Emergent Prefigurative Politics and Social Psychological Processes: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract

Prefigurative politics, the enactment of desired future social relations in present social change practices, has become central in contemporary political organizing. Protest movements like the Arab Spring and recent Latin American uprisings illustrate prefiguration emerging through struggle rather than from a pre-existing political programme. This paper reports a systematic review of the empirical psychological literature on prefigurative politics. We analyse 19 studies, exploring key research questions, methodologies, and contexts to provide a critical overview of the existing research. Through a thematic analysis of social psychological processes described in the studies, we identify three focuses: processes facilitating the *emergence* of prefigurative projects (e.g., empowerment), psychological *outcomes* of participation (e.g., sense of community), and the role of psychological processes as prefigurative actors face practical *challenges* (e.g., intra-group discussion). Our findings indicate that prefiguration is a socially embedded, dynamic, and agentic process where the grievances, psychological needs, and aspirations of individuals and groups within their social context shape the emergence, content, and outcomes of prefigurative politics. Building on our review, we propose a research agenda for 'emergent prefigurative politics', provide methodological recommendations, and highlight the promise of dynamic social identity models of collective action to address the challenges of researching prefigurative phenomena.

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The term 'prefigurative politics' refers to the practices and strategies employed by political actors to enact alternative futures in the present (Fians, 2022). The increasing prevalence of prefigurative projects worldwide, ranging from eco-villages to protest-movements, serve as evidence of the growing influence and relevance of prefiguration in today's political landscape (Yates & de Moor, 2022). In recent protest-movements, such as the Arab Spring 2011 and recent Latin American uprisings (2017-20), we have witnessed the 'spontaneous' adoption of practices that embody desired future societies through ongoing struggles (Sitrin, 2020).

Prefigurative politics, along with its emergence through struggle, is a well-established topic in social theory (Barker, 1995; Graeber, 2013; Raekstad, 2018). However, it has only recently gained attention in social psychology, where the literature consists of disparate contributions and lacks a published research review.

Against this backdrop, in this paper we systematically review the empirical literature within psychology on prefiguration, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of 'emergent prefigurative politics'. Building on our review and critical analysis, we then propose a research agenda for advancing work in this area. In doing so, we highlight the potential of psychological perspectives that engage fruitfully with the theoretical and methodological challenges of studying these creative initiatives for radical social change.

The rise of prefigurative politics

The world is currently facing a constellation of interconnected crises – notably the impending threat of ecological collapse, the relentless humanitarian emergencies in conflict zones, and the deepening of inequalities across the globe. This predicament underscores the urgent need for a radical shift in how we imagine and create our present and future worlds (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2014; Power et al., 2023). In traditional politics, there is often a striking lack of compelling vision for alternative futures, with a decline in voter turnout since the 1990s indicating a waning trust in representative democracy (van de Sande, 2020). Alongside this, there has been rising interest in *'prefigurative politics'*, which refers to social change projects where participants embody their goals and vision of a future society through their ongoing social practices, social relations, and decision-making processes (Monticelli, 2018). Rather than 'wait' for large-scale structural change, people collectively *prefigure* new forms in the 'here and now' (Cornish et al., 2016).

A broad distinction is often made between prefiguration as a project-based construction of alternatives, such as eco-villages, and prefiguration as a means of protest, exemplified by uprisings and protest-movements (Yates, 2015). The former often involves deliberate efforts to organize in a prefigurative way and to establish varying forms of organization to uphold these practices (Monticelli, 2022). The latter raises significantly more questions, given that it often involves groups that do not begin the action talking about radical social change; rather, new prefigurative understandings and practices *emerge* through the struggle.

Recent prominent examples of emergent prefigurative movements include the Arab Spring (Awad, 2016), Hong Kong Umbrella Movement (Chow, 2019), and recent Latin American Uprisings (Sitrin, 2020). These diverse movements, despite their geographic and cultural differences, all served as arenas where ideals of equality and democracy were not only

advocated for but also embodied in the present (Sitrin, 2020). Participants in these movements, in their resistance against repressive forces, engaged in practices of horizontality, direct action, and self-organization (van de Sande, 2013), prefiguring the kind of society they sought to bring about.

Research on prefigurative politics across the social sciences

Prefiguration, while deeply rooted in the history of anarchist thought (Gordon, 2018), only emerged as a concept within academic social movement studies during the 'New Left' movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Boggs, 1977). A literature search by Yates and de Moor (2022) on published research between 1975 and 1995 revealed a mere 30 citations on prefigurative politics across the social sciences, reflecting a notable lack of scholarly engagement during this period.

However, over the past two decades, there has been a surge in academic interest, sparked by the anti-globalization movement and the Arab Spring, which both helped popularise the term (Monticelli, 2022). This has accelerated in recent years, evidenced by the recent publication of the first book on prefigurative politics (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), the recent release of the first edited volume (Monticelli, 2022), and publication of another introductory book published last year (van de Sande, 2023).

Despite this recent upturn in interest, research on prefigurative politics is still in its early stages in the field of social movement studies. Highlighting this issue, authors have lamented the lack of sociological (Monticelli, 2018) and psychological (Trott, 2016) explanatory frameworks and a notable lack of empirical studies (Sitrin, 2020). Consequently, in social movement research, the subject of prefiguration emerging through struggle has not yet enjoyed attention proportionate to its contemporary relevance.

However, in the field of social theory, the phenomenon of emergent prefigurative politics has been a topic of scholarly attention for some time. For example, Marxist theorists, such as Barker (1995) and Raekstad (2018, 2022), have examined the links between prefigurative politics and collective struggle, drawing on the Marxist notion of collective self-emancipation. Unlike orthodox interpretations of Marx, which emphasise the socialist capture of the means of production as the solution to human emancipation (Maeckelbergh, 2017), these thinkers have highlighted the transformative power of collective resistance for human consciousness, needs, and drives. Raekstad (2022), for example, argues that Marx stressed the importance of revolutionary struggles not only for changing society, but also for *transforming* those involved in ways that enable them to bring about social change. In essence, this suggests a dialectical coincidence of societal change and self-transformation within a single process (Barker, 1995).

