

Democratic uprisings and protest politics: an analysis of the organizational structures within the Occupy San Diego social movement

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Abstract

This analysis explores the decentralized, horizontal, and participant-centered organizational structure of the Occupy movement, focusing particularly on disconnections between the rhetoric and reality surrounding the organization and mechanisms of the movement. Utilizing an original data set focused on the case of Occupy San Diego, I draw primarily on two research methods: survey research and direct observation. I find that – when asked directly – the movement participants often offered strong verbal support for the leaderless structure, the highly consensual form of decision-making, and the diversity of participants. However, our observations tended to uncover some challenges to and frustrations with these organizational aspects of the movement. These findings contribute to our understanding of the nature of prefigurative social movements, particularly with regard to the gap between expectation and reality. In the conclusion, I offer some suggestions for closing this gap in future non-hierarchical, mass-based movements.

Keywords

Occupy, protest, San Diego, organization, structure, social movement

Introduction

On October 7, 2011, two weeks after the Occupy Wall Street movement launched in New York, Occupy San Diego protesters gathered for the first time in a prominent downtown park near the San Diego harbor. From there, they marched about a dozen blocks to the Civic Center Plaza, where many of the participants set up camp for the next few months, officially kicking off their “occupation” of San Diego. Along the way, they carried signs and banners that signaled a deep distrust and abhorrence of the dominant social, economic, and political power structure – one that they viewed as corrupt and imbalanced (“People Over Profits – We Are the 99%” and “Corporate Greed and Endless War Crashed Our Economy” are just two examples). In reference to the bank and corporate bailouts of a few years prior, they angrily chanted “We got sold out! They got bailed out!”

Approximately 1,500 protesters from all walks of life gathered that day. As Karla Peterson wryly described in a *UT San Diego* article on October 10, 2011, “There were dreadlocks and John Deere caps. [San Diego] Padres windbreakers and John Lennon T-shirts. There were strollers and tambourines and sleeping bags

for the people who are in it for the long haul.” Indeed, over the next couple of months, hundreds of protesters spent their nights in downtown’s Civic Center Plaza. Though the numbers dwindled over those months as police raids and arrests took their toll, by early December, a core group of approximately 150 protesters remained in the Civic Center Plaza encampment.

This article explores the Occupy San Diego movement during a critical period of time: the weeks after many were cleared from the plaza during the police sweeps of late October but before the encampments cleared out of the plaza entirely. In short, this project analyzes a movement in a transition phase, when its most dedicated activists are highly visible and active, yet after many of the initial protesters have headed home.

This analysis seeks to deepen our understanding of the larger Occupy movement, by offering a detailed case study of a major, urban Occupy site. In particular, this analysis focuses on the disconnections between the rhetoric and reality surrounding the organizational structures and mechanisms of the Occupy San Diego movement. Therefore, a brief description of the organization of the movement is worth noting here, before moving on to a deeper discussion of the chasm between rhetoric and reality.

Some of the movement’s main components were horizontal accountability and non-hierarchical organization, with an emphasis on the lack of centralized leadership as a strength of the movement and a “living out” of their anti-elite message. For many in the Occupy movement, the intention was to create alternative structures that offered participants many access points, a contrast to what they claimed to be the problems of the American political system. Thus, the internal focus was on consensus building among the diverse group of movement participants. Decisions were to be made collectively, intentionally in contrast to the top-down, elite-driven manner predominant in American politics. The internal nature of the movement then – with its consensus norms of decision-making and egalitarian models of leadership and participation – reflected the external focus of the movement as a disruptor to the status quo. Put simply, the Occupy movement organized its own participants in a manner meant to starkly contradict what they argued was a dearth of real public – and truly democratic – participation in American politics. In short, the Occupy San Diego movement organized itself in alignment with the goals they had for the larger political and social world, with a focus on consensus, equality, non-hierarchical structures, and widespread participation.

But did participant hopes for this organizational structure match the reality of how it functioned? Our research indicates that, when asked directly, the Occupy San Diego participants strongly favoured such a system of organization, as they overwhelmingly emphasized that it was necessary to create these alternative structures within the movement, so as to influence and pressure the larger political system to do the same. However, during our observation period of the Occupy San Diego movement, we detected many challenges to or weaknesses in the horizontal and decentralized organizational structure. These challenges and

weaknesses tended to reveal themselves informally or indirectly, typically during deliberations, informal interactions, and meetings.

