangulation data will be detailed next section. In relation to our research question, '*How do youth climate activists cultivate care within their movement and which interconnections can be found between their internal ethics of care and prefiguration?*', we identified two main themes, which are illustrated next.

4. Findings

Our findings are organised into two main themes. The first, "Inspired by just futures: cultivating care within climate activism" illustrates how *School Strike for Climate* develops an internal culture of care within the movement and explores the interconnections between young activists' practices of care and their sense of empowerment to enact shared political aspirations, i.e., horizontality, equality, mutual support, justice and common purpose**.** The second, "Crafting new coexistences to sustain the climate struggle", delves into the enactments of prefiguration within *School Strike for Climate*, specifically looking at how young activists create new ways of relating with each other to convey new world-making alternatives.

4.1. Inspired by just futures: cultivating care within climate activism

Practices of care were observed in a range of activities, including during the movement's meetings and open assemblies, where newcomers were welcomed and encouraged to join the upcoming occupations. In an open assembly that occurred in March 2023, with the evocative title: *Peço a Palavra!*[3] (which can be translated as 'I request to take the floor!'), the goals of the meeting were established as follows: '*We will share the objectives of the occupations and encourage new people to join us in fighting together for the end of fossil fuels.*' Rita, organiser and member of *School Strike for Climate*, explained how the group was negotiating its *modus operandi* for the occupations: '*To establish consensus is a pre-requisite to organise our actions with transparency and openness. In decentralised actions such as these, involving many people at once, consensus is our main tool, to take care of each other and guarantee that we stand united, across all the occupations, for a common purpose: for the end of the fossil fuel!*' This intervention exemplifies how young activists understand the connection between ethics of care and the climate struggle, recognising that mobilising together requires mutual agreements and shared responsibilities. Rita continued: '*The occupations are not against the people whose lives may be affected by them in any way, nor are they against any member of our educational community, nor are they against the public or the security forces. Our action is against the fossil fuel industry and for climate justice. We are motivated by a great love for life on Earth, a great fear for our future, and an enormous hope for all that we can achieve if the whole society mobilises for climate justice.*' Interestingly, Rita spoke of the group's motivation as 'a great love for life on Earth', echoing prior studies on regenerative cultures and ethics of care in activist movements (e.g., Bond et al., 2020; de la Bellacasa, 2017; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Hurtado et al., 2024; Mulligan & Garriga-López, 2021; Santos, 2020; Westwell & Bunting, 2020; Woodly et al., 2021; Wrigley et al., 2024). By invoking planetary love, mutual care and wellbeing, *School Strike for Climate* invites new members to engage in ongoing communal care, in preparation for demanding

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[3] 'Peço a Palavra' has a historical meaning in Portugal, as it was the sentence used by a 23 year-old university student, in the city of Coimbra, during the dictatorship, in 1969, to reclaim the freedom of speech of the students. His contestation gave rise to a series of uprisings and student strikes to challenge the political status quo.

political endeavours. As the assembly continued, Rita shared more principles that guide the movement's actions: *'Our action is publicly disclosed and everyone, with or without a prior activist experience, is welcome to participate, as long as they are properly prepared. The safety of the students and everyone involved is our top priority. To ensure this, we will prepare ourselves with training, prior to the occupations. We will take care of each other before, during and after the actions, and we will be vigilant about the needs and the strengths of all the people around us.'* It is striking how 'taking care of each other' and 'prioritising the safety of all participants' has been incorporated into the language of the movement. Following Rita's explanation, participants of the assembly were organised into three groups and asked to discuss amongst themselves if they had proposals to change or add to these shared agreements. Newcomers were encouraged to interact, establish connections with their peers and actively participate in the discussion, following the movement's ideals of distribution of power, horizontal participation and equal responsibility (Sitrin, 2012).

A few months later, in May 2023, young activists had incorporated some interesting additions to the initial agreements. Newcomers' views on the importance of building equality, respect and inclusiveness had been inscribed in the rules and norms of conviviality of the occupations' sites. For instance, the sentence 'we will not tolerate discrimination of any kind in this space' was included in a collective document. Activists also wrote that they wanted to 'build a more just, inclusive and equal society'. By including these sentences, it was indicated that the movement wanted their members' interactions and relationships to reflect antiracist and anti-capitalist political aspirations. We can see another example in the following fieldnote.

