

I'm a "good" activist, you're a "bad" activist, and everything I do is activism: parsing the different types of "activist" identities in LGBTQ organizing

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Abstract

"What is an activist? Do you consider yourself an activist?" This paper uses memoing and content analysis to analyze interviews with thirty-five movement participants from two organizations involved in LGBTQ issues. I draw upon sociological and social psychological theories of the "perfect standard" of activism, identity competition, boundary disruption, and "identity not" to explain three configurations of activist identity—Emphatics, Demarcators, and Reconcilers—as gleaned from analyses of their responses. I conclude the paper by suggesting why people involved in activism may be more likely to identify with one type of "activist" identity over another.

Keywords: Social movements, activist identity, identity boundaries, identity competition, occupational activism, identity not

Introduction

Yes [I am an activist]—Although I don't really like the connotations that go along with social activists. [*What are those?*] I think it's often very liberal sort of extremists kind of kooky people. —Justin, SAGA

I think a lot of people think that activists are people who are out there throwing Molotov cocktails at the G8 or something like that. I really think anyone who really tries to bring awareness, speak their mind not let others control the conversations so much. So, in that sense, yes [I am an activist]. —Mark, NORM

What is an activist? Do you consider yourself an activist? These simple questions yielded broad responses from thirty-five activists from two separate social movement organizations. Participants, as we see from the quotes above, described "activists" in different ways, from kooky extremists to awareness-bringers. To scholars and activists alike, it is likely to be no surprise that movement participants define "activist" in different ways, and that "activist" is a negotiated identity. Past research provides insights into how movement actors contest the definition and challenges a self-identification of "activist" (Bobel 2007; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Gamson 1995). But, how can social movement scholars and activists make sense of these discrepancies in "activist" identity?

The multiple ways movement participants construct and perceive an “activist” identity can be understood using theories of “perfect standard of activism” (Bobel 2007), identity competition (Corrigan-Brown 2012; Hardnack 2011; Naples 1998; Stryker and Burke 2000), and boundary disruption and defense (Gamson 1995).

The focus of this paper is to parse out three types of “activist” from my findings—*Emphatics*, *Reconcilers*, and *Demarcators*—in order to more clearly understand the competing cultural constructions of what an “activist” is and what they do. I argue how social location (age, career, position within organization, duration of involvement), lived experiences with activism, social psychology (e.g., meaning-making of “activist”), types of organizing (e.g., advocacy groups), and personality characteristics shape the definitions of “activist” and help social movement scholars and participants explain why some movement actors may be more likely to fall into particular categories.

Participants in social movements define “activist” differently. This became evident when I conducted thirty-five interviews¹ with people involved in organizations that are tangentially aligned with gender and gay and lesbian social issues, but are not generally considered part of the broader Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) social movements.² Like much of the research on how movement participants define and identify with an “activist” identity (Bobel 2007; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Hardnack 2011; Naples 1998), I did not *intentionally* look for evidence of an array of “activist” identities in the movements I studied. The findings described in this paper arose serendipitously in other research when I asked interview participants, *What is an activist? Do you consider yourself an activist?* My intent was to ensure that I did not impose my own definition of activist (or claim that identity for them) in preparation for a series of questions that followed regarding how they, as an activist, perceived the successes or failures of the movement in the future. The questions were not asked to uncover differences in “activist” identities.

¹ Each interview lasted about ninety minutes. The names of the participants are pseudonyms in accordance with the IRB stipulations. I explained to participants the general themes of the questions at the beginning of the interview, but participants did not see the questions in advance.

² The participants for SAGA were a part of a previous research project (Cortese 2006) where I analyzed organizational records and completed thirty in-depth interviews with members in five regions in the United States to uncover the ways in which activists in an LGBT organization deploy “straight” identities differently in geographic locations to achieve particular movement goals. The participants from NORM were a part of a previous research project where I sought to uncover if, and how identity deployment strategies may be used by the organization to educate parents, medical professionals, policymakers, and the public of their perceived dangers of routine circumcision of infant boys. Both organizations in this study were chosen because included two questions that I asked both groups: *What is an activist? Do you consider yourself an activist?* Given that these movements differ in purpose and goals, and yet I find that the ways in which participants struggled with defining and identifying with an “activist” identity are similar amongst each other and to what others have found in other different social movement organizations (See Bobel 2007) is further evidence that researchers are “stumbling” onto something that should be further explored more strategically.

Nonetheless, the respondents defined “activist” in three distinctive ways. Each category I describe below had both long-term and newly-joined members; like Bobel (2007), length of time in the movement is not a predictor for particular categories other than perhaps *Emphatics*, but each type had included those who were continuously involved in a movement for 3 or more years. Rather, I find it is how one *perceives* activism in relationship to their own experiences with it that most strongly differentiates each category.

Emphatics define “activist” in extraordinarily positive ways, and emphatically identify with an activist ideal-type. These movement actors often set the standard of activism in the organization, and are the leaders who have a deep dedication to the movement goals and outcomes. But not all movement participants construct an “activist” identity in the ways that *Emphatics* do. I found that some movement participants construct “activist” based upon tactics, rather than on the tasks that they (struggle to) accomplish.

Demarcators have clear definitions of a “good activist” and a “bad activist,” identifying themselves as among the good ones, and setting a clear us-versus-them border between activists. Most of *Demarcators* are current or immediate past organizational leaders, which suggests that the boundary-setting may be either a movement strategy to act as a sentinel to keep away would-be bad “radical” activists or an outcome of managing the divergent perspectives on tactics from their current pool of movement actors. *Demarcators* see activism as occurring in everyday sites of talk and interaction, deeming in-your-face activism as an inappropriate tactic. All *Demarcators* differed from *Emphatics* by using schemas to process these in-your-face forms of activism as “radical” and to use “identity not” (Freitas et al. 1997) understandings of self to explain how their lived experiences with activism differ from the cultural presentations of “activist” as radicals.