A few in particular are worth noting here. First, while the respondents did tend to emphatically and proudly emphasize the decentralization of leadership within Occupy San Diego, close to a quarter of respondents indicated that some core voices had emerged informally, illustrating the existence of a more centralized leadership than was perhaps intended or desired. Second, the decision-making process – intended to be grounded in consensus norms in order to maximize democratic participation – led to much participant disappointment in terms of stalemate, power inequities, and the need to tolerate all forms of speech, including those that were deemed offensive to many in the movement. Finally, a number of divisions arose in the movement, leading to a lack of unity that threatened the efficacy of the movement and perhaps more critically, tended to further disempower groups that are already marginalized in the political and social arenas.

Thus, there was a tension within Occupy San Diego. Participants tended to offer strong verbal support to the organizational structure when asked about it directly, however their actions and words in other observed moments tended to indicate a deeper level of participant discontent, fracture, and inequality within the movement. Over time, it seems inevitable that these issues would begin to chip away at Occupiers' conceptual support for such a high level of participatory democracy. Is this then the fate of all decentralized and highly participatory social movements? Are they doomed to lose steam as activists experience an expectation gap between hope and reality?

Perhaps. But this does not mean that we should throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. I argue here that the weaknesses that emerged with the prefigurative organization of the Occupy San Diego movement are first, not exclusive to participant-centered movements and second, should not be cause for declaring the movement to be ineffective, unwieldy, or impractical. Indeed, there are also many benefits to such a participatory democratic system of organization, including the development of better deliberative practices, the discovery of innovative tactics, and the grooming of more representative and accountable political leaders (Polletta 2002). Therefore, the process can fulfill many needs and offer much value, despite the challenges. The key, of course, is to discover the most appropriate and effective means for offsetting the problems, thereby reducing the tension between the rhetoric surrounding the benefits of prefigurative politics and the reality of such a system. Future social movements – Occupy or otherwise – would be well-advised to consider these processes in order to actualize the vision of decentralized organization and maximize the impact of their social movement.

Methodology

The case that I analyse here is the Occupy San Diego movement, occurring in the eighth most populous city in the United States. It is an example of the

nationwide, mostly urban-based Occupy movement that enveloped the country in the last few months of 2011. The research took place over a two week period, during the height of the Occupy San Diego movement and approximately a month and a half after the beginning of the protest activity in San Diego. Our focus was primarily within San Diego's downtown Civic Center Plaza, the headquarters of Occupy San Diego. However, we did attend events in other parts of the city.

I utilize two research methods: interviews/surveys and direct observation. The interviews, primarily guided by survey questions, were conducted by a team of researchers and capture a wide swath of movement participants. Specifically, 73 surveys were completed during this time. Based on participants' estimates, 150 people were still highly active in the movement at the time of research, thus providing about a 49% response rate among core participants.¹ The second method used, direct observation, was also conducted by a team of researchers. The process was unstructured,² reliant on general, ethnographic observations, and consisted of attending General Assembly meetings, committee meetings, teach-ins, protest marches, as well as just hanging around the encampment. These two methods offer an in-depth look at the Occupy San Diego movement, with the direct observation methods adding richness to the detailed and nuanced comments from the interviews and surveys. In the sections that follow, I report on the findings of this research, focusing on the organizational dynamics of the movement.

How did they organize themselves?

In San Diego, the Occupy movement designed their local movement based on the structure of the original Occupy Wall Street movement, adopting the collective leadership model of governance. The model emphasized group decisions, solidarity, and mass participation, all with an eye toward mutual respect and a sustained egalitarian ethos. Deliberation could take hours and typically relied on a stacking system (sometimes a progressive stack). In the sections that follow, I detail the Occupy San Diego movement's organization, including the perception of leadership, decision-making tools, and divisions that arose amongst this diverse group of actors. In particular, I focus on the

¹ Of our respondents, 73% were male and 27% female, with the majority of participants being under the age of 35 and about three-quarters of the participants being 45 years or younger. In addition, 37% of movement participants had *at least* a college degree. Once you take into account those with some college experience, the number expands to 75.4%. Finally, with regard to employment, our respondents were split about evenly between the employed (both full-time and part-time) and the unemployed.

