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'... we scratch our heads; we look at each other... we come up with a solution and we have no idea who came up with the solution... probably all together...': A study of how adults act and learn through and from social action

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Abstract

This paper investigates aspects of informal and non-formal learning that emerge through adults' participation in collective actions and social movements. Drawing on qualitative data derived from interviews with members of social collectives in an urban area of Athens (Greece), the study illustrates how these spaces function as dynamic learning environments. Participants develop practical knowledge, social skills, critical awareness, and a deeper understanding of social issues. Moreover, engagement in collective actions also fosters emotional bonds, solidarity, and processes of personal transformation. The findings underline that learning is not confined to formal settings but emerges meaningfully through participation in civic life. The study highlights the pivotal role of collective action in promoting adult learning and self-awareness, contributing to the broader dialogue in the field of adult education by demonstrating how involvement in social groups constitutes a significant site for both individual and collective transformation.

Keywords: social movement learning, informal learning, transformative learning, adult education, collective action

Introduction: Informal and non-formal learning through collective action

A growing body of research highlights the significance of informal and non-formal learning in social movements, community organising, and collective actions. Unlike formal education, which follows structured curricula, informal learning emerges

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organically through lived experience, while non-formal learning is intentional but not institutionalised (Eraut, 2004). Scholars argue that these learning modes are central to the empowerment of marginalised groups, the cultivation of critical consciousness, and the sustaining efforts to achieve social change (Choudry, 2020). Despite their significance, the educational dimensions of social movements are frequently neglected within mainstream approaches to adult learning and education. Nevertheless, numerous studies reviewed by Atta and Holst (2023) demonstrate that adults, through collective efforts to enhance their daily lives and advance social change, acquire forms of knowledge and skills that would be difficult informal learning in collective action. Foley (1999) identifies two defining features of this form of learning. First, it is 'incidental and embedded in practice' (Foley, 1999, p. 39), often tacit, frequently unrecognised, and emerging through engagement in shared activities. The knowledge and skills acquired are typically context-specific and action-oriented, grounded in lived experience. Second, such learning is dynamic and unpredictable, if not impossible – to obtain within the confines of formal educational frameworks.

This study examines how adults participating in diverse collective initiatives critically assess their motivations, identify the knowledge and skills developed through their engagement, and recount the processes through which these competencies emerge. While theoretically eclectic, our analysis is grounded in a socio-cultural perspective that conceptualises learning as inherently dialogical and transformative. Within such a perspective, education is understood as a communicative and socially mediated process through which the individuals co-construct knowledge and reconstruct their cognitive and affective orientations. From this standpoint, learning entails an ongoing cognitive and emotional development shaped by cultural mediation within socio-cultural contexts. Building on this foundation, scholarship on informal learning within social movements situates learning as inseparable from collective praxis (Curnow & Jurow, 2021). Whereas socio-cultural theories emphasise development within broad social and cultural settings, movement-based perspectives highlight how participation in collective action generates knowledge, transforms identities, and nurtures critical consciousness. Learning through collective participation is not a by-product of activism but a constitutive element of it – embedded in practices of negotiation, resistance, and solidarity.

These insights foreground a central question: How does participation in collective action foster learning? The answer lies in the social contexts and practices that enable learning to occur.

Learning, from this perspective, is a social process of knowledge construction that simultaneously and in a mutually constitutive way comprises processes of identity transformation and the formation of critical consciousness in learning subjects.

Communication and interaction within enabling contexts – such as those created through collective action – are therefore fundamental to the learning process.

In adult learning contexts, communication is shaped by the emotional states, attitudes, and relationships among participants. These factors influence how meaning is constructed, trust established, and transformation achieved through dialogue (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Furthermore, as Mezirow (1997) notes, transformative learning encompasses not only rational reflection but also emotional engagement and dialogical relationships that enable adults to reinterpret and reframe their experiences.

Aspects and dimensions of adult informal and non-formal learning

The field of adult education encompasses diverse theories of learning, each grounded in distinct assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the processes of its acquisition, and

the characteristics of adult learners. These theoretical orientations shape not only how learning is defined but also how educational practices are designed, implemented, and evaluated (Illeris, 2009). Within social movements, however, learning tends to develop in informal and collective ways arising through participation in shared practices rather than through formal instruction or structured curricula.