From this viewpoint, prefigurative practices can emerge as the result of a collective challenge wherein people, as an outcome of struggle, begin to conceive of the world in different ways and undergo *changes* in their needs, goals, and desires (Raekstad, 2018). In a form of virtuous cycle, through these empowering experiences of collective self-organization, people acquire a taste of truly free and equal relations, and as a result, will go on to seek them in subsequent political and social action (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020).

The study of prefigurative politics in social psychology

Although these Marxist accounts of prefiguration imply the role of a range of psychological changes (e.g., consciousness) in its emergence through struggle, these theorists do not provide detailed psychological explanations. However, commentators have lamented the scarcity of psychological research on prefigurative politics, calling on researchers to address this gap (Cornish et al., 2016; Trott, 2016). Furthermore, there is no published review systematically mapping the existing research. A review would provide an outline of the research landscape and simultaneously extract lessons about the psychological study of prefiguration to guide future work.

The present study

In this paper, we systematically review the empirical psychological literature on prefigurative politics, guided by two main aims. Our first aim is to provide a critical overview of the existing research landscape and to explore the social psychological processes underlying prefigurative politics, as suggested in the literature. Our second aim is to address the specific research question: To what extent has existing research suggested the social psychological processes that facilitate the emergence of prefigurative politics through struggle?

Based on our review, which provides insights about the methodological and theoretical challenges involved in the study of prefiguration, the limitations of the existing literature, and the gaps that remain, we develop a research agenda for future work on emergent prefigurative politics. Moving forward, we emphasise the importance of adopting theoretical and methodological approaches tailored to these unique research challenges. Accordingly, we advocate for the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and in particular dynamic social identity models of collective action (Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2009; Smith et al., 2014), as promising theoretical frameworks for future work.

Methods

In line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), we designed a comprehensive search, screening, and inclusion protocol was to identify relevant studies in the psychology literature.

Search strategy

We conducted a systematic search across three key electronic databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO. By conducting an extensive examination of the theoretical literature related to prefiguration and an initial exploratory search, we developed specific search-terms and formed search-strings compatible with the interface of each database. For example, in databases equipped with integrated subject-area filtering, we utilized this function to narrow our results to psychology; while in others, we included 'psychology" manually in the search strings. For Scopus, we implemented a dual-strategy aimed to broaden our scope and try to capture all the relevant literature. For a comparison of all search variations refer to Table 1. After removing duplicates from the search results, 337 articles remained and underwent screening for

further assessment.

Table 1. *Search strategy: search-strings across databases*

Database	Search string	Variations
Scopus (Strategy 1)	*TITLE-ABS-KEY ("prefigurative politics") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("prefigurat*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("alter-cultur*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("lifestyle politics") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("be the change") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (politics) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (protest*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social movement") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (activis*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("communit*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("collective act*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("collective participat*")*	Integrated subject filter option was used to filter results to psychology
Scopus (Strategy 2)	*TITLE-ABS-KEY ("prefigurative politics") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("prefigurat*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("alter-cultur*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("lifestyle politics") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("be the change") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (politics) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (protest*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social movement") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (activis*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("communit*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("collective act*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("collective participat*") AND ALL (psychology)*	AND ALL(psychology) was used as a manual alternative filter strategy
Google scholar	("prefigurative politics" *OR* "prefigurat*" *OR* "alter-cultur*" *OR* "lifestyle politics" *OR* "be the change") *AND* (" politics" *OR* "protest*" *OR* "social movement" OR "activis*" OR "communit*" OR "collective act*" *OR* "collective participat*") *source:* Psychology *AND Publication Type:* Peer Reviewed Journal	*Source* search was used to filter results to Psychology.
PsycINFO	(*Abstract:* "Prefigurative politics" *OR Abstract:* Prefigurat* *OR Abstract:* "alter-cultur*" *OR Abstract:* "lifestyle politics" *OR Abstract:* "be the change") *AND (Abstract:* politics *OR Abstract:* protest* *OR Abstract:* "social movement" *OR Abstract:* activis* *OR Abstract:* communit* *OR Abstract:* "collective act*" *OR Abstract:* "collective participat*") *AND ALL:* psychology *AND Publication Type:* Peer Reviewed Journal	-Abstract search field was used as *TITLE-ABS-KEY* not available -AND ALL (psychology) was used as a filter strategy.

Screening and inclusion

Following this initial search, a screening process was conducted to assess the eligibility of the identified studies. The screening processes consisted of both title/abstract screening and full-text screening to assess the relevance of each study based on the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles were eligible for inclusion within the review if they: were of empirical nature; were available in English; and were published in peer-reviewed psychology journals, peer-reviewed edited volumes, or by psychology scholars in non-psychology peer-reviewed journals. This decision to not include grey literature was taken to ensure the reliability of the sources included (Pickering & Byrne. 2014). Articles were not eligible if they: examined apolitical uses of prefiguration (e.g., alcoholism, childhood); were of a theoretical nature (e.g., commentaries); or were not available in English.

