

“The right to have a say”: UK adolescent strikers and non-strikers’ perspectives on the youth climate strikes

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Abstract

The youth climate movement has gathered pace and notoriety since its inception at COP21. Here we show that although adolescents share the view that climate change is an injustice and that urgent action is required, they express varied views about strikes and strikers. These differences appear aligned with their own choices to participate, or not, in the strikes.

Main Text

Youth are more vulnerable to future climate impacts [1], yet their voices are largely marginalised in decision-making about issues such as climate change [2]. Recognising this, unprecedented numbers of youth have joined the youth climate movement, with important potential impacts on climate policy, as well as more broadly for democracy [3]. From its inception at COP21 in Paris, the movement has gained momentum, with protests in March 2019 attracting 1.6 million people globally [4], and an estimated 6 million in September 2019 [5]. Although the pandemic has impacted in-person striking, the movement has remained active through online protests and interest in youth activism – through proponents such as Greta Thunberg – has continued. The growth in climate activism is indicative of a recalibration in how to address climate change: away from dominant approaches seeking to change individual behaviours in the private sphere, and toward collective action in the public sphere speaking to wider political and economic change [6]. Additional impetus has been provided by the minimal impact of pandemic lockdowns on greenhouse gas emissions, which have underlined the inadequacy of a business-as-usual approach for climate mitigation focusing on the private sphere [7].

A small but valuable literature is emerging, providing insights into the youth protest movement. These include rhetorical analyses [e.g., 8], cross-European surveys [e.g., 4], interview studies [e.g., 9], to focus groups [e.g., 10]. The current study presents an inductive analysis of in-depth interviews with 22 British adolescents aged 11 to 17 about the climate strikes. The novelty of our study is twofold. First, we engage exclusively with adolescents across the age range; that is, the period between childhood and adulthood from 10 to 19 years [11]. Conducting research with minors presents researchers with the additional hurdle of obtaining parental consent for under 16s [3]), which may explain why in-person studies typically include only older adolescents and adults. Second, we use semi-structured in-depth interviews to elicit rich and deep data. This enables us to foreground participants' own voices and perspectives, allowing them to direct the discussion and focus on the aspects of interest to them, rather than those prescribed by the researcher. Our research question is: How do adolescents conceptualise the youth climate strikes?

Based on their explanations about their choices to strike or not and/or experiences on strike days, participants were categorised into three groups: strikers, would-be strikers, and non-strikers. The nine strikers' experiences resonated with those documented in the broader collective action literature [e.g., 12].

Strikers spoke enthusiastically about their experiences, variously calling the atmosphere '*electric*', '*euphoric*', '*really super friendly*', '*great vibes*', '*almost like a festival*'. They talked about the excitement of striking, which seemed to have been something of a revelation. They alluded to feelings of empowerment and connectedness with like-minded others. Six would-be strikers expressed an interest in striking but had been unable to, either because their parents had not given their permission, or because they were worried about a punitive school response. These participants were all aged 11 to 13, so it is perhaps unsurprising that they were more constrained than older participants. They expressed some disappointment – along with resigned understanding and acceptance – about not being able to strike. Finally, seven non-strikers prioritised being in school over striking. They acknowledged the importance of acting on climate change but were unhappy about striking during school.

The analysis revealed three areas of consensus and three of divergence. Participants were unanimous that climate change will have a disproportionate and unfair impact on their generation compared to previous generations, they held the government most responsible for resolving climate change and described their education as very important. Differences emerged when participants spoke about Greta Thunberg, the effectiveness of strikes, and the motivations of strikers. Here, strikers and would-be strikers were aligned, whereas non-strikers articulated more complex positions. A diagrammatic representation of the analysis is presented in figure 1.

The narrative of intergenerational injustice was universally articulated. It was presented as an incontrovertible truth that the participants' generation would be more affected by climate change than older generations – who bore responsibility for causing climate change and yet were negating responsibility for addressing it. This injustice certainly gave these participants and their generation the right to speak and be heard; but beyond this, the right also to challenge the legitimacy of (adult-dominated) decision-making and efforts to silence youth voices.

Participants indicated that the principal aim of the strikes was to show the government how much young people care and to persuade them to act. Allusions to their own powerlessness to enact the changes needed, such as dismantling carbon-creating infrastructure and subsidising green initiatives, contrasted with the responsibility they placed with the government.