I also found that some movement actors—*Reconcilers*—construct a new “activist” definition in order to reconcile their dedication to the movement mission despite their inability to achieve a “perfect standard” of activism. *Reconcilers* set their own standards of activism that almost anything they do qualifies them as an “activist.” *Reconcilers* fall into three groups: those who are more recently involved in the movement and yet to be socialized on the expectations of activists, those who fail to see themselves as measuring up to the work level of other activists, or former leaders who recently let their activism take a back seat, opting for a less-labor intensive role in order to focus on their personal lives that compete with the time necessary to their activism. The latter category take these identity claims further, stating that their non-activist occupations that they now do instead of their previous leadership work they once did in a movement qualifies as activism (what I call “occupational activists”). This is a departure from the oft-studied activists in social movements, making a distinct contribution to the study of movement participants.

I offer this paper as a foundational piece that identifies the issues regarding the dimensionality of activist identities. It is meant to prompt new questions and

provide fertile new research paths in the exploration of identities in social movements. This paper also provides a method for further exploration of the multiple ways movement participants understand activist identities. Scholars can apply the foundational typology in this paper to assess its generalizability to other movements, or to understand if this typology is endemic to a particular movement organization type or its membership composition. Activists can use this research as a way to prompt introspection on how participants perceive their identities as “activist” in response to the pressures of activism on the sense of self. For example, as I find with *Reconcilers*, activists with high dedication may need opportunities for recovery where they reduce their output for a brief time but still wish to identify as an activist. This paper helps activists see the commonality of this experience. It can help foster a sense of understanding amongst movement participants in response to activists’ concerns about movement sustainability.

Theoretical framework

Similar to previous research on activist identity (Bobel 2007; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Naples 1998), group membership in the movement organizations that I chose is homogeneously gendered; mine, however, skews mostly educated middle-class men instead of women. Similar to Bobel (2007), I could not find any gender, age, or other demographic patterns to explain the findings. Looking to explain these patterns, I sought out the social movement research on activist identities (Bobel 2007; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Naples 1998) and applied social psychological concepts of boundary disruption (Gamson 1995), identity not” (Freitas et al. 1997), identity construction (Yueng and Martin 2003) and identity competition (Hardnack 2011; Stryker 2000) to explain why my findings comport in some ways to previous research, but also diverge in the significant ways.

Competing cultural perceptions: the “good activist”

Much of the social movements research—indeed, most of the media attention of movements—focuses its articles on long term or professional activists. Why wouldn't they? These participants are often the key to our understanding of movement trajectories and successes because they tell the stories that provide valuable insights into how organizational dynamics can shape movement trajectories and decision-making. Their blood, sweat, and tears demonstrate their true dedication to the movement's cause. From reading about the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee activists who risked their lives to register African Americans to vote in the South during the 1968 Freedom Summer (McAdam 1990) to the leaders in Queer communities who challenged political, medical, and pharmaceutical institutions during the height of the AIDS pandemic (Gould 2009), we understand activists to be deeply courageous, full of conviction, and having deep dedication to the cause. We see that activists risk their lives and reputations to follow their convictions with an ambition to

transform the world.

However, focusing only on this small core of dedicated individuals is similar to looking at a submerged iceberg: by seeing only the visible tip, we distort our understanding of the entire object and its potential impacts. When we focus our research primarily on the most central participants of a movement, we implicitly shift our focus away from the others in the movement who are in less-visible roles, but also key to a movement's success. In doing so, activists and scholars end up adding to a cultural construct of "activist" that uses "unrealistic, even romantic, notions of the omniscient, tireless and selfless individual" (Bobel 2007: 156).

By considering Klandermans' (2004) typology of activism levels based upon synergy of time and effort, we can understand why the extant research focuses most often on those members who invest the most time and energy to a movement: One may sign a petition (short-lived and facile), join a sit-in (short-lived and demanding), pay a membership to an organization (long-term and facile), or serve on a committee in an organization (long-term and demanding). The focus of social movement research tends to be the latter because of the strong impacts on the movement organizations and lifecycles. The assumption is that the more involved one is in a movement, the more likely one would see themselves as activists, and consider what they do as activism. When considering movement involvement over a lifetime, Klandermans' (2004) foundational assumption is that actors mature into more arduous and enduring ones. However, people join movements at different times and with different levels of motivations, and may choose to exit a movement temporarily to regroup, or have a refractory period when "life happens" and they cannot dedicate the time and efforts as they once did. Klandermans time/effort synergy categorizes the levels of activism well, but it cannot explain how activists see themselves as an activist in relationship to what tasks they do, or fail to do.

In her research on women involved in the Menstrual Activism movement, Chris Bobel (2007: 147) finds that "an activist must 'live the issue,' demonstrate relentless dedication, and contribute a sustained effort to duly merit the label" of *activist* (emphasis in original). Bobel (2007)—building upon Stryker's (1980) role-identity theory of how one organizes their identities within a salience hierarchy of desirability—finds that the identity of *activist* is highly desirable and well-positioned within a salience hierarchy due to this romanticized notion of the tireless, selfless, and humble activist who sacrifices their lives for the greater good. Bobel (2007: 153) identifies that activists construct their identities within broader value systems of humility (avoiding a "holier-than-thou" arrogance attached to the meaning of *activist*) and rigor ("unyielding sacrifice s/he brings to her[/his] social change efforts...no hardship [and] no trial is too much"). Combined, this becomes a *perfect standard* of activist rooted deeply in our value systems and reflected in our cultural and scholarly focus on one particular type of activist: the selfless leaders in the movement for the long-term.

