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Scaffolding collective hope and agency in youth activist groups: 'I get hope through action'

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Karen Nairn
University of Otago, New Zealand

Carisa R. Showden
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

Kyle R. Matthews
Joanna Kidman
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Judith Sligo
University of Otago, New Zealand

Abstract

We argue youth-led social justice movements are key sites for building collective hope in the face of the existential threats of colonisation, climate change and sexual violence. Building on the concepts of projective agency and affective scaffolding, we create an analytical framework to understand how collective hope was created *and* challenged in the work of six activist groups in Aotearoa New Zealand. The groups in our study encompassed a spectrum of intersecting causes – Indigenous rights, climate justice, feminist and queer rights, and social and economic justice. We attended campaigns and meetings and followed the groups' social media between 2018 and 2021, and conducted interviews with a total of 90 participants, asking about what inspired, and sustained, their activism. We found that activists created collective hope in the groups they were part of through being, and acting, together. The commitment to shared goals, a sense of community, a belief in mutual efficacy through democratic participation, and courage to take action are integral to building collective hope. To sustain a sense of projective agency in the face of intractable issues required a variety of strategies, including affective scaffolding and support, to keep moving forward.

Corresponding author:
Karen Nairn, College of Education, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin, 9054, New Zealand.
Email: karen.nairn@otago.ac.nz

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Introduction

> I'm definitely hopeful. Some of the most hopeful people that I know are the people that are most active . . . and some of the less hopeful people I know are the people who are the least active. I get hope through action. (Te Raukura, ActionStation)

Collective hope is integral to activism. Hope for change inspires people to join social movements – from civil rights to anti-war to climate change – and social movements foster hope. Hope is grounded in the materiality of action, as illustrated by Te Raukura's assertion in the quote above: 'I get hope through action.' In political collectives, activists build the material conditions for hope by refusing myriad injustices 'now' and accruing small victories to chart a path towards a larger vision of justice (Alberro, 2021; Stockdale, 2021). The activist groups in our study imagined a future where climate change, sexual violence and colonisation would be addressed but not easily solved. They imagined alternative possibilities and mustered the collective wherewithal to act in the here and now, despite anger, fear, frustration and fatigue.

We argue that youth-led social justice movements provide a key site for conceptualising and understanding how young people learn to hope critically and collectively in the face of the existential threats of colonisation, climate change and sexual violence. Our focus on these threats mirrors how many participants understood them as interconnected: 'climate change is always there . . . queer rights and sexual violence and also Indigenous rights . . . I look at these things very, quite intersectionally . . . they're all linked' (Astrid, Thursdays in Black Auckland). Yet in the media and research on youth activism and hope, climate change currently receives central billing although it is not the only existential crisis we are facing, or have faced. Indigenous, queer and feminist rights deserve concerted attention too, especially when considering the role of hope in supporting such long-running struggles, and the ways that these struggles have generated critiques of domination and extraction rooted in colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy (e.g. Stockdale, 2021; Whyte, 2017).

Activist organisations can serve as spaces in which hopeful visions are created and amplified inside and outside group boundaries (Castells, 2015). The visionary, collective, action-oriented activism that young people in our study described is integral to what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) identify as projective agency. Projective agency – imagining what could be achieved – operated in conjunction with practical agency where activists judged what action to take in the present, informed by what had worked in the past (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). We interpret activists' reports of the empowering effects of collective action as 'affective scaffolding': building and supporting a sense of agency and purpose in concert with others that enables collaborative work towards an alternative vision of the future (McGeer, 2004, 2008). Activists' achievement of goals along the way affectively scaffolded agency and hope (McGeer, 2004). Many participants in our study said their vision for change seemed more achievable because they were part of collectives, rather than individuals pushing for change.

We proceed by extending our review of hope and how it is deployed. We then introduce the activist groups and explain our methodology. Our analysis draws on interviews, fieldnotes and a 'living manifesto' produced by two of the groups, to explore how projective agency and affective scaffolding worked together as a mutually reinforcing process. Generating a hopeful vision with others and leaning into the hard work of addressing injustice and negotiating group dynamics builds and nourishes critical collective hope.

Differing deployments of hope

Hope is one of many affective resources that can be called on to bolster collective action (McGeer, 2004; Stockdale, 2021). 'Hope becomes an affective "capital" and a form of political and cultural agency . . . a future-focused process of becoming' (Kidman et al., 2018, p. 237). Hope – encapsulated in an activist group's vision – can be energising, building affective connections with others, and enervating because of the ongoing forms of injustice that must be challenged. While some scholars argue hope is too naive or nice (Berlant, 2011; Watego, 2021), we argue that hope is more frequently critical and complex, moderated by grief, anger and despair, but also created out of those very emotions. Emotional responses to injustice drive young people to find each other and fight together, and that connectivity generates a sense of possibility and informs the development of ethical and political consciousness, constituting political lives (Pulido, 2003). Emotions can be contagious within groups, and more generally in wider society, being passed on and amplified by the sociopolitical conditions of the time (Kenway & Fahey, 2011).