David, a young black activist from *Climáximo,* invited by *School Strike for Climate* organisers to speak at the 'ocupa', said he wanted to talk about the importance of intersectionality in the climate justice struggle, namely the importance of articulating different ideas and coordinating with other activist collectives. He stated: *"A poor black person will always have greater difficulties in accessing their rights, there are even young black people born in Portugal who have not yet had the right to their documentation, imagine that!".* The others listened with interest and interacted with a few *"hum-hums"* and *"wow, really?"*, while nodding to show agreement and engagement. David continued, explaining that there are important struggles which the climate activist movement cannot afford to forget, for instance: *"The anti-racist struggle, which includes fighting for rights of access to the city, even in terms of mobility. Do you know that many black people work in the city, but live in the periphery, and they only have transportation during working hours, or sometimes not even that…they need to make huge manoeuvres to be able to return home.* The others continued to listen attentively and nodded in agreement.

(Fieldnote, 3-05-2023)

Interestingly, after the talk described in this fieldnote, climate activists involved in the occupation proposed new ideas for the collective document (in co-production) to reflect ethical agreements and rules of conviviality that prevented racism and discrimination. The new version included the following sentences*: 'We aspire to create a space free from oppression and discrimination that challenges us to build a more just, equitable and inclusive society. We are people from diverse social and political backgrounds, we see ourselves as part of the movement for climate justice, and it is up to all of us to challenge and stop climate breakdown. Our struggle is against all interconnected systems of oppression and discrimination. We stand in solidarity with all peoples fighting for a just and liveable planet.'* This collective revision of the document illustrates the forging of a culture of care that embraces the intersectional recognition of historical hierarchies, including race-based oppressions, which is essential for a decolonial imagination of what a liveable planet means and how it can be prefigured.

In another event that took place during the occupations, the ethnographer documented a talk on Ecofeminism, facilitated by Marta - an invited speaker and climate activist. Similarly to what happened after David's talk,

the movement invited participants to use the insights they learned from ecofeminism to reflect on their own conviviality. The following fieldnote details the outcomes.

> Rita wrote down the suggestions that were spoken by the eight participants, during the brainstorming exercise. She used a small piece of paper to write down all the suggestions: '*1) Non-gendered bathrooms; 2) more qualitative assessment feedback; 3) reinforce teaching staff and student support staff; 4) implement a curriculum that includes climate and social justice; 5) reduced workload; 6) distribution of food and menstrual products; 7) distribution of contraceptives and access to unconditional psychological support; 8) positive reinforcement of students; 9) expel harassers and use transformative justice to repair any abuses.'* Next, these ideas generated by the group were transformed into proposals by Noel and Artur [organiser of the *School Strike for Climate*]. They were transferred into a cardboard poster and stuck to the entrance wall. Noel said: *'All students must read it upon entering the university's doors.'*
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> (Fieldnote, 6-05-23)

The action described in the excerpt above illustrates how climate activists engaged in using new knowledge and shared values to redefine and disrupt the habitual rules and norms of conviviality within a common space of socialisation – in this case, in a university (Vaillant & Schwartz, 2019). Inspired by the ecofeminist tenets discussed beforehand, young people felt empowered to propose a set of ideas that framed care as a tool to undo injustices and support the redistribution of resources within their faculty. Expressing their aim to dismantle cisheteropatriarchy, individualism and self-centeredness, young people proposed to replace them with a more equal and communal interaction, in a familiar and localised context. This exemplifies how activists develop alternative ways of relating that involve deconstructing prejudices perceived to be at the core of the political establishment, which their movement aims to challenge (Bell et al., 2022; Collins, 2022; Ticktin, 2020). This can be further noticed in the following excerpt of the paired interview, with organisers Pina and Petra, aged 17 and 18.

