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A Comparative Analysis of the Motivations of Youth Political Participation across Different Types of Activism

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Abstract

During their early political socialization young people start to recognize their agency as political actors and to develop their political identity. This article presents the findings of a comparative study across different types of youth activism in two cities, Athens and Cologne, which differ in their youth cultures of participation and the opportunities they provide to mobilize. Our data derive from in-depth qualitative interviewing, which is considered to be most fruitful for the exploration of the reasons behind activists' trajectories. We identified three groups of influences: micro-, meso- and macro-level influences, with micro-level influences being most visible in the path of social movement-related activism, meso-level influences being dominant in the path of partisan activism, and macro-level influences prevailing in grassroots activism. Finally, the implications of the differential impact of the studied socio-spatial contexts are critically discussed.

Keywords: youth participation; youth activism; political socialization; qualitative interviews

The political socialization of young people is shaped by several factors with various influences motivating their early political participation (Gordon and Taft 2011; Hooghe 2004). Scholars suggest that youth political participation is influenced by family, friends and institutions (Maher and Earl 2017; Sloam and Henn 2019), while there are distinctive types of sociopsychological motives at play in shaping political participation (Klandermans 2004). In addition, the broader sociopolitical context matters in the political socialization of the youth (Andersson 2015) and empirical evidence suggests that cohorts that are socialized under given circumstances, within certain discourses and contexts of contestation, will indeed be shaped by them (Grasso et al. 2018). Conceptualizing young adulthood as the phase during which transitions towards emotional, financial and housing

independence occur (Furlong 2017; Honwana 2019), and given that these transitions have become longer and less linear nowadays, we adopt here a broad age-span for the definition of youth (Furlong 2017).

With the linkage between differential political activism and individual-level motivations having attracted scholarly attention (Rainsford 2017), the impact of influences at different levels in motivating youth political participation remains largely unexplored. Our intention is to fill this gap. Through a qualitative investigation of activists' pathways of political socialization across different contexts, we aim in this article to provide a deep and nuanced understanding of the connection between different types of influences and certain types of youth political participation, based on involvement in different types of organizations.

Our data derive from 48 in-depth, biographical interviews with young activists aged 18–35 who are active members of different organizations in Cologne (Germany) and Athens (Greece).[1] The selection of these different contexts aimed to capture as much diversity as possible in order to investigate whether particular types of influences are associated with certain types of activism. Focusing on the period of early political socialization, the analysis looked at the visibility of different influences of political engagement in the discourses of these young activists at the point of their first mobilization, defined here as the moment when they recognized themselves as members of an organization. Comparison across different types of activism is based on the identification of the most typical traits that paved the way to each of the following studied types of membership: political party membership, membership of a social movement (SM) organization and membership of a grassroots group.

The aim of this study motivated us to bring into dialogue different streams of research that deal with the motives of early political participation and the influences in the political socialization of young people. Moving beyond the comparison between participation and non-participation (e.g. O'Toole et al. 2003) and subscribing to the reinvention of political activism by youth (Norris 2002; Pickard 2019), we focus on the very process of political socialization as recommended by scholars (Fillieule 2013: 5). In particular, we raise the question of whether different types of youth activism are motivated by different kind of influences, and we attempt to answer it through a comparison of the socialization experiences of young people who are engaged in different types of political organizations. The exploration of the linkages between different sets of influences and different types of political activism seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the reasons why young people choose particular pathways of political participation.

We begin with an overview of the literature on the influences at different levels that motivate youth political participation. The next section proposes a conceptualization of youth activism on the basis of associational engagement, so that different types of activism can be defined on the basis of distinctive types of organizations. The section on our selected methodology, research design and analysis follows. The findings of this study are articulated in three subsections that showcase how each type of activism is predominantly motivated by influences of a certain level. The closing section critically discusses the findings and the nuances observed, taking into consideration the particularities of each context.

Youth political participation and the influence of micro-, meso- and macro-level factors

In the absence of a consolidated literature on youth political participation, this broad field has been explored by political scientists, sociologists and developmental psychologists. With interdisciplinary perspectives being frequently adopted, most scholars have focused on political socialization processes and the influence of SMs (Earl et al. 2017). It is generally recognized that the political participation of young people differs from that of adults because the circumstances of the transition to adulthood have an impact on how people relate to the political world (García-Albacete 2014), something known as the lifecycle effect. Moreover, the recognition of youth agency suggests that young people are being politicized following their own interests and intersectional identities rather than following the example of previous generations (Earl et al. 2017). This explains why political activism is reinvented by young people, who opt for new and creative forms of political expression and mobilization (Norris 2002; Pickard 2019). Youth activism thus is distinguishable from adult activism and should be studied as such, given also that early engagement with activism impacts on the trajectories of engagement across the lifespan (Earl et al. 2017: 14).