Whether or not they had gone or wanted to go to a strike, participants stressed the importance of their education. The nine non-strikers gave their education as the reason for not striking. For them it was not necessarily that protesting was wrong or unimportant, but that being in school was more so. Strikers and would-be strikers also highlighted the importance of education. Choosing to strike did not reflect lack of concern about education, but a pragmatic decision that striking could take the place of school for half a

day. However, the choice between education and striking was not static, strikers approaching educational milestones – such as major examinations – explained that these would present the need to re-evaluate.

Strikers and would-be strikers talked about Greta Thunberg as an inspiring role model. They referred to her without prompting, appropriated her language (*'what's the point of school if you don't have a future?'*), and said that she had inspired them to strike. In contrast, non-strikers did not mention Greta spontaneously and when they did, were less enthusiastic. Although they prefaced criticism with something approaching praise, their portrayal of Greta was, at best, ambiguous. They did not criticise her goals; rather, they criticised her personal attributes. She was *'over the top'*, fearmongering, volatile, not quite *'normal'* in the way she speaks.

Strikers and would-be strikers believed that the strikes would be effective. Effectiveness was understood to mean persuading the government to take action and convincing broader publics that climate change affects everyone, that it's not just an issue for *'crazy hippy vegans'*. Some claimed that the strikes had already been effective in that the government had already declared a climate emergency, others drew on the implementation of small, local changes that could develop into large-scale changes (*'a butterfly effect'*). Non-strikers were less convinced that the strikes would effect change. They observed that the strikes had achieved little thus far and – whilst they might play a part – would not be the catalyst for change. They took issue with striking being passive; congregating with signs was not *'action'*. Some suggested that individual actions, such as litter-picking or tree-planting might be more effective.

Strikers and would-be strikers explained the reasons that their peers were striking in simple terms; they care about their future and want to be heard. They acknowledged that some might be going to strikes to miss school and did not condone this. However, these were *'people'* rather than friends and were depicted as a minority. They generally took the view that even if their motivations were not admirable, those skipping school were still helping the cause by adding to the list of absences on strike days. Non-strikers praised some strikers for having principles but in general spoke about strikers more negatively. They made a distinction between those who were doing something noble (who should not be punished for striking) and those who were simply taking the opportunity to skip school (who should). There were some suggestions that some strikers had been subjected to peer pressure; one non-striker joked that the movement was a *'cult'*. More generally, non-strikers categorised strikers into two groups: the pro-environmental striker (sometimes simply noble but sometimes *too* environmental), and the more reprehensible *'skiver'*, who was simply skipping school. By situating these groups at the poles, non-strikers could position themselves as moderates between the extremes.

All participants viewed climate change as an injustice. Although non-strikers sometimes discussed the importance of individual actions when considering the utility of striking, they, along with strikers and would-be strikers, positioned wholesale structural change as the solution to climate change. Choosing not to strike may reflect a lack of support for that form of expression, but not a lack of support for justice, action, and change. The areas of divergence appeared reflective of different points of emphasis rather than fundamental disagreement. For example, all participants supported Greta's goals, but non-strikers were critical of her persona. All groups acknowledged the existence of two 'types' of striker, but whereas strikers and would-be strikers did not dwell on 'skivers', non-strikers made them a focus. We propose two non-exclusive explanations for this. First, non-strikers' positions may reflect their more jaundiced view of and faith in democracy [13] or their feelings of powerlessness or hopelessness in the face of climate change [14, 15]. Second, non-strikers may have deployed uncomplimentary narratives about the strikes and their proponents to justify their own decision not to strike; arguably a more morally difficult position to defend in the context of these interviews. Certainly, their explanations and justifications were more convoluted than strikers and would-be strikers, who tended to give straightforward justifications. Future research could examine both strikers and non-strikers' reasoning for their non/participation, and the implications of this for democracy.

Method

The study employed a qualitative cross-sectional interview design. Ethical approval was granted by University of Bath in July 2019.

The study was advertised through local online message boards. Parental consent was obtained for all participants under the age of 16 prior to their interview. Interviews were conducted at participants' homes or on university premises and lasted between 35 minutes and one hour. At the start of each interview, participants were given an information sheet and asked if they had any questions. Then they provided their consent (if over 16) or assent (if under 16). A semi-structured interview schedule was followed. This included questions about the nature and aims of the strikes, participants' own and others' decision-making about participating. They were also asked about the responses of their schools, parents and, for those who had attended a strike, what their experience had been like. Participants were also invited to make any other comments they wished. At the end of each interview, participants read a debriefing sheet and were asked if they had any questions. Finally, they were given a £10 voucher to thank them for taking part.

