

An Interpretive Investigation into Motivations for Outgroup Activism

Catherine Borshuk

Indiana University South Bend, South Bend, Indiana, USA

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the motivations of individuals, who advocate politically for members of social outgroups. Long interviews with social activists focussed on self-ascribed motivations for activism, relationship with the outgroup, and the costs and benefits associated with being an outgroup activist. A thematic analysis revealed that feelings of social responsibility were shared by the activists, who were interviewed. Further, some activists attributed their behavior to their personal relationships, while others believed they had a psychological predisposition to engage in social justice. Experiences of personal marginality were also highlighted as a key contributor to social justice efforts. The respondents emphasized the importance of a fundamental, shared human connection between themselves and members of outgroups, suggesting that universalism may be importantly implicated in forging bonds across social identities. Finally, participant's tendency to explicitly describe their social justice work according to cost-benefit analyses may signal a desire for recognition or reward for their efforts in light of perceived personal costs. Key words: Social Activism, Intergroup Relations, and Universalism

Scholarship into social groups in ethnic, national, and global contexts over the past 25 years appears to suggest that human groups are inescapably divisive (Feshbach, 1990). Divisiveness – and sometimes violent conflict – between social groups have marked the landscape of the 20th and early 21st centuries (Mays, Bullock, Rosenzweig, & Wessells, 1998).

Social psychologists have devoted considerable effort to the problem of intergroup relations, and their findings indicate that social group identity is an overwhelming engine for divisiveness between groups. Individuals psychologically categorize themselves and others into social groups with little provocation (Tajfel, 1981). Research into social identity suggests (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) that individuals favor and reward members of social identity groups in which they feel a subjective membership (ingroups) while denigrating and holding biases against groups to which they have no subjective claim (outgroups). People are more likely to help members of their ingroup and deny aid to members of outgroups (Gaertner, 1973). If we engage in social protest in attempts to achieve social justice, it is on behalf of our ingroup that we tend to take action (Taylor & Mogghadam, 1987). Indeed, it has been suggested that the post-cold war world can be viewed as a profound partitioning between different human civilizations, which will ultimately engage in violent confrontation to promote the incompatible worldviews of each (Huntington, 1993).

Is it inevitable, then, that in any intergroup situation, humans will side with those whom they perceive as “their own”? Despite the enormity of evidence that we tend to

favor those most like ourselves, it is important that we not overlook the possibility of cross-identity unity, especially in the interest of achieving social justice. A historical example of such unity is the action taken by the Righteous Gentiles, rescuers who sheltered and saved Jews and other members of social outgroups from the Nazis during the Second World War

The central question of this article is why, despite evidence of bias and conflict between groups, do some individuals cross intergroup boundaries to engage in social justice efforts for members of lower power outgroups? The reasons one may intervene in the lives of others has traditionally been constructed as a problem for social scientific understanding, as scholars have devoted far more research to the question of why people do not intervene in the lives of others than to the question of why they do. Research into the motivations of Righteous Gentiles, for example, has often treated the actions of these individuals as a puzzle to be worked out (e.g., Gross, 1994; Monroe, 1994, 1996; Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Tec, 1986).

A current example of the “puzzle” of cross-identity intervention is the phenomenon of outgroup activism (Borshuk, 2000), which is social and/or political advocacy on behalf of lower-power outgroup members. Examples of outgroup activism include men in the feminist movement, Whites active in anti-racism efforts, and the middle-class youth so visible of late at anti-globalization protests. The existence of such outgroup activists requires that we cast a new look at our conclusions regarding group identity to acknowledge the possibility of bridging intergroup boundaries in light of common interests or a shared identity.

Perhaps because of the preponderance of evidence of group divisiveness, outgroup activists have not been the subject of much scholarly attention. When the motivations of outgroup sympathizers with social movements have been examined, their behaviors were explained through reference to interpersonal variables such as altruism. For example, in a study of Black and White women active in the 1960’s civil rights movement, Irons (1998) attributed Black women’s activism to experiences with oppression and discrimination but concluded that White women were only “indirectly” linked to the movement despite the extent of their actions on behalf of civil rights. Irons (1998) wrote, “they sometimes became involved for the sake of helping others” (1998, p. 703, italics added). The attribution of such actions to altruism bears further examination, especially in light of research findings suggesting that similarity of the helper to the helped is important in prosocial behavior (Hornstein, 1978; Sole, Marton, & Hornstein, 1975).

The practice of psychologically crossing a primary social identity boundary to pursue social justice for an outgroup is the subject of the present research. I begin this article by reviewing what is known about motivations for political activism and highlighting possible explanations from the research literature for outgroup activism. Findings from in-depth interviews examining the motivations of a small sample of outgroup activists will be reported and discussed. Finally, I will raise the possibility of a universalist worldview that may prompt some individuals to engage politically beyond self or ingroup interests.

What Motivates Activists?