Drawing on his analysis of informal learning in collective action, Foley (1999) identifies two defining features of this form of learning. First, it is *incidental and embedded in practice*, often tacit, frequently unrecognised, and emerging through engagement in shared activities. The knowledge and skills acquired are typically context-specific and action-oriented, grounded in lived experience. Second, such learning is *dynamic and unpredictable:* it evolves in response to shifting social, political, and organisational conditions. As participants adapt to new challenges, learning remains emergent and adaptive, often exceeding the intentions of those involved and contributing to processes of empowerment, capacity building, and social change. Hall and Clover (2005) similarly emphasise that much of the learning within social movements is tacit, rooted in experience and collective practice rather than from explicit teaching. They argue that critical reflection on tacit knowledge enables participants to articulate implicit understandings, transforming experience into conscious strategy and thereby enhancing both individual learning and the collective evolution of the movement.

Theoretical and empirical analyses of learning within, for, and from social movements explore diverse aspects of informal and non-formal learning, including participants' experiences, identity formation, meaning-making, and knowledge production (Niesz et al., 2018). Our study focuses particularly on the outcomes of informal learning among adults engaged in collective action and, in particular, how their participation fosters new understandings, skills, and transformative perspectives.

In any case, social movements function as educational spaces that foster ways of interpreting the world – not merely as it currently exists, but as it could potentially become (Mayo, 2005). Adults in these movements learn through dialogue, collaboration, and engagement in movement activities, as well as through studying materials that movements produce. Even those who are not directly involved may learn indirectly from movements' public expressions, messages, and media presence. The interpretations and lessons individuals derive from a social movement are significantly shaped by their positionality and evaluative stance toward the movement.

Observers who engage with a movement sympathetically are likely to interpret its actions and derive meanings differently than those who approach it critically or antagonistically, reflecting the ways in which social movements shape knowledge, identities, and understanding through cognitive praxis, in which social movements constitute sites of cognitive and identity formation shaped by the interpretive frameworks of participants and observers alike, as argued by Eyerman and Jamison (1991). Niesz (2022) further argues that movements foster learning, identity formation, and civic engagement not only among participants but also among external audiences who engage intellectually and emotionally with their narratives and performances.

In summary, learning in social collectivities is multi-dimensional, evolving, and mutually constitutive (Foley, 1999). It includes learning about oneself – i.e., identity construction (Jasper, 1998), learning about the movement's issues (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), learning to act – i.e., engagement in action (Melucci, 1996), learning to organise, i.e., finding appropriate forms of coexistence with others (Milan, 2015) and learning to analyse and critique – i.e., developing critical consciousness (Tarrow, 2011). Current research on learning within social movements continues to address questions about participation, processes, and outcomes of informal and non-formal learning, examining

how collective engagement fosters both individual transformation and broader social change (Atta & Holst, 2023; Shield et al., 2020).

Research purpose and methodology

Social movements encompassing a wide range of social, political, environmental, and economic concerns have increasingly emerged as pivotal agents of change.

Their role as globally recognised agents of social change has expanded considerably throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, propelled by the emergence of new forms of collective action and transnational mobilisation (Almeida & Chase-Dunn, 2018).

Although social movements vary in form and objectives according to regional and contextual circumstances, they share key defining characteristics: engaging in collective action, a commitment to social transformation, and forms of mobilisation that often extend beyond conventional political institutions (English & Mayo, 2012). Encompassing a wide spectrum of efforts to confront social, political, economic, and environmental injustices, social movements operate across multiple scales and contexts. Among these, urban social movements have assumed particular prominence, reflecting the distinctive challenges and opportunities that cities present for collective action and change. Urban areas serve as dynamic sites of concentrated populations, economic activity, and social diversity, making them critical arenas for contestation and change. Focusing on urban social movements allows for a deeper understanding of how localised struggles intersect with broader structural issues, and how space, place, and community shape collective action. This emphasis is crucial for analysing contemporary movements that confront issues such as housing rights, gentrification, environmental justice, and public space, all of which are inherently tied to the urban experience (Mayer, 2013).

As contemporary urban phenomena unfold, we increasingly encounter what Meyrowitz (2005) has termed *glocalities* – situations in which local contexts are simultaneously shaped by, and contributing to, global dynamics. The concept of glocality – derived from the fusion of *global* and *local* – highlights this reciprocal relationship, wherein global trends are filtered through and reinterpreted by local specificities (Gobo, 2016). Despite these global influences, urban social movements fundamentally retain their local orientation. They are rooted in particular communities and are typically organised around immediate needs and conflicts, which serve as catalysts for sustained mobilisation and advocacy (Domaradzka, 2018).