When scholars focus their research on this romanticized type of the "perfect"

activist, we are complicit in perpetuating the “perfect standard” of activism that may lead movement participants to make new claims on what activism is, and whether they claim an activist identity. It begs the question, if we do not see ourselves as able to achieve this “perfect standard,” can we *really* claim to be “activists”? As Bobel (2007) notes:

Who, exactly, does satisfy the criteria for activist? Who can afford to devote nearly every waking hour to their chosen cause? And while this mythic activist is off doing the good work, who, after all, is caring for the children, preparing meals, washing laundry, [and] paying the bills? The idea of constant, relentless dedication obviously sets an incredibly high standard, a standard of constancy and commitment that few even self-described activists could satisfy. [Emphasis in original]

Bobel demonstrates how “perfect standard” is mythic in its portrayal of who an activist is and, in turn, who is not. Indeed, when I compare my own activism work against this standard of constant dedication and commitment to a chosen cause, I begin to self-doubt if I can—or whether I want to—satisfy these exceptionally high criteria for activist when I am still responsible for the mundane duties of home and career life. Movement participants may feel similarly, leading to questions of *if*, *how*, and *why* activists might construct different definitions of “activism” to comport with different standards of activism they believe they can meet.

Competing cultural perceptions of “activist”: the “Bad”

Activists, in addition to being considered a mythic selfless being, also get a “rotten deal” in our cultural conceptualizations of who they are. The word “activist” can paint negative stereotypes in the minds of those outside of the movement (Bashir et al. 2013), where they envision an emotional and irrational protestor (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001; Gould 2001; Gould 2009) who have a “better-than-thou...arrogance” (Bobel 2007: 153) with a radical ideology (Corrigall-Brown 2012) that shapes their revolutionary political agenda (Hardnack 2011). Indeed, the opening quote of this paper demonstrates how one activist I interviewed—Justin from SAGA—did not like the term *activist* because it was loaded with imagery of “very liberal...extremists kind of kooky people.” Defining oneself “as an activist is not merely a matter of semantics” because it has implications for movement participants (Corrigall-Brown 2012:115) and is elusive, fluid, and contested in its definition. Words evoke images drawn from cultural meanings (Anderson, Dewhirst and Ling 2006) that are processed mentally through schemas that selectively receive and organize these meanings (Sandstrom, Martin and Fine 2010). When activists are confronted with these diametrically-opposed cultural constructions of “activist,” it is inevitable that movement participants will begin to negotiate the definitions and construct their own identities in response. In this paper, I argue that these

different cultural meanings have significant impacts on movement actors because they create identity boundaries between activists, rooted in philosophies about “good” and “bad” types of activist tactics.

The concept of an activist identity has its roots in the cultural analyses of movements. An activist identity derives from a history of political activity outside of a broader movement, whereas organizational identity, building on Gamson (1991), “involves loyalty to a single organization and its fellow members” (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 293). A tactical identity focuses on an affinity to a particular style of action (Jasper 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Gecas (2000:94) introduces the concept of value identity, which is “anchored in values and value systems.” Corrigall-Brown (2012) found that a value identity—not an organizational or activist identity—was most salient to members of broad, multi-issue groups that connect people based upon an interconnected set of beliefs. The concept of value identity helps explain why some movement actors imbue value systems into “good”/“bad” dichotomous “activist” identity based upon tactics of choice, but cannot fully explain how and why they set clear boundaries of appropriate “activists” based on tactical choice. I demonstrate in this paper that there are multiple ways in which activists parse the meanings of “activism,” and to fully explain these processes, it is important to understand both the cultural meanings and social psychological processes of boundary maintenance to develop a clearer picture of when and how movement participants may choose to claim an “activist” identity (and which one).

Gamson (1995) demonstrates that activists can engage in boundary disruption and boundary defending. Taylor and Rupp (1993) demonstrate how radical feminists engage in this boundary-setting between lesbian feminists and other feminists in order to sustain a movement during times of abeyance when the sociopolitical environment reduces political opportunity structures for movement success. Gamson (1995) argues that secure identity boundaries (e.g., gay, women) are politically efficacious, whereas fluid ones (e.g., queer) challenge the dichotomous symbolic meanings of identity that reify political oppression. The queer paradox that Gamson notes emphasizes activists’ ambivalence when “collective identity is both pillaged and deployed” (Gamson 1995: 402). Similarly, Bobel (2007) finds that women involved in menstrual activism also create an us-versus-them dichotomy of “good” versus “bad” activists, but one that is differentiated by core values of humility and rigor, rather than essentialist notions of gender or sexuality. In her research on four social movements (both conservative and liberal), Corrigall-Brown (2012) uncovers similar “activist” identity claims of boundary-setting, but with a twist: that particularly those activists who held a rightist ideology were less likely to consider an activist identity salient because of its liberal connotation. This distinctive organizational feature of conservative movements may also play a role in how movement members identify (or reject) the value identity of “activist.”

Movement participants create boundaries of us-versus-them and, in turn, these boundaries can impact when and how one claims an “activist” identity. It is not

unusual or unexpected for activism to follow an “us-versus-them” model (Cortese 2006; Gamson 1995; Ghaziani 2011), and construct an identity based on group distancing and border construction. In this social psychological concept of “identity not” (Freitas et al. 1997), groups define themselves primarily by what they are *not* versus what they *are*, creating an identity of “us” that is intrinsically relational to “them” so that it is almost impossible to separate the two. For example, if one claims that they are a “good kind of activist,” the implication is that the primary definition of activist is one who is “bad” and therefore, this person is not “one of them.”

The research on boundary-creating and defending shows that this social psychological process is not unusual. However, the boundaries that are created may lead to competing constructions of activism, and movement participants might even reject an “activist” identity altogether because they do not see their work as “activism.” The process of boundary-creating may be the impetus of further social psychological processes that lead one to reconcile their an activist work with an identity that does not always fit the cultural definitions we may use to consider behaviors as “activism.”