Inter-generational differences in the patterns of participation are largely attributed to the broader context that creates certain opportunities and constraints of action as well as certain understandings of the political (Weiss 2020). However, things become more complicated when looking at the intra-generational level. This brings to the surface the motivations and the triggers of early political engagement. Doubting the existence of political apathy among young people, a stream of scholars acknowledge that youth have no uniform approach to politics; instead youth political participation is complex and nuanced, with factors such as the social class and educational history of young people having a crucial bearing on their political engagement (Henn and Foard 2014). Current socialization research acknowledges that beyond parental and school influences a richer set of factors shape socialization experiences, from voluntary associations to peer groups, informal interactions and the mass media (Hooghe 2004: 335). In addition, youth political developmental pathways are shaped by exposure to certain contexts of political contestation (Grasso et al. 2018) and the reactions of young people to historic events (Wray-Lake 2019).

A multilevel perspective has recently been proposed for the study of the various factors that influence youth political engagement (Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014). These multilevel factors interact with each other and include macro contextual factors, demographic and proximal social factors, and endogenous psychological factors (Barrett and Pachi 2019). Thus, the micro, meso and macro levels constitute three distinct spheres of influence: micro-level factors include political interest, efficacy, ideologies, values and identity; meso-level factors include the family, school, peers and the neighbourhood; and macro-level factors include political cultural, economic, legal and institutional factors (Chryssochoou and Barrett 2017).

These three spheres of influence can be traced in scholarly works on youth socialization and political participation. The 'personalization' argument (Bennett 2007: 64) that focuses on personally meaningful causes guided by young people's

own lifestyles and shifting social networks validates micro-level influences. Micro-level factors involve cognitive, emotional and ideological sets of attitudes that trigger mobilization through processes of rational thinking, identity formation and moral reasoning (Klandermans 2004). From a sociopsychological perspective, thus, the motivational components of collective action involve grievances, aspirations, moral obligations and the expectancy of success (Pinard 2011).

In youth socialization meso-level influences are emphasized. The important roles played by family, support networks and the school environment (Andolina et al. 2003; Maher and Earl 2017) as well as the influence of peer-to-peer socialization (Gordon and Taft 2011) are discussed on the basis of social learning theory. Family, for example, has a direct influence that arises from the learning processes operating within the home as well as an indirect influence that emanates from 'situating the child in a given local socio-political environment' (Jennings et al. 2009: 795). Following the same logic, the classroom climate at school has an impact on adolescents' civic knowledge and their appreciation of political conflict (Campbell 2008).

Together with micro- and meso-level influences, macro-level factors, which relate to the political opportunity structure, play a significant role in motivating people to join political organizations (Morales 2009). Youth political socialization is an integral part of ongoing processes and situations that are defined by their spatial and sociopolitical conditions (Andersson 2015). Everyday political life shapes the experiences of young people, their perceptions of their own grievances as well as of their agency, thus influencing their political behaviour (Andersson 2015). In addition, the macro context involves the organizing principles of political institutions, such as the context of party structure, which motivate the adoption of certain frameworks for organizing political choice, while macro-level change and stability also impact on youth politicization (Sapiro 2004: 8). Beyond the influence of structural characteristics, big events have a significant impact on everyday life and motivate youth mobilization (della Porta 2017).

Reference to the micro, meso and macro levels is also found in studies of activists' biographies. The collection of studies included in the edited volume of Olivier Fillieule and Erik Neveu (2019) highlights the interaction between individuals, organizations and social structures, but instead of looking at the influences or motivations of participation it goes in the opposite direction, examining the personal consequences of activism. Finally, Catherine Corrigall-Brown's analysis of activists' trajectories (2012) demonstrates how biographic, organizational and contextual factors all matter: personal factors such as becoming a parent or moving away, organizational factors such as the frequency of meetings, internal relations and working routines, and contextual factors such as social change that attributes significance to specific movements – each plays a role in activists' trajectories.

Towards understanding youth activism on the basis of associational engagement

Departing from broader conceptualizations of youth activism as 'any behaviour performed by adolescents and young adults with a political intent' (Hart and

Gullan 2010: 67), we define youth activism on the basis of associational engagement, which brings to the fore the role played by its agencies (Norris 2002). The issue of agency here concerns the organizational structures that orchestrate collective action and define certain combinations of action repertoires (Norris 2002).

While acknowledging that the ties young people have with organizations are weakening nowadays (García-Albacete 2014), we consider that associational engagement is nevertheless substantial in youth activism, since organizations are the agents of mobilization (Giugni and Grasso 2020) and 'represent "a microcosm in which participatory dynamics unfold, resulting in different pathways to political engagement"' (Bosi et al. 2022: 2). Following this rationale, recent works have looked at young people's experiences of different forms of group membership (Ekström and Sveningsson 2019), examined the relationship between membership in different types of organizations (Quintelier 2008), compared the trajectories of activists who are involved in different types of organizations (Bosi et al. 2022) and asked what makes them become politically active (in the same way) in different domains (Rainsford 2017).