² Unstructured direct observation is in contrast to structured direct observation, the latter of which includes the use of an observation protocol. Unstructured direct observation calls for the researcher to "pay attention to all that goes on in a debate, take careful notes, and analyze the notes in an effort to discover patterns that can provide a basis for theorizing" (Brians, Willnat, Manheim, and Rich, 328).

disconnection between a rhetoric of support and the realities of frustration and even failure.

Leadership

Social movement research has long illustrated the importance of leaders, pointing to the critical role they play as they “inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognize opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands, and influence outcomes” (Morris and Staggenborg 2007, 171). However, the Occupy movement explicitly rejected a hierarchal structure of governance, instead organizing the movement as a leaderless, “real people’s movement” (Woodman 2011). Indeed, a participant in the Occupy Oakland movement notes:

What sets this apart from any other movement is that there are no leaders. There are people who step up and take more responsibility, take on facilitator duties, and more leadership roles inside committees, but anyone can do that...It’s important for everyone to be as active as the next person, and as accountable as the next person, and encourage others to stand up and speak. Because if you push someone to the top then you’re just replicating this hierarchy we’re trying to undo (Bardi 2012).

The Occupy San Diego movement utilized the same practice of collective leadership.

In our survey research, we posed the open-ended question: “Who do you see as the leader or leaders, if any, of the Occupy San Diego movement?” Two-thirds of the participants responded that there are no leaders, everyone is a leader, or mentioned the horizontal nature of the movement. However, 5.5% of respondents mentioned an actual person by name and 20.8% noted the emergence of what many called “core” members or “strong” voices, indicating that over a quarter of the participants did not view the movement as truly leaderless. In our direct observation, we did begin to notice regular contributors, strong organizers, and informal leaders, if only by virtue of their consistent contributions, technology skills, and articulation abilities. Thus, despite the leaderless nature of this horizontally-structured movement – designed by intention to embody their democratic message³ – influence among members did emerge in a disproportionate manner, producing a gap between expectation and reality.

Decision-making

Close to four decades ago, Piven and Cloward (1977) warned protest groups against too much organization, arguing that the protest spirit stems from the masses, not leaders focused on hierarchical structures. Similarly, the Occupy

³ As Pellotta (2006) notes, prefigurative social movement groups like Occupy tend to privilege democratic principles over political efficacy (p. 6).

movement was built on the idea of mass participation and, as discussed above, the notion of “everybody as leader.” As a result of this approach, the movement adopted consensus-based decision-making tools, including a nightly General Assembly where participants made group decisions on all aspects of the movement, from tactics to food distribution (Berrett 2011).

In the Occupy San Diego movement, the General Assembly (GA) was held every evening at 7:00pm. Smaller committee meetings were held in the hour before the GA, with the explicit purpose of delegating some issues to individual groups of participants. These committee meetings were meant to be held to the same standard of consensus in decision-making. In our research, we asked questions of decision-making in both the GA and the committee system; the results are reported below.

In response to the question, “the committee system of the Occupy San Diego Movement has been an effective decision-making tool,” 64.4% either agreed or strongly agreed. Only 4.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 23.3% answered that they were neutral in their assessment. We also posed a question about equality in the committee system (“all voices are equally heard through the committee system of the Occupy San Diego movement”). A strong majority (58.9%) either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and 12.4% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Approximately a quarter of respondents replied that they were neutral. Finally, we asked about a desire to keep the committee system. Almost three quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, with only 6.9% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

With regard to the GA system, the results were similar. In response to the question of “the system of general assembly voting within the Occupy San Diego movement has been an effective decision-making tool,” a majority (56.2%) agreed or strongly agreed. In terms of whether or not voices are heard equally in the GA voting system, the same percentage of respondents (58.9%) as above (in response to the committee system) responded that they agree or strongly agree, with 13.7% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. And again, more than three quarters of respondents (76.7%) said that they would keep the GA voting system.

The responses from these six questions – generally geared toward governance, organization, and voice – offer a good starting point from which to assess the disconnect between rhetoric and reality as the respondents’ answers illustrate a few things. First, the committee and GA systems were largely supported by the participants of the Occupy San Diego movement, even two months into the movement.⁴ Second, while some activists were more tepid in their assessment of the efficacy of and equality within the committee and GA systems, movement participants indicated a strong dedication to keeping the systems in place. Finally, this support emerged in response to close-ended questions, but our direct observation produced a slightly different perspective, as frustrations

⁴ This finding could, of course, be the result of those who were unhappy with the processes having already left the Civic Center Plaza.

seemed to be voiced more often than is indicated in the survey responses. It is this last point that I'd like to highlight and discuss more fully.