> Pina: It's a nice thing that we try to transcend our limits.
> Petra: And we're all super different [from each other]. By the way, one of the things that we wanted to take into account was the fact that we have a lot of people in our school who are autistic, so, on the first day, when we made a lot of noise, we scared them.
> Pina: Even people with anxiety didn't join us initially, because we were being too aggressive, for example, when we hit the windows. But hey, there it is; this was Monday and on Wednesday we changed and did a silent demonstration.
> Petra: To try to adapt to what had happened.
> Pina: And there was a person who sent us a message saying that a student who was deaf couldn't understand very well what we were saying, but she would like to join. We tried to get an interpreter, but it was not possible, so we told her, 'Look, you can come anyway, and we will try our best to communicate with you'. Also, there were girls who came from Ukraine and only spoke English, so there was a person translating for them, and sometimes we would have the meeting in English (…) Because for us, this is something natural.
> Petra: Yes, it is.
> Petra: There's mutual respect.
>
> (Paired Interview, 21-01-2023)

As made clear in the above excerpt, creating an inclusive space has been understood as a key component of the school and university occupations, helping to sustain the activists' collective strength and wellbeing (Westwell & Bunting, 2020; Woodly et al., 2021). Members of *School Strike for Climate* developed flexible

ways of relating to one another, allowing for experimentation, accommodation of individual needs, tailored support and the setting of personal limits. This helped them make sense of shared political ideals such as equality, horizontality, solidarity and reciprocity (Woodly et al., 2021). By rehearsing such 'utopian becomings' (Harms, 2022), young activists engaged with possibilities of transformation, sustained by an internal ethics of care, which in turn fostered a sense of empowerment. Our findings thus show that cultivating care is a crucial component of the youth climate movement, intentionally promoted to encourage members' active engagement and participation. Next, we will delve into young activists' enactment of prefiguration and the crafting of alternative coexistences, to sustain the climate struggle.

4.2. Crafting new coexistences to sustain the climate struggle

So far, we have seen how young climate activists shape communal ways of relating with one another, inspired by shared values, aspirations and ethics of care. We have also seen that young people are empowered by the climate movement to experiment these values and aspirations in the present. In this theme, we will delve more deeply into the political prefiguration of alternative coexistences, within the Lisbon chapter of *School Strike for Climate*.

The focus group that we conducted with four members of the activist group illustrates that young activists' ongoing exchanges and interactions contribute to feeling 'naturally empowered' to engage with climate activism, as suggested in prior research (e.g., Bond et al., 2020; Neas et al., 2022; Sloam et al., 2022; Santos, 2024). Young people perceive their own empowerment to develop 'organically' as a result of their participation in the movement, as we can read in the following excerpt.

> Facilitator: Telma, a moment ago you were talking about cultivating care… does it resonate with… creating a safe space where people can experience care and mutual support?
> Telma: Yes (…) *School Strike for Climate* builds an almost prefigurative space where we can experiment what we might want in the society of the future. It's not intended to have that purpose, but I guess we use it that way, because we see that it works well, that way. And people end up empowering themselves and sharing their opinions about what they want and what they don't want within the movement… I think there's a lot of young people who simply lack the tools to do this elsewhere, and they are waiting to get into a point where they'll finally be allowed to do things the way they want. And I think...that's because we lack a culture of care [outside the movement]…When people come in [to *School Strike for Climate*] and stay for a while, and start getting into the process and do things collectively, all of a sudden, they're so absorbed by it, and when they look back, after like, three months, they're already doing a lot of things they never imagined and they are feeling a certain responsibility…it becomes organic. Now, how do people realize that *School Strike for Climate* is that kind of safe space, I don't know… because in fact it's super demanding!

(FGD with *School Strike for Climate*, 2-02-2023)

Telma perceives a sense of empowerment emerging from her regular participation in the activities and interactions of the climate group. She connects it to the sense of care and safety created within the group, saying that this is a difficult environment to find elsewhere. Through this experience of communal care, safety and empowerment, members of *School Strike for Climate* 'naturally engage' with the prefiguration of potential 'societies of the future', which resonates with extant literature on prefigurative politics as the embodiment of 'utopian becomings' (e.g., Harms, 2022).

It seems thus that the development of an internal culture of care within the movement encourages members to engage with the prefiguration of practices that reflect their beliefs and aspirations. This shows an interesting

interconnection between care and prefigurative politics within the youth climate movement. Moreover, perceiving the group as a place of safety, mutual care and interpersonal connection, activists seek to experiment with new possibilities of coexistence, conviviality and collaboration that reflect their political aspirations of climate-just futures. In other words, through the movement's internal ethics of care, young people develop a sense of empowerment that is conducive to prefiguration and open-ended experimentation of new possibilities for social transformation (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021; Westwell, 2020; Harms, 2022; Santos, 2024). Specifically, young activists engage in alternative ways of building community ties, challenging capitalist and neoliberal practices deemed responsible for global climate injustices (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Polletta & Hoban, 2016).