This study is empirically based on the following three distinctive types of political activism: SM organizations, political parties and grassroots groups/organizations. Following much of the SM literature, the first type includes the movements that grew significantly during the 1960s and 1970s within post-industrial societies in response to 'post-materialistic' concerns such as feminism, environmentalism, LGTBQ rights and pacifism (della Porta and Diani 2006; Pichardo 1997).[2] Political parties, along with unionism, represent conventional instances of political participation and are characterized by highly structured and professionalized schemes (Dalton 2017; Pickard 2019). Our third type, grassroots organizations, are distinguished by their participatory component, low level of formal structuration, strong ties with local communities and the adoption of bottom-up decision-making processes (della Porta and Diani 2006: 149).

We assumed that each of the aforementioned types is carving out a distinctive path of youth activism as also defined by the criteria identified by Lorenzo Bosi et al. (2022): the degree of bureaucratization, the adopted forms of action and the political orientation in terms of the vision of the world. This assumption does not cancel out the perspective of multiple participation or the possibility of being engaged in different organizations. As mentioned in the previous section, young people invent their own ways of doing politics, with youth participation patterns becoming increasingly fluid, flexible and individualized. Thus, young people often combine different forms of activism and action repertoires and engage in different types of civic and political engagement (Coe et al. 2016; Dalton 2017; Oosterhoff et al. 2020; Pickard 2019). It is not unusual for activists to join different types of action or take part in different groups, as it is common for the intensity of their engagement to fluctuate (Corrigall-Brown 2012). Bearing this in mind, we focused on the early phase of youth activism and compared the motives of activists' first enrolment. As a previous study has focused on individual-level factors and using quantitative data and a hypothesis-testing approach (Rainsford 2017), our aim was to broaden the scope to the study of the motivations of political participation through an exploratory, qualitative investigation of the linkages between different sets of influences and different types of organization.

Methodology, research design and analysis

We view political socialization as 'a meaning-making practice, thus implying a subjective, situational, relational, participation and action-oriented approach' (Andersson 2020: 243). In-depth interviewing was considered to be most appropriate on the basis of its advantages in gaining deep insights into respondents' experiences of the different instances of political participation, their understanding of the significance of such participation and their own conceptions of the political more generally (O'Toole et al. 2003: 55–56). Aiming to explore the reasons and perceptions of young activists' own choices, we adopted a biographical approach, as suggested by previous empirical works on activists' trajectories (Corrigall-Brown 2012; McAdam 1988).

Acknowledging that the political opportunity structure influences youth politicization, our empirical investigation involved young activists who mobilize in two different contexts – Athens in Greece and Cologne in Germany. The first context is characterized by low levels of trust in the political system and increased levels of youth participation in protests and radicalization as a response to neoliberal policies and austerity (Hooghe 2012; Zamponi and González 2017). This revived the political culture of youth resistance that emerged in the 1970s as a result of the role played by young students in the overthrowing of the dictatorship in Greece (Andronikidou and Kovras 2012). Particularly in Athens, the capital city, youth contentiousness manifested in the events of December 2008 after the killing of a teenager by a police officer (Sotiris 2010) as well as in the spontaneous unmediated action of the occupation of Syntagma Square (Leontidou 2012).

The second context is less contentious and constitutes a richer landscape of opportunities for both conventional and alternative routes for youth participation. This so-called 'two worlds of youth participation' (Busse et al. 2015) includes both highly organized and professionalized youth organizations and a set of more disperse and less professionalized activist networks. Germany also witnessed important expressions of youth protest throughout the past decade (Busse et al. 2015; Sloam 2014). Being the third largest city in Germany, Cologne accommodates a diverse youth population and recorded several protests during the previous years, such as the Hambach forest protests, protests against racism and police brutality, demonstrations against the new police regulations and against rising housing prices.

The inclusion of these different contexts and the stimuli and the opportunities they provide for young people was intended to facilitate the identification of the more generic and ubiquitous traits of the influences of youth activism. It was assumed that what people recall from their past is what they recognize as important for their future development and thus has influenced their activism to some extent. The interview guidelines included five different thematic blocks: life before participation, first mobilization, sustained/interrupted mobilization, future and sociodemographic information. The biographical interviews that were conducted aimed to capture how activists see their own political socialization in retrospect and how they relate their mobilization to other aspects of their lives, such as family, school, peers, significant others and their perceptions of the broader sociopolitical background (EURYKA 2019).

Aiming to identify variation between young individuals who are engaged in different types of activism, our sample includes three subsamples of equal size: one

to represent partisan activism as defined by membership of mainstream political parties, one for SM-related activism as defined by membership of an organization devoted to the advocacy of issues that pertain to SMs, and one to represent grassroots activism as defined by membership of a group or organization that is basically characterized by bottom-up mobilization. In each country, each subsample includes two organizations that vary along issue areas: a right/centre-right and a left/centre-left political party for the first subsample, an environmentalist and a feminist and/or LGTBQ organization for the second one, and a left libertarian group and an informal citizen solidarity initiative for the third subsample. Four members were interviewed per organization (i.e. eight interviews in each country for each subsample),[3] having been identified through snowballing. In order to guarantee variation in our sample we targeted diversity in terms of the sociographic background of those who were selected for the interviews (EURYKA 2019).