Before doing so, let me briefly note that this discrepancy between what was expressed in the formal survey and what was observed more informally is likely not unique to the organizational structure of the Occupy movement. However, some (Juris, et al 2012; Maharawal 2013) have argued that the inclusive and aggregating principles of a movement such as Occupy only replicate – and perhaps *worsen* – societal inequities, as many of the processes rely on an assumption of established equality that does not exist in reality. The harm, then, is that the inequities, frustrations, and schisms that we observed and that are discussed below are not uncovered or properly recognized as the movement's mantra of equality masks the problems and stifles participants' ability to criticize what is supposed to be the model of participation.

Within the Occupy San Diego movement, these movement challenges revealed themselves in small and subtle ways. In both formal and informal settings, we consistently heard frustrations voiced regarding the consensus model of decision-making. The concerns centered on a few different aspects, including what level of consensus is required for decisions to be made, the power to block decisions, and the tolerance of intolerant speech.

First, with regard to level of consensus, Occupy San Diego protesters at times debated how much consensus was needed to achieve their egalitarian aims. Initially, the movement called for 100% consensus, but one protester mentioned that in some cases, this number had been reduced to 90%. There did not seem to be a clear rule for which decisions required full consensus and which could be made at a lower level of approval. Indeed, the consensus decision-making appeared to cause a dilemma in the movement – while the consensus norms of unanimity underscored the basic principles of the movement, they also threatened the level of efficacy and organization of the movement. At one General Assembly, one man summed up this tension, noting that they needed unity, organization, and to “just do.” With regard to organization, he said, “we are close to really, really bad,” illustrating that the quest for unity was threatening the basic organization. He then noted that the consensus model was not intended for every decision, stating “the consensus model is only if something is going to affect everyone – we don't need consensus to go to the bathroom.” A second participant concurred, agreeing that the organization of the movement was poor, but he added that this is not a critical default and that in fact, the disruptive protest activities will triumph over the lack of organization. However, at another event, a young woman publicly declared her disdain for consensus-voting: “I hate consensus – sorry, full disclosure.” She argued that it doesn't work, noting that the process was forcing indecision. She continued, arguing that many people do not attend the General Assembly because they felt as though it did not work. This was a frequently made comment. Our own observations supported these statements as people would often end their 6:00pm committee meetings and leave the plaza, despite the General Assembly occurring immediately after the committees and in the same

venue. This young woman finished her argument, stating bluntly that the entire process focused on blocking decisions, rather than making decisions.

This leads to the second point regarding consensus norms of decision-making. Occupy San Diego participants often voiced frustration that, under a consensus model of decision-making, a very small minority could block decisions, and in a way that often reflected larger societal inequities. One woman declared: “all it takes is one bigot to say ‘we don’t want queers’ when we’re talking about a declaration of tolerance.” Another added: “the power to block is giving power to [white men].” Another participant voiced her concern that women did not feel comfortable at the General Assemblies, leading to the disproportionate numbers of men attending them, often at double the rate of women. Here the aims of the movement, in terms of maximizing equality and horizontal power dynamics, were perceived by some in the movement to be turned on their heads. The perception caused many to complain that General Assembly was not only ineffective, but was actually counter to the movement’s goals. It was a common refrain for movement participants to say that General Assembly was not well-attended or well-received. Indeed, at the point of research, a common conversation at the General Assembly was what to do with dwindling numbers. Many Occupy San Diego participants remained disheartened by the way in which the egalitarian principles of the movement were only recreating the power imbalances within the 99%. In other words, the concern centered on the way in which consensus norms reproduced the very societal inequalities that the movement was seeking to eradicate.