Research into social activism has revealed many factors attempting to explain activist’s motivation (Vela-McConnell, 1999) including self-concept, socialization, the search for meaning and identity, values, personality attributes, political consciousness, a quest to join

community life, and a need for status (e.g., Bettencourt, Dillman, & Wollman, 1996; Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Duncan, 1999; Hercus, 1999; Lofland, 1996; Seaton, 1990; Youniss & Yates, 1999). Some researchers have determined that there are, in fact, no individual differences between activists and non-activists beyond situational variables such as the time and energy one's lifestyle allows (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991). One consistent finding about activism, as with volunteering in general, is that the best predictor of future involvement is previous experience of involvement (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Stewart, Settles, & Winter, 1998).

Studies on demographic characteristics offer clearer findings about social activists. The middle-class, in general, devotes more of their time to all types of volunteer activity than does the working-class, as do women over men, and students over their parents (Franz & McClelland, 1994). Activism also tends to be associated with people, who have higher levels of education, and, in particular, higher levels of knowledge about social issues (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1999; Lee, 1997).

Theorizing Outgroup Activism

While marginalized individuals tend to be attached to ingroup movements (e.g., women, more than men, are involved in the feminist movement), outgroup activists likely do not share similar markers of social oppression with members of the outgroup. Rather, it may be that a recognition of one's relative privilege (as opposed to relative deprivation) is exactly what leads some to engage in advocacy work on behalf of lower-power groups. As Montada, Schmitt, and Dalbert (1986) pointed out, "relatively little is known about the perspective of the privileged" (p. 125), especially their feelings about inequalities of opportunity and resources. What prompts some individuals to move from the recognition of their own privilege to advocacy or activist behaviors on behalf of others?

Some have suggested that empathy may play a key role in bridging intergroup boundaries. Oliner and Oliner (1988) used the term "extensivity" to describe Holocaust rescuer's ability to feel empathy and responsibility for a group other than their own. Stephan and Finlay (1999) concluded that empathy is related to people's willingness to reject status quo intergroup relations, which is likely to also be implicated in social activism. Hoffman (1989) has argued for a direct relationship between empathy and a concern with justice for outgroups claiming that emotional empathy can lead to "existential guilt" (p. 290) wherein more advantaged individuals experience guilt regarding their privileged position relative to others. Hoffman (1989) believed that White social activists manifest this existential guilt, which spurs a response to take action for the justice interests of less privileged groups: ". . . if one's group or class is viewed as contributing to or even benefiting from the victim's misfortune, one's empathic distress may be transformed into a feeling of guilt by association" (p. 291). Montada et al. (1986) distinguished empathic distress from existential guilt, believing that the latter required "solidarity and sympathy with the underprivileged as a prerequisite" (p. 138), and acted as a key motivator for behaviors consistent with outgroup activism.

Taking an intergroup relations perspective, another possible explanation for outgroup activism is implied by theories of re-categorization, which ingroup members cognitively re-evaluate their identity relations with former outgroup members in creating a superordinate identity. It is possible that in the case of outgroup activists, the established intergroup

boundaries dividing “we” from “they” become re-interpreted, and outgroup members are re-identified as part of a common ingroup (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

While experimental research has provided support for a common ingroup identity which may be at least temporarily induced (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), it is not known whether personal characteristics may contribute to a more spontaneous decision to re-categorize. It is possible that some aspects of personality, for example one’s personal values and ideology, are also implicated in the propensity to apply this type of single-group worldview to social justice efforts.

Rokeach (1973) first drew social psychologist’s attention to the importance of values in political ideology and political activism with his two-factor model of political engagement. Thomas (1986), in applying Rokeach’s two-factor model to social activists, found that the value of equality alone (an indicator of the extreme left, according to Rokeach, 1973) was the key discriminator between school desegregation activists and non-activists in the United States. More recent investigations into the influence of values on behavior have led to the explication of value types that are relevant specifically to social justice. Schwartz’s (1992) value types are based on multi-value associations that incorporate the motivations for the values. For example, the primary motivation of benevolence is directed toward the well being of the ingroup with corresponding value associations consisting of helping, forgiving, honesty, and loyalty. By contrast, the primary motivation of universalism targets the well being of outgroups as well as ingroups, including value associations of peace, equality, and social justice (Schwartz, 1996).

A universalist worldview may allow an individual to de-emphasize ingroup loyalties and move toward an awareness of outgroups while fostering recognition of interdependence of fate (Lewin, 1948). As Monroe (1996) reported of Holocaust rescuers, outgroup activists may hold a “shared perception of themselves as part of all humanity” (p. xx) which could lead them to widen the boundaries of their perceived ingroup beyond single identity variables such as gender or religion.

Recent and ongoing empirical investigations into outgroup activism have suggested that personal characteristics, as well as political awareness and universalist worldviews are all implicated in the phenomenon of outgroup activism (Borshuk, 2000). The present research represented an exploration into the phenomenological interplay of these variables, as well as the subjective meaning of “helping others” as lived and experienced by outgroup activists. This study examined outgroup activists’ self-described motivations for and understandings of their social justice work.