Data analysis was based on a systematic coding of the transcribed interviews. Our coding scheme emerged out of a multistage process. The first stage of the analysis was deductive with the codes corresponding to the codebook categories. This stage involved the assignment of big textual segments to the following codes: life before participation, political socialization, political background of the family and primary socialization, public transformative events and the broader context, inequality, private transformative events and mobilization (referring to the first instance of joining a political group or organization). The distribution of our interview textual material in these broad categories helped to reduce the complexity of the data and to compare responses within each section.

The second stage of coding aimed to further refine our analytical categories based on their thematic content. These subcodes, which emerged out of an inductive process, were less abstract than the initial codes and more discrete as to their thematic content, aiming to improve the mutual exclusiveness of our coding scheme. In this second-level coding, excerpts of the text were assigned to these subcodes. Examples of subcodes are values and beliefs, family life, school life, economy and social policies, each of them involving a subset of related issues. These were grouped based on the micro, meso and macro distinctions (Table 1).

Noticeably, the subcodes were interconnected across the three levels, as can be exemplified by the linkage between one's values, family and social background or the connection between economic policies, family income and the career prospects of youth. The distinction between the micro, the meso and the macro levels advanced the coding process by shedding light on the most influential source, as identified by activists themselves. This helped to identify, for example, whether participation in a school protest was motivated primarily by an educational reform or by school life (or by both), as reflected in participants' own memories and justifications.

The aim of the analysis was, first, to unveil the influences that prompted early mobilization with a group and, second, to compare them across our studied types of activism. To achieve the first aim, two indicators were adopted: (1) the visibility of the subcodes and (2) their connections with the coded part of the 'mobilization' code through axial coding. These two indicators highlighted which features were prominent in the political socialization of our sample and brought to the surface the linkages between an initial phase of distant observation or occasional participation in collective action and the decision to engage in

Table 1. The Subcodes of the Micro-, Meso- and Macro Levels

Micro-level influences	Meso-level influences	Macro-level influences
• Personal belief system (political, philosophical, spiritual and worldviews) • Political efficacy (related to perceived agency, understanding of politics and the conviction that one's political action can change things) • Personal interests (as usually related to leisure activities, hobbies and career orientation) • Experiencing inequality, stereotyping and discrimination (as victim or observer) • Self-realization (incl. life decisions and emotions related to turning points, transitions and significant events)	• Family life (parents' ideological orientation, family values and upbringing, family rituals, roles and decision-making practices) • Friends/interpersonal relationships (incl. significant others, peers and other influential individuals) • School/university life (curriculum, student committees, readings, in-class discussions, campus life, student community) • Community (neighbourhood, collectives and virtual communities)	• Economy (economic and fiscal policies, market operation) • Social policies (education, work, social security and health) • Governance (authorities and the political system) • Sociopolitical events (elections, protest events etc.) • Culture and the media

more stable forms of political participation by joining a political group. To profile our sample based on their motivations for political participation, this process has been applied for each participant to define individual pathways of political socialization.

For the second aim, to compare the pathways between types of activism, the sample was divided into three subsamples based on the type of activism in a search of the commonalities and the most typical features shared by the members of each group. The analysis was based on pyramidal visualizations, in which the higher the position of a code, the stronger its influence on political participation.

Findings

General overview of the sample

This study is based on 48 qualitative interviews with young adults aged between 18 and 35, a period in life that marks the transition into adulthood and independence. These transitions include going through education, gaining financial and housing independence, entering formal partnerships and starting a family (Furlong 2017; Honwana 2019). As a result of social and economic changes, young people nowadays tend to stay longer in education and delay their entry into the workforce. Likewise, young people leave the family home and get married later than previous generations, and also experience 'setbacks' in their transition towards independence

(Furlong 2017: 4). These reasons justify our decision to use a long age-span in our sample selection.

Table 2 summarizes participants' main sociodemographic information, showing that the sample met the goals of age dispersion and gender balance. Regarding the family socioeconomic status and activists' educational qualifications, the sample is characterized by the strong presence of highly educated people who come from middle- or upper-class families. While the inclusion of few activists from working-class families in the sample satisfied our goal to differentiate our interviewees in respect of their socioeconomic status, a balance in the representation of the different classes has not been achieved. This under-representation of lower socioeconomic classes and levels in educational attainment, however, reflects the dominance of middle-class, university-educated people in the population of young activists in Europe, as noticed by previous studies (Dalton 2017; Pickard 2019). Moreover, the fact that the majority of participants either held a university degree or were university students highlights the significant role played by universities as incubators of youth activism. As for their occupational status, the sample overall exhibits heterogeneity with less than half of them working full-time, as a reflection of their transitory phase.