Our search process was aided by suggestions by experts within the field of psychology. These recommendations not only

added articles that met the inclusion criteria but also expanded our scope and introduced new search terms that engaged with prefigurative phenomena (e.g., lifestyle politics). Through this process 19 papers were considered eligible for inclusion. The selection process is illustrated below in a PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), which illustrates the stages of article identification, screening, and inclusion.
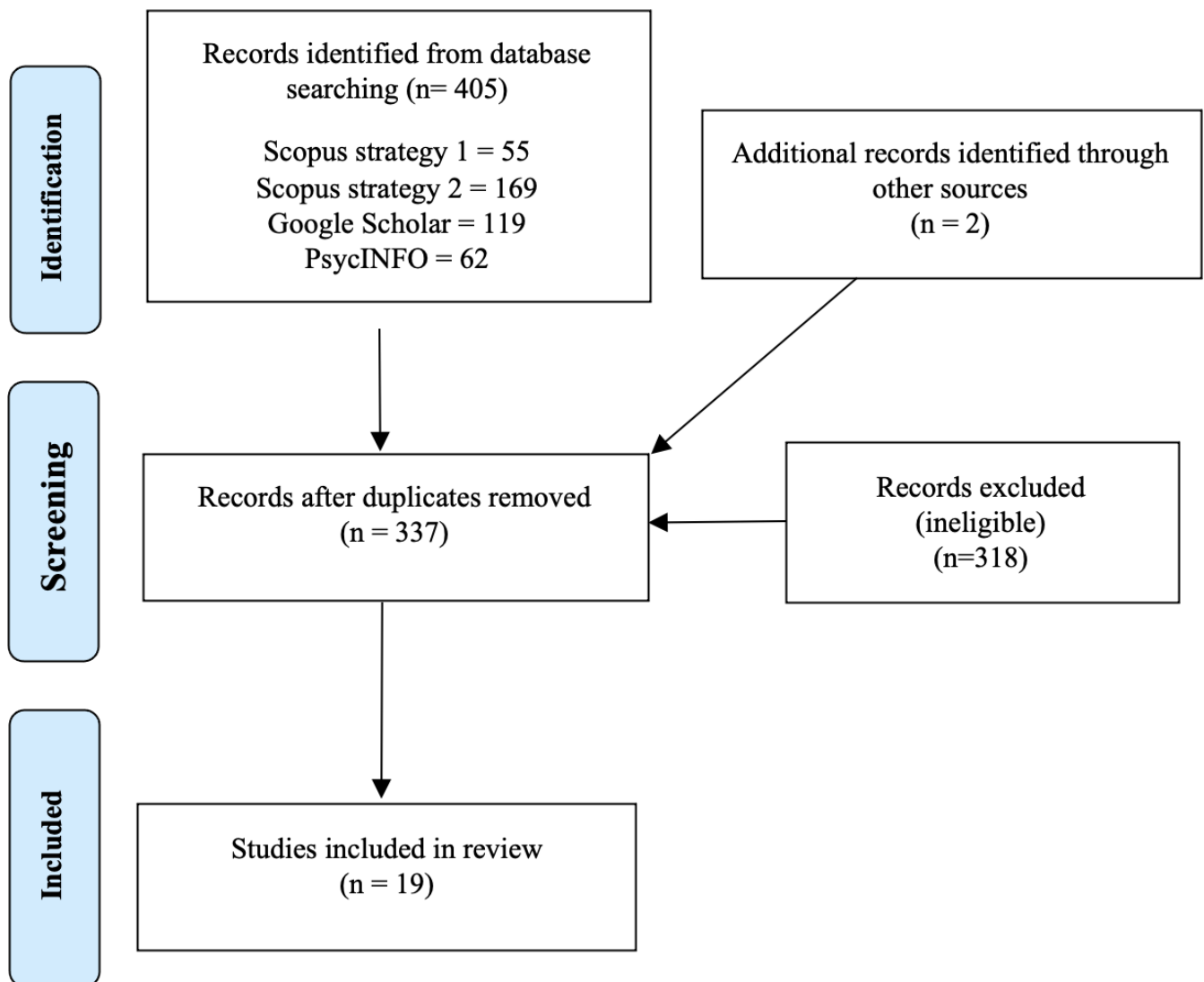

Figure 1. *PRISMA flow diagram for identification of included studies*

Analysis

The initial phase of our analysis involved a descriptive review to summarise the main characteristics of the included studies, such as methods, areas of focus, contexts, and findings. Subsequently, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to explore the social psychological underpinnings of prefigurative politics as suggested by these studies. Our analysis began with an in-depth engagement with the literature, where we identified and annotated

initial codes that appeared relevant to our research aims. We then shifted to a more structured approach, categorizing these codes into potential themes. In developing themes, we adopted a reflexive, analytical, and iterative approach. Through rounds of coding and re-coding, we sought to identify both surface-level (explicit) content and the deeper, underlying meanings (latent) within the data. This allowed us to organise our findings into central themes and sub-themes, creating an analytic narrative that highlights the social psychological processes underlying prefiguration in the existing literature.

Results

Overview of study characteristics

The literature reviewed included a relatively modest but varied collection of studies exploring prefigurative politics and its underlying psychology, published between 2016 and 2023. All the reviewed studies adopted qualitative approaches, including interview, longitudinal, and ethnographic methods. The studies were conducted in: United Kingdom (4), United States (3), Egypt (2), Australia (1), Brazil (1), Bulgaria (1), Canada (1), Colombia (1), Italy (1), Nicaragua (1), Portugal (1), Sweden (1), and Turkey (1). Notably, only seven studies focused on non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) countries, suggesting limited engagement with the diverse range of groups involved in prefigurative politics globally.

The literature explored prefigurative politics within two main types of settings. Twelve studies investigated community contexts or projects, while the remaining 7 focused on social movement or collective action contexts. In terms of theoretical frameworks, most studies drew on a range of disciplines (e.g., sociology) to adopt their own unique framework, highlighting the still-developing nature of the field. For a comprehensive overview of the studies, Table 2 presents a literature view matrix.