Finally, we observed frustration at the expectation that all forms of speech should be at least heard, if not respected. At one “Feminist Friday” teach-in (teach-ins directed toward discussions of gender and discrimination), this erupted in a rather antagonistic exchange between a group of women and one young man. One woman noted that the first General Assemblies were male-dominated, leading to the establishment of Feminist Fridays and other female-only events. As the conversation continued to draw on themes of male-dominance, a young, white man then entered the circle, first sitting on the outside of the circle, but then slowly inching his way into an inner, more central location. As he moved, he began consistently interrupting the group, asking questions that alternated between a passive questioning and an aggressive challenge to their points. When he loudly declared that “we are all discriminated against equally...we are all oppressed people,” one woman responded by saying “a lot of us are very offended – can we cut this off?” Another responded: “don’t shut off someone’s free speech.” A heated conversation erupted, with the group debating the need to allow him to speak (free speech) and the need to curb offensive language (hate speech). The conversation ended when the young man stormed off, yelling expletives at the group. The consensus norm and focus on “people power” ran into problems in this situation and others, and while debate and discussion was lively and engaged, and civil, resolve never arrived and the consensus norm continued to drive the decision-making process, despite antagonistic interactions as the one described.

In fact, many did not agree that the consensus model was problematic for decision-making. One man spoke at General Assembly, stating, “we don’t need a bunch of naysayers... [so many people] say it won’t work.” He urged the group to continue with the consensus model, and his remarks were followed by a raucous round of applause and cheers. In general, our observations of Occupy San Diego indicate that a critical mass of influential voices were supportive of the consensus norm, thereby allowing it to continue as a decision-making procedure. However, some participants continued to be frustrated with the consensus norm and the egalitarian model in practice – whether because of stalemate or because of the power imbalance within the 99% or because of the expectation to tolerate all forms of speech. It is therefore not surprising that a number of divisions within the movement arose or deepened, threatening the movement’s focus on unification of the 99%. It is to these divisions that I now turn.

Divisions and Diversity

The Occupy movement, as with most modern-day social movements, did not act as a unitary actor; instead, it was a hodge-podge of groups, individuals, and organizations, uniting briefly under an umbrella of grievances, loosely aimed at the politically and economically powerful. Occupy San Diego was similarly diverse. The movement consisted of anti-establishment activists, homeless persons, young, highly educated feminists, non-profit workers, attorneys, middle-aged, middle-income former hippies, teachers, college students, marijuana-rights activists, current military members and older war veterans, and many more. These categories are of course not mutually exclusive, nor is the list exhaustive. And while the movement rhetorically celebrated these differences and distinctions, diversity within the movement also tended to produce divisions that threatened the organizational promise of prefigurative structures.

Over the few weeks that we observed the Occupy San Diego movement, we witnessed a number of schisms in the group, from small annoyances to large impasses, each threatening to send branches of the movement into other venues and arenas. I will briefly address some of the areas of discord in the movement, before moving onto a discussion of the ways in which these rifts tended to show themselves. One major schism that was apparent on almost every visit that I made to the site was between what I called the “social justice advocates” and the “constitutionalists.” The social justice advocates were often younger, highly educated, and focused on economic, political, and social power imbalances in the country. They tended to use the language of positive freedoms – rights *to* things (education, health care, social services). In contrast, the constitutionalists were often middle-age and older, less educated, and focused on constitutional freedoms. They tended to use the language of negative freedoms – freedom *from* government intervention (wiretapping, detainment, press restrictions). These groups did not necessarily clash in a negative way, but they often seemed to be traveling the same path in very different vehicles.

A second area of division was between the so-called “24/7s” and the media group. One occupier of the plaza, a middle-age homeless man, told us of his attempts to enter the media office of Occupy San Diego in a nearby office building. He told us that they physically prevented him from entering the office and then forcibly escorted him down the elevator. We could not verify the story, nor the existence of the media office, but his mere perception of these incidents indicates that he felt sidelined, frustrated, and unappreciated. This division may have been indicative of a larger issue and rift between the homeless and the media-savvy, higher socioeconomic status movement members. Indeed, one member noted a concern that people passing by the plaza may say “they’re just bums.” This concern for movement image likely impacted group relations, as each side sought appreciation for their influence and contribution.

A third source of division fell along gender lines. From the beginning of the observation period, we heard many complaints about the gendered nature of the movement, with women often feeling at best marginalized and disempowered, and at worst, physically threatened. As noted above, the number of men outnumbered the number of women in terms of regular occupiers. This could be a reflection of biographical availability, however, one teach-in leader told us that the constant police raids had driven away the less aggressive male activists, leaving what he called the “intimidators,” who could sustain the raids but who did not make the women feel safe.