Partisan youth activism and the influence of meso-level factors

Based on our findings, the consistency of the profile of those who are members of a youth branch of a political party stands out. What is most typical for them is the prevalence of meso-level motivations, in particular the political background of the family and of the opportunities to participate in collective processes at school

Table 2. Sociodemographic Sample

Age range	Gender	Socioeconomic status[a]	Educational qualification	Current occupation
18–20: 6 21–25: 15 26–30: 19 31–35: 8	Female: 24 Male: 22 Other:2	Working class (e.g. manufacturing, agriculture, construction, sales): 7 Middle class (semi-professionals and professionals, teachers, social workers, nurses, middle- and lower-level administrators, small business owners): 23 Upper middle/ managerial class (highly educated business and professionals such as academics, lawyers, chartered engineers, politicians and doctors): 18	Vocational school/middle secondary school or lower: 5 High school/ grammar school graduate: 13 First degree/ diploma/ Bachelor: 18 Postgraduate (MSc equivalent and PhD): 12	School pupil: 1 University student: 4 Working student: 15 Unemployed: 7 In part-time or flexible work: 5 In full time work: 16

Note: [a]The highest status achieved by either of the two parents is coded.

level. Meso-level influences intertwine with each other to shape a coherent and consistent profile, with partisan activism following a linear pathway, with gradual involvement and incremental engagement in political activities.

With family life playing a significant role in the political socialization of all sampled activists, those who mobilized in a political party were most influenced by their families. In this group the ideological leaning of young activists was almost always congruent with that of their parents, whereas in the other groups parental influence came indirectly through family discussions and daily routines. In addition, all partisan activists reported that at least one parent or other family member was very interested in politics and supported the same ideology or political party as his/her children. Overall, the value system of the family was very visible in the biographical accounts of the young partisan activists we studied:

> My mom used to be in the party and she still has a lot of friends. My father was not in the party but he votes for the [centre-right political party in Germany] and he shares these ideas. So this was always very present … also in my town. Most people are conservative … but everyone is very tolerant. It is just that the tradition was important, self-responsibility and the role of the church. (DE31)[4]

The other prominent characteristic of those who mobilized in the youth branch of a political party is their participation in institutionalized forms of political participation at the school level, such as on student committees. This trend was much more visible in this type of youth activism compared to the others, where the influence of the school was either marginal or occasional, such as the experience from political discussions in class. Additionally, partisan activists referred most frequently to their membership of other types of in-school communities, such as theatre groups, choirs, environment- or sports-related groups. This type of participation was usually chosen because of a perceived obligation or civic duty that was also related to the values and the tradition of the family:

> My time growing up … well I was part of a football association … I was also a member of a carnival association, if that is relevant … My father is very interested in politics and society so this was also a topic at home, we had a lot of political discussions. Also I think it didn't hurt that I had a very engaged and very good politics teacher, I think he was politically active too … I was also a class speaker and later on a school speaker for a couple of years … Then when I turned 16 I joined the [centre-left party in Germany]. (DE18)

> My grandfather had given me a small book entitled *Statute of School Councils*, which I memorized and I thought why should I wait for another year to participate in the student council? Let's do it in the primary school. … Thus I convinced them to organize elections and I became the president. … Thereafter I was always elected to school councils until my graduation. (GR27)

Beyond family values and school, interpersonal relationships were also very influential in the group of young partisan activists. Meso-level factors usually interact with each other, as shown in the previous example, in which an influential family member inspires political participation at school. The influence of important others is very visible in all types of activism, with charismatic teachers, relatives, friends and peers part of the memories of early political socialization as comrades or the instigators of action during first mobilization. With youth partisan activism being guided by a sound ideological orientation that is tied to family values, the safety net of friends, peers and the community plays an additional supportive role. This explains why having an internal contact at the time of joining a group appears quite often in this type of activism:

> I joined the party because I have the same ideology and I didn't like to see the university in chaos and to see how it is destroyed. I can't see drug dealers in the university or anarchists with helmets and bars to attack the police [… it was] the same time when I joined [the Greek centre-right party] in my neighbourhood, because a very good friend of mine was already a member and she recruited me. (GR26)

> Well, because of my parents it was clear that this was so to speak the first place to go [centre-left political party in Germany] that was clear. I don't always agree with everything the [party] do – that was also clear from the start, which is why I did look at other organizations but at the time of my enrolment I already knew a couple of people in the [party] and this made it easier … and I had a classmate who invited me to the first meeting and then it fitted … and then after I had been there three times I never had a reason to seriously start looking at other groups. (DE16)

To sum up, partisan activists follow a political socialization path that favours networking and connectivity through established channels, institutionalized instances and well-structured spaces of civic exchange. These findings are in line with works that demonstrated the significance of parental role models for young partisan activists (Sloam and Henn 2019) and the role of educational institutions in nurturing democratic engagement with traditional political institutions (Sloam et al. 2021). Drawing on activists' own reflections and comparing across different types of youth activists, we demonstrated that young people who mobilize in youth branches of political parties are most likely to be prepared by their family, school and peer environments.