Method

Using Qualitative Methodology

Defining a type of activism on the basis of the intergroup status of the targeted beneficiary (i.e., limiting to outgroup activism) allowed the researcher to explore the ways in which such activists construe their own identity in relation to the outgroup on behalf of whom they are advocating. Much has been written on “constructing the other” in research contexts (e.g., Fine, 1994; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and in general social relations (e.g., Hill Collins, 1991), leading to conclusions that those perceived as outgroup members risk being conceptualized as homogenous, exotic, or essentially different from a normalized subject (Mohanty, 1991). Given that some of the activists recruited for this study did, in fact, work on

behalf of groups that can be viewed as exotic (e.g., East Timorese), it was further explored how activist's position in their own group contributes to their conceptualizations of the other.

It was decided to begin research into outgroup activists with a qualitative interview study of their key motivations rather than examining the issue through survey or questionnaire methods in order to capture the anticipated complexity by which activists make meaning of their behaviors (Maracek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997). Qualitative research methods are recommended when a researcher wishes to access patterns of interrelationship between multiple components of complex phenomena (McCracken, 1988; Rabinowitz & Weseen, 1997). Furthermore, the disparate activities promoted by these activists, as well as the variety of causes with which they identified, might very well have rendered the devising of a standardized instrument impossible. In short, a general overview of various types of outgroup activists was sought rather than a particular type of activist (e.g., feminist; environmentalist). Most importantly, as outgroup activism had not to this point been identified or studied, it was determined that a detailed description of their experiences could provide rich interpretative data on which to base further research.

Participants

Eight individuals satisfying the criterion for "outgroup activist"¹ agreed to engage in long interviews for research purposes. Aware of the limitations of using a small number of participants, the researcher attempted to capture a diverse sample with regard to gender, national origin, and religious and cultural background (participants' self-described demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1). Four women and four men ranging in age from 20 to 64 years participated. The targets of their activism were also diverse; while some aimed their efforts locally, others worked on the national or international scene. While one of the interviewees had full-time, and two had part-time paid employment that did not intersect with social justice efforts, the remainder were either not in the work force or were nominally remunerated for their activism in consulting or advisory council capacities.

Table 1. Self-Reported Characteristics of Interview Respondents.

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Highest level of Education	Ethno-cultural background	Social Class	Activist Outgroup
Ashmir	20	M	Some university	Pakistani-Canadian	Student	East Timorese
Gilly	32	F	High School	White Canadian	Poor	People with AIDS
David	34	M	Graduate degree	Jewish/Norwegian American	Middle	Latin Americans

¹ To be included in this study, participants had to be actively involved in day-to-day social or political advocacy work intended to benefit members of an outgroup. Simply sympathizing with the cause of outgroup members was not sufficient to be categorized as an outgroup activist.

Jean	64	F	University Degree	White Canadian	Middle	People living in poverty
Helen	54	F	University Degree	WASP	Middle	African Women
Kevin	57	M	University Degree	Anglo Canadian	Middle	Women
Susan	60	F	Some university	British	Middle	Refugees
Gord	39	M	Some university	White Canadian	Working	Native Canadians

Developing the Interview Protocol

A semi-structured protocol was used to guide the interviews. The main topics covered by the protocol were a personal history of the participant's involvement with social activism, reasons for engaging in activism, ideas about social justice, relationship to and perspective of the social outgroup, and the rewards or consequences, social or otherwise, of their activism.

The research themes and questions focussed on the experiential component of activism, in that activists were asked to reflect upon and make meaning of their behaviors. This emphasis on the phenomenology of activism was purposeful; a number of large-scale surveys have to date explored through aggregate data analysis methods the reasons that people become activists (e.g., Lee, 1997). This research, in contrast, was intended to capture activists own understandings of their motivations for being involved with an outgroup; therefore, their personal narratives provided the data for analysis. Like Mishler (1990), this study was not concerned with possible "distortion" in participants' accounts that could threaten the reliability of their interpretations, but instead an interpretive paradigm was settled on, wherein the intent was to gain an "understanding of how individuals interpret events and experiences, rather than assessing whether or not their interpretations correspond to or mirror the researcher's interpretive construct or 'objective' reality" (Mishler, 1990, p. 427).

In addition to the interview protocol, a confidential demographic questionnaire was completed in which the participants were asked to record/describe their age, sex, socio-economic position, marital status, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and education.

Interview Procedure

Long interviews were carried out by the author in Ottawa, Canada after a research proposal had been reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics panel at the author's university. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit outgroup activists through contacts with members of social justice organizations. After being contacted by telephone and given a description of the research project, appointments were made with amenable respondents for times and places at their convenience. The majority of interviews, which lasted between one and half and three hours each, was completed in activists' homes. All interviews were tape recorded and professionally transcribed in their entirety. Participants all

gave written informed consent before they took part in the research, which included consenting to having their interviews tape recorded and transcribed.