However, most gendered discussion drew on more subtle forms of gender inequality in the movement. At the first Feminist Friday that I attended, over fifty women gathered in a large circle in the Civic Center Plaza to discuss societal patriarchy in America today. The conversation, however, quickly turned to a discussion of patriarchy within the Occupy San Diego movement. One of the first women to speak stated that she had “concern for [her] experience in the Occupy San Diego movement,” especially in the working groups as men were consistently “stepping over [her] voice in a project that [they were] working on together.” A second woman pointed out that many women were initially placed in support roles in the Occupy San Diego movement, tasked with such aspects as feeding people and finding showers. Another agreed, stating “it is assumed that I’ll do the relationship work.” One woman mentioned that the first General Assemblies were male dominated, leading to the eventual creation of a “women only” microphone at marches and at General Assembly. Another woman then pointed out the creation of a radical women’s group within Occupy San Diego, in addition to the already formed Women Occupy San Diego, a female-only branch of the Occupy San Diego movement. Both of these women’s groups operated alongside the larger movement, with the radical women’s group engaging more in discussion and support efforts, and the Women Occupy group focusing more on separate protest activities, sit-ins, and marches. As noted above, one concern of these women was that consensus decision-making tended to favor the already powerful. It should also be noted that feminist discussions did not consist of only female voices, as many men offered verbal support in the Feminist Friday group. Nor were all the anti-feminist comments from men. For instance, one

older woman sat in a chair just outside the Feminist Friday circle and loudly stated: "I can't stand this bitch emotion."

At another teach-in, this one a non-gendered discussion of the history of Western colonialism, the group was more racially diverse than other activities, but it did not include many women. An hour into the teach-in, twenty-seven people were in attendance, and only five of them were women. The discussion lasted almost two hours and during that time, only one woman spoke. She spoke briefly, only once, and only toward the end of the teach-in.

One final note bears worth mentioning with regard to a lack of cohesion. Many events and activities lacked crossover, resulting in groups that congregated in a location but had little contact with one another. For instance, one Friday evening, I arrived in the late afternoon and spoke with some 24/7ers about recent developments. Feminist Friday began at 6:00pm and very few of the 24/7ers joined the group, despite being only feet away from the gathering. After Feminist Friday ended, just before 7:00pm, most of this group quickly dispersed and left the plaza, while yet another group arrived for the 7:00pm General Assembly. These participation patterns were quite common, with movement activists seeming to adopt "their" mode of participation, engaging in few other activities.

The divisions and schisms often showed themselves in small ways. For instance, smoking cigarettes was a deep annoyance for some of the more environmental, health-conscious participants, while it was a consistent part of life for others. Irritated requests for smokers to leave the area were common, and smokers sometimes responded with frustration at being pushed from the circle of discussion. Other times, the rifts emerged very publicly, such as at a General Assembly meeting. For instance, on a few occasions, we heard public complaints regarding perceived intolerance toward LGBT participants. A second example emerged during the colonialism teach-in, when one participant took issue with the discussion regarding solidarity with the U.S./Mexico border in San Diego, noting his concern with the permissive and apologetic nature of the conversation regarding border crossings, immigration, and American hegemony. Finally, these divisions could be seen in ways that truly threatened the ability of the movement to function. For example, at least six Facebook pages or groups were established, as well as a few different websites. Indeed, the online world of Occupy San Diego was often fragmented and incomplete, as well as distant from the on-the-ground activities.

One area where Occupy San Diego *lacked* diversity was in its racial and ethnic make-up, as the group was predominantly white. In fact, despite San Diego County being home to the tenth largest population of Hispanics in the country – with Hispanics being close to a third of the population of the county – the Occupy San Diego movement lacked representation from the Latino community. Of those who answered the open-ended question regarding race and ethnicity, only 13.6% mentioned having a Latino or Hispanic heritage, either alone or in combination with another race or ethnicity. Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans were similarly underrepresented in the movement as

compared to the numbers living in San Diego County, while whites were overrepresented.⁵ In regards to the lack of diversity in the larger Occupy movement, Campbell (2011) writes, “it is difficult to understand how this predominantly, in fact, overwhelmingly, white movement proves worthy for black people to join.” He quotes Nathalie Thandiwe, a radio host and producer in New York: “Occupy Wall Street was started by whites and is about their concern with their plight. Now that capitalism isn’t working for ‘everybody,’ some are protesting” (Thandiwe quoted in Campbell 2011). Campbell concurs, arguing that her comments align with the “economic and financial realities for black and Latino/a people,” and reflect frustration with a continued norm of white privilege within the movement – and one that largely mirrors racial inequalities in society.