Competing cultural perceptions:

I am an “activist” because everything I do is activism

The “activist” identity is imbued with the concept of “activism” because they are related categories: to be an activist means one is *doing* activism. That does not mean that the cultural *meanings* of “activism” and “activist” are monolithic. Nor does it mean that everyone doing what culturally is defined as “activism” will claim an “activist” identity. The fluidity of social psychological processes in identity construction help explain why one may reject an activist label, even when they are doing what we may consider “activist” work. But, the fluidity of definitions and the expression of human agency in the social cognitive processes (Bandura 2001) of reconciling “activist” identity with “activism” as a social construct can lead to a circumstance where one sees themselves as an activist because everything they do is activism—even if others may not see their work as comporting with the cultural definitions of “activism.”

Researchers have identified a number of reasons why movement participants may reject the “activist” label. As explored in the previous sections, movement actors may reject the “activist” identity because they fail to meet what they see as a “perfect standard” of activism, and therefore do not see themselves as truly being an activist (Bobel 2007). In addition, organizational cultures may shape whether movement participants reject an “activist” identity. Naples (1998) uncovers a different identity construction process than Bobel does. Community leaders and paid organizational staff of a grassroots movement in the “War on Poverty” (primarily working class women of color), perceived and experienced an “activist” identity from their social position within broader systems of inequality, and did not see themselves as activists because of their separation between the realms of politics and community work (Naples 1998). In other

words, they did not claim an “activist” identity because they did not see their work as “activism” and, therefore, to make such identity claims for themselves would be inappropriate. Corrigan-Brown (2012) found that those women involved in four different social movements also constructed an “activist” identity in contextual ways. Those who lacked time to dedicate to activism earlier in their lives due to familial and career demands were also less likely to see themselves as activists. For these movement participants, there was a competition of which identity (activist, familial, occupation, relationships) was most salient amongst their social identities (Corrigan-Brown 2012; See also Hardnack 2011; Stryker 2000), and may choose not to identify as an “activist” in response.

In her interviews with menstrual activists Bobel (2007) notes that in their responses to her queries on their activism, participants imbued their definitions of “activism” with their identifications with “activist.” Indeed, Corrigan-Brown (2012) and Naples (1998) also demonstrate evidence of activists imbuing “activist” and “activism” simultaneous cognitive processing. We cannot know after the fact if the participants in their research were struggling with these definitions previously in their own identity construction, or if it was prompted on-the-spot by the interview where they quickly assessed their movement activities with competing cultural definitions of “activism” and made an identity claim of “activist” in a hasty response to the interviewer.

Regardless of who, when, or what prompted this identity construction process in their research (Bobel 2007; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Naples 1998), the self is a social product (Fine 1990: 122 from Yeung and Martin 2003) and the activists in their research engaged in the social psychological processes to evaluate oneself through the eyes of others and make identity claims of “activist” in response. Cooley’s classic concept of the “looking glass self” (See Franks and Gecas 1992; Sandstrom, Martin and Fine 2010; Yeung and Martin 2003) illustrates how the self is the result of the social processes where we learn to see ourselves as others see us (Yeung and Martin 2003). Using Cooley’s framework, we answer the question “Who am I?” not as Popeye might (“I am what I am.”), but more reflexively and through the eyes of others: I am what I think you think I am. This self-construction process occurs through processing an “interactional context, ...managing information strategically” (Yeung and Martin 2003:845) through sets of schemas that individuals use to understand, filter, interpret, and respond to situations through biological and cultural influences (Goffman 1974). These schemas, and the cognitive processes used in interpreting them, are shaped by value systems (Bandura 2002; Bobel 2007; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Gecas 2000) that can alter how one perceives “activist.” The result is that two “activists” with very similar roles within a movement can see themselves as an “activist” in remarkably differently ways because of the multiple possibilities of realities and interpretations one could use (Dewey 1969; Sandstrom, Martin and Fine 2010).

Applying the social psychology theories of identity construction explored in the paragraph above, how a movement participant identifies as an “activist” might

occur like this: An interaction with another person occurs where the question is posed: “Are you an activist?” The movement participant employs schemas of “activism,” with definitions drawn from culture, to assess its multiple meanings (both positive and negative) that people give to these actions. In this interaction, the movement participant rapidly and subconsciously assesses how the other person (and others) might interpret their actions: “Does the person asking me likely have a positive or negative view of activist? Would they see my work as activism? What definitions might they use to understand ‘activist?’” and immediately filters out multiple interpretations to complete the interaction and respond. The permutations of responses are situational and contextual. Hence, we can get responses from movement participants that seem to others as ambivalent, conflicting, or even illogical.

This paper will delve more deeply into identity construction processes of “activist” and build upon the theoretical concepts of “activist” identity construction strategies that can shape a sense of “good” versus “bad” activism. I build on the growing body of evidence that contends the collective identity category of “activist” is neither static, nor uncontested by movement members (Bobel 2007; Corrigall-Brown 2012), and that movement actors engage in boundary defending (Gamson 1995) and “identity not” (Freitas et al. 1997) border construction (e.g., I am what you are not—I am a “good activist” and you are a “bad activist”) to explain the differences between *Emphatics* from *Reconcilers* and *Demarcators*, and how these positions matter for scholars who study and activists who engage in social movements.

Methodology³

Thirty-nine interviews were completed, and from that set, thirty-five participants qualified for the study (Table 1). I analyzed the data using memoing of semi-structured interviews (Cortese 2006) and a content analysis using standard methods (Rose 2012) where I looked for specific sets of words or phrases that exemplified positive, negative, or ambivalent responses to the two relevant questions for the purposes of this study: *What is an activist? Do you consider yourself an activist?* I recoded demographics and responses to the questions into quantitative format, and generated descriptive, frequency, and crosstabs using SPSS, which helped inform my creation of the category types of *Emphatics*, *Demarcators*, and *Reconcilers*. I provide details of this mixed methodology in the paragraphs below.