Table 2. *Literature review matrix of existing empirical studies on prefigurative politics*

Author / Date	Context/groups	Source	Topic/Question	Research design	Framework	Psychological processes
Awad (2016)	Egypt Revolution 2011	Journal of Social and Political Psychology	The link between social ruptures and prefigurative politics, through identity processes.	Longitudinal narrative approach using activist blogs	Identity process theory (IPT; Breakwell, 1986); social representation theory (Moscovici, 1984)	Empowerment, identity change
Biddau et al. (2016)	Transition Town Movement Initiative, Italy	Journal of Social and Political Psychology	The role of social representations, shared social identities and collective efficacy beliefs in sustaining a prefigurative movement while engaging with conventional politics.	Qualitative ethnographic methodology	Psychosocial model of community participation (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000)	Empowerment; sense of community; identity-change; place-making
	Academic	Journal of	Neoliberalism as a contextual	Semi-structured	Insights from the Social Identity Model of Collective Action	Grievances;

Coşkan et al. (2021)	collectives, Turkey	Social and Political Psychology	factor in academic collective action, through its impact on social psychological processes.	interviews; qualitative content analysis	(SIMCA; van Zomeren et al., 2008) and the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM; Drury & Reicher, 2000)	identity processes; empowerment
Dutt (2017)	Feminist grassroots organization, Nicaragua	Edited volume of social psychological contributions	The psychological outcomes of participation in a feminist prefigurative movement.	Collaborative interviews; comparative quantitative surveys.	Critical communicative methodology (Gomez et al., 2011).	Empowerment, sense of community; sense of well-being
Dussault (2022)	Neighbourhood project, Canada	Emotion, Space and Society	The contribution of prefigurative politics to place-making processes, and the psychological outcomes for participants.	Ethnographic walking interviews; inductive content analysis approach	Insights from urban studies, critical geography and environmental psychology.	Sense of community; place-making; empowerment.
Fernandez-Jesus et al (2018)	Environmental activists, Portugal	Political Psychology	1) The meanings, motives, and processes involved in lifestyle politics and collective action. 2) The extent to which people engage in lifestyle movements and/or manifestly political movements	Semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	IPT (Breakwell, 1986); Lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013)	Identity change; politicization of identity
Fonseca & Jovchelovitch (2023)	Peacebuilding course with students and former guerrilla members, Colombia	European Journal of Social Psychology	The role of knowledge encounters in facilitating the prefiguration of new social relations	Longitudinal design; focus groups and interviews	Social representation approach (Moscovici, 1984; Jovchelovitch, 2019)	Empowerment; sense of community; identity change.
Guerlain & Campbell (2016)	Community gardens, UK	Journal of Social and Political Psychology	The role of psychological outcomes of participation in a community project in facilitating the emergence of prefigurative politics	Semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions; participant observations; photovoice.	Health-enabling social spaces (Campbell & Cornish, 2010).	Empowerment; sense of well-being; sense of community
Lin et al. (2016)	Reproductive justice organizing project, USA	Journal of Social and Political Psychology	Rethinking prefiguration through relationality, self-determination, and intersectionality.	Case-study approach	Women of colour feminist praxis (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997)	Sense of dignity; self-determination
Maarek & Awad (2018)	Cooperative initiatives following the Egypt revolution 2011	Edited volume of social psychological contributions	The emergence and development of prefigurative cooperatives and the challenges in managing them.	Field visits; thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001)	The concept of imagining alternative collective futures	Identity-change; imagination processes; adaptive learning
Mihaylov (2021)	Anti-fracking movement, Bulgaria.	Journal of Community Psychology	How a prefigurative collective constructs meanings and practices of organizing in interaction with their socio-political context.	Semi-structured interviews with activists and participant observations	Community organizing and grassroots democracy framework informed by community psychology and sociology.	Empowerment; identity-change

Moskovitz & Garcia-Lorenzo (2016)	NHS Change Day Movement, UK.	Journal of Social and Political Psychology	The emergence of a prefigurative movement through empowerment and identity-change.	Longitudinal ethnographic interviews	Social Identity Model of Collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren et al., 2008); Encapsulated Social Identity Model of Collective action (ESIMCA; Thomas et al., 2012)	Empowerment; identity change
Mao et al. (2021)	Covid-19 mutual aid groups, UK	Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy	The well-being outcomes of participation in mutual-aid groups and the moderating role of politicized identity.	Semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	Social cure approach (Haslam et al., 2018)	Improved well-being; empowerment; sense of community.
O'Dwyer, Beascoechea Seguí (2023)	UK peace activists	Journal of Social and Political Psychology	How peace activists conceptualised their activism and how public perceptions were implicated in these understanding.	Semi-structured interviews; reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021)	Social representation theory	Impression-management.
Ojala (2022)	High school students, Sweden	Environmental Education Research	Everyday engagement with climate-friendly food choices and the challenges faced in unsupportive environments.	Interviews; quantitative survey	Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978)	Role modelling; identity reaffirmation.
Power (2016)	Transition movement, Australia	Journal of Social and Political Psychology	The challenges of prefigurative groups as they deal with burnout and avoid replicating existing power-structures.	Semi-structured interviews and open-ended surveys	None mentioned	Intra-group discussions
Permut (2016)	Occupy Movement, USA, 2011	Journal of Social and Political Psychology	Psychological sense of community (PSOC) as mechanism for the emergence of prefigurative politics.	Semi-structured qualitative interviews	Integrative-framework drawing on sociology and community psychology concepts – psychological sense of community (PSOC) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).	Sense of community; empowerment
Sales et al. (2020)	Brazilian public high school protests, 2015.	Mind, Culture, and Activity	Transformative Activist Stance (TAS) approach and the dialectics of individual and collective agency in the evolution of a high school occupation.	Content analysis of young peoples' social media posts, blogs, and websites	TAS (Stetzenko, 2008)	Empowerment; collaborative learning; development of 'collectvidual' agency (Stetzenko, 2008)
Trott et al. (2018)	Undergraduate students in indigenous communities, USA	Sustainability	The role of participatory action research undergraduate experiences in advancing sustainability goals and student development.	Semi-structured interviews; interpretive phenomenological analysis	Participatory action research (PRA; Kindon et al., 1997)	Empowerment; identity change

Thematic analysis of social psychological processes

In this section, we present the findings of our thematic analysis that delved into the social psychological underpinnings of prefigurative politics as indicated in existing research. Our analysis generated two main themes: 1) Social psychological processes linked to prefigurative politics and 2) The duality of social embeddedness and enactment of new understandings in prefigurative politics. Below we elaborate on these themes and their corresponding sub-themes with representative examples from individual studies.