SM-related youth activism and the influence of micro-level factors

With the influence of meso-level factors being most prominent in partisan youth activism, micro-level influences are most visible in the biographies of young activists who are mobilized in SM-related organizations. Our analysis suggests that this type of activism is most likely to be motivated by individual-level factors, such as personal interests, beliefs and experiences, which lead to the prioritization of a particular agenda, such as environmentalism or gender issues.

Based on our in-depth interviews, firm beliefs are usually associated with certain memories that marked milestones in activists' personal trajectories and boosted their self-realization. While micro-, meso- and macro-level influences intertwine, our qualitative data allowed us to discern when the former were the most decisive forces of mobilization. This was found predominantly in the narratives of SM-related activists, in which individual beliefs, convictions, selective memory or subjective interpretations of certain events were prevalent during their first mobilization:

> It was when I finished my undergraduate studies in psychology … I was looking for a place to do my internship … I remember myself watching on TV this advertisement from the Network of European Women who did work in support of abused women … It was this occasion that unlocked something inside me and reminded me of the incident of the abuse of my friend a long time ago as well as the oppression of my mother as a housewife at home … (GR11)

> I always cared about the environment … and politics. I grew up with this … [and] my mother was politically active in political circles and feminism, so I spent time at meetings … I guess when my father died I really felt the need to become environmentally active … as a way of carrying on his memory. (DE2)

Experiencing inequality and discrimination was particularly relevant in motivating engagement in feminist and LGTBQ groups. In such cases political mobilization was a means to defend personal choices or to renegotiate identity issues:

> … there were no lesbians in our circle; because of this I came out very late, because I simply didn't consciously see this as a possibility for me. It also leads to a strong outcry from my parents, and it's like at this point I find my identity … and this was only four years ago when I also took this step and decided I will do this openly. (DE10)

Private transformative events usually occur outside of everyday life and the ordinary; they emanate, for instance, from travel or unexpected health problems. Perceptions associated with personal experiences that emerged as strong motivators of mobilization were reportedly activated when the right opportunities arose. This explains why engagement with a group through this path was more often later compared to the other types of youth activism. Moreover, multiple participation or group-switching appeared most frequently in this type of activism and was justified in terms of self-development and a need for experimentation:

> I had some friends who were anarchists, so I went to their squats and to their parties, but not to their general assemblies. … Since I came back from Senegal, many years ago, I developed this interest in foreign cultures and this actually motivated me to enrol in the immigrants' hangout. (GR13)

> When I came back from South America I really started wondering: How did we get to this point? How did we get to this division between rich and poor? …

> Why are some countries treated so differently … I always thought well I can get outraged over certain situations, but then I can at least try to be coherent with this personally or be able to say that I do it better. So I started eating less meat, being a more conscious consumer and then getting better informed. I had planned to go to [environmental organization] for a long time, or at least take a look at it, until I said, okay, you go there and try to get involved and try to be active for the things that you consider right. (DE3)

> I started to look for different things. I tried to get in touch [with] SYRIZA youth in 2008 but they never called me back … In the meantime, I contacted [environmental organization]. I found an eco profile that I liked. Initially through their website I applied for volunteering but then I realized this application was for a salaried position so they hired me … I chose them because I liked their actions, the articles they posted on their website and their approach overall. (GR18)

The impact of the social environment and cultural norms appeared marginal or less powerful in this group of activists, who were mainly influenced by their personal belief systems and interests. At other times, meso-level influences such as those that emanate from family or school had reportedly operated in opposite directions or were negotiated through tensions:

> There were many things that I thought about growing up … like my parents telling me don't do this, don't sit like this … girls don't do this … so I thought a lot about the way young women are socialized. (DE7)

> I had heard about the operation of political parties in the university but I didn't expect that mess. It was ridiculous, it was too ugly! I felt a strong hatred for the student unions because of their adopted means to approach and lure in students, for example by distributing the topics of the forthcoming exams, helping students to pass the classes or by sending the answers of exam questions through text messages! That's why I always tried to avoid them. (GR14)

> In school I was confused, and I had the impression that some of the teachers did something wrong, and this happened because they were right wing while my family [were] left wing. (GR18)

To conclude, individual drivers emerged as being most powerful in motivating youth mobilization with an SM-related organization. This finding is in line with previous works that suggest that mobilization is prompted by the experience of inequality and the need to change things in a direction that is coherent with one's own values (Klandermans 2004). The contribution of this study is that it identifies these kinds of influences as being particularly relevant in this type of youth activism.