This study focuses on collective activities in Chalandri, a municipality in the northern part of the Athens metropolitan area in Greece, with an estimated population of 80,000 residents. A range of social initiatives and civic associations in this area address diverse urban concerns, including the deterioration of public health services and local educational institutions, environmental degradation, the scarcity of green areas and public spaces, and growing housing insecurity. In addition, many groups focus on animal welfare, particularly the care of stray animals, as well as on providing support to vulnerable populations such as refugees, migrants, and incarcerated individuals (Municipality of Chalandri, n.d.).

The collectives included in this study were selected on the basis of their sustained and publicly visible activity over many years, which is recognised by local society, while many of their key players maintain an active presence in the Municipal Council of Chalandri, indirectly representing their collective. The selection therefore seeks to elucidate the principal dynamics and learning outcomes that emerge within such initiatives, rather than to offer a comprehensive account of all local collectives:

- *Association for the Protection of the Environment and Creek of Penteli-Chalandri.* Founded in 1990, this association aims to preserve the Creek which crosses Chalandri in its natural state, preventing interventions that would alter its character as a green lung for the surrounding regions. It is an environmental social collectivity with continuous significant activity (SosRematia, 2025).
- *Social Solidarity Clinic of Chalandri:* Established in 2015 during the economic crisis, this collective has remained continuously active. It operates through the voluntary contributions of doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, pharmacists, and dentists. Its mission is to offer free healthcare services – without discrimination – to the poor, the uninsured, and all individuals in need within the local community **(**Municipality of Chalandri, 2025).
- *Association of Volunteer Friends of Animals of Chalandri.* This organisation has been active since 2000, dedicated to protecting local stray animals and advocating for animal rights more broadly. It acts as a social movement by bringing individuals together around a shared cause, employing diverse strategies to challenge societal norms, and aiming to transform existing economic and cultural systems (Chalandri Animals, n.d.).
- *The Citizens' Network Think-Act-Left:* A distinctly political social movement established in 2023 with the goal of developing a new left-wing political agenda that responds to current social and political challenges. Within the scope of its initiatives, the collective holds bazaars to gather essential goods for socially marginalised populations, such as incarcerated women with young children, refugees, migrants (Think & Act Left, n.d.).

Our research aimed to explore participants' motivations for engaging in collective actions, the knowledge and skills they perceived themselves to have gained and the processes through which they acquired these competencies.

From each of the four collectives included in the study, two individuals were selected using a simple randomisation procedure from a pool of consistently active members who had indicated both willingness to participate and availability for in-depth interviews, yielding a total sample of eight participants. Therefore, the participants in this study constitute a purposive (judgmental) sample**,** a form of non-probability sampling in which individuals are deliberately selected based on predefined criteria that align with the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). Unlike random sampling, which seeks statistical representativeness, purposive sampling targets individuals whose characteristics and experiences can most effectively illuminate the research focus (Patton, 2015). Accordingly, participants were selected for their knowledge, engagement, and capacity to articulate insights, experiences, and emotions relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Although this approach limits generalisability, it is methodologically appropriate for studies seeking in-depth understanding from a specific subgroup – such as activists within social movements – where analytical relevance outweighs demographic breadth (Patton, 2015). As a researcher, I approached the field as both an observer and a participant with prior familiarity with the collectives, a position that offered valuable contextual insight but also required ongoing reflexivity to remain aware of how my assumptions, relationships, and commitments shaped the research process and interpretation.

The individuals who finally participated in our study were between 45 and 65 years old, possessed a higher-education background and were either currently employed or retired. It is important to note that the participants were selected through a random sampling process within each collective and can be regarded as representative of the

residents of Chalandri – the area in which this research was conducted – a district of Athens predominantly inhabited by middle- and upper-income, middle-aged, and highly educated individuals.

A thematic analysis approach, employing data collected through semi-structured interviews, was adopted because, according to the literature, allows researchers to explore how individuals make sense of their lives and the meanings they attach to their experiences, in this case learning (Cohen, et al., 2017). The interviews conducted between November 1, 2024, and January 31, 2025, were carried out in a supportive environment designed to ensure participants' comfort and promote trust, in line with established ethical standards of informed consent and confidentiality, thereby facilitating open dialogue and the uninhibited articulation of experiences and perspectives.

The experiences of the selected participants in our research are complex and multilayered, encompassing diverse dimensions of their engagement in collective activities. These experiences are deeply embedded within, and shaped by, the broader social and political contexts in which the participants operate. The challenge in analysing the empirical material from these interviews primarily lies in the attempt to understand and represent this complexity with authenticity, sincerity, and credibility (Mertens, 2010).