³ These findings are drawn from two completed research projects on two different social movement organizations with distinct sets of research problems. As other findings from these separate projects are already published, I am no longer collecting data. The data that I use—for better or for worse—is all that will be available for analysis. These, and other limitations, are expounded upon at the end of the paper.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Sexuality	SMO	Years Active	Position	Identity Category
Paul	64	Male	Straight	SAGA	4	Member	Emphatics
Adam L.	23	Male	LGBT	SAGA	2	Chair/Past Chair	Demarcators
Greg	32	Male	Straight	SAGA	2	Member	Uncategorized
Grant	28	Male	LGBT	SAGA	2	Member	Reconcilers
Vincent	33	Male	LGBT	SAGA	6	Chair/Past Chair	Reconcilers
Gloria	56	Female	Straight	SAGA	2	Member	Emphatics
Trey	20	Male	LGBT	SAGA	0	Member	Reconcilers
Taylor	52	Male	LGBT	SAGA	4	Chair/Past Chair	Demarcators
Chrissy	27	Female	LGBT	SAGA	1	Member	Emphatics
Casey	34	Female	LGBT	SAGA	1	Member	Reconcilers
Brooks	30	Male	LGBT	SAGA	1	Member	Reconcilers
Don	28	Male	LGBT	SAGA	1	Member	Demarcators
Marc	24	Male	LGBT	SAGA	3	Chair/Past Chair	Demarcators
Anson	58	Male	LGBT	SAGA	3	Member	Reconcilers
Edit	35	Transgender	LGBT	SAGA	4	Staff	Emphatics
Reid	55	Male	LGBT	SAGA	1	Member	Emphatics
Dixon	33	Male	LGBT	SAGA	1	Member	Emphatics
Joshua	40	Male	LGBT	SAGA	13	Staff	Uncategorized
Judy	58	Female	Straight	SAGA	6	Chair/Past Chair	Emphatics
Justin	19	Male	LGBT	SAGA	2	Member	Reconcilers
Raul	32	Male	LGBT	SAGA	3	Member	Emphatics
Sebastian	32	Male	LGBT	SAGA	7	Chair/Past Chair	Reconcilers
Melissa	25	Female	LGBT	SAGA	1	Member	Uncategorized
C.J.	35	Male	LGBT	SAGA	5	Chair/Past Chair	Emphatics
Chase	18	Male	LGBT	SAGA	0	Member	Reconcilers
Xavier	23	Male	LGBT	SAGA	4	Member	Uncategorized
Cameron	23	Transgender	LGBT	SAGA	1	Staff	Emphatics
Eric	58	Male	LGBT	NORM	10	Member	Reconcilers
Mark	42	Male	LGBT	NORM	6	Chair/Past Chair	Demarcators
Scott	41	Male	LGBT	NORM	1	Member	Uncategorized
Julian	55	Male	Straight	NORM	3	Member	Uncategorized
David	53	Male	LGBT	NORM	2	Member	Emphatics
Adam	62	Male	LGBT	NORM	4	Member	Emphatics
Chris	32	Male	Straight	NORM	2	Member	Reconcilers
Alan	47	Male	LGBT	NORM	10	Member	Reconcilers

For responses to the question *What is an activist?*, I coded response “positive” if the participant’s statement described activist’s behaviors as constructive, creating positive change, or educating people on social issues, and as negative if they described an activist as destructive, having a negative impact on society, or misinforming the public on social movement issues. I coded responses as ambivalent if a respondent’s comment delineated a difference between activists,

such as “good” or “bad” activists, “helpful” or “unhelpful” tactical use by activist, or other value-laden and/or ideal-typical construction of a “good”/“bad” activist.

For responses to the question *Do you consider yourself an activist?*, I coded responses “unqualified yes” and “no” if the participant answered affirmatively or negatively, respectively, and without equivocation. Responses of these types were typically terse with little further explanation; I probed all participants who provided quick responses to elaborate, and include their elaboration in the data. I coded responses as “qualified yes” if the participant equivocated their affirmative response, re-evaluated their identity of activist in relation to their earlier description, or created a new meaning of activist so that their activities would fit into their definition.

I organized the coding of responses in an SPSS file that includes all the names and demographic data of all respondents and creating two nominal variables for Definition of Activist (DefineActiv) and Self-Identify as Activist (SelfIdentAct). I eliminated any response without data. I used Select Cases function to parse out into new files those participants who responded positively for definition of activist, and unqualified yes for self-identity, and so on through the remaining eight permutations, which yielded three robust subsets that became the categories I discuss in this paper. Four permutations included no data, and therefore are uncategorized. Two permutations did not have enough data to establish a pattern and draw definitive conclusions (See Table 2).

Table 2: Cross-Tabulation of Definition of Activist and Self-Identify as Activist

		Definition of Activist			
		Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Total
Unqualified Yes		76.9% (10)	23.1% (3)	0% (0)	100% (13)
		68.4% (13)	31.6% (6)	0% (0)	100% (19)
No		100.0% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (3)

Key

Emphatics =

Demarcators =

Reconcilers =

I reviewed the three sub-sets for particular themes using memoing processes. I returned to the SPSS file to look for demographic commonalities, and identified similarities and differences to identify potential generalizations. Particular social locations (gender, sexuality, race, class) did not yield any relevant commonalities, likely a result of the overrepresentation of white middle class men due to the nature of the movement organizations. The multistep memoing and content analysis allowed me to see more deeply the relationships between definition and self-identity of *activist*. In the sub-sections below, I briefly describe the selection and demographics of the participants for this study.

