Personal Drive to Collective Action: The Role of Emotions in Social Protests Among Adolescents

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Abstract

Our emotions play an undeniably crucial role in determining social movements, influencing both individual participation and collective mobilization. This research will examine and explore how sentiments catalyze public activism among adolescents in a local student-led protest at a school. Through qualitative and contemporary case studies, this study examines the psychological and sociological mechanisms by which sentiments transformed thoughts into organized actions during protests on the school site. The study also addresses how emotions are strategically harnessed by personal drive and a collective approach to mobilize support. By gaining a deeper understanding of the interplay between emotions and activism, this research contributes to a more nuanced analysis of how social movements emerge, evolve, and achieve impact within a younger generation.

Introduction

In April 2025, Istanbul Social Sciences High School became the site of a student-led protest in response to the dissatisfying administrative decisions on teacher appointments and growing concerns about the learning environment. The protest took place during the academic schedule, and despite being informed that participation would result in being marked absent, the majority of students, particularly those in the preparatory year, chose to attend. Their collective decision to take a stand, despite knowing the consequences, revealed the existence of strong emotions, values, and motivations driving their actions, as well as social undercurrents that demanded closer attention.

Youth participation in protests is often framed as impulsive or purely emotional, yet emerging scholars are beginning to challenge this view. Studies show that teenagers are not only emotionally reactive; they're also capable of deep, thoughtful moral reasoning, especially

when it comes to situations with impact they regularly encounter at school. As Flanagan and Syvertsen (2006) clarify, adolescents “possess a keen sense of justice and fairness and demonstrate quite sophisticated moral reasoning when interpreting or evaluating events in their schools and communities” (p. 261). Jasper (2011) argues that rather than being merely irrational with impulses fueling protest, emotions are "part of the cultural and strategic toolkit that individuals and groups use to make sense of their situations." Playing a key role in inspiring group action, he underlines that emotions are meaningful, socially constructed reactions to perceived injustices. Gordon (1981) also notes that when individuals express their emotions in public, whether it be anger at a protest or tears at a speech, it is not only personal. Often reflecting people's societal roles, these emotional expressions follow deeper cultural norms. In her words, "emotional expressions are guided by cultural scripts that are tied to social identities and positions" (p. 13). Attending protests at school isn’t only about expressing their complaints; it is also a way of exploring their identities and values. During the protests, students, especially teenagers in the identity formation stage of their lives, discover the values they stand for and who they are. Archer (2008) highlights this by saying that “young people’s participation in protest can be a key moment in the development of their identities, shaped through emotional and political engagement” (p. 41).

Recent research shows that when young people resist or speak out, their emotions aren’t just personal reactions; the people around them shape them. Emotions like frustration, hope, and solidarity move through peer groups, creating a collective purpose that powers collective action. As Kuntsman (2012) so eloquently states, “emotions are produced, circulated and negotiated collectively,” they become “central in the making of political subjectivities” (p. 5). In educational contexts, these feelings are typically triggered by institutional actions that are perceived as unjust or disempowering. According to Tüfekçi

(2017), youth-led protests may appear spontaneous from the outside, but they typically emerge from emotionally charged conversations and a sense of shared values among individuals who feel connected. She says that "movements do not spring out of nowhere; they grow out of conversations, relationships, and emotional engagement rooted in communities" (p. 33).

This study examines the motivations, emotional experiences, and reflections of 13 preparatory students who participated in the protest within this framework and aims to understand the emotional dynamics, expressions, and narratives that emerge within this protest environment, contributing to the broader sociology of emotions literature. The focus of this work is to understand student activism directly from the viewpoint of the students themselves.

Literature Review

Youth protests have either been misunderstood or downplayed as merely an expression of impulsiveness; however, existing scholars across youth studies and the sociology of emotion present more sophisticated explanations. Researchers contend that the political behavior exhibited by young people, particularly within schools, is characterized by complex dynamics among identity, emotion, authority, and social networks. This research sits at the center of scholars on emotion and protest by exploring how student activism is inherently imbued with emotional experiences and collective meaning.

Adolescents today are not only passive learners, but more and more, they are being viewed as reflective, ethical beings who can identify injustice and feel obligated to act. Their protests are not merely responses; they're strong statements of what they're concerned about and what they believe is right. Flanagan and Syvertsen (2006) highlight that youth civic engagement is not only possible but essential for democratic growth. The writers assert that

adolescents, particularly within schools, use moral reasoning when they perceive the authority figures as rigid or unjust. The assumption negates the caricatured notion that students are passive recipients of institutional norms. Conversely, it acknowledges them as active agents, and their affective responses, such as frustration, solidarity, and hope, play an essential part in propelling social movements. Jasper (2011) also mentions that emotions are not just accompanying elements in protests but are typically the motivators. In his opinion, "emotions are key potential building blocks for moving from the micro to the macro level," indicating the significance of emotions in collective action. For instance, shared anger can emerge as a result of a feeling of shared injustice, and shared hope can unite people who share a common vision of change. These sentiments are not independent, isolated, or individual experiences; instead, they are shaped by the context, environment, and discourses. This is an important point for emphasizing the multidimensional relationship between individually experienced emotions and collective movement actions. Gordon (1981) emphasized the social construction of emotions, asserting that: “Most of the experiences that we usually attribute to human emotional nature are socially constructed.” Educational settings, particularly secondary schools, are important spaces where young people negotiate authority and identity. Archer (2008) notes that students from marginalized backgrounds often use resistance, both overt and subtle, as a way to assert control and agency within rigid school hierarchies.