Data analysis

As previously discussed, the empirical material for this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews in which participants reflected on their motivations for engaging in collective action and their perceptions of the knowledge and skills developed through such involvement.

The semi-structured interviews focused on three main questions: What motivated participants to engage in collective action? What forms of knowledge and skills do they perceive to have acquired through their involvement? And how do they describe the processes through which these were acquired?

The interviews were recorded and analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework as follows. Guided by the research questions recurring patterns of meaning, or *themes*, within data were identified in a deductive or top-down manner driven by our theoretical interest in the topic. A theme as put by Braun and Clarke (2006) 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (p. 82).

Combining deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) approaches, our thematic analysis of the data was informed by a socio-cultural perspective that views learning as situated, dialogical, and shaped by the social contexts in which it occurs. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) recommended procedure, the thematic analysis proceeded through six sequential phases. In the first phase, interview transcripts were read closely to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences within collective action. In the second phase, initial codes were systematically generated to identify salient features of the data. These codes captured participants' reflections on their motivations for engagement, the practical knowledge and skills gained through participation, and the processes by which these competencies were developed. The coding process revealed a multifaceted pattern of learning emerging from participation in collective activities. Motivational dimensions were expressed through codes such as 'embodied solidarity', 'moral responsibility', 'reciprocal emotional benefit', and 'response to social injustice'. Early engagement was reflected in learning through action and perspective transformation. Impacts of participation encompassed both practical and socio-emotional domains, including acquisition of experiential knowledge, development

of empathy and adaptability, enhanced active listening, exposure to diversity, emotional fulfilment, formation of social bonds, civic awareness, broadened perspectives, and a sense of belonging and solidarity. Learning processes were reflected in codes such as critical self-reflection, emotional reappraisal, interpersonal understanding, social learning, self-directed engagement, and ethical awareness, highlighting the interconnection of cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions in participants' transformative experiences.

In the third phase, preliminary themes were constructed by identifying patterns and relationships among the codes. These themes were then reviewed and refined in the fourth phase to ensure internal coherence, distinctiveness, and consistency with the study's research objectives. The fifth phase involved defining and naming the themes, which captured the central dimensions of the inquiry:

- Reasons motivating adults to participate in collective action**,**
- Knowledge and skills acquired through participation**,** including three sub-themes (practical and technical knowledge, social and communicative competencies, and political knowledge), and
- Processes of adult learning within collective action

Finally, the sixth phase entailed integrating the empirical findings with theoretical interpretation, linking participants' narratives to broader understandings of informal and non-formal learning within socio-cultural contexts.

This procedure ensured a focused yet interpretive thematic analysis, driven by our specific research objectives while allowing for rich, nuanced engagement with the interview data.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the themes identified are not rigidly distinct or mutually exclusive; instead, they frequently intersect and interact, reflecting the complexity and multidimensional nature of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Findings of adult learning in urban collective activities

Based on the thematic analysis, the main findings are presented below in a concise and structured manner. As mentioned, selected interview excerpts are included to illustrate each theme and support the conclusions drawn. To ensure anonymity, quotations are attributed using participants' first-name initials. This approach reinforces analytical credibility while centring participants' voices in the interpretation.

Reasons for participation in collective action

The findings of our research suggest two primary motivations behind individuals' engagement in the activities of the collectivities previously discussed: the expression of solidarity with people facing social, economic, or personal problems; and a strong desire to contribute positively to the local society and the common social good.

A number of our participants expressed the view that their involvement stems from a deep sense of empathy and moral obligation toward others, particularly those experiencing marginalisation or vulnerability. One participant remarked:

> I want to connect with other people, to fight for our rights. I feel that helping others makes you stronger. I start to understand the feelings of being in their situation – especially during

> a time of crisis, when I see a need for care everywhere: care for refugees, Roma people, migrants. To put it simply, I step into the other person's shoes. (K)

This statement illustrates how participation often adopts a form of embodied solidarity, where understanding and action go hand in hand.

The idea that social sensitivity should lead into action was a recurring theme in the words of the participants in our research. As another participant stated:

> It is not enough to be aware or concerned about the cause of a problem. I must actively work toward its solution to have peace in our mind. And in return, our actions come back to us as positive energy and a smile. (T)

This reflection encapsulates the reciprocal emotional dimension of engagement: giving back to the community not only helps others but also nourishes the self.

Several participants described their participation experiences as a potential source of personal transformation, as illustrated by participant R, who reflected:

> I feel fortunate to have had this experience. Every day I felt satisfied, even when I encountered deep suffering – poverty, illness, hardship. It fills me up. I feel useful. And through this, I found paths to do even more acts. (R)

Her words highlight how collective action can become a source of personal growth and a renewed sense of purpose.