Hope is goal-directed rather than wishful thinking (Alberro, 2021; Braithwaite, 2004a; McGeer, 2004, 2008; Milona, 2019; Stockdale, 2021). Activists might fail, yet they can draw on the collective energy and commitment to their group's vision to push forward and try again (Braithwaite, 2004a). Alternatively, establishing a vison can generate conflict within groups if it leads individuals away from their beliefs about the best ways to achieve justice, and the roles that they and others should play (Dietz, 2014; Maeckelbergh, 2013; McCammon et al., 2015; Polletta & Kretschmer, 2015). Notably, hope can play a role in all areas of the social change cycle: encouraging the initiation of a group, mobilising individuals to join them, sustaining the work, and improving the chances of groups to achieve their goals (Lueck, 2007). The commitment to shared goals, a sense of community, a belief in mutual efficacy through democratic participation, and courage to take action are integral to building collective hope (Braithwaite, 2004a, 2004b). Hope can therefore serve collectives as a tool of mobilisation (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018; Stuart, 2020), motivating individuals to cooperate with group actions and make sacrifices to pursue collective goals (Braithwaite, 2004a).

There are also important critiques of the concept of hope. Berlant (2011) challenges assumptions that hope or optimism is positive; they warn that there can be a cruel side to optimism if the hopes and dreams we pursue negatively affect our well-being. Hope, like other resources, is unevenly available. Indigenous people, migrants, refugees and low-income groups often suffer from 'hope scarcity', according to Hage (2003). Indigenous Australian scholar Watego (2021, p. 197) describes how exhortations to hope are used to pacify Indigenous peoples, constituting 'the new smoothing of the pillow of the dying, a call to wait for a new day which never dawns'; instead, she advocates for nihilism. Other authors

found that hope was more a coping than a mobilising strategy in the context of climate change (e.g. van Zomeren et al., 2019). Solnit (2020) acknowledges hope carries the stigma of niceness but claims its meaning 'to instil courage' can embolden people (p. 212).

We identified three trends across the literature on hope and activism addressing colonisation, climate change and sexual violence. First, we noticed that scholars who brought these together were relatively rare (e.g. Ritchie, 2021; Táíwò, 2022; Whyte, 2017). When they did, the intersections were powerfully portrayed: 'Climate change . . . is both a gendered form of colonially imposed environmental change, and another intensified episode of colonialism that opens up Indigenous territories for capitalism and industrialisation that occurs through gender violence' (Whyte, 2017, p. 156). Second, we noticed that hope featured in different ways and to varying degrees across the three sets of literature. In broad terms, we noticed that hope, or the lack of it, featured in the literature about activism and climate change (e.g. Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Ojala, 2012; Pihkala, 2020). There was a longer history of consideration and critique of hope in the literature encompassing Indigenous resistance to colonisation (Kidman et al., 2018; Tuhiwai Smith, 2015; Watego, 2021; Whyte, 2017). However, hope was hard to find in the literature about activism addressing sexual violence (but see Gordon, 2012). Third, the majority of social science research about young people and hope focuses on individuals and is often framed as 'positive psychology' or resilience, especially for marginalised young people (e.g. Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Munford & Sanders, 2015). We challenge the individualised 'resilience' approach through our focus on how collective hope was created, employing the concepts of projective agency and affective scaffolding to help identify and understand this dynamic process across time.

Indigenous scholars such as Tuhiwai Smith (2015) and Kidman et al. (2018) identify hope as one of many collective, affective resources that sustain Indigenous political movements over time. Hope and desperation coexist, amongst a multiplicity of emotions (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013). The way we confront colonisation should not be the responsibility of the groups most affected (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013). Rather, all of society needs to be transformed and the concept of 'radical hope' provides a resource for the work this transformation will entail. Here she is building on Lear's (2006) discussion of how the Crow people of North America confronted the cultural devastation of colonisation. The Crow leader, Plenty Coups, acknowledged the pervasive collective anxiety amongst his people and how 'hope is held in the face of the recognition that, given the abyss, one cannot really know what survival means' (Lear, 2006, p. 97). What makes hope radical in Lear's analysis is its potential as an imaginative, collective resource for the Crow people (and others) 'to survive the destruction of a way of life' (Lear, 2006, p. 96).

Radical hope is influential in the literature about Indigenous futures (e.g. Pearson, 2011; Tuhiwai Smith, 2013), but is only glimpsed in the climate change literature, where Thompson (2009) promoted radical hope as a conceptual resource for imagining how to live with less in a warmer world. The apocalyptic future of global warming is a familiar trope used by scholars and activists to motivate action, although many question its efficacy (e.g. Thomas et al., 2019). The trope renders invisible how climate change is already happening, disproportionately affecting those living on Pacific Islands, or in countries least equipped to cope with extreme weather conditions (e.g.