Theme 1: Social psychological processes linked to prefigurative politics

This theme explores the intricate relationship between social psychological processes and prefigurative politics in the existing literature. Table 2 outlines the range of social processes identified in the literature. Broadly, the relationship between social psychological processes and prefiguration can be categorised into the following subthemes: 1.1 Social psychological changes that *facilitate* engagement with prefigurative politics; 1.2) Social psychological changes that occur as a *result* of engaging in prefigurative politics; 1.3) Social psychological processes and practical challenges.

Subtheme 1.1: Social psychological changes that facilitate engagement with prefigurative politics. Within the reviewed literature, nine studies shed light on the emergence of prefigurative politics in both social movement and community contexts. These studies emphasized the transformative potential of collective participation, suggesting it can engender psychological changes that facilitate the adoption of prefigurative practices. These individual studies do not typically emphasise specific psychological changes, but instead refer to multiple changes to engage with this emergence process. The main psychological changes documented were empowerment, identity change, and sense of community.

Empowerment. Empowerment was the most recurring psychological change linked the emergence of prefigurative politics, explored in both social movements (Awad, 2016; Mihaylov, 2020; Permut, 2016; Sales et al., 2020) and community contexts (Fonseca & Jovchelovitch, 2023) Guerlain & Campbell, 2016; Maarek & Awad, 2018; Mao et al., 2021; Moskovitz & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2016). articipation in these projects fostered a heightened sense of individuals' and groups' ability to effect change, as well as an increased awareness of the contingency of existing arrangements in the face of collective action and participation. One example is the study conducted by Moskovitz and Garcia-Lorenzo (2016) on the NHS Change Day movement. Their ethnographic interviews suggested that the emergence of the prefigurative movement was facilitated by the empowering effect of enacting small-scale changes, which enabled participants to recognize the power of collective action and envision alternative possibilities for the NHS. The authors link these empowering effects to the adoption of prefigurative practices, such as horizontality and compassion, enacting the values and principles they wished to see realized in the healthcare system.

Identity change. Identity change was another key psychological change linked to the emergence of prefigurative politics (Awad, 2016; Maarek & Awad, 2018; Fernandez-Jesus et al., 2018; Fonseca & Jovchelovitch, 2023; Guerlain & Campbell, 2016; Maarek & Awad, 2018; Mihaylov, 2021; Moskovitz & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2016; Trott et al., 2018). Several studies suggest that collective participation and action can fundamentally shift people's self-conceptions in ways that can inform social change processes, including engagement in prefigurative politics. For example, Awad's (2016) longitudinal analysis of activist blogs from the 2013 Egyptian revolution found that this social rupture acted as a trigger for identity change, leading individuals to reconstruct their identities in empowering ways that fuelled their participation in prefigurative politics.

Positive sense of community. Another recurring change linked to engagement with prefigurative politics was positive sense of community (Dussault, 2020; Guerlain & Campbell, 2016; Permut, 2016; Sales et al. 2020; Mao et al, 2020). These studies suggest that collective action and participation can foster a positive sense of community between group members and this, in some cases, contributes to people's engagement with prefigurative politics. For example, Permut's (2016) interview research suggested that participation in Occupy camps offered individuals a profound experience of community, mutual influence, and strong affective relationships. She found that these experiences, which contrasted with

the sense of isolation experienced in participants' daily life, facilitated the adoption of prefigurative practices such as consensus-based decision-making and direct democracy.

Psychological change in the absence of a pre-existing social change agenda.Most research on the psychological processes that foster engagement with prefigurative politics explore movements or community projects established to promote social change. However, Guerlain and Campbell's (2016) study demonstrates that prefigurative politics can emerge through psychological change, even in the absence of a pre-existing political intention. Through interviews with participants of community health-enabling spaces, they suggest that the unintended psychological benefits of participation, such as greater sense of well-being and sense of community, facilitated the emergence of prefigurative politics. By organizing social gatherings and workshops, the gardens facilitated experiences of dignity, mutual respect, and equality, which offered a taste of the kind of society they would hope to live in.

Subtheme 1.2: Social psychological changes that occur as outcomes of participating in prefigurative politics.
Another collection of studies investigated possible social psychological changes that arise as outcomes of participating in prefigurative movements or projects. These studies indicate that engaging in prefigurative politics *leads* to a range of psychological changes, in some cases echoing processes identified in the studies investigating precursors (Biddau et al., 2016; Dussault, 2022; Dutt, 2017; Fernandez-Jesus et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2016; Trott et al., 2023). Evidence of a transformative psychological effect is provided by two studies exploring community organizations set up to embody prefigurative ideals and practices. Dutt (2017) observed that participation in a Nicaraguan grassroots feminist collective led to greater civic participation, empowerment, improved well-being, and a sense of community among the collective's members. Lin et al. (2016), in their analysis of a reproductive justice project for people of colour, suggested that participation contributed to an increased sense of dignity, well-being, and self-determination among participants.

Engaging in prefigurative politics naturally involves a challenge to status-quo arrangements. However, studies exploring the psychological processes that facilitate the emergence of prefiguration also highlight the transformative effect of such challenge, suggesting a reciprocal relationship (Maarek & Awad, 2018; Moskovitz & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2016; Permut, 2016; Sales et al., 2020). For example, Moskovitz and Garcia-Lorenzo (2016) argue that through enacting small changes that challenged existing arrangements in healthcare management, participants became more aware of the possibility of change and of the feasibility of alternatives.

Subtheme 1.3. Social psychological processes and practical challenges. Additionally, a series of studies shed light on the challenges prefigurative actors face, examining how social psychological processes help address some of the hurdles linked to sustained participation (Biddau et al., 2016; Maarek & Awad, 2018; Mihaylov, 2021; O'Dwyer & Beascoechea Seguí, 2023; Ojala, 2020; Power, 2016). For example, in the context of the UK peace movement, O'Dwyer and Beascoechea Seguí (2023) explore the complex discursive negotiations and strategies these activists employ, suggesting they practice impression management to counter being labelled as deluded idealists. Similarly, Biddau et al (2016), in their study of the Transition Movement in Italy, highlight the role of sense of community and shared social identities in motivating activists while they navigate bureaucratic hurdles in traditional politics.