Other interviewees described particular causes – such as animal protection, environmental degradation, poverty alleviation, and social inequality – that spurred them to take action, framing their engagement as a direct response to issues they perceived as urgent and meaningful.

One explained: 'I felt the need to do more for stray animals than just feel sad when I saw them wandering hungry in the streets' (H).This quote illustrates how moral discomfort can motivate individuals to move beyond passive concern to active engagement.

For certain participants, retirement – and the increased availability of time it afforded – played a significant role in enabling their engagement. As one participant shared: 'After I retired, I told myself that as long as I am strong and have free time, I will contribute wherever I can in our community' (R). These accounts reflect how different life stages can open up new opportunities for civic engagement.

It is worth noting that, while participants often acknowledged the personal rewards of their involvement, they consistently emphasised that such benefits were not the driving force behind their actions. As one put it succinctly: 'I became involved in the collective out of a desire to help others. The fact that I also gain something is undeniable – but this is never my motivation' (B).

Lastly, participant V offered a particularly rich reflection on the deeper personal and cultural dimensions of offering:

> For me, it is both a need and a desire to contribute in improving living conditions. It is the need to be part of a collective that places the 'we' above the 'I'. Maybe it comes from a kind of 'motherly' habit – to give to others while putting you aside. (V)

This testimony eloquently captures the layered motivations behind participation, blending personal values, emotional needs, and social ideals into a coherent ethic of care and responsibility.

Especially compelling insights emerge from responses to the question, 'How did you learn about the movement before joining it?' which capture a *disorienting dilemma* and in and in one respect a *perspective transformation*, two interrelated key points in transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2006).

A participant in Think-Act Left Movement recounts:

> One day, while waiting at the bus stop, I saw a poster calling for a meeting about police brutality and the rule of law. I went out of curiosity, expecting loud speeches, but instead, I heard neighbors – people I recognised – sharing real stories of injustice. That's when I understood: real change is not a politician's promise, it is us, coming together in our community to learn and act. (T)

This person approaches a meeting out of curiosity, anticipating 'loud speeches' but instead encounters familiar neighbors sharing authentic experiences of injustice. This unexpected shift challenges prior assumptions about how change happens and who drives it. The realisation that 'real change is not a politician's promise, it is us' was something akin to a 'perspective transformation', as the participant in our study moves from viewing political action as external and institutional to recognising the agency of ordinary people within their community. Another participant involved in the Protection of the Environment Association narrates

> One afternoon as I was walking by the creek, I noticed a group of people cleaning it and holding signs. Curious, I asked what was going on. They explained they were working to protect the creek and invited me to join their movement. In that moment, I did not even hesitate – I knew I had to be part of it. (E)

What begins as curiosity about people cleaning the Creek becomes an immediate recognition of shared responsibility and agency 'I knew I had to be part of it'. This moment exemplifies how unexpected, community-based experiences can trigger perspective transformation and foster new commitments to collective action.

Knowledge and skills acquired via collective action participation

Our analysis identified three primary domains of knowledge and skills that participants perceived they have acquired through their involvement in collective activities: (i) practical or technical knowledge, (ii) social and communicative competencies, and (iii) political knowledge, in a very broad sense.

Practical or technical knowledge

Practical or technical knowledge refers to skills that enable participants to carry out the necessary tasks in order to advance the objectives of the collective initiatives. These include digital literacy, media skills, financial management, events organisation, effective communication, publicity techniques, and social networking. As various scholars have pointed out (e.g., Walter, 2007), such knowledge empowers participants in a movement not only to act more effectively but also to question dominant hegemonic or *common-sense* ideologies, fostering the creation of alternative meanings rooted in collective identity.

One participant illustrated this by reflecting: 'I do not underestimate the skills I developed through formal education, but real learning happened to me through experience, socialisation, and the shared realities within the group' (H). Another described the practical benefits of this engagement: 'In the Solidarity Clinic we learned a

lot we did not know – about substances, medication, scheduling, appointments... there was a local supportive network that provided donations in pharmaceutical and medical materials, even money' (K). Managing funds was another critical learning experience:

> I had financial responsibilities in the collectivity. I had to keep careful records, write everything down – how much I paid, how much I received, how much balance is. It was my first time I had to manage money, and I learned everything an accountant should know. (K)

Social and communicative competencies

Social and communicative competencies are integral to fostering sustained participation and cohesion within collectives. They include enhanced awareness of social, political, and economic structures, the cultivation of empathy toward the struggles of others, and the development of critical consciousness. This critical awareness enables participants to examine systemic injustices and understand the root causes of social problems. Through exposure to diverse perspectives, individuals challenge dominant narratives and begin to articulate alternative interpretations of their social reality. One participant recalled: 'I learned to adapt my behaviour according to each person in need or elderly person's personality, which extended to every aspect of my life' (T). Another interviewee noted: 'I learned to be patient, to listen' (H). These interactions also expanded their understanding of the experiences of socially marginalised people: 'I saw another side of reality – I met people and faced problems I had never known about, like teenage mothers or individuals recently released from prison' (R).