The Research Story

According to Seale (1999), “Telling the story of how a research project was done can serve many purposes, not all of which assist judgments about the credibility of the findings or the quality of a study. Relevant methodological accounting, however, can assist readers in evaluating the quality of conclusions” (p. 177).

The author’s interest in the substantive topic of outgroup activism grew out of two observations. The first observation occurred when as a graduate student, immersed in research on prejudice and social identity; I realized that very little research evidence provided hope that humans could overcome their long history of intergroup conflict. The second was a worry that identity politics had the potential to exert a divisive influence within social justice movements themselves. Nonetheless, I did note examples of individuals coming into alliances to strive for justice or equality beyond their own self-interest, and I wanted to explore the nature of those psychological outgroup alliances. Qualitative research – specifically, engaging in long interviews with a select number of participants – seemed the right vehicle for this exploratory research, especially because there was so little available information on how such activists understood their own efforts and constructed their identities in relation to outgroup members.

Results

Working with the Data

The transcripts were not officially verbatim transcripts, as pauses and other minor speech markers were omitted by the transcriber at the request of the researcher, as it was not the intent that a true discourse analysis be pursued. The tapes were re-heard immediately after the interview, and interview notes were augmented with ideas about possible categories contained within for future analysis. Interview tapes were professionally transcribed in batches of two or three, and as soon as the transcriptions were available, the researcher compared the written transcription to the audiotape. Minor adjustments were often necessary to the transcriptions, especially in cases of acronyms for organizations.

Ongoing analysis continued while more data were collected. Overall, interviews were read and re-read dozens of times as different layers of analysis occurred. Qualitative data analysis software was employed as an aid to indexing data points (text or meaning units) from the interviews, in searching transcripts for terms or string patterns, to make researcher memos (theoretical comments, connections, and ideas), and to do basic content analyses (e.g., text searches, reference counts, etc.).

Analytic Levels and Validity of Interpretation

Although grounded theory methods were used to analyze the interview data (e.g., giving multiple readings; coding, categorizing and subcategorizing; clustering and uniting categories, etc.; see Rennie, Phillips, & Quattaro, 1988), this study was not considered a grounded theory project because its intent was not the generation of a unified theory, rather an

exploration of some key hypotheses relating to social activism and outgroup activism was the aim. Although there are a myriad of different numbers of analytic levels that can be applied to qualitative data, depending on one's approach (see, for e.g., Brown, 1997; Glaser & Stauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1989), this study used four levels of analysis, which closely corresponded to Maxwell's (1992) typology of validity in qualitative research. Maxwell paralleled the issue of validity of qualitative findings to different levels of understanding, the first four of which were descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, and internal generalizability.

Descriptive validity refers to gaining an accurate account of behavioral events. It is a type of "reportage" that presents an unproblematic and undisputed first-person history (Maxwell, 1992). Accordingly, the first level of analysis consisted of coding information that was narrative and descriptive and took a within-subject approach in that each participant's interview was treated as a single set of data and was not analyzed in comparison with other interviews. This level focussed mostly on coding behavioral events pertaining to the four W's in each interview text: Who, When, Where, and What. In short, this first level of analysis focussed on background information, behaviors, involvements, chronology, and simple causal statements (e.g., "My husband had been posted to east Africa, and I went along") in the context of the participant's life history.

The descriptive analysis focussed on the details of individuals' narratives or life histories (Mishler, 1990). From this overall story of a life with activism given foreground, general meanings were eventually inferred, and themes for individual participants began to emerge. For example, under this level of analysis, prominent narrative theme for different participants included heroism (Kevin), interaction with others (Gilly), and social responsibility (a number of participants). These narrative themes emerged solely from the life descriptions of the participants but not necessarily from their attempts to make meaning of their activism. The themes were arrived at through coding each interview individually and searching for internally consistent themes marked by emphasis and repetitions. As McAdams (1993) wrote,

We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. This is not the stuff of delusion or self-deception. We are not telling ourselves lies. Rather, through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. (p. 11)

The second level of analysis was aimed at uncovering and decoding respondents' answers to the two main research questions: why is this individual an activist (rather than a non-activist), and why has this individual chosen to work on behalf of an outgroup? In this phase of the analysis, the researcher worked closely with interpretive or psychological aspects of the texts in order to move toward an understanding of the participants' own explanations for their activist behaviors, thereby taking an emic, rather than an etic approach. Maxwell's (1992) application of interpretive validity is relevant to this process, as he described a type of understanding that is "concerned with what these objects, events, and behaviors mean to the people engaged with and in them. . . I include intention, cognition, affect, belief, evaluation, and anything else that could be encompassed by what is broadly termed the 'participants' perspective" (p. 288).