Hayward et al., 2020). Many climate activists report beliefs about the future that at first glance contradict their commitment to action; for example, Australian climate activists strategically used the idea of hope to recruit new members despite privately admitting that they did not believe their activist efforts would be successful in mitigating climate change (Rosewarne et al., 2014).

In the literature on activism combatting sexual violence, the politicising of emotions is frequently mentioned, although explicit attention to the affective role of hope is harder to find. The politicisation of emotions has its roots in Indigenous, feminist and queer activist histories, where the transformation of shame, grief and fear into pride, anger and joy has long been an explicit feature of social movements (Fraser, 1996; Tuhiwai Smith, 2013; Whittier, 2001). This means that one role of feminist and queer activism is to affectively scaffold activism by channelling the emotional fallout of trauma and marginalisation through activism to create space for positive emotions – and necessary structural changes – to emerge.

While most studies in this area discuss pride, anger, grief, hurt and politicised trauma rather than hope, Gordon's (2012) work is a notable exception. Gordon describes 'a pedagogy of hope' in sexual assault survivor support zines that resisted dominant responses to, and discourses of, sexual violence; they were 'irreverent, parodic, utopian, and imaginative' (Licona, 2005, p. 109) and 'hopeful of creating communities that are supportive, consensual, and accountable' (Gordon, 2012, p. 15). They were also a form of prefigurative politics; the 'zines perform the difference they are trying to make' (Licona, 2005, p. 109). It is important not to overstate survivors' abilities to act or engage in emotional transformation but also to recognise that in coming together, survivors can support each other and mobilise in supportive communities that can scaffold affects towards hope.

The building of collective hope and a 'future now' (Alberro, 2021) while managing group dynamics entails work: it is 'emotional labour' to draw on the phrase many of our participants used. Emotional labour encompasses the myriad of social and cultural practices groups adopted to help individuals feel part of the collective (Ahmed, 2004). In activist groups the emotional labour and practical tasks can be shared; others can carry the baton when individuals' energy flags. Both Stockdale (2021) and McGeer (2004) argue that being in a hopeful community is necessary for agency. When action fails, the collective hope forged through the community can mitigate against despair and preserve a sense of agency (McGeer, 2004). Collectivity provides activists with a greater sense of agency than acting alone (Stockdale, 2021). For example, even when anti-sexual violence activists doubt that longer term cultural change would eventuate, they still said that they 'hoped' it would and had faith they could mobilise communities to act (Gordon, 2012). Such pessimistic hopefulness comes from a clear-headed reflection on past feminist failures combined with the affective scaffolding facilitated by the community (McGeer, 2004; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019).

While hope is difficult to sustain in social movements addressing colonisation, climate change and sexual violence, activists from groups tackling these issues in Aotearoa New Zealand pursued collective visions for change despite significant obstacles. Rather than nihilism, we saw a non-naive creation of collective hope that incorporated a critical

appraisal of the political and cultural landscape. Such hope was often radical in approach: facing ongoing sexual violence, a warming climate and rancorous political rhetoric regarding Indigenous sovereignty, activists imagined, and collectively worked towards, a more just future.

Research with young activists

Six youth-led activist groups participated in the research, encompassing a spectrum of intersecting causes – Indigenous rights, climate justice, feminist and queer rights, and social and economic justice. Protect Ihumātao (established in 2015) is fighting the impact of colonisation by reclaiming Indigenous land confiscated in 1863 from a present-day high-cost housing development. JustSpeak (2011) aims to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, incarceration. ActionStation (2014) is a people-powered online petition platform addressing diverse social and economic justice issues. InsideOUT Kōaro (2015) promotes rainbow youth visibility and safety in schools and communities. Thursdays in Black (1994) is working towards a future without sexual violence. Generation Zero's (2011) goal is a zero-carbon future, addressing the threat of climate change.[1] These intersecting causes motivate our own political endeavours as activists and scholars.

Between 2018 and 2021 we spent time with each group, taking fieldnotes as we attended campaign events and meetings, and followed their social media and websites. Each group was also invited to construct what we called a 'living manifesto' of their vision. Five of the six groups produced these using diverse forms, including video, handbooks and a commemorative plaque and tree planting (Nairn et al., 2022). One of these manifestos, 'A Message from 2040', was explicitly designed to motivate young people to take action and is part of the analysis that follows. A total of 90 participants also took part in 143 interviews about what inspired, and sustained, their engagement in the groups. The majority of the activists were aged between 18 and 35 years at the time of their first interview. We stretched available definitions of 'youth' to include those in their thirties because youth is relative to other age groups and can be understood differently depending on culture and context (Bettie, 2014; Eliason et al., 2015; Opai, 2021). Protect Ihumātao was the only group where there were similar numbers of Māori (the Indigenous people of Aotearoa) and Pākehā (the settler group); participants from the other groups were predominantly Pākehā. Generation Zero was the only group with similar numbers of women and men; participants from the other groups were mainly women and/or gender diverse. Approximately two-thirds were in paid work and a similar proportion had completed tertiary qualifications; one-third were tertiary students. There was a range of socioeconomic backgrounds across the study and the material consequences of engaging in activism varied between those with and without dependants. According to their wishes, some participants' real names are used while others have code names.