Engagement also had emotional and relational impacts: 'It filled me with joy and optimism. It taught me that there are no dead-ends. You can always do something – big or small – for many people or for few' (K). Participants frequently spoke of the deep social bonds that they created through their participation in the collective actions: 'I made connections, met amazing people… all different, but everyone found a way to help. I formed strong ties, as if we had known each other for years' (V).

Political knowledge

Political knowledge, in a broad sense, acquired through collective action helped participants understand broader socio-political realities and interpret public issues from a viewpoint beyond their immediate personal situations. This knowledge fostered a sense of civic engagement and public responsibility. As our findings indicate, participants developed the ability to identify and address social problems and to situate their personal experiences within wider structural contexts.

As one interviewee described: 'I learnt through real-life cases. I felt immersed in what is happening around me – it is not just personal, it is social. I want to contribute not just to my family, but to society' (F). Another participant, until that time socially withdrawn, reported a significant shift: 'I used to not even greet people living next door… Now I speak to people who come here, I have conversations; I listen to their problems and efforts, which I had never imagined' (K).

Such a shift in perspective often culminated in a deepened ethical commitment: 'There is so much suffering around us. Can we truly be well when the person next door is in pain? That became my motivation – that we should all be well' (R).

Finally, apart from these specific domains of learning, participants described acquiring more generalised forms of knowledge that led to personal transformation or a shift in life orientation. This knowledge often transcends traditional categorisations of learning. 'I cannot say I learned something entirely new, but I did get to know myself

better and developed self-esteem through my involvement' (K). Another participant expressed this as: 'I would call them life lessons. I cannot pinpoint exactly what I learned, but I know the experience made me stronger' (T). Other participants noted a broadening of their perspectives: 'A whole new world opened to me. I learned a lot, even though it is hard to say exactly what or where' (V). Social belonging was also a key outcome of their participation in a social collectivity: 'As someone new to the city, I needed social connection – and I found it. I made friends among the volunteers, and we are still in touch' (F).

These insights illuminate the multifaceted nature of learning within collective actions, demonstrating that such experiences transcend the mere acquisition of functional competencies to encompass the development of critical awareness, enhanced social and interpersonal connections, and profound personal transformation. Participants' reflections indicate that engagement in collective activities can foster heightened self-awareness, resilience, and an expanded sense of agency, while also broadening ethical and social perspectives and reinforcing the significance of communal solidarity and belonging. Thus, learning in such contexts is both cognitive and affective, influencing not only individuals' capacities but also their identities and their ways of relating to others and to society at large.

Processes of learning within collective action

An exploration of how participants in collective activities acquire knowledge reveals two distinct, yet interrelated, processes: critical reflection and emotional engagement. Brookfield (2010) has extensively analysed critical reflection as a fundamental process in adult learning, through which adults analyse and challenge assumptions, beliefs, and social structures that influence their thinking and behavior. He has also argued that critical reflection is not merely a learning technique, but a *practice of freedom* that helps adults becomes more critical and creative citizens.

This approach follows a pattern that is broadly similar to Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning, highlighting comparable processes wherein individuals fundamentally alter deeply held perspectives through critical self-examination.

In the context of social movements, learning often stems from reflective engagement with transformative practices. As Melero and Gil-Jaurena (2019) suggest, such self-reflective processes enable participants to question, revise, and develop new knowledge and behaviors aligned with collective goals. One participant echoed this sentiment by stating: 'I reached the age of fifty and then realised what truly empowers me, and everything I've learned has ultimately become an asset in my life' (T). Another interviewee noted: 'I reassessed many things I had previously considered important in my life' (R). And a third one comments: 'I became more familiar with behaviors of people who used to be strangers to me… Now I try to understand the peculiarities of each one' (K).

Experiences of confusion, doubt, and challenge often prompt participants in social movements to critically re-evaluate their prior beliefs and attitudes, a process described in terms of emotional re-appraisal and shifts in perceived group norms and efficacy (Smith et al., 2021). The following quotes from interviews with our research participants are illustrative.