The interpretive level of analysis emphasized the participants' own explanations, which were first coded into general categories (e.g., family influences, peer influences, books and ideas, moral beliefs, etc.). The participants' own words formed the titles of the categories, so at this level the analysis was still very much data-driven. At this point, an indexing system was developed, and the researcher began to integrate the participants' explanations with the themes developed earlier through the first-level narrative analysis.

The third phase involved looking behind participants' words to arrive at conclusions about general themes as applied to particular ideas and reflects Maxwell's (1992) theoretical validity, the point in the process where understanding "goes beyond concrete descriptions and interpretation and explicitly addresses the theoretical constructions that the researcher brings to, or develops during, the study" (p. 291). Memoing (Richards & Richards, 1994), a process of making comments on and relating text to particular theoretical ideas, was the main method in this level of analysis, as was the beginning of unifying or making connections between categories that had been generated by the data. In this third level of analysis, the researcher took a much more active and reflective role, as the categories begin to be index-driven rather than simply driven by the words of the interviewees.

The fourth and final level of analysis was the point at which the research project itself took a role in imposing order on the hitherto developed chaos. The original research questions again resurfaced and were compared against the categories and memos generated through the first three levels. This phase combined previously generated categories to form larger, subsuming themes encompassing personal narratives, participant's meaning-making, and the researchers' own memos. The constant comparison method (Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988) was ubiquitous at this point in the analysis, as individual participant accounts were no longer viewed as unitary narratives, but the meaning units contained therein were fully cross-indexed with those in all other texts. This process is, in some ways, akin to Maxwell's (1992) idea of internal generalizability, in which a researcher begins to question to what extent findings may be common among members of a specialized community (in this case, outgroup activists). It is important, at this point in the analysis, to be aware of the ways in which the data have not fit nicely into coded categories; in other words, for the researcher to remain critical and self-reflexive (Rabinowitz & Weseen, 1997). During this final phase, any index category that had generated only a few data points or comments was abandoned in order to return the whole system back to the research questions and decide on what was relevant to the project as a whole. This process has been described as "determining the most central, or core category . . . that is mostly densely related to other categories and their properties" (Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988, p. 144). At the end of stage four analysis, the major or "root" index of categories had been reduced through parsimonious cutting or judicious combining, down to the three major categories. These categories centered on motivations for activism, views of the outgroup, and cost/benefit analyses of social activism.

Motivations for Activism

When describing why they became social activists, participants mentioned a wide variety of factors ranging from a serious, considered personal choice, to an event or person that influenced their lives. While a few participants related their motivations in terms of circumstantial causes, others reflected psychological explanations, focussing on personality, existential, or spiritual reasons for being an activist. The circumstantial explanations dealt

mainly with people and relationships that acted as motivators for involvement. Of those who engaged in internal explanations of their motivations, many offered psychological reasons, focussing on early experiences, family impact, and even birth order effects to explain their commitment to social justice causes. Most, however, referred often to a system of core beliefs and values, which at times encompassed philosophical or political doctrines and at other times spiritual convictions.

Relationships. A common motivator for initial involvement was the influence of friends and family members on decisions to engage in activism. Ashmir noted that, "Once I started university, I sort of went through a personal revolution. All my ideals changed. I attribute that to certain people and maybe more information being available." Gilly, an HIV-negative woman, who spoke of finding herself in the AIDS movement almost by accident, said that her commitment to the movement was strengthened upon becoming friends with a central member of the activist group: "He was the center of everything. . . He touched everyone he met. He was such an incredible person. And when he died, it was like the world fell apart." After his death, this activist doubled her efforts in the AIDS movement in order, as she said, to honor the memory of her friend.

As a further testament to the influence of others, Gord, a Native rights activist, described an early demonstration against clear-cutting that eventually became the focal point for his solidarity activities:

It's cold, and raining heavily. Pouring. . . We were going to set up our tents on the logging road for the next day, and block the trucks and machines so they can't get in. God, it was wet and cold and miserable. And there were about 30 people there. That's it. And I remember thinking, if I didn't love this woman, I wouldn't be here.

Ashmir, Gilly, and Gord, in particular, identified no special internal characteristics, which had led them to the movements but rather pointed to fate, circumstances, and, most importantly, the influence of others as motivators for their commitment to outgroup advocacy.

Internal motivations. Other activists attributed their motivations to personality characteristics, ingrained beliefs, or long-standing moral principles and relied less on explanations of fortuity or relationships. For example, Kevin referred to a fundamental personality characteristic: "Look at my record [of involvement]. I'm like a moth to a flame. I don't feel happy unless I'm connected." When asked to describe his motivation, another activist spoke of his personal suitability for such a life: "Why don't I run over animals in the road? It's a social responsibility. It's just something I've always done. I enjoy it. I think I do it well. I think it's something that needs to be done."