SAGA participant selection

Straight and Gay Alliance (SAGA), a pseudonym, is an organization situated within the safe schools, anti-bullying, and LGBT social movements (Cortese 2006). It has a federated structure with a national headquarters and local chapters with goals to create safer kindergarten through 12th grade schools for LGBT children (Cortese 2006). I invited SAGA chapters from five regions across the United States to participate using an informational letter and brief description of my research project. Chapter leaders informed members to consider participation. I also selected participants through email by using published contact information. Once a chapter was selected and permission to interview was granted, I selected members through a snowball sample. I

interviewed SAGA members between March and September 2003.

NORM Chicago participant selection

National Organization of Restoring Men (NORM) is a social movement organization that is in transition. NORM is also organized in a federated structure. Participants are selected exclusively from the Chicago chapter due to its proximity to the author. Although the mission is one of “a support group for men who have concerns about being circumcised, are considering foreskin restoration, or are in the process of restoring their foreskins” (National Organization of Restoring Men 2012), the local chapters—such as NORM Chicago—follow an organization model more about activism and protest. While a participant observer in NORM for 2 years, I observed the group’s activist campaigns stop the routine infant circumcisions in the Chicago area through organizing marches, mobilizing writing campaigns to medical, political, and non-profit organizations involved in infant circumcision policies, protests at hospitals, informational booths in street fairs, and march in the Gay Pride parade in Chicago, Milwaukee, and other suburbs. I asked the organizational leader to forward my informational letter and brief description of my study to the organizational listserv, from which I met five; the remaining four I found through snowball sampling. I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight of the NORM members between February and September 2011; one did not complete the activist portion of the interview and therefore not included in this study.

Participant demographics

The median age of SAGA participants were 32-years-old (Table 1), with a range of 18 to 64-years-old, with most of them white gay males and members of their chapters and only three members of SAGA self-identified as a racial or ethnic minority (Paul, Raul, and Edit). Ten became involved with SAGA one year or less at the time of the interviews, eight involved for two to three years, and another nine being involved with SAGA for four or more years (Table 1). Seven respondents were currently or previously a chair or co-chair, with the remaining comprising mostly of chapter members. Three (11.5%) were staff in the National organization (Edit, Joshua, and Cameron).

All of the NORM participants are male and most are either gay or bisexual, with only two identifying as straight (Table 1). The median age of participants is 50-years-old with the range being 32 – 62. Most were white, with one person (Julian) identifying as Latino. One person (Mark) is considered the de facto leader because he organizes the meetings, but there is no official chair.

Findings

I uncover a categorization of responses when I generate a cross-tabulation of

responses to both the “*What is an activist?*” and “*Do you consider yourself an activist?*” questions (Table 2), and as noted in the introduction and theoretical framework. The focus of this paper is on three categories in particular—*Emphatics*, *Demarcators*, and *Reconcilers*. In each category, movement participants tended to share a similar perspective of activism, their self-identity of activist, or both. Six participants remain uncategorized (Table 2) because there is insufficient data to establish patterns and draw meaningful conclusions.

No participant expressed a negative response to the question “What is an activist?” (Table 3). Three-fourths of SAGA (20) and NORM members (6) expressed a positive response to this question (Table 3).

When considering both NORM and SAGA participant as a whole, responses to the question “Do you consider yourself an activist?” are interesting: Almost forty percent (13) express unequivocally that they are activists, almost nine percent (3) state they are not activists, and a little more than half (19) respond affirmatively, but with some equivocation or reservations (Table 4). When I separate participants by movement organization, responses are even more distinct, but due to the small sample of NORM activists, it is difficult to draw conclusions as to the reasons for the difference.

SAGA members, though, were almost evenly split between responding affirmatively with and without qualifications (Table 4). Only one SAGA member stated that he was not an activist because of his job in a state government lobbying organization and the lack of specificity in his definition of activist. Of the remaining 26 SAGA members I interviewed, they were equally split between an unqualified and a qualified affirmative response (Table 4).

**Table 3: Response to Question *What is An Activist?*,
 by Movement Organization**

Response	Movement Organization		Total
	NORM	SAGA	
Positive	62.5% (5)	74.1% (20)	71.4% (25)
Ambivalent	37.5% (3)	25.9% (7)	28.6% (10)
Negative	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Table 4: Response to Question *Do You Consider Yourself An Activist?*, by Movement Organization

Response	Movement Organization		Total
	NORM	SAGA	
Unqualified Yes	12.5% (1)	48.1% (12)	40.0% (13)
Qualified Yes	62.5% (5)	48.1% (14)	51.4% (19)
No	25.0% (2)	3.7% (1)	8.6% (3)

Emphatics: the dedicated doers

I categorize *Emphatics* as such because I find an overwhelming agreement between positive responses to both my questions of an activist and their self-identity as one (Table 2). Typical responses were emphatic, and most exemplify what scholars might define as activists. Similar to previous research (Corrigan-Brown 2012; Klandermans 2004), participants in this category tended to be those who put in demanding efforts of movement actors, such as those members who were personally invested in the organization by being a member for three or more years (55% of *Emphatics*), or paid staff in the movement organization (100% of all salaried staff members who participated), or people with long histories of involvement in all types of social movements (eight had been involved in movements for 5+ years, including other organizations). Interestingly, *Emphatics* included many of the oldest members among all groups (median age 35, mean age 44). Even if they did not participate in activism in the 1960s and 1970s, the older *Emphatics* held positive memories of activism in that time, and not drawn from their lived experiences of activism backlash or abeyance during the conservative political and cultural environments of the 1980s through 2000s.