In Occupy San Diego, despite the power-challenging rhetoric of the movement, racial dynamics continued to drive power distribution and representation. For instance, at the largest Feminist Friday that I attended (over fifty people), people of color were almost completely absent from the group. When the one most identifiably black woman did speak in support of comments recently made by the group, people began to stand and move around, engaged in side discussions, looked around in a disinterested manner, and generally ignored her comments. This was a common occurrence, with white men tending to speak more often and more than once per session. In contrast, non-whites and women attended less frequently and therefore spoke less frequently. Thus, despite the egalitarian principles of the Occupy movement – or perhaps *because of* these very inclusive processes – the racial dynamics of the Occupy San Diego movement were unequal and unrepresentative of minority voices in the San Diego community. Indeed, this is a continual challenge faced by prefigurative groups and movements, as principles of horizontal organization could simply replicate societal inequities. Movements and organizations dedicated to decentralized structures and consensus decision-making often assume that equality and power sharing will be realized naturally – despite diversity within the group – because of a heightened awareness of and reverence for organizational horizontalism. Instead, the risk is that the strong rhetoric of equality that is so present in a participant-centered organizational structure will mask the realities of elitism and inequitable distribution of power, voice, and influence. Below I discuss ways to maintain the egalitarian ethos so desired in a decentralized structure, while offsetting some of these dilemmas.

⁵ If we look only at the City of San Diego, blacks and Asians are even more underrepresented in the Occupy San Diego movement, and whites are even more overrepresented. Hispanics, on the other hand, are less underrepresented when comparing participation rates to the demographics of the city. This is because many Hispanics live in San Diego live outside the city proper, in the many suburbs and surrounding jurisdictions in the county.

Discussion

This research has offered a snapshot glimpse into a major social movement as it operated in one of the largest urban cities in the United States. Occupy San Diego, in its quest to disrupt the cultural status quo, stoke the cognitive liberation of the entire region, and challenge the ruling political, economic, and social order of the country, grabbed the attention of the region with its disruptive tactics, thought-provoking claims, and seemingly nebulous organizational structure. Indeed, the Occupy San Diego movement was an intentionally decentralized movement, proud of its leaderless and non-hierarchical structure.

When asked, participants tended to respond that they liked the consensus norms of the movement and that they would prefer to keep the structure as it was operating. However, our directed observation of events and forums uncovered a less optimistic view. Indeed, many participants acknowledged that certain people had become de facto leaders of the movement. In addition, the consensus norms of decision-making tended to cause frustration at lengthy impasses that were often peppered with incendiary speeches. These consensus norms also produced a situation in which societal power norms tended to replicate themselves in the organization of the movement, as consensus was often subtly displaced in favor of a minority power structure. Finally, many schisms and divisions arose in the movement, threatening both the sense of unity surrounding the issues of the movement as well as the sustainability of this intensely participatory form of democracy.

Are there then ways to offset some of these problems? Both Polletta (2002) and Mansbridge (1980) suggest that the use of more conventional decision-making rules and organizational structures can assuage these challenges while still upholding the principles of cooperation and egalitarianism. For instance, when interests are in deeper conflict than is typical for the movement, switching to a vote of majority, supermajority, or proportional representation can restore efficiency and better protect the wide range of opinions. Similarly, it may be necessary for movements to occasionally limit debate or utilize a progressive stack, again in order to retain efficiency and to promote equality (since a regular stacking system would tend to simply reproduce power inequities). Finally, movements may need to authorize committees to make decisions for the group, as this will decrease stalemate and empower those whose voices are stifled in the larger arena. Proponents of participatory democracy and horizontalism may claim that these traditional processes merely insert the elitism that they are seeking to counter, thereby tainting their deliberative process. However, successful horizontal movements will recognize that organizational structures should be fluid, allowing the system to occasionally move to a more traditional model – and then back again. Wholesale attempts to be *only* horizontal, deliberative, or prefigurative, will often end up creating just the opposite.

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