Theme 2: The duality of social embeddedness and alternative understandings in prefiguration

The second theme generated in the analysis explores the complex relationship between prefigurative politics and the socio-cultural context within which it is embedded. The literature suggests a duality: on the one hand, the social context influences the content, emergence, and outcomes of prefigurative politics; on the other hand, these projects involve the enactment of alternatives striving to reshape the social context itself. The intricate interplay between social context and emergence of new understandings is illustrated in the following subthemes: 2.1. Experiences of social context shape new understandings and practices; 2.2 Contrast between individual and collective experiences

Subtheme 2.1. Experiences of social context shape new understandings and practices. Some studies suggest that the social context significantly influences the content of prefigurative politics, with participants' drawing on grievances, psychological needs, and aspirations linked to their social context to experiment with alternative social understandings and practices (Dussault, 2020; Mihaylov, 2021; Coşkan et al., 2021). For example, Dussault (2020), explores the formation and development of a prefigurative social centre in a Canadian neighbourhood marked by economic decline, gentrification, and lack of accessible communal services. This context of decline shaped the centre, with its members redefining an urban space to embody anti-capitalist values, such as self-management and communal welfare. Similarly, Bulgarian anti-fracking activists, frustrated by the corruption in their national politics, structured their movement as an alternative to this corruption, based on principles of informality, meritocracy, and transparency (Mihaylov, 2021).

Subtheme 2.2 Contrast between individual and collective experiences. Across studies, whether examining the emergence or outcomes of prefigurative politics, a strong contrast emerges between these transformative collective experiences and participants' usual daily experiences. For instance, studies focusing on empowerment reported that participants often experience a lack of agency and decision-making power in their everyday lives (Awad, 2016; Dussault, 2020; Dutt, 2017; Guerlain & Campbell, 2016; Mihaylov, 2021; Mao et al., 2021; Moskovitz & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2016; Sales et al., 2020). Similarly, investigations that emphasise positive sense of community reported day-to-day experiences of isolation and a lack of belonging among participants (Dussault, 2020; Mao et al., 2021; Permut, 2016), as well as instances of conflict and division (Fonseca & Jovchelovitch, 2023). These findings suggest the transformative potential of collective participation and action on everyday experience, while emphasising the intricate relationship between the psychological changes that both precede and arise from participation in prefigurative politics, and the grievances, psychological needs, and aspirations of individuals linked to their social context.

Studies on the Egyptian revolution (Awad, 2016; Maarek & Awad, 2018) and the Covid-19 pandemic (Mao et al., 2021) illustrate the role of collective responses to social crises, amidst disruptions to daily life, in contributing to the emergence of prefigurative politics. This suggests a nuanced relationship between societal ruptures and prefiguration, through the collective political responses that emerge as a result and the underlying social psychological processes.

Discussion

The aim of this review paper was twofold: to critically overview the existing broader literature on prefigurative politics and

to specifically focus on the phenomenon of emergent prefigurative politics. The search identified a relatively modest body of studies delving into the psychological underpinnings of prefiguration. Our thematic analysis identified three key focuses in the literature: the social psychological processes facilitating the emergence of prefigurative projects, the psychological outcomes of participation, and the role of social psychological processes in helping prefigurative actors face practical challenges. Through these lenses, the literature offers insights into the affective, experiential, symbolic, and communicative aspects of prefigurative politics, highlighting the complex interplay between psychological processes and socio-political dynamics.

The reviewed studies showcase the value of developing psychological perspectives on prefiguration, emphasizing the potential for future work. The literature substantiated our interest in emergent prefigurative politics, highlighting it as a promising field for these research efforts.

Reviewing the empirical literature on prefiguration offers a valuable overview of research developments but also sheds light on the unique theoretical and methodological challenges raised by the psychological study of prefiguration. We begin by addressing these challenges and their implications for research, situating them within dominant trends in social psychology. We then summarise the existing research evidence on emergent prefigurative politics, highlighting limitations and critical gaps remaining. In the last section, we outline a research agenda for future work, emphasizing the need for theoretical and methodological approaches that engage with the complex demands of studying prefiguration.

The psychological study of prefigurative politics and dominant trends in social psychology: a misalignment?

A key challenge arises from the deep embedding of prefiguration within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts, where individuals and groups mobilise around their particular grievances, needs, and aspirations. These not only shape the content of their prefigurative practices but also influence the process through which they emerge. Despite these constraining influences, prefigurative projects involve envisioning and striving to manifest alternative worlds through present actions, positioning people as capable of transcending and shaping the culture and structures that constrain them. The possibility to imagine and actualize alternative worlds suggests people are not only embedded in the past, but living, at a psychological level, in many potential futures which they can work to realize in the present (Power et al., 2023). This suggests a duality, wherein individuals are both shaped by society and capable of shaping it. As the reviewed literature emphasised, this relationship is not straightforward, with prefigurative actors navigating the challenge of enacting alternative understandings without reproducing existing structures. This tension underscores the need for a dynamic theoretical and methodological approach that engages with a dual understanding of the interplay between agency-structure, acknowledging the mutual shaping of culture and agency (Reicher, 2004).

The need for a dynamic approach is also relevant considering the insight that in collectively fighting for social change, which often involves within-and-between group interactions, participants come to envision and enact new prefigurative understandings (Vestergren et al., 2018). This highlights the need for a multi-level approach that examines the interaction between micro (e.g., appraisal) and macro processes (e.g., socio-economic system) but also delves into meso level processes, both within-group (e.g., sense of community) and between-group (e.g., repression). Furthermore, the very

emergence of new forms through struggle suggests something potentially generative about the nature of collective participation, which our theories and methods need to account for.