Student contradiction sometimes mirrors more general issues of justice, respect, and involvement, even when protests are not officially coordinated. In these environments, young people may use protest as a purposeful tool to find their position inside systems of institutional power. When viewed together, these concepts provide a prism through which student protest might be seen as an emotionally and morally charged reaction to institutional circumstances rather than as chaotic or illogical. This study expands on these ideas by

examining how students in a high school environment perceive and express their involvement in protests. It looks at how emotional expression, peer influence, and a feeling of agency interact to form acts of resistance among young people.

Methodology

High school students' personal experiences of participating in a protest will be investigated in this study using a qualitative research design. In-depth information about students' emotional expressions and the social dynamics that influenced their involvement will be gathered through semi-structured interviews. While still offering structure to guide the discussion toward important themes, this approach will enable participants to openly express their experiences. The interview data will also be subjected to thematic analysis in order to find trends in social meaning-making and emotional expression. In the context of student-led protest, a qualitative approach will be particularly well-suited to revealing the complex ways in which emotions, resistance, and collective identity meet.

Sampling Method

The participants will be sampled through purposive sampling with a specific interest in recruiting students who will be actively involved in the protest and will belong to a group not generally anticipated to be involved in activism: preparatory students. All 13 participants will be preparatory students at the Istanbul High School of Social Sciences. As a group, they will constitute the largest portion of the protesters, despite their relatively recent and less established status in the school society. Their active and surprising involvement will render them a key focal point of this research. Furthermore, being a researcher, I will also be a preparatory student in the same high school, introducing an element of self-reflexivity into the research process due to my closeness to the social environment being researched.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, designed to allow for free responses while covering key topics, such as emotions, agency, and involvement in protest actions. Five of the interviews will be demo interviews, which will make a significant contribution to the generation and completion of the final list of interview questions. Formal interviews will last approximately 4 minutes each and will be recorded with the participants' informed consent.

Figure 1

The Questions Asked During the Interviews

1. What factors influenced your decision to join the protest? Why do you think you chose to participate?
2. What did you feel during the protest?
3. Have you ever felt like you were there because of some external factor?
4. Would you have regretted it if you hadn’t joined?
5. What did participating in the protest give you or cost you?
6. How did your school or family respond to your participation in the protest?
7. Did you feel supported, or did you feel pressured during the protest?
8. Has this experience changed you?
9. Did any of the content you were exposed to on social media during the protest have an impact on you?

The interviews will be transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis will be employed to identify recurring patterns and themes in the participants' responses. Initial notions emerging from the research questions, such as “emotions in protest,” “student agency,” and

“institutional power,” will be identified and later connected to broader themes. The examination of student themes will be centered on the exploration of how students communicate a sense of agency, how emotions influence their engagement, and how they perceive power relations within the learning context. All participants will provide informed consent, with an assurance of maintaining their rights to confidentiality. The participants will also be made aware that they have the option to withdraw from the study at any point. All data will be anonymized, and details of identification will be kept confidential. To protect the anonymity of participants, each individual will be assigned a code (e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.), which will be used throughout the findings section when quoting their responses.

Findings

The interviews revealed continuing patterns in the students' referrals and experiences regarding their involvement in the protest. Several interconnected themes appeared that pointed to the significance of personal belief, group membership, affective atmosphere, and external influences in affecting their actions.

Individual Belief and Ethical Drive

All participants indicated that their motivation for joining the protest was based on their individual beliefs regarding the matter. Despite the awareness that they would be officially recorded as absent for half a day, they chose their moral stance over potential disciplinary action. A notable and consistent finding of the research was that all interviewees expressed a profound sense of regret if they had not participated, despite the adverse consequences of being marked absent while still physically present at school. To promote, P4 stated verbatim, “I would’ve absolutely regretted not joining,” with all participants noting similar responses. This intense intrinsic motivation testifies to the deeply personal nature of

the protest, rather than being simply an extrinsic influence.

Collective Mood and Emotional Solidarity

The students characterized the protest as friendly, welcoming, and almost peaceful, with individuals respecting each other's personal space. Even though it was hot under the blazing sun, students stood in solidarity with one another through gestures of goodwill, such as sharing materials and providing a feeling of unity. The formation of what the students called the "Sobil culture," a tradition of solidarity and loyalty built up over the history of the school, played a major role in sustaining the protest atmosphere, fitting the definition of "collective identity" as used by researchers in the study of social movements (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). The effect of the perceived culture can be supported by P7's statement, " I was meant to be there, with them." Although the participants were solely students, they nonetheless shared a robust sense of belonging and allegiance to their learning community, thus establishing a significant collective identity.