> At first, I thought change only came from politicians or big organisations. But being part of this movement, hearing real stories and facing tough questions, made me realise I had it

> wrong. I started questioning everything I believed about power, justice, and my own role in it all. (T)

> Seeing the damage done to the Creek is frustrating, and sometimes I feel angry about how long we have been ignored. But standing alongside others who care just as much gives me hope. In those moments, I realised we're not alone – and together, we can still make a difference. (E)

> I used to think protecting animals was just about kindness, but being part of this movement made me see it is also about justice and responsibility. It challenged everything I believed and pushed me to take real action. (H)

As evidenced by the interview responses mentioned above, critical reflection contributes not just to individual change but also to cultivating a collective mindset.

The variety of emotions that may arise during the learning processes offers different learning experiences to adults who learn through collective activities. Many researchers argue that emotions are one of the main factors affecting an individual's learning process (Dirkx, 2008). These findings remain valid irrespective of the distinction between the emotional experiences adults encounter in learning contexts and those arising in their everyday social interactions (Zembylas, 2007).

Analysis of participants' experiences suggests that the emotions influencing their learning processes were primarily triggered by their cognitive appraisal of each activity.

Specifically, participants interpreted the relevance, difficulty, and alignment of these activities with their personal goals and prior experiences, which in turn influenced their emotional responses and level of engagement in learning. These findings align closely with Dirkx's (2001) analysis of adult learning. Dirkx emphasises that emotions are integral to the construction of meaning, arising from learners' active interpretation and imaginative engagement with their experiences. This theoretical perspective supports the notion that emotions in adult learning are not incidental but are deeply intertwined with how individuals make sense of and find significance in their learning contexts (Dirkx, 2001). As one participant exemplified:

> And beyond the good I do for others, I will also be doing good for myself. The very feeling, the emotional satisfaction that I receive through giving, is crucial for my self-esteem. Knowledge, experiences, connections, recognition, love, satisfaction. I will offer a lot – and receive even more. (E)

Another participant reports her emotions arisen when she relates to others: **'**Although the people we served were poor, uneducated, and worn down, they are marked by kindness and dignity' (R). The emotional intensity involved in these contexts can profoundly shape how adults experience and assimilate new knowledge. As one participant exemplified: 'Even the most committed volunteer as me needs to hear a thank you, a well done. Yet, despite disappointment or lack of recognition, I keep going on … because that's what I wish to do' (H). Such expressions highlight how emotional experiences – ranging from fulfilment and solidarity to frustration and exclusion – become formative learning events. The emotional dimension is not merely incidental. Numerous researchers affirm that emotions are central to adult learning, as they influence motivation, perception, and cognitive processing (Dirkx, 2008).

Participants also reported potentially transformative experiences in their relationships with others and in their internal states of mind. 'I became more familiar with behaviors that used to make me uncomfortable. Now I try to understand each person's uniqueness' (K). 'My contact with nature makes me calmer, but also more independent,

I believe, because its laws apply everywhere in life' (E). These insights suggest that emotional engagement promotes empathy, self-awareness, and interpersonal growth, all of which are integral to the learning process (i.e., Atta & Holst, 2023).

Another significant mechanism traced in our research is learning through social interaction. In such settings, participants acquire knowledge by observing and collaborating with more experienced members. This informal mentorship, coupled with self-directed learning – through study and dialogue with peers – enhances participants' capacity for independent thought and collective problem-solving. One participant explained: 'I like to "take" from others what I do not know – to be influenced by people I admire for their character or psyche. Imagine – I never used to approach animals, and now I have a cat in my house' (F). Notably, within this context, participants in the collective activity demonstrate an increasing ability to self-regulate their learning processes. As one participant observed, 'I once waited for direction, uncertain of my own voice or next steps – but now, I seek answers with others or take the initiative to find them myself' (R). These self-directed strategies were frequently strengthened through involvement in non-hierarchical, participatory structures that fostered collective responsibility and mutual support. Within this setting, participants described shifts in their reference frameworks, prompting them to reconsider assumptions about leadership, activism, and solidarity. As one participant explained, 'Without a designated leader, we all shared knowledge – making it easier to learn together' (R), while another reflected, 'Since no one was in control and each of us contributed to every task, mutual learning came naturally' (B).