Twenty-two participants aged 11 to 17 were recruited. The interviews were conducted in October and November 2019. Nine participants had attended one or more strikes (strikers), 13 had not attended a strike. Of these 13, six participants had wanted to strike but were not able to (would-be strikers) and seven had not wanted to strike (non-strikers). The participants lived in several locations: a large city, a small city, two small towns, and a village in the southwest of England. One participant was home-schooled, 20 participants attended one of their local schools and one a further education college. All participants have been given pseudonyms. A summary of participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
 Summary of participants – Pseudonym, Sex, Age, Year group, Striker status (striker = S, would-be striker = WBS, non-striker = NS)

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Striker status
Neo	M	12	S
Esme	F	13	S
Yannick	M	12	S
Shura	F	17	S
Matt	M	13	S
Alex	M	13	S
Natalie	F	16	S
Eric	M	12	S
Olivia	F	15	S
Emily	F	11	WBS
Sophie	F	12	WBS
Ellie	F	13	WBS
Ryan	M	13	WBS
Finley	M	13	WBS
James	M	11	WBS
Amy	F	13	NS
George	M	17	NS
Ed	M	15	NS
Tina	F	17	NS
Nicky	F	14	NS
Rachel	F	16	NS
Rob	M	13	NS

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A total of 216 pages of interview data were analysed using thematic analysis [16, 17], to identify patterns of meanings and similarities and differences across the dataset. An inductive thematic analysis approach was taken [18]; the data were examined without pre-existing conceptions or the imposition of existing frameworks. Data were first coded, codes grouped, finally grouped codes were brought together into themes.

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Figures

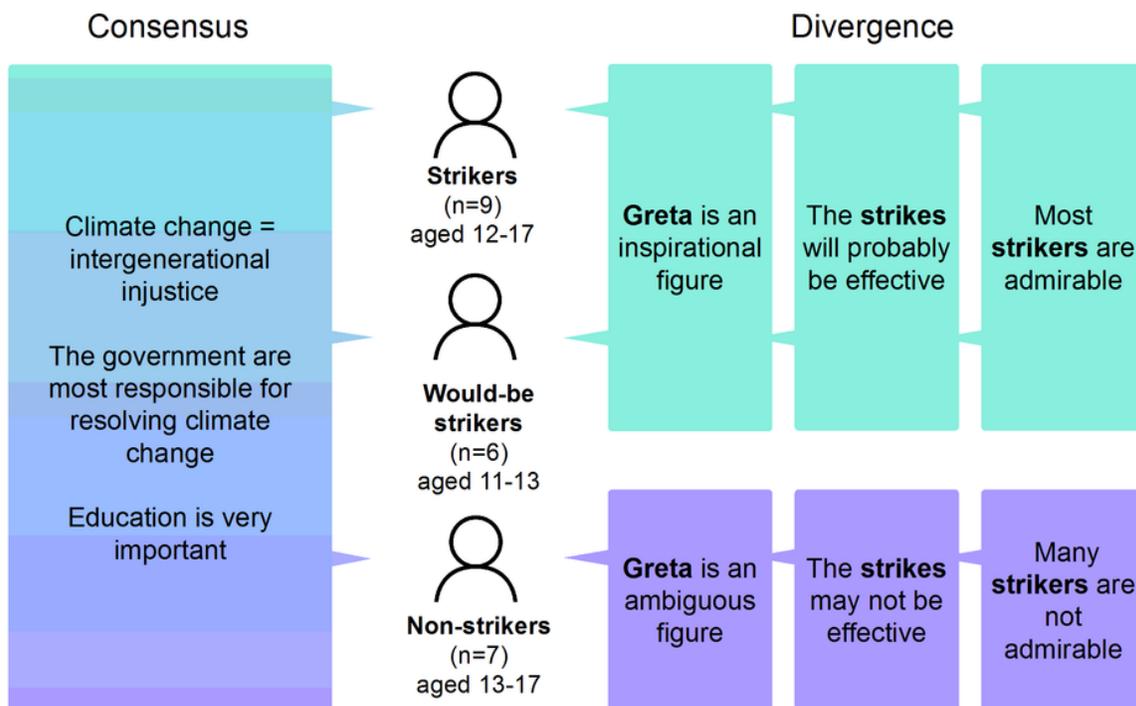


Figure 1

Striker status, topics of consensus and divergence