Youth engagement in grassroots activism and the influence of macro-level factors

Macro-level influences were most visible in the political socialization path of those who initially mobilized with a grassroots group. These types of influences involve the sociopolitical and economic context and public transformative events. Our interviewed grassroots activists criticized public governance and questioned authorities. Their responsiveness to macro influences was reflected in their lower levels of loyalty to a single group or organization and their involvement in numerous political ad hoc ventures:

> My first political memory is the Rostock fire in 1992. This really shocked me. … Just thinking that someone could set a building on fire … where other people are living … I found it unbearable. So I became interested in this particular topic: racism. (DE5)

Meso- and micro-level influences, although evident in the activists' narratives, remained largely unrelated to their decision to become involved in a political organization or were obscured by the impact of macro-level factors and significant moments in public life, such as the outcome of a referendum, which triggered both mobilization and disengagement from a group:

> The outbreak of the crisis consolidated our disagreement since we both changed: my father … made a shift towards conservatism due to social-class and economic criteria while I followed [in] the opposite direction. (GR2)

Issues of unfairness in the distribution of public goods and the use of urban space were very visible in the interviews with grassroots activists. The realization of the inequalities produced by poor policymaking and planning emerged as an opportunity to engage with the commons, to take to the streets and to participate in collective action. In some contexts grassroots activists adopt the 'right to the city' argument that emphasizes various aspects, such as the unmet need for affordable housing or the privatization of public space, and is often portrayed as the leitmotif in the political socialization of this group of activists:

> A week ago I actually sent a complaint to the district authorities and for me this was a sign of entering society and really getting old … And anyway, it was precisely about the cars and the distribution of space in the street where I live. This street is a one-way street and you can park left or right on the sidewalks so there are 90 parking spaces for cars and zero parking spaces for bikes, which is why all the bikes also fill the sidewalks, so if cars are parked on the sidewalk and bikes are also parked on the sidewalk then you can't really walk through very easily. (DE29)

Similarly, the imposition of austerity policies and laws that restricted youth rights made the daily lives of young people difficult and hindered their transition to independence were mentioned more frequently as mobilizing factors by grassroots activists compared to the other types of activists. Rather than focusing on a

particular agenda, this group appeared to be most mindful of several societal problems, such as racism, war, inequality, immigration and their interconnectedness with institutions and social policies in education, the healthcare system, social security, policing and judicature. High-impact public events, and particularly demonstrations and other influential protest events that increased awareness of such issues, had acted as catalysts in the early mobilization of this group:

> The protest made in the memory of Gregoropoulos was the time that I decided to play an active role in politics and not sit down and watch things happening. … Not only was it police repression, but a generalized disappointment in the system that made me realize for the first time my need to react to the establishment and the indifference of the masses. (GR6)

> I remember for example this one time, we went to this demonstration at the parliament and then we were surrounding it … a lot of teenagers and young people … and then I heard they'd sent the army… and then I realized okay I think it's time to go back home … but at the same time I thought okay it is important to do something. To go out to the street. It was a shocking experience but it was also a very nice sense of shared consciousness … (DE20)

In the case of grassroots activists, thus, it was prominent that their early political activity was fuelled by a sense of urgency, an emphasis on the 'here and now' and an interest in what is going on in society more generally. Acknowledging that the sociopolitical context and historic events define how certain ideas are contested in the public sphere (Grasso et al. 2018) – and thus that they are significant in the political socialization of young people (Wray-Lake 2019) – this study points out that the influence of the macro context on youth political participation is stronger in grassroots activism than in other types of activism.

Discussion and conclusion

With this study we advanced our knowledge of the interplay of influences at different levels in motivating political participation (Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014; Chryssochoou and Barrett 2017) by connecting them with different types of activism. A comparison between types of activism was expected to contribute to a better understanding of youth participation, given different types of activism can reveal different understandings of the political and of the very sense of activism (Manning 2010; Pickard 2019). The inclusion of samples from different national contexts allowed the identification of the influences which remain stable across different contexts. The connection of types of activism with types of agencies or collective organizations was based on the assumption that distinctive types of agencies are related to certain combinations of repertoires and forms of action, thus prescribing distinctive paths of youth activism (Norris 2002).

The analysis presented above suggests that the distinction between micro-, meso- and macro-level influences helps us to understand differences in the political socialization pathways of young people. Micro-level influences, such as personal values,

private significant events and identity, were most visible in the narratives of those who are engaged in SM-related activism. Meso-level influences – that is, influences that come from one's familiar environments such as home, school or relationships with peers and significant others – were found to be prevalent for partisan activists. Macro-level influences, which relate to the broader sociopolitical background and are memorable as significant public events, appeared to be the most decisive forces in the engagement with grassroots activism. The revealed linkage between influences at different levels and different types of youth activism refines our knowledge of the different experiences of membership across different types of organizations (Bosi et al. 2022; Ekström and Sveningsson 2019; Quintelier 2008) as well as the triggers of youth political participation across different kinds of activism (Rainsford 2017).

Notwithstanding that our analysis was based on a comparison across different types of organizations, we acknowledge that the patterns of youth participation also vary across countries due to differences in socioeconomic circumstances (Sloam 2016), civic-political cultures (Almond and Verba 1963) and regimes of youth participation (Walther et al. 2021). The particularities of the selected national and local contexts helped us understand the nuances in the identified pathways of political socialization. Macro-level influences were overall more visible for our Greek respondents, who most frequently referred to certain public transformative events, such as the assassination of Gregoropoulos or the occupation of Syntagma Square, as the trigger for their mobilization. Meso-level influences appeared stronger in the German context, where the tradition of civic society is stronger, something that is reflected in the narrated routinization of environmental attitudes in family life, among other things.