We developed an analytical frame centred on three concepts: 'projective agency' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), 'affective scaffolding' (McGeer, 2004) and 'collective hope' (Braithwaite, 2004a, 2004b). Evidence of projective agency included the diverse forms of imaginative and visionary work each group engaged in, including rallying speeches, a video imagining a message from the future, and legislation as groundwork towards a zero-carbon future. Evidence of affective scaffolding included the effort to

engage others in a cause and to keep the group's spirits up. Our focus on the imaginative, projective elements of agency contributes to the literature, which Mische (2009) identified as seldom paying attention to creative, future-orientated action because it is too difficult to analyse (but see Cook & Cuervo, 2019).

The role of projective agency and affective scaffolding in creating collective hope

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) theorise agency as comprising three interlocking orientations: (1) past (routine habits sustaining identities and institutions over time); (2) present (practical evaluation of current options); and (3) future (the ability to imaginatively project different trajectories of action that might reconfigure a future, taking into account past and present hopes and fears). While all three orientations were evident among our participants, we focus on the capacity to imagine the future. Participants such as Tamatha (JustSpeak) express how they vacillate between hope and nothing: 'I guess you have to be hopeful in the sense that you can imagine an alternative reality. Otherwise you're just grasping for, you know, nothing.' In this section, we present our analysis of this process in three parts: (a) what constitutes projective agency; (b) how this form of agency was affectively scaffolded; and (c) how these processes fed into creating collective hope within activist groups.

Projective agency

We identified projective agency in the ways activists articulated the pursuit of alternatives to the status quo of sexual violence, colonisation and climate change. Different ways of understanding projective agency in relation to the future could be discerned, and we identified four time signatures. In 'A Message from 2040' projective agency follows a *linear trajectory to the future*, which is deliberately imagined and constructed as an alternative to New Zealand's past, distinguished by the impacts of colonisation and neoliberal policies. But more generally, we discerned projective agency as happening in non-linear ways. This was evident amongst activists from groups which were deliberately *living their future vision now*. It was also evident amongst activists who persisted despite significant obstacles and setbacks, where any progress towards their vision seemed to be constantly *deferred* and, in some cases, *foreclosed*.

Projective agency along a *linear trajectory* is clearly portrayed in 'A Message from 2040', designed to imagine the future and to inspire political action (www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9FN0-jUf_U). As they describe it, the video is 'a direction, an intention, *a projection*, of what we see before us' (emphasis added). This animated video was a collaborative effort by JustSpeak and ActionStation. The narrator in the video is Ara, a young Māori woman; she briefly describes New Zealand's history of colonisation from the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, hence the significance of the imagined message from 2040, 200 years later. Ara then summarises the impact of New Zealand's neoliberal reforms introduced in 1984 and consolidated by subsequent governments, which exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities (Rashbrooke, 2013). Projective agency is

encapsulated in Ara's description of what is possible when we (re)imagine political systems; she reflects back from 2040 in the following quote:

> The systems that shape our lives are ours to create and ours to change. The ceiling on our political imagination shattered and a window of opportunity opened . . . People from the justice, climate and equity movements chose to work together . . . Over the next 10 years, we prioritised the things that matter for healthy people and a healthy planet.

Imagination and vision were the primary goals of the video. As one of the collaborators pointed out in her interview: 'all of us struggle to understand what a different system and world might look and be like . . . There was a bigger story than parliamentary politics' (Tania, JustSpeak). Another collaborator was clear that the video's message should not be 'didactic' or 'naive'. Instead, she identified the importance of anchoring an imagined future in the materiality of solutions. 'For any group of people that you're trying to influence or build support with [there is a need] to name solutions and name the actors and describe what you're trying to achieve, what you're working towards rather than just describing the problem' (Madeleine, ActionStation). Specifying the actions and a timeline of 2040 for achieving change provides helpful parameters for the collective projective agency the video is encouraging:

> I think with some of these systems, they're just so big and they're so engrained . . . because of the nature of colonial capitalism . . . They were decisions made by humans that created this reality, which means decisions made by humans can create a new one. I think that is a story that we're telling over and over again because of the normalisation and naturalisation of capitalist, neoliberal, all those 'isms' and ways of doing things has been . . . seen to be so static and concrete. (Madeleine, ActionStation)

The scale of imagined political change is significant and the collaborators were clear about the challenges now and in the future. Madeleine summed up the importance of projective agency for sustaining social justice movements: 'I think that the more space and resources that are devoted to imagination and vision-making-work, the more powerful our movement is going to be.'