Adam, a 62-year-old (in 2011)⁴ bisexual man and member of NORM for more than four years details his activist dedication with gusto:

[An activist is a] person who is active in some goal or cause who either writes

⁴ I list the interview year next to the ages of participants to help the reader contextualize their experiences with activism and employ a schema upon which they gain meanings of 'activist' differently than those from younger generations, a concept I expand further upon in the *Demarcators* subsection of the findings. For example, participants who are in their 40s or 50s in 2003 referenced activism during their young adulthood in the 1960s, versus those who are in their 20s and 30s in 2003 or 40s in 2011 who seemed to perceive activism differently from their experiences in young adults in the 1980s and 1990s.

about it, or speaks about it, marches about it, demonstrates about it, which I have done. ... I am an activist on Yahoo! Answers in the intactivist cause. I'm an activist politically... [And you consider yourself an activist?] Very much so!

Gloria, a 56-year-old (in 2003) straight woman and participant in the SAGA chapter in the Pacific Northwest for two years responds how compelled she is to dedicate her life to social causes, stating that even the “bumper sticker on [her] car says, “To believe is to care, and to care is to do”. So, it's just, [I] can't not be doing those things:”

[What is an activist?] Someone who works for change, as opposed to just watching the world go by. I would say periodically I try and figure out how to scale back to a manageable level. ... I even suggested to my family at one point that, “I'm overboard and I'm gone all the time doing all these things, and I should probably stop.” And they all looked at me like, “Oh, my God, no, no, no! We don't want you here at home pacing the floors. This would not be good.” ... So, I'm an activist. I don't think I couldn't be an activist.

Adam and Gloria both describe activists as dedicated doers who work for the social movement goal they have. Both do not see themselves stopping: Adam confides that his hip problems will not keep him from representing the intactivist⁵ cause in the local Pride parade, and Gloria's family recognize that even when she is overwhelmed, her activism satisfies her.

Judy, a 58-year-old (in 2003) straight woman who has chaired the SAGA chapter in the Northeast suburbs for six years, describes what an activist is by being self-reflective while also evaluative of the other activists she has known:

Somebody who is willing to risk themselves, I guess. ...You have to be willing to act, you can't come and just talk. It doesn't work. You've got to do. You've got to be willing to lick the stamps and go out and talk and try to get money—maybe not everything—but you've got to be willing to do sort of a lot of things because it's not all one thing to be successful. ...[You] need to have a commitment.

Judy echoes other *Emphatics* who describe activism as doing, and sets a high expectation of activists, reinforcing the cultural meanings of activist as needing

⁵ The term “intactivist” is a pun that conflates the word “intact” (more colloquially, “uncircumcised” or “uncut” penis) and “activism.” The male penis is the only body part in Western culture where we have created a word to describe it in relation to its amputation status. As a number of respondents in my research on NORM noted, it would be very unusual for us to refer to a body part by the lack of an amputation upon it (e.g., a woman's breast as “unmasectomized” or a foot as “unamputated”). Intactivists argue that their word choice evokes a more positive image of the intact male body, rather than calling a penis “uncircumcised” or “uncut” which evokes a sense that circumcision is either necessary or pending.

to meet a “perfect standard” (Bobel 2007).

People use schemas to organize and simplify the interpretation of information (Sandstrom, Martin and Fine 2010), and *Emphatics* process what “activist” is through an “activism as doing” schema by understanding, “I am an activist because I do A, B, and C.” *Emphatics*, because they comprise mostly of the paid staff, older members, and those who have been involved in the movement for the longest time, are the ones who emphasize activism as doing the long-term and demanding tasks that the cultural meaning of “activist” typically elicits. Because “doing something” is a concept used by movement actors to create meanings of “activist,” it can be considered a meaning-making resource (Garfinkel 1967) that explains how movement participants make sense of “activist” as an identity.

In summary, because *Emphatics* emphasize activism as doing the really long-term and difficult tasks within a movement, they set the ideal standard of “activist” that others will use in their meaning making. *Emphatics* employ a schema that internally processes doing as the core component of an activist role, creating the “perfect standard” by which other movement participants will measure themselves against. Their embracement of this role is what distinguishes them from the other types.

Demarcators: I’m a “good” (but you’re a “gad”) activist

I categorized participants who expressed ambivalence both to their definition of and their own self-identity as an activist as *Demarcators* (Table 2) because they engage in “boundary defending” (Gamson 1995) between “good” versus “bad” activists based upon tactics. As Polletta and Jasper note, “people develop a “taste” for certain tactics... Some may pride themselves on their moderate demands and tactics, others on being avant-garde or radical” (Polletta and Jasper 2001:293). In defending identity boundaries, *Demarcators* always present themselves as more reasonable than those who engage in radical tactics.

Interestingly, four of the six *Demarcators* are current or immediate chairs of the organization, and those who set the public face, direction, and tactics of the movement. It makes sense *Demarcators* in these two tangentially LGBT organizations would pride themselves on deploying moderate tactics given the ambivalence lesbians and gays felt in the early days of AIDS activism (Gould 2001), delinking militant lesbian and gay political activism and “channeling it instead into the direction of an internally oriented community pride that encouraged...the commendable path to nobly, responsibly, and quietly taking care of their own” (Gould 2001:143).

Although it is too small a sample to generalize, there still is some evidence that there is a generational split in this category that can reflect experiences with movements like ACT-UP, where half of the *Demarcators* were in their early to mid-20s (in 2003), or in their mid-40s and early-50s (in 2003), and one participant in his 40s (in 2011). This is revealed in some of the ways in which the movement actors describe “radical” activists like ACT-UP from their lived

experiences that focused on negative aspects of activism (e.g., “in-your-face” other “radical” tactics that had ample media attention in this timeframe). Many participants who were ambivalent about whether they saw themselves as activists because of their internalization of this interpretation the signified “activist” is negative due to the visibility of types of radical activism.