During a meeting with two organisers of *School Strike for Climate*, Telma and Joana, aged 19 and 16, the ethnographer witnessed the preparation of specific actions to enhance mutual support between participants, during the occupations. Telma and Joana mentioned that the movement's objectives were to build 'spaces of care' at each school and university occupation. The need for such 'spaces of care' was identified during the occupations of November 2022, when Telma felt an immense psychological pressure, while squatting for the first time, inside the walls of a university. As a result, she said, '*fatigue was the main consequence, and School Strike for Climate wants to avoid that this happens again*'. Joana added that the movement plans to experiment with a new model they learned during a national climate justice meeting [an annual event involving several climate activist groups]. This model, she explained, *'requires a trained and well-identified 'awareness team', with the role of remaining attentive to everyone's needs and, for example, changing some rules that are not working well, finding logistical solutions to problems that are being reported, directing people to external support services, etc.'* It was interesting how Telma and Joana highlighted the need to design a 'tailored' model of care for each occupation, leaving it open to each group to decide what they wanted to prioritise, more specifically, and inviting them to introduce their own ideas and proposals. Planning for an organised and intentional space of care helped young people rethink their collective coexistence through the lenses of the movement's political ideals. *School Strike for Climate's* members are thus expected to actively develop alternative communal coexistences, which illustrates the interconnections between the movement's culture of care, empowerment and prefiguration. The climate group fosters prefiguration through the development of experimentation, creativity and autonomy, while also modelling practices previously experimented by other activist groups. Through such pragmatic endeavours, we can see how young climate activists shape new modes of relating with one another, inspired by political aspirations and objectives.

Another example was registered during a direct action in Sines[4], where the ethnographer had the opportunity to volunteer as a member of the 'care team'. The very existence of a care team clearly demonstrates the importance and centrality of an ethics of care within the movement. The goal was to remain attentive to the needs of the activists involved in the direct action, particularly those using their own bodies to block the entrance of the natural gas terminal. A line of policemen stood on the other side of the gate to ensure that activists did not enter the property. Five activists had their necks chained to the gate by bicycle lockers and their arms entangled to each other through connecting plastic tubes. As a member of the 'care team', the ethnographer stood up close to the activists who could not move nor use their arms, providing them with water, renewing sunblock, feeding them, etc. Furthermore, the team was requested to 'keep the spirits up', by suggesting activities and ideas that could sustain the general energy levels.

The activists started to brainstorm ideas that could help the group relax and cheer up, particularly the activists who were chained to the gate since early morning. Ana suggested that we started to sing songs to increase our energy levels. Carlos said that we could try something more soothing, like playing charades, to disconnect from the physical discomfort. The other members of the team did not agree with Carlos. Ariana said, "We need something more engaging; maybe we can suggest them to tell a story, in continuity,

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[4] As mentioned in the methodology section, this event took place after the May 2023 occupations and involved the blockade of a LNG terminal in Sines, a city in the south of Portugal, by School Strike For Climate activists and other allies of the movement.

using cues or gestures, like, someone starts to tell a story, then the next person continues from where the last person left it, you know?" Suddenly, our time to brainstorm was over. Carlos, the leader of the support team, took all of our group's ideas to the plenary of delegates, where they would negotiate and pick the best solution to care for the activists at the gate. It has been decided by the delegates that we would support the group with chants, using the megaphone and dancing with energy. Sara and Andreia volunteered to lead the activity, and, after lunch break, everyone started to sing, dance and rejoice again.