Articulations of projective agency were evident amongst the groups in our study who were *living their future now*: enacting the kind of community they envisioned (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021). At Ihumātao, mana whenua (Māori tribal groups who have ancestral and territorial interests in the land) were living on the disputed land and gardening as though a resolution had already been achieved: 'living our best lives' and being 'the best kaitiaki [custodians] that we can be' (Pania, Protect Ihumātao). Pania's description of her motivating forces and the social change desired demonstrates what constitutes projective agency:

> When my nieces and nephews grow up, when I have children, I want them to be able to look back and see, like even if I lose, I want them to know that their aunty did everything in her power to prevent this development. I want them to be proud of what I did. I want them to be inspired and motivated and I want to give them hope [that] whatever injustice that they might face in their lives, they can overcome it . . . Also fulfilling the legacies of our ancestors, of our

> elders . . . [the Treaty of Waitangi] claim was heard here on our marae [complex of carved buildings and grounds that belongs to a particular tribe] in Ihumātao and it's still not settled and we're still suffering the same issues. (Pania, Protect Ihumātao)

In Pania's words, generations past, present and future coalesce. She exemplifies what motivated many other activists in this study: their determination to enact their ideal 'future now' (Alberro, 2021; Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021).

Activists also expressed projective agency despite what seemed like the endless *deferral* of 'progress' towards their vision. The activists in the study were critically aware of the structural obstacles in their way, yet the majority maintained their activism and sense of possibility, even if it was halting: 'you just have to keep pushing even when it's like one step forward, two steps back, I guess you just kind of have to keep your eyes focussed on the bigger picture' (Mackenzie, Thursdays in Black Auckland). Participants from the groups directly addressing sexual violence (Thursdays in Black, ActionStation and InsideOUT Kōaro) persisted in taking action. They acted in concert with others to make change in sexual consent education and sexual assault policies in universities and schools, initiated nationwide programmes to ensure schools were safer places for rainbow youth, and challenged transphobic public narratives. Ruby articulates the tenacity required to maintain projective agency towards a future where sexual violence is taken seriously, a vision that seemed to be constantly undermined:

> With our experience, it was incredibly empowering to go through the process of campaigning, petitioning and, you know, the incredible response we had through the media, and even through some of the statements from politicians. But, at the same time, afterwards, the process has been so slow, and the main thing we got [out] of it was the public awareness. And it's a shame that nothing more concrete has happened . . . you can do as much as you can, but you've really got to keep pushing, otherwise it can sometimes get forgotten about. (Ruby, ActionStation)

Activists conveyed how difficult it was to make any progress to end sexual violence. They were clear that the problem was not theirs alone to solve. They believed in collective responsibility and action, including beyond their groups, and that this would have to be continually pursued, to avoid the threat of constant deferral.

The emotional labour of pursuing a vision that seemed to be endlessly deferred could also result in *foreclosure* of projective agency and possibility. Activists joined groups initially filled with hope at the possibility of change. But the hard grind and slow progress meant many wavered between hope and disillusionment and disappointment, with consequences for their well-being (Berlant, 2011). Some took a break, while others considered giving up. Astrid (Thursdays in Black Auckland) conveys the emotional labour involved:

> I used to be a lot more optimistic. I think especially when I was first coming into contact with feminism and queer activism and de-colonialism and all these things, I was a lot more hopeful . . . I think this is also a generational thing . . . my generation . . . we've grown up in a world where climate change has been like a pertinent issue at the forefront of our minds since we were young and in that way, this is going to sound really dramatic but it kind of feels a bit apocalyptic in a way (laughs) and . . . I've actually been reflecting on that a lot recently because I think it's

> getting me down quite a bit . . . We do so much mahi [work] towards ending sexual assault and yet . . . it just doesn't get any better, like what's even the point? And that's . . . upsetting and draining . . . I still feel hopeful and that's why I can still be involved with TiB and do activist stuff but I just feel a lot more kind of pessimist about the state of things now than I used to, which is, yeah it's draining. (Astrid, Thursdays in Black Auckland)

To maintain a sense of projective agency in the face of pessimism required a variety of strategies. Dewy (Generation Zero Auckland) described it as a balancing act; she harnessed her anger to maintain her momentum despite witnessing no obvious progress towards addressing climate change:

> Hope as one emotion has to be actually balanced with anger, and I think that anger is mainly pushed by the reality. I think that the reason why I am having the juxtaposition between idealism and reality was because I started off being idealistic, but I kept going because of the reality . . . If you look at reality right now, not much change is happening, and I am angered by that or I am frustrated by that. So I think that . . . talking about idealism and reality is super-important, not just in terms of bringing people in, but in dictating how we work.

Despite the emotional toll and the risk of burnout, Astrid, Dewy and many others continued to be involved, often in multiple groups. Or if they left one group, they found another meaningful avenue for pursuing their political goals. Hope was continually tempered by activists' anger and despair creating a complex set of emotional resources that shaped their group's work.