These activists spoke of their engagement in social movements as a natural outplay of their core sense of self, shaped by childhood experiences and in many cases, by their feelings of marginality within their own primary social groups. Jean, a middle-class married woman, who had spent her life engaged in anti-poverty activism, described growing up as part of the "low-income intelligentsia," fitting into neither the heightened social class of her family's church, nor into the life of the poor, who surrounded them in her neighborhood and school.

Helen speculated that she felt a need to actively engage in social justice and community building because of an unsettled childhood. She said, "I wonder if moving a lot through my childhood and youth required me to fit in and fit in and fit in again, you know." David, active in the Latin American solidarity movement, said "I have this theory that because

I was odd, I was an intellectual, skinny kid with glasses, played the violin . . . definitely not popular. Picked on in junior high school. That could contribute to a dislike of injustice. I think so.” Such statements raise the possibility that a history of subjective marginality can serve as a precursor to an interest in social justice. Developing empathy with outsiders because one has experienced being an outsider in the past, is consistent with the process of self-construction known as positive marginality (Mayo, 1982; Unger, 2000).

Views of the Outgroup

Participants were asked to describe their view of the outgroups to whom they lent their efforts. Little, if any, evidence was found to support the researcher’s expectation that these activists may have perceived the intended beneficiaries of their actions as “exotic others.” In fact, in many cases, the respondents did not perceive members of the outgroup as beneficiaries at all, but rather as fellow actors engaged in an effort to ease conditions for the good of all. All of the activists spoke of both the perceived similarities and differences between themselves and members of the outgroup.

Differences. While circumstantial and practical differences were acknowledged to exist between the activists and members of the outgroup, these differences were not considered to be profound by any of the respondents. For example, Jean, who spent her adult life in the anti-poverty movement, wryly explained, “What sets [the poor] apart from others is simply, they lack money,” pointing out that the values of thrift and responsibility held dear by her middle-class friends were exhibited more widely among the poor.

Gord, a Native rights advocate, said that he felt more comfortable in the environment of the outgroup than in his own community: “Part of the year I live on reserve, I work construction for band council. I feel at home there. I don’t feel at home living in a city, or among Whites or with my family.” However, he noted that Native Canadians did not or could not experience the same level of comfort in non-Native settings due to economic inequalities and social stigma. His description of the role he played in Native organizations made it clear that the main distinction between himself and Native people was due to his relative privilege of being born a White man. He spoke often of the “accident of birth” that transferred onto him, in his own mind, a sense of responsibility toward Native people.

All of the participants acknowledged that real social divisions did exist between themselves and members of the outgroups they worked with. It appeared that everyone in the sample encountered these separations in different ways, such as being careful not to speak on behalf of any particular group or feeling intimidated by the magnitude of suffering that the outgroup experienced. Jean, the anti-poverty activist, was blunt: “I’m not poor, I can’t pretend I am. But the injustice of how society deals with the poor! They’re the best money-managers we have. They have to be. Yet, we persist in trying to teach them how to budget. Now, middle-class people who cry poor, they drive me crazy.”

Similarities. While the intergroup differences tended to be tangible and circumstantial, participants also spoke of the perceived similarities between themselves and outgroup members, many of which involved their perception of a common or shared humanity. For example, when asked to describe the Burmese, East Timorese, and Afghan people on whose behalf he has attended dozens of meetings and demonstrations, young Ashmir replied: “We’re all human beings. They’re not different from me in any consequent way.” He noted the main difference between his North American friends, and these others lay mostly in opportunities

for self-determination. Gilly, describing her early experiences in an AIDS organization, said, “There wasn’t a difference between the people, who were actually working, and the people who, were classified as service-users. A lot of times you couldn’t tell who was who.” Susan applied a metaphysical understanding to the idea of universalism: “Some Quakers hold that there’s a God in everyone. I wouldn’t use the term God. I would say the shared energy that holds us all together. That we are all one and not just human beings, but all forms of life and everything.”

The most important finding about these outgroup activists, in fact, may lie in their hesitation to acknowledge that profound differences existed between themselves and others. They did not perceive an unbridgeable gulf between members of different social groups, regardless of geographic distance or diversity of experience. As expressed by the interview respondents, differences between peoples are quite easily breached by recognizing the shared experience of human beings.

Cost/Benefit Analyses of Activism

The final theme in the analysis concerned participants’ insights into the question of altruism. During the interviews, I had asked each activist outright whether their activities were purely selfless – intended solely to benefit another, or whether they themselves benefited in any way from their activism.

The response was unequivocal: all participants acknowledged that they themselves benefited from their social activism, and further, were much more easily able to list ways in which they themselves benefit than the ways in which outgroup members benefit from their actions. The primary benefit of being involved with a social justice movement, according to the participants, was social interaction with others. A number expressed that they truly enjoyed the interaction with other activists or with people from other cultures or situations. Many had made close friends as a result of their involvement and that acted as a motivating factor to continue their work; consistent with role-identity theory, some activists apply social norm pressure to keep one another in the movement (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). David stated simply: “I enjoy it. I like the social aspect of it. I enjoy accomplishing something, or working together with people on something that is common to us all.” Another noted, “It’s the relationships that are the primary rewards.”