Persistence, Respect, and Order

The protest lasted for approximately two hours, fueled mainly by the protesters' emotional investment and solidarity. The students manifested a strong degree of endurance while still being respectful of their surroundings and fellow protesters. Above all, the protest was concluded peacefully and respectfully, which is indicative of the restraint, respect, and earnestness of the students regarding their cause. This peaceful conclusion was interpreted by the protesters as an indication of the success of the protest and the maturity of the protesters in conducting collective action.

Influence of Family Concerns and Media Exposure

Although students acknowledged feeling minor nervousness about how their close

families might react to their participation, they remained steadfast in their decision to join the protest. Family expectations were a background concern but did not override their personal sense of justice. P12 stated, “ I could not have let my parents know at first, thinking it would be perceived as unacceptable behavior, although they stood supportive when I expressed the action.” Regarding the influence of media, participants generally stated that while content on social media served as a provocation, it was not a major factor in their decision to protest. Their primary drive remained their convictions and the collective emotional environment created within the school community.

Limitations

One significant limitation of the current inquiry is the relatively small sample size of 13 individuals. While qualitative research often involves fewer participants, this limited number could impact the generalizability of the findings to a larger student body in different schools or geographical locations. Also, the research was carried out in one individual high school, which implies that the experiences of students in this particular school may not represent the general experiences of students in other schools with varied administration structures, student cultures, or histories of protest. Although these results provide valuable information on emotional and social engagement related to student protests within this particular academic setting, they cannot possibly reflect the vast range of student experiences that occur in a wide range of educational settings.

Additionally, whereas the present study is specific to one protest, future research can expand its scope by employing a greater sample size, potentially encompassing various schools or districts. This would allow for a more thorough comparative examination of protest experience and perceptions across varying school contexts. Future studies may examine how variables such as socioeconomic status, geographical location, or institutional policy impact

the choice to protest. However, this research presents a strong basis for grasping the multifaceted interrelationships involved in youth activism and emotional commitment to protest action in schools, yielding findings that are both sophisticated and detailed in their specificity.

Discussion

The study's conclusions support the notion that youth protest is a complicated, emotionally charged act of agency and identity construction rather than necessarily being spontaneous. More than outside influences, participants were driven to participate in the protest by deeply held moral commitments. This is consistent with Flanagan and Syvertsen's (2006) argument that adolescents are capable moral and political actors who take action on perceived injustices in institutional settings. The intense collective identity that developed during the protest mirrors trends cited by Polletta and Jasper (2001), who argue that a collective group identity plays a significant role in the existence of social movements. Even though participants were preparatory students, typically the youngest and newest students of the school, they expressed a profound sense of loyalty and belonging to their school's evolving "Sobil culture." Experiencing this loyalty and shared emotional journey enabled them to maintain solidarity throughout the protest, despite physical discomfort and the risk of disciplinary consequences.

Emotions played an important role in the participants' experiences, not just as a setting for their actions but also as an energizing factor, as explicated by Jasper (2011). Hope, frustration, solidarity, and fear of how families would react were all interconnected emotions and helped create and maintain the general atmosphere of the protest. These findings reiterate

that emotional display in youth-led protests is characterized by organization, context-relatedness, and social meaning, rather than randomness or disorder.

Interestingly, while social media was known to be quite "provocative," it was not the primary driving force. This contrasts with several recent studies that emphasize the centrality of digital media in modern youth activism. For instance, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) and Tufekci (2017) argue that digital media are at the heart of organizing and mobilizing youth movements. However, in this study, face-to-face emotional interactions, peer influence, and shared moral beliefs were particularly stronger influences than online content.

This study makes a valuable contribution to the emerging scholarship that views youth protest as a form of understandable and emotionally engaged civic engagement. Moreover, it demonstrates that even during the early adolescent years, students exhibit higher-order moral thinking, collective action, and constructive dissent —qualities that are essential for the well-being of democratic societies.

Conclusion

The present research aimed to understand the emotional and collective processes of student activism, particularly during a protest event held within a high school. The results indicate that the students' participation was driven by conviction, a strong sense of commitment to their school, and the establishment of a collective identity that reinforced their determination throughout the protest. Despite pressures from the external world, such as the risk of missing school, respondents were firm in their beliefs and found solidarity in shared affective experiences. The observations validate the argument that young people's protests are not a response but a thoughtful and significant response to perceived injustice and a way of negotiating their position within broader institutional structures.

While this study provides valuable insights into the motives and experiences involved

in youth protest in a particular educational setting, it is important to be aware of the limitations. The small sample size and the single institutional setting reduce the generalizability of the findings to other situations. Future studies could aim to examine youth protests in a wider variety of educational institutions, using a broader sample, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences involved. Future studies could also examine the impact of digital media on the development of student activists even more closely, particularly within the context of its increasing prominence in modern protest movements.

Briefly, the present research adds to an emerging corpus of academic work that acknowledges young individuals as active, ethical, and political actors. The study counters prevailing presuppositions about youths' disengagement from politics and emphasizes the centrality of affective solidarity, collective identity, and personal agency in student-organized protest behavior. The results call for a continued exploration of the social and emotional processes of young people's activism and how schools can help to shape this experience.

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