Projective agency and 'vision-making-work', to quote one of the collaborators in creating 'A Message from 2040', were therefore essential ingredients in these political movements. But it was not enough to collectively negotiate a vision and a set of actions towards that vision without paying attention to what might fuel activists. Different articulations of agency were motivated by a vision for a new future. What allows this agency to be cast as *hopeful* (inspiring desire and expectation for change) is the affective scaffolding groups do: taking complex emotions and collectively creating non-naive hope from them.

Affective scaffolding

The six groups in this study provided the 'affective scaffolding' and 'the motivational energy' for activists to exercise 'their capacities in new and creative ways' (McGeer, 2008, p. 246). In other words, affective scaffolding and projective agency worked in tandem. The scaffolding of agency is what McGeer (2004) calls 'good hope', which is responsive to real world constraints and acknowledges the importance of peer scaffolding. Peer scaffolding works to stimulate in others 'confidence in their own hopes and a capacity to realise those hopes' (McGeer, 2004, p. 118). We interpreted the following quote as a succinct summary of how affective scaffolding facilitates projective agency: 'When you get the energy of a bunch of people in a room all caring about the same issue, and coming up with creative ways to tackle it, I think that's really inspiring' (Tania, JustSpeak). The energy Tania describes supports creative imagining about potential actions. In this section, we identify what affective scaffolding looked and felt like for the activists in this study.

Acting *together* facilitated positive emotions. The shared emotional energy amongst people in activist groups can be contagious (Kenway & Fahey, 2011). Two activists' descriptions exemplify this:

> Robust is the first word that comes into mind. Like, super resilient. And, I can kind of shake things off me and . . . yeah, like, bulletproof almost, or, especially when I'm in a crowd of people or in a community and we've planned something together, and it's gone really well and . . . it's just that feeling of joy and togetherness and power. (Cordelia, Protect Ihumātao)

> People coming together and just being really sure that what they're doing is the right thing, I think is very empowering to make you feel that sense of hope . . . What can we do if we're actually organised and we actually harness all of our power? (Orla, ActionStation)

Some of the emotions expressed by Cordelia were more about 'the now' (joy) and some about the future (resilient, bulletproof). Both participants describe feeling 'powerful' in a collective sense of 'we', which corresponds to McGeer's description of how we learn to hope with and from others.

Hope as a 'social phenomenon' (McGeer, 2004, p. 108) was also seen in the feelings of empowerment and inspiring visions for social change that motivated participants to join *and* remain in their groups. Tongaporutu described what kept him involved in Protect Ihumātao and unpacked how the mutual investments of affective scaffolding operated: 'At the core it is being around people that have something they believe in so fiercely . . . and just being connected to that belief and hoping that you reciprocate some of that . . . Being on the fringes of brave people keeps me here.' This inspired Tongaporutu and animated his commitment since the 2015 start of the renewed campaign to reclaim disputed land confiscated from Māori by the New Zealand colonial government in 1863.[2]

Positive emotional energy, attributed in part to how other activists seemed to be feeling and responding, was therefore one signal of affective scaffolding in action. But so-called negative emotions were also important. Jemima's (InsideOUT Kōaro) determination to act was affectively scaffolded by others who cared about sexual violence and discrimination against rainbow communities. Like Dewy, quoted earlier, hope and anger propelled her:

> I feel way more hopeful than I used to . . . It's really invigorating to see the young people caring so much about these issues and working so hard. And, so, on the one hand, the wins keep me going, and the idea of making this change and getting things to really change and be better makes me feel like I should keep going. And then, the other side of it . . . the horrible stuff keeps me going . . . that's what fuels my angry feminism is . . . every new story about some horrible case of domestic violence or sexual violence, or some awful example of sexism, it just kind of fuels me. And it's the same with rainbow stuff, any time I see news about all of these injustices, it just makes me want to fight back more. (Jemima, InsideOUT Kōaro)

The scale of activists' anger, frustration, fear and worry often felt overwhelming. A group could offer validation and affective support as well as direction for members who felt overwhelmed (Stockdale, 2021). This direction is future-focused projective agency. It mobilised activists to continue to act despite the odds. Two activists described how this aspect of affective scaffolding worked:

> What groups do is, they give people direction for their emotions, for their frustration, for their overwhelmedness, kind of gives them a path to go on and to say look it is scary and overwhelming and you know, it's a horrible place out there but if you do this, it could get better, you know give some direction. (Portia, Thursdays in Black Auckland)

> We all understand that reading scary climate change news too often can be quite detrimental to our mental health. And we're also aware that we need to talk about it. And not just store it or repress it. But talk about it in a healthy way . . . And we do make a very careful effort to allow space for that to happen through our check-ins at the beginning, asking people how they are. (Rhys, Generation Zero Auckland)

Many participants described how groups offered a space where they could express emotions with others who understood, often directing these emotions into actions towards a group's vision. The groups in our study had processes for bringing people together and acknowledging feelings of elation and disappointment circulating at meetings, depending on how planned actions had unfolded. This was not always straightforward; competing ideas about how best to achieve a group's vision could create conflict. Most of the conflict we witnessed occurred *within* groups. Attending to conflict can be emotionally uncomfortable yet necessary; building consensus requires time, facilitators' skills, and is integral to the work of activism (for more detail, see Nairn et al., 2022).