These overlapping processes of cognitive analysis, emotional investment, and social learning cultivate a rich, multi-dimensional learning environment. And beyond technical skills, it is the human dimension that often leaves the most profound impression: 'The people who accepted our help were genuinely grateful, often offering their skills and knowledge because they wanted to feel useful and give something back. They shared what little they had, and their generosity was a powerful life lesson' (K).

Finally, experiences with nature also emerged as learning catalysts, contributing to a deeper sense of inner calm and autonomy. One participant noted: 'Being in touch with nature makes us more peaceful and more independent. Its laws apply everywhere in life' (E).

In sum, learning within collective action emerges through a constellation of interrelated processes – critical reflection, emotional engagement, social interaction, and experiential learning – which together foster both personal transformation and collective empowerment. Participation in such initiatives transcends the act of offering help; it becomes a dynamic journey of self-discovery and growth that deepens individuals' understanding of themselves, others, and broader societal structures.

The participants' reflections illustrate that collective action fosters empathy, solidarity, and a heightened sense of social responsibility, particularly through interactions with marginalised communities. Experiential learning enhances practical competencies – such as healthcare assistance, financial management, and organisational skills – while also cultivating communication abilities, including patience, adaptability, and active listening in diverse contexts.

Moreover, collective action functions as a forum for political learning, heightening participants' awareness of systemic injustices, promoting civic engagement, and encouraging a re-evaluation of personal values. The development of critical consciousness through this process often leads to increased self-awareness and transformative shifts in how individuals engage with their communities and approach social change. In essence, learning within collective action is multidimensional,

encompassing emotional, practical, social, and political aspects. It not only fosters individual development but also strengthens active citizenship (English & Mayo, 2012).

Concluding comments: Adult learning flows into and from social collectivities

This study explored how adults acquire knowledge and skills through engagement in social collectivities and movements, highlighting the informal and non-formal learning dynamics inherent in collective practice. Although the study was not intended to produce universally applicable findings, its insights are firmly grounded in the lived experiences of individuals participating in diverse forms of collective action.

Through a thematic analysis of the data collected, it became evident that the learning outcomes of our participants – whether arising from intentional or incidental learning processes – emerged through situational, socially embedded interactions and were essentially collective. Their learning experiences, intertwined with emotions such as frustration, hope, anger, and solidarity, often generated confusion, doubt, and challenges that prompted them to set aside immediate learning difficulties and begin critically reassessing prior beliefs or attitudes. These disorienting moments, frequently accompanied by perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1997), marked turning points in participants' understanding of their actions and roles within the collective.

Contemporary urban social movements, unlike traditional forms of mobilisation such as labor movements, exhibit a decentralised and pluralistic character. They synthesise diverse motivations, ideologies, and experiences, transforming everyday struggles into opportunities for learning and agency (Psimitis, 2017). In this sense, social movements function not only as agents of social change but also as living spaces of adult education (Jesson & Newman, 2004).

In the Greek context, initiatives such as citizens' cooperatives, community kitchens, barter networks, self-managed spaces, and environmental or anti-fascist movements exemplify how collective action operates simultaneously as a field of practice and as a form of pedagogy. Knowledge within these collectivities is constructed from below – through participation, dialogue, and shared experience – rather than transmitted from above.

Our findings reveal that learning unfolds through a series of interconnected phases encompassing the periods before, during, and after participation. Prior to engagement, learning emerges through processes of awareness and critical questioning; during participation, it develops through lived practice and collaborative interaction; and following engagement, it continues through reflection and the envisioning of future action. Participation in social collectives fostered evolving relationships between individuals and collectivities, shaping both personal and collective identities. This was vividly expressed in many of the participants' research narratives.

Our research findings also highlight instances in which collective engagement transforms participation into a process of learning. Through dialogue and collaboration, participants convert experience into shared knowledge, fostering the co-creation of understanding. In this way, participation influences not only the actions undertaken but also the interpretive frameworks and identities through which individuals make sense of those actions.

From such a perspective, learning in social movements is best understood as an interactive process shaped by the dynamic interplay between individuals and their social environment. It is through this interaction that experience is transformed into knowledge, underscoring the social and dialogical nature of adult learning within collective contexts. Social movements seem therefore to be not merely vehicles for social transformation but

also dynamic educational spaces where citizenship, identity, and agency are continuously negotiated and redefined.

Ultimately, this collective engagement – through which the notion of *we* is redefined – serves as a catalyst for individual learning processes and positions social movements as critical sites for the production and dissemination of knowledge. In this context, adult education and social movements converge within a shared space where knowledge understood as a socially constructed phenomenon flows within and among individuals, emerging from lived experience and returning to it in a continuous cycle of collective meaning-making.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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