The preceding discussion highlights the necessity for a theoretical and methodological approach that can capture the context-specific, dynamic, and emergent nature of prefiguration, and allows for the mutual interplay between agency-structure. Yet dominant trends within social psychology have long been critiqued for undermining the field's ability to engage with social change processes which are relevant to these research needs (Moscovici, 1984; Reicher (2004; Tajfel and Turner 1979). One notable critique has targeted the tendency to neglect the historical and social context in which social psychological processes occur (Tajfel, 1972; Reicher, 2004). Reicher (2004), for example, argues that this reification of social categories has significant implications for how we understand the social world and the possibilities of changing it. By taking social action out of its context, the existing social world is legitimized as natural, rather than the product of historical forces (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). This tendency conflicts with the ontological basis of prefiguration, which sees the world as contingent and shaped by the mutual interplay of agency and structure. Furthermore, a decontextualised and ahistorical psychology implies a particularly limited view of agency. While prefiguration suggests a view of people as active agents who adapt to, but can also create, their social worlds (Reicher, 2004), a view of the world as an expression of natural forces reduces people to passive perceivers who make sense of a world which pre-exists "out there" (Subašić et al., 2012, p68).

The tendency to abstract social psychological processes can be observed in collective action research, which has recently been dominated by a focus on uncovering universal predictors of collective action participation. This trend is exemplified by the development of the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (van Zomeren et al., 2008), which has significantly influenced the research landscape, as evidenced by its 3199 citations on Google Scholar as of March 2024. While these contributions have advanced our understanding of some of the factors that drive people's initial engagement in protest, this emphasis on antecedents has led to a neglect of the psychological outcomes of collective action (Louis, 2009) and dynamics of social movement participation (Selvanathan & Jetten, 2020). Furthermore, such universal, ahistorical, and quantitative approaches are not well suited to the study of prefiguration (Trott, 2016). Rather, an in-depth examination of prefiguration requires an approach that can account for the often unplanned and emergent processes implicated in collective action. In this light, the relative lack of attention to prefigurative politics and limitations of existing research are not indicative of the suitability and potential of psychological perspectives but may reflect a misalignment between the unique nature of prefiguration and dominant trends in social psychology and collective research. With this in mind, we now turn to the existing research evidence on emergent prefigurative politics.

To what extent has existing research suggested the social psychological processes that facilitate the emergence of prefigurative politics through struggle?

Emergent prefigurative politics refers to the 'spontaneous' adoption of practices that embody desired future societies through ongoing social change projects. Our review identified seven pertinent studies, offering insights into some of the psychological processes involved in the emergence of prefiguration, in both community and social movement contexts.

These studies collectively emphasised a strong link between emergence and the psychological changes engendered by collective action and participation, resonating with social theory accounts (e.g., Raekstad, 2018) and highlighting the potential of social psychology to help provide the psychological basis of these accounts.

These preliminary findings suggest a pattern wherein the emergence of prefiguration through struggle is tied to a transformative psychological process involving an upward shift in collective aspirations. This process implies that collective participation and action, under certain conditions, transform participants' self-conceptions, strengthen their connections with fellow group members, and heighten their sense of collective empowerment, in ways that facilitate the enactment of prefigurative practices. Across studies, the recurring identification of specific psychological changes (e.g., empowerment, positive sense of community, identity change) in this transformative process seems significant; however, it should not be mistaken for universality. Rather, these changes were always tied to participants' experiences of their social context. This recurrence may instead reflect common dissatisfactions in contemporary capitalist societies and representative democracies, from which collective endeavours offer a reprieve.

Despite these valuable insights, there are some limitations in the existing literature. Research in this area often engages with the subject of emergence indirectly, highlighting the role of psychological change in the emergence of prefiguration without aiming to offer an in-depth explanation. For example, Mao et al. (2020) observed that participation in COVID-19 mutual aid groups led some to view their actions in prefigurative terms, but this was not the main emphasis of the study. Similarly, another study highlighted the role of participation in the Egyptian revolution in facilitating the emergence of prefigurative cooperatives (Maarek & Awad, 2018), though the focus was on the challenges members encountered through these initiatives. The emergence of a prefigurative movement in Bulgaria was linked to empowerment (Mihaylov, 2021), but the main aim of the study was to explore how the socio-political context influenced participants' activism.

Six studies reviewed aimed specifically to engage with the emergence process. However, one of these study offers primarily descriptive insights (Guerlain & Campbell, 2016), while two relied on secondary data sources and lack explicit discussion of the prefigurative practices involved (Awad, 2016) or the specific mechanisms that facilitated their emergence (Sales et al., 2020). The remaining three studies investigate contexts that could be viewed as prefigurative by design, such as the Occupy movement (Permut, 2016), NHS Change Day (Moskowitz & Garcia- Lorenzo 2016), and a structured peacebuilding course in rural Colombia (Fonseca & Jovchelovitch, 2023).

These initial contributions to the study of emergent prefigurative politics provide preliminary insights, yet there is a notable lack of robust evidence elucidating the mechanisms and processes involved. Despite effectively underscoring the significance of psychological change, the literature falls short in offering detailed explanations; particularly there is a lack of clarity of how collective participation can facilitate these changes and how these, in turn, facilitate the adoption of prefigurative practices, and the role of social context in this transformative process. A potential contributing factor to this dearth of explanatory evidence is the absence of established theoretical frameworks in the literature. Instead, each study reviewed adopted its unique framework, drawing from various disciplines. While this interdisciplinarity is enriching, it also suggests a scarcity of relevant theoretical approaches within social psychology. This observation is mirrored in the broader prefiguration literature where only two theoretical frameworks (e.g., social representations theory) are utilized

more than once.

The lack of evidence on the underlying mechanisms and processes exposes the need to develop explanatory models of emergent prefigurative politics. Based on our review, this would require dynamic theoretical and methodological approaches that can capture the interplay between agency-structure; examine the complex interaction between micro-, meso-, macro-level processes; and conceptualise the process and mechanisms through which collective action or participation can facilitate the emergence of prefigurative practices. In this light, the lack of detailed explanatory accounts may result from dominant trends in social psychology and collective action research that struggle to accommodate for the unique nature of prefiguration, limiting the suitability of the tools available.