McGeer's (2004, 2008) concept of affective scaffolding enables social movement researchers to identify the dynamic and complex interplay of self and other *within* activist groups. But affective scaffolding can also operate on a wider scale. The swift and far-reaching behavioural changes demanded of the public by the New Zealand government's initial pandemic response inspired hope *and* scepticism that overcoming 'wicked' problems such as climate change was possible:

> I'm also sceptical/also hopeful considering the stuff with Covid . . . this has proven that in a heartbeat we can completely change the ways that we are living. It's just that it has not been prioritised for climate change . . . so I'm hoping that there are a lot of lessons learned from this horrible thing that's happening. (Jaye, InsideOUT Kōaro)

The affective scaffolding we have described supported relationships with others where agency of self and others could be mutually reinforcing, inspiring group members, and providing an exemplar of what was possible collectively. Affective scaffolding supported activists as they learned to negotiate the limitations of individual and collective agency in the face of obstacles, including the frustrations and difficulties of working together to create – or not – change, and was integral to creating collective hope.

Collective hope

Activists in these groups learnt about working for change and ways of hoping from others (Braithwaite, 2004a; Vestergren et al., 2019). Feelings of confidence, hope and determination to continue working towards transformational change provided the affective energy for projective and practical forms of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; McGeer, 2004; Mische, 2009). Activists also expressed anger, disappointment and despair about

the lack of progress towards their vision. Affirmation of the value of the collective is significant against a backdrop of the individualising imperatives of New Zealand's neoliberal government reforms, policies and practices instigated in 1984 (Nairn et al., 2012). The constant refrain of the need 'to keep pushing' echoed across the study, demonstrating activists' projective agency despite the structural obstacles they encountered:

> It's really important for me to stay involved, because there's a sense of solidarity and a sense of connection and a sense of, like, we invigorate each other and we inspire each other, and, you know, we challenge each other. And that is so important . . . I think I'm such a community-based person: I need to be involved with communities because they sustain me. (Astrid, Thursdays in Black Auckland)

> I truly think that people underestimate the power of collective action or working together. Once you reduce everything down to an individual level it can seem hopeless. But if you're in a wider community that's working together, then it can build that sense of hope or that sense of optimism, and a vision for the future that is achievable. (Rhys, Generation Zero Auckland)

Astrid wraps affective scaffolding and collective hope together. These participants were typical of many who attributed their ongoing activism to the affective scaffolding of solidarity and community they experienced in their groups. Personal connections, invigoration and challenge were integral to building a sense of shared commitment and collective hope that achieving a group's vision was possible. The affective scaffolding that groups provide generates collective hope that is both clear-eyed about challenges and insistent in its necessity if conditions are to change.

Collective hope was generated through 'doing' and 'being' together. Below, Kuini and Quin demonstrate the interwoven process of projective agency (the 'doing') supported by the affective scaffolding of shared emotional states stimulated by 'being' together, which, in turn, cultivated a sense of collective purpose and hope in activist groups:

> Protect Ihumātao accepts people from all walks of life, as long as they know the boundaries and they're passionate about the kaupapa [purpose], and they're willing to contribute their time and energy into the activities that we do, which is a community-based thing. Like assist people in walking around the land, chauffeuring, hosting, teaching art, doing workshops. (Kuini, Protect Ihumātao)

> All those activities we do, they're all fun. And there's a lot of hope that is there between people, despite a lot of trauma or fear or discomfort or trouble navigating the world outside. When we're in the office or something, it feels a lot safer and like we have some form of unity, and people will have your back. (Quin, InsideOUT Kōaro)

These activists identified how passion and fun were key features of 'doing' and 'being' together, which inspired them to remain involved and brought people into their groups. These activists also describe how they were living their group's vision now, validating how the vision they were pursuing was achievable (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021).

A sense of collective hope was also fostered whenever a group identified some form of progress, whether it was achieved by their group or as evidence of social change

beyond the group. Yasmin attributed a rising sense of hope in response to prolonged public discussion of the problem of sexual violence across several institutions, including law firms and universities. Avery identified how local wins that improved public transport and cycling in Auckland exemplified what could be achieved.