(Fieldnote,13-05-2023)

As we can see in this fieldnote excerpt, youth climate activism is sustained by a robust set of principles and relational ethics that makes members accountable to the physical, emotional, intellectual and social needs of others around them. This enhances prefiguration through the ongoing experimentation of political aspirations in practice (Yates, 2015, 2021). Trying to respond to the challenges emerging from the climate struggles, young people establish their own ways of relating, accommodating individual differences and common aspirations for climate-just futures.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we explored how young climate activists cultivate care within the Lisbon chapter of *School Strike for Climate* and the interconnections between the movement's culture of care and the activists' prefiguration of alternative coexistences, aligned with their climate activism ideals. Our analysis combined ethnographic data with a focus group discussion and a paired interview with members of the climate movement involved in occupations of schools and universities. Our findings suggest that young climate activists forge a culture of care both through practices and relationalities, and the movement's internal ethics of care develops young people's empowerment, enabling the prefiguration of alternative coexistences. In this sense, by shaping the movement's cultures of care, climate activists embody different ways of relating that mimic their political convictions and shared ethical ideals. Our ethnographic study further suggests that young people draw inspiration from historical social movements (e.g., anti-racist and ecofeminist movements) to experiment with new ways of relating and acting with one another, attempting to deconstruct prejudices and prevent discrimination, racism and gender inequality. Care facilitates climate activists' collective learnings and ongoing dialogues about the world they wish to build, as they experiment with concrete actions against a hegemonic world system (Hurtado et al., 2024). In this way, the political prefiguration of alternative world-making practices is shaped by climate activists' own socio-ecological subjectivities (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020). Moreover, our study shows specific examples of practices of care that reflect young activists' commitment to developing meaningful connections, inclusiveness and mutual support within the movement. This indicates that care is perceived as an important feature of climate activism and helps to sustain the ongoing political struggles (e.g., Bond et al., 2020; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Gottschlich & Bellina, 2017; Hurtado et al., 2024; Westwell & Bunting, 2020; Wrigley et al., 2024). This bridge between care and the prefiguration of idealised ways of living together draws inspiration from Joanna Macy's seminal work on active hope (Macy & Johnstone, 2022), which invites activists to experiment the world such as they would like it to be – i.e., to recognise the interconnections between humans and the planet and to restore these relationships through their own communal practices.

Based on our findings, we argue that prefiguration is encouraged and made possible in youth climate groups through this essential foundation of care and mutual support. Prefigurative politics play a significant role in the actualisation of relations and coexistences that aim at social transformations towards climate-just futures. Young people use open-ended experimentation (Harms, 2022) of practices and relations that help establish meaningful ways of interacting, based on mutual care, respect, equality and horizontality (Held, 2006; Westwell & Bunting, 2020). Everyday practices and rituals of care are a powerful resource, entailing a 'method

of non-capitalist world-building, a non-biological kinship arrangement, a collective survival strategy, a liberation politics, and a non-exploitative relation to land' (Woodly et al., 2021, p. 892).

Young climate activists anchor their mobilisation in the internal ethics of care crafted within the movement, making continuous efforts to embody shared values that counter the hegemonic discourses maintaining climate injustices. Care facilitates climate activists' collective learnings and ongoing dialogues about the world they wish to build, as they experiment with concrete actions against a perceived unfair system (Hurtado et al., 2024). In this way, young people manage prefigurative politics as a way to seek novel ways to craft alternative coexistences. In this sense, cultures of care potentiate prefigurative politics by inspiring alternative ways of organising and building community in the here and now (Mckane et al., 2023) which in turn helps young people resist their widespread societal subalternisation (Bowman, 2020), using empowerment, hope and mutual care (Bond et al., 2020; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1995; Woodly et al., 2021; Santos, 2024). Perceiving themselves as powerful actors in a meaningful struggle empowers young activists to experiment with new forms of political mobilization (Santos, 2024). Prefiguration can thus be used both as a tool of political experimentation and an activism practice that forges and actualises the movement's claims and purposes.

Capturing *School Strike for Climate*'s ethics of care and its interconnections with prefigurative politics was possible through data triangulation. By combining intensive participation in daily activities before, during and after the occupations with a focus group and a paired interview, we gathered a rich diversity of data. Despite the advantages of our approach, we recognise some limitations in our study, namely in the type of actions and activities that were observed. We were only able to conduct participant observations of public events, which means that we did not observe internal meetings of the movement, where more complex and nuanced interactions could have deepened our understanding of the sense-making processes and group dynamics (e.g., issues of power distribution). Future research should explore how young climate activists manage their diversity and relational complexities to craft collective agreements in their internal meetings. Despite its limitations, by showing how young climate activists cultivate care and craft alternative coexistences that articulate their hopes and future aspirations, our study offers a significant contribution to youth climate activism scholarship.

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