Social acceptance also played a role for some of the respondents, as not surprisingly; many had recounted being ostracized from their primary identity groups at some point during their lives. Gilly said, “The most important people in my life are part of the AIDS movement. The majority of people I’m close to are [HIV] positive.” Because of this, she believed that her involvement had enriched her life: “People wonder how you can be involved with such a depressing thing, especially when it doesn’t really have anything to do with you, and you make it clear it’s not all depressing. It’s not all about people dying. There’s something affirming about it.”

Gord spoke about gaining a sense of purpose from his activism: “I do have a sense of satisfaction. I have a purpose in my life. And many people don’t.” Of her present involvement with local community groups, Helen said, “It’s right for me because I get so much back out of it. I remember when I was first recruited . . . my husband said, and is it going to get you a job? And I thought, what’s that got to do with it!”

Participants often framed the question of “who benefits” according to a cost-benefit equation, indicating that this was something they had previously given thought to. Susan, in particular, was quite explicit that “helping” showed up on both sides of the accounts ledger:

The people who are truly happy doing this work are getting as much as they’re giving. There always has to be that equation and gradually over a lifetime you learn that the act of giving, and I think Jesus probably said something about this, giving is a form of love and it comes back to you.

In terms of personal costs, participants named more downsides to their activities than they did benefits. If the benefits were more social in nature, the costs were tangible: time, money, and reputation were noted most often, yet the importance of these costs was downplayed. For example, when asked if there were any personal costs to the life she had chosen, Jean quickly responded, “Not with my value system.” But she immediately added, “But we would have been better off. Ever so often I do the arithmetic, if I’d been a school teacher instead . . .”

This sort of ambivalence about financial costs was echoed by David, who explained about his work in Latin America:

I probably have gotten as much out of them as they have gotten out of me. In a way. I mean, okay, I haven’t earned a dime in terms of the work I’ve put in. But in terms of the things I’ve learned, who I’ve become, you know, the experiences I’ve had. I’d stack that up any day with the money I’ve raised for them, the ads I’ve put in the paper with my own money, all the political work . . .

For some of the participants, the financial losses associated with spending unpaid time devoted to social justice work seemed to be accepted as simply a part of life: “With a wife and two kids, we lived on less than \$54,000 for that whole period [16 years]. I mean, living communally . . . you could live on \$200 a year. You could, and we did.”

Along with monetary disincentives, loss of time was also frequently mentioned as a personal cost of activism, especially for those with paid employment. Helen, who ran her own consulting company, said, “Sometimes you think, oh God I’ve got another meeting which is going to go on all afternoon. Just in terms of time, you know, you get very limited . . .” She continued,

And I have literally limited my ability to earn a living by one week a month. I have certainly lost [business] opportunities because I’ve said I’m not available this week, I can’t go anywhere. And I made that decision because the cost to me of making a commitment to an organization and then not being able to be there is emotionally horrendous . . . So I said, what’s the bottom line here? Am I going to do this, or am I not?

Participants described other consequences of activism such as arrest and intimidation; however, most did not construe these as problems but as natural byproducts of being involved in often-unpopular activities. The Native rights protester appeared undaunted when he stated, “I’m not too caught up in my own life, my career, my prospects. I haven’t got any prospects.

I've got a criminal record." Another dismissed the threatening letters and phone calls he had received as a result of involvement in activist causes: "I've had this habit of being heroic and applying it to any situation that comes up and boy, you really have to pay for it sometimes. You can't just walk in and change things and get away. You're here for life. This is your home." In fact, some activists appeared more concerned with their outgroup allies, who they felt paid a much higher price for similar activities: "They had the most to lose. They would be forced to lose their jobs; they were being pressured to change their views, to stop speaking out against the companies. They really put themselves on the line."

Thus, the respondents were able easily able to recount both the benefits and the costs to themselves of being involved in activism, and some explicitly formulated these in terms of a cost/benefit equation.

Discussion

This study attempted to gain a phenomenological understanding of the motivations for being involved in social justice work on behalf of social outgroups. Mirroring the discrepant findings in the literature on motivations for activism, some of the activists interviewed for this research made external self-attributions for their involvement, citing the influence of relationships and circumstances, while others made dispositional self-attributions, identifying key components of their character or upbringing, which led to their activities. Most, however, made reference to some previous experience of marginality in their personal lives, which may have been important to the development of empathy for less privileged outsiders.

While none of the participants explicitly stated that their activism stemmed from a desire to help others, several did communicate a sense of moral obligation or social responsibility. This may be interpreted as a form of altruism in a collective, rather than an individual context. It is noteworthy that while there was some recognition of their own privilege relative to outgroup members, the interviewees spoke of these privileges in terms of leading to feelings of social responsibility, rather than guilt. Cole and Stewart (1999) similarly found that social responsibility was related to political activism in a sample of White and Black women activists.