> There has been an upward trend of talking about sexual violence . . . [There have been] lots of law events I've gone to since the Russell McVeagh scandal . . . and [law] firms are trying to introduce diversity programmes and trying to change that [negative culture]. So I think across society, there is probably more hope in that way. (Yasmin, Thursdays in Black Auckland)[3]

> If you're a volunteer with a group like Gen Zero you're probably going to see some sort of win on a local level. You get a few of them a year, hopefully (laughs) . . . if you're very lucky, where you can actually see how volunteering in an organisation can make change . . . so I do think that makes you optimistic that more things can change . . . So I think that naturally kind of makes you more hopeful, I think especially at the moment with all of the doom and gloom around climate when you can actually see that stuff can change. (Avery, Generation Zero Auckland)

This sense of 'progress' provided proof of concept that actions towards an agreed vision did have an impact (see Nairn et al., 2022 for further elaboration of what each group achieved). The hope it catalysed was felt individually and collectively by activists in groups, and could be discerned across wider society.

Collective hope was not found in any certainty of a better future, but the possibility that 'it could get better' meant that action was worth pursuing. If affective scaffolding was constructive within a group, activists learnt from others ways of coping with disillusionment and despair and could be reassured that failed actions were not an individual's responsibility. Even when activists explicitly acknowledged their pessimism and the weight of 'the century of systems' (colonial and capitalist), they were still determined to act:

> Honestly, I'm kind of a pessimist. I don't really think there's much we can do to stop everything at this point. It feels like 10 years for this climate change action and social change to happen. It's too short a time when we've had like over a century of systems that have been passed down generations. In saying that, there's nothing we can really do except hope that can change. It's either we keep on trying to do it and make it or we actually all die. There's no in-between so is it better to try and end up dead or not try and speed up the process? (Quin, InsideOUT Kōaro)

> I think if none of us did anything, that would be a terrible world . . . I hope that even when we are no longer at Auckland University anymore that it [Thursdays in Black] keeps up its presence because I think people need to be reminded, both survivors and potential perpetrators, that there's a presence there and there are good people out there. (Taylor, Thursdays in Black Auckland)

Here Quin and Taylor fold in Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) multi-temporal agency with the motivational energy that scaffolds McGeer's (2004) 'good hope'. Activists traversed the full spectrum of emotional states, affecting others in the process. There were those orientated to optimistic affect, while others occupied the pessimistic end more

frequently. Vacillating between hope and despair demonstrates the complex emotional labour these activists engaged in and how they hoped critically, fully cognisant of the obstacles in their way. Although it was tempting to give up and do nothing, many echoed Taylor's rejection of nihilism. Hope was radical in the way it operated as an imaginative, collective resource (Lear, 2006).

Conclusion

Young people in the social justice movements in this study articulated how they learn to hope critically and collectively. These activists described how colonial, ecological and gender violence connect and overlap, even if they belonged to a group whose vision prioritised one issue that they would mainly act on. Our analysis emphasises this intersectionality to disrupt the siloing and simplifying of crises and to rethink who is responsible for envisioning and enacting change (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013). This is necessary to challenge assumptions that Indigenous people are responsible for decolonisation; women and queer people for stopping gender violence; and young people for halting climate change. The groups in this study were trying to be the change envisaged by their group to varying degrees: challenging colonising and heterosexist attitudes within their groups and looking after the environment and addressing climate change, although this was an imperfect process (Nairn et al., 2022; Showden et al., 2022).

Young people sustained collective hope in their groups through 'being', and 'doing', together. This is a complex, dynamic process that we explain as incorporating 'projective agency' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and 'affective scaffolding' (McGeer, 2004), to generate 'collective hope' (Braithwaite, 2004a). The delineation of these three concepts is intended to be generative rather than reductive. An analytical framework based on these key concepts provided one way of analysing how collective hope was created *and* challenged. The projective agency or vision-making-work of the activists in this study demonstrates the complexity of hoping critically and collectively across time.

We found that, to be hopeful, the activists imagined an alternative reality and plotted the steps necessary to achieve their vision; they had the collective wherewithal to act in the here and now; and the reflective appreciation of how communities nurtured them. The affective scaffolding and support available in their groups helped sustain a sense of projective agency to keep them moving forward. But this momentum was challenged by disillusionment over lack of progress, conflict over what constitutes effective action, the risk of burnout, and the constant churn of group membership (Nairn et al., 2022). Learning to hope collectively in activist groups is hard work. This research can inform other investigations of collective emotional labour and in particular what interventions might be necessary to foster critical, radical forms of hope to counter collective anxieties (Lear, 2006; Pihkala, 2020). These activists' commitment to shared goals, a sense of community, a belief in democratic participation, and courage to take action with others were integral to building collective hope.

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Notes

1. We worked with the Auckland groups of the latter two organisations.
2. The satisfactory resolution of land ownership was not fully resolved at the time of writing (2024).
3. Russell McVeagh is a prominent New Zealand law firm. A top lawyer in the firm was accused of sexual harassment, which kicked off a public examination of problems across the industry (www.newsroom.co.nz/ex-russell-mcveagh-partner-suspended-for-two-years-over-summer-clerk-groping).

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