Research agenda: Refining our theoretical frameworks

This critical examination sets the stage for practical recommendations for future research. We begin with theoretical considerations and then move to methodological recommendations for future work. Despite the difficulties in social psychology to cater for the research needs of prefiguration, certain theoretical frameworks in the field appear promising for engaging with these needs and could be fruitful in informing future research.

The social identity approach (SIA), comprising social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), was developed to address the interplay between social psychological processes and broader socio-political dynamics (Reicher et al., 2010). This approach posits that social identity mediates between the individual and the social context; while a social identity is deeply meaningful at an individual level, it is also shaped by broader historical, institutional, and communal realities (Reicher & Haslam, 2013). A shared social identity, which can emerge out of common experiences and mutual identification, can also be the basis for collective behaviour where people recognise and adopt group norms, values, and goals as their own (Reicher et al., 2010).

In other words, the SIA provides a framework for how individual experience (micro) relate to group processes (meso), as well as how these are shaped by broader societal contexts (macro) – underscoring its utility for multi-level analysis. While a few prefiguration studies have drawn on some of its insights, it has not yet been applied to the subject of emergence. Building on the SIA, there are two dynamic models of collective action that appear particularly relevant to prefiguration and its concern with the mutual interplay of agency and structure and the need to conceptualise emergent processes of change through collective participation and action.

The Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) was developed to account for the dynamic relationship between identities and social context in crowd events, necessarily engaging with the duality between agency-structure (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Stott & Reicher, 1998). ESIM explores the range of identity-based psychological changes that can occur when a subordinate group challenges a relationship of domination. Drury, Reicher and colleagues found that this change-process could operate as a virtuous cycle, where identity enactment can reflect to people their world-making power and, given that these changes often endure after the events themselves, can potentially foster more advanced resistance (Drury & Reicher, 2018; Vestergren et al., 2018). ESIM suggests that it is through the *emergence* of new empowered identities that people are able, if only for a limited time, to *shape* social reality according to in-group values and understandings. (Drury &

Reicher, 2009). Despite its relevance and over twenty years of evidence on emergent processes of collective participation, research on prefiguration has not yet applied its conceptual tools.

Another potentially relevant framework is the identity-norm nexus model (INN) introduced by Smith et al. (2014). Extending the encapsulated model of social identity in collective action (Thomas et al., 2012), Smith et al. (2014) propose that the emergence of radical social movements is rooted in the dynamic interplay of intra-group discussion, collective identity formation, and normative conflict. The INN model suggests that through validating group discussions about a normative conflict – between what the world is and what the world should be – an identity-norm nexus is formed, whereby people 'become the change they want to see' in the world (Smith et al., 2014). While the model appears theoretically pertinent to prefigurative politics, its empirical application to the study of collective action, and prefiguration in particular, remains untested.

Research agenda: Methodological recommendations

Our review and subsequent critical analysis not only highlight the importance of adopting suitable theoretical approaches to prefiguration but suggest key methodological recommendations. First, in order to *explain* how prefiguration emerges through social change projects, researchers need to shift from providing mere descriptive accounts or indirect examinations to developing detailed explanatory accounts or models. Next, future work would benefit from greater attention to the contexts where prefiguration commonly emerges. The existing work, mirroring a dominant trend in wider social psychology, has not sufficiently examined contexts beyond the so-called WEIRD countries. Prefigurative protest-movements and uprisings, which are more commonly observed in non-Weird contexts (Albrecht & Koehler, 2020; Sitrin, 2019) offer fruitful settings for investigating the question of emergence, given their spontaneous nature. By conducting comparative analysis across different cases, researchers can identify commonalities and differences, allowing for a more generalized understanding.

The lack of explanatory accounts can also be attributed to the neglect of potentially valuable methodologies. The agentic and context-specific nature of prefiguration highlights the need for methodologies that explore participants' own understandings, such as ethnography. Although most existing studies draw on interview-data, most lack rich analysis and ethnographic detail. A few studies draw on ethnographic principles within the broader prefiguration literature, but only one adopts this approach in the research on emergence (Moskovitz & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2016). Utilizing approaches based on these principles is key for developing explanatory accounts, allowing researchers to engage with participants' lived experience and examine how specific social factors shape the unique features of these initiatives (Trott, 2016).

Furthermore, detailed accounts of emergent prefiguration require methodologies capable of exploring it as an unfolding process. Therefore, embracing both ethnographic and longitudinal methods, or case study techniques that can examine change processes over time, would be particularly fruitful to develop the study of emergent prefigurative politics. Research grounded on these methods can offer insights into the process, mechanisms, and sequence of *how* and *when* prefigurative practices emerges, explicating the relationship between collective participation, psychological change, and prefigurative politics.

Limitations of this review

The review is subject to several limitations that may affect its representativeness of the field of prefigurative politics in psychology. Firstly, only English-language articles were included in the review which may exclude significant research published in other languages. Secondly, despite broadening the scope of the review with the inclusion of alternative search-terms (e.g., lifestyle politics), relevant studies may have been missed if they explore prefigurative phenomena without referring to prefiguration explicitly. Lastly, the exclusion of grey literature to maintain the reliability of the sources might have led to the omission of significant contributions.

Conclusion

Our systematic review has explored the existing empirical literature on prefigurative politics in the field of psychology. It has provided a detailed overview of the research landscape, highlighted some limitations of the existing work, and identified future areas of inquiry. By proposing a research agenda on 'emergent prefigurative politics', we have charted a promising direction for future work. Moving forward, we highlight the importance of aligning our theoretical and methodological approaches to the unique challenges raised by the study of prefiguration. To this end, we advocate for the social identity approach and in particular dynamic social identity models of collective action as promising theoretical frameworks. By adopting tailored theoretical and methodological tools, future research could more effectively tap into the potential of psychological perspectives to enrich our understanding of this increasingly central phenomenon in the contemporary political landscape.

Statements and Declarations

Conflict of Interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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