The comprehension of the recent history of Greece and its social turbulence and of the significant role played by the youth in anti-austerity mobilizations all over southern Europe (Zamponi and González 2017) may explain why contentiousness was pervasive in the political socialization of its youngest generation, as reflected in the high rates of participation in school sit-ins and mass protests among our sampled youth. While the opportunities for protest participation together with other unconventional forms of political action were reported most frequently by our Greek respondents, the German youth reported having found the opportunities for their early political participation through institutionalized channels most of the time, something that is related to the strength of associational membership in Germany (Busse et al. 2015; Sloam 2014).

Added to the political radicalization of the youth due to the generalized economic distress (Hooghe 2012: 35), the impact of the economic crisis on middle-class families in Greece hampered youth transition to adulthood (Sakellariou and Koronaiou 2018). The rise of youth unemployment and precarity prolonged the dependency of young people on their parents, with the lack of autonomy usually being portrayed as a generalized problem for young Greeks. Interestingly, while the inability of young people to gain economic independence was reported as a trigger for mobilization by many Greek interviewees, moving away from the family home, thus gaining independence, was reported as a trigger for mobilization in the case of German youth. The latter were found to be more focused, based

on their chosen field of activism and combined materialistic and post-materialistic concerns, following the trend of 'the new cosmopolitans' (Sloam and Henn 2019).

While we noticed these country-specific trends, we did not ascertain differences in the triggers of mobilization based on the gender or age of activists. Overall, women appeared to refer more frequently to micro-level influences, something that may be due to the over-representation of women in the sample of SM-related activism, whereas this difference disappears when looked at from an intra-group perspective. Likewise, with respect to age differences, any observed differences were cancelled out when looking within groups. People who had mobilized at a younger age seemed to be predominantly influenced by meso- or macro-level factors, while those who had mobilized relatively later reported micro-influences most of the time. These differences, however, faded away when controlling for the type of activism or country.

A limitation of our study is posed by the demographic profile of our sample, which mainly represents the middle classes and highly educated cohorts, who were found to be more likely to engage in activism in previous research (Dalton 2017; Pickard 2019). While this limits our ability to generalize the findings, it leaves room for future research to explore how the micro-, meso- and macro-level influences operate for people with significantly different socioeconomic or educational backgrounds.

In regard to the influence of the micro, meso and macro levels, it is important to acknowledge that these are not independent factors. In many cases they interact with one another. The interpretation of and reaction to macro events can be influenced by the filter of the activists' personal identities but also by their interaction with peers and families. Conversely, personal experiences and identities, as well as interactions with peers and families, can also be reinterpreted in the light of important events at the macro level. Our interpretation of the findings took into account the interplay between the different levels but remained focused on what the interviewees recognized as their most significant motivation, something that sheds light on how activists see their own political involvement.

Finally, our identified connection between the type of influence and the type of youth activism contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which activists think about and experience their own activism. Considering that political socialization is an ongoing process and that activists are constantly learning and expanding their understanding, further studies could explore how the relationship with each level of influence changes over time: whether or not they continue to attach a greater relevance to specific levels, or whether the meso level (in particular the organization and peers) ends up as the dominant influence in ongoing socialization. Furthermore, the perceived significance of influences at different levels on activists' trajectories could also be explored. The understanding of the linkages between different types of influences and different types of political behaviour would benefit if other forms and modes of political participation beyond associational membership, such as online political participation, were explored. In addition, the study of youth political socialization would benefit from an understanding of the nuances in the motivational patterns of young people in the intersection of gender, age and social class.

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Notes

1 The study is based on the findings of an empirical investigation that was conducted in the context of the HORIZON 2020 EURYKA project 'Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities' (coordinated by Marco Giugni), WP6 (under the leadership of Lorenzo Bosi).
2 The label NSM to describe feminist, LGTBQ, environmental and pacifist movements has been highly contested by scholars (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008), hence we have opted for the broader label 'SM'. In this sample it includes environmental, feminist and LGTBQ movements. Furthermore, in spite of the association of these movements with 'post-materialistic concerns', scholars have also stressed how identity and material concerns are usually present in all movements (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008).
3 The exception to this was the German sample of SM, which is composed of interviewees from three organisations: four interviewees from an environmental organisation, two from a feminist and two from an LGTBQ organisation. The reason behind this selection was the dynamic of the groups themselves. These had been previously highly unstructured groups that were informally unified in the defence of gender equality (including feminism, LGTBQ rights and a broad idea of gender- and sexual identities) but that at the time of the interviews were becoming more formalized and focused either on feminism or LGTBQ issues.
4 The letters are the country code and the number is the respondent ID.

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