Could it be that personal feelings or experiences of marginality function to lessen the guilt that would otherwise accrue for a privileged individual or do former experiences of marginality act to increase a recognition of inequality? Unger (2000) has raised the possibility that marginality can, in fact, be functional for social activists by allowing them to retain an outsider status and perhaps absolving them of responsibility for the problems of mainstream society. However, positive marginality "supports a vision of collective as well as individual responsibility for change" (Unger, 2000, p. 177). In other words, it is possible that constructing a marginal self allows an individual to participate in finding solutions to social issues that others (the supposedly non-marginal) have created.

It was anticipated that the special case of outgroup activism may signal a different type of worldview that centered on universalism rather than the traditional intergroup competition. Interviews revealed some evidence for this, which took shape in the recognition of fundamental similarities between activists and outgroup members. Where differences were noted, they tended to be circumstantial in nature and were given less importance. In fact, for more than one participant, the common experience of

humanity was credited with being a reason for their continued involvement, suggesting support for a more superordinate identity in which intergroup divisiveness is mitigated.

Miville, Holloway, Gelso, Pannu, Liu, Touradji, and Guertes (1999) have advanced a construct called Universal-Diversity Orientation (UDO), which is “an attitude toward all other persons that is inclusive yet differentiating in that similarities and differences are both recognized and accepted; shared experience of being human results in a connectedness with people. . . ” (p. 292). Although UDO was not measured in the present study, there appears to be an intersection between this construct and the worldview forwarded by the participants. The possibility that UDO and/or a universalist worldview are distinguishing characteristics in those, who seek to bridge group divisions merits further research, especially in relation to the process of re-categorization.

When queried directly about the role that altruism plays in their social justice efforts, interviewees tended to speak at length about both the costs and the benefits of their activism. Although most expressed that qualitatively, the benefits outweighed the costs of activism, quantitatively, they were more easily able to enumerate specific sacrifices stemming from their activism, which include both financial and social costs. The resource mobilization theory of social activism, which promotes the idea that the rewards of political involvement must exceed the costs to individuals (Klandermans, 1987), was therefore lent some credence in the present study. Consistent with resource mobilization theory, the causal manner of enumeration suggested that participants placed more value on the personal benefits of activism, which included quality-of-life issues such as social interaction, self-improvement, and purpose in life, to which they clearly attached importance.

Limitations

As with any research project, regardless of methodology, difficulties were encountered during the course of this study; most of the challenges were related to the actual conducting of the interviews. For example, a few of the long interviews were simply too long; my determination to facilitate open-ended conversations led more than once to an over-abundance of what I considered to be superfluous, gossipy detail about organizations, individuals, and political histories. When this occurred with participants older than I, there emerged the difficulty of not wanting to interrupt or too boldly state my interests in returning to the subject at hand (this was, of course, a difficulty of power and how it manifests itself culturally in interpersonal interaction).

Another problem concerned the small amount of resources (in time, and money for transcription) available, which may have contributed, at least in part, to the final sample size of this project. Qualitative research, when compared with quantitative research, requires far more time for collecting and analyzing data.

Finally, in terms of social interaction, I experienced difficulties from both sides of the insider/outsider position. While I was not an active member of any organization to which the participants belonged, I was familiar to many individuals in social justice organizations; after all, an activist community in any city is relatively small, familiar, and at times internally divisive. I was at times treated as an insider and was made privy to unflattering information about people whom I esteemed. However, being an outsider to the actual social movement organizations to which my participants were committed at

times, led me to misunderstand the significance of local networks and their intertwined histories.

Conclusion

The fruits of recognizing outgroup activism are abundant not only for social psychologists but also for those with an interest in social change. As more participants in social justice movements discuss the possibilities of organizational alliances (Johnson Reagon, 1983), outgroup activism offers a place for individuals, who wish to work for justice beyond particularized identity communities. In this context, the question of who is most likely to become an advocate on behalf of outgroup members becomes most salient. As Bishop (1994) has written of social activism, “as long as we who are fighting oppression continue to play the game of competition with one another, all forms of oppression will continue to exist” (p. 10).

A number of empirically testable hypotheses have resulted from the current qualitative study of outgroup activism. Based on the findings of this research, empirical research into outgroup social activism has begun. It is expected that both personal and social group variables, encompassing empathy, altruism, universalism, and social responsibility will emerge as important components of the self-constructions for those who choose to bridge intergroup divisions and work together for global social change.

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Author's Note

Catherine Borshuk, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Indiana University South Bend. She explores social identity, diversity, social change, and prejudice in her research. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Catherine Borshuk, Ph.D., Indiana University South Bend, Department of Psychology, 1700 Mishawaka Avenue, Post Office Box 7111, South Bend, Indiana, 46634-7111; Telephone: 574-237-4122; E-mail: cborshuk@iusb.edu.

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