Marc, a 24-year-old (in 2003) gay man and former co-chair of a SAGA chapter for three years in the Midwest, states that highly vocal activists can be off-putting to developing a coalition. For Marc, “radicals like ACT-UP do more harm than good” to advancing LGBT rights. When I ask Marc, then, who helps SAGA, he states:

You get parents, you get teachers, you get just educators in general. ...Activists are not bad, as long as they aren't an antagonistic activist.

Adam L.,⁶ a 23-year-old (in 2003) gay man and chair for two years of a SAGA chapter in the Southwest, makes it a point to describe how he is not a “classical definition of activist” because he is not a protester:

I am an activist, although I don't think I necessarily fit the classical definition of activist. [What's the classical definition?] Somebody that's screaming. When I think of activism, I think of screaming. That's not who I am. I'm a consensus-builder and a relationship-builder.

For Adam L., the classical definition of activist is bothersome because he seems himself as a consensus-builder. Those activists who protest or, in his words, are “screaming” are unhelpful and, therefore, not what he wants to be known as in his activist work.

Adam L. and Marc set distinct boundaries between what they see are “bad” activists (screaming, antagonistic, and radical activists) and “good” activists (consensus- and coalition-builders). But, if we look closely at their words, they are engaging in “identity not” (Freitas et al. 1997) border construction, creating an “us-and-them” model of activism (Ghaziani 2011) where groups define

⁶ In a previous publication (Cortese 2006), Adam L. is known by his first and last pseudonym name (Adam Lieberman). NORM also had participant that I named Adam. Although an easy solution would be to change NORM's Adam to another name, I could not bring myself to change it due to his deep connection to it. In our interview, he describes an epiphany scene to the normalcy of the intact penis when he saw a statue of Rodin's Adam in the Art Institute of Chicago. Although he is an atheist, he has a replica on his *étagère* of the same statue of Adam from the Art Institute, and uses it as a reminder to him that Adam was “the first man [with] the first foreskin” and that it is not meant to be removed (despite, he notes, the Biblical story of Abraham). The “Adam” symbolism is so imbued with his activism that Rodin's Adam is his avatar in his online activism. Out of respect and to differentiate between both Adams, I added the last initial to the previously-published Adam from SAGA.

themselves by creating an identity of “us” that is intrinsically relational to “them” so that it is almost impossible to separate the two. That situates their identity in a value-laden schema that relationally links activist identities together with moderate tactics (e.g., I am a “good activist” because I’m not “bad” and a radical like you) and making it more that they are defining themselves as something they are *not*, instead of creating an identity on what they *are*.

For Adam L. and Marc, being children during the 1980s and 1990s may have impacted their cultural perceptions of activism; the meanings of activism may be different from those who lived during the time when protesting was more widespread. It is not unreasonable to assume that when this new generation of activists replaces previous generations of social movement leaders, the negative perception of “bad” activists can become institutionalized in some movements, which could create rippling effects on particular tactics, strategies, alliances, and outcomes – a result that is occurring between Labor and the Occupy Wall Street movements (Lewis and Luce 2012).

Activists who are older still defend boundaries between radical and moderate activists, but tend to frame them more specifically around episodes of violence in what are otherwise relatively moderate movements. Taylor, a 52-year-old (in 2003) gay man and chair of a SAGA chapter in the Pacific Northwest for four years, also intimately weaves his general (and positive) definition of activist into his own self-identity of activist that he does not really feel he is one despite being labeled one in the media:

I don't really know [what an activist is] because I've never thought of myself as an “activist,” but I'm always described on the news or in the newspaper as a “gay activist.” So, I guess I am. So, I guess to me an activist is a person who is actively involved in what is going on and what's happening.

Taylor continues his response uninterrupted, refining his definition of “activist” in that that a movement has “thoughtful” and “rioting” sides, each belonging to a movement. But Taylor engages in “identity not” boundary setting because he perceives rioting as a more immature or irrational tactic in today's movements and he feels it weakens the public's perception of activists:

...As a gay activist, one of the things that you always want the community to see you as is as a respected individual who has thoughtfully put together ideas and a plan for the betterment of the community and for it not to be a rioting kind of—disturbing meetings and throwing things. But, you know, damn it, I guess there is a piece of that too!

As Taylor continues his response uninterrupted, he draws comparisons between SAGA and “the black movement” that he—perhaps unintentionally—describes monolithically and in racist and/or white-privileged ways:

...I guess I look at the black movement and I don't think people started listening to black people until they started rioting and breaking and burning and looting and killing. ...Now, the part that I don't think the black community has got yet, or a lot of communities have gotten, which I think the gay community has finally figured out, which is what SAGA to me is all about, I think you have to educate. ...[Most] gay people are well-educated. Their parents expect them to go on. They are very well-educated. They are well-spoken. They have goals. They know how to set those goals. They know how to reach those goals. And consequently, the movement, I think, is moving along rapidly because of that.

Taylor is engaging in boundary-defending on multiple levels. First, in what are misinformed racial generalizations, Taylor is differentiating between race and class (e.g., "gay people are well-educated" and implying that African-Americans involved in "the black movement"—whatever that is—were not), assessing the LGBT movement as comprising of mostly educated white males who behave differently from "the black movement." Taylor also maintains a boundary between activists based upon tactics, seeing education as a paramount tactic to rioting, even if the end result of equal rights is the same.

In summary, *Demarcators* construct an activist identity by demonstrating what they are not, and constructing and defending boundaries between "good" and "bad" activist categories. Unlike *Emphatics* and *Reconcilers* (below) who focus on what they do that qualifies them as "activist," *Demarcators* focus on what they *do not do* to establish their "activist" identity.

Reconcilers: everything I do is activism

I categorize movement participants who have a positive definition of activist but express ambivalence or qualify self-identity as an activist as *Reconcilers* (Table 2) because they tend not to see their activist work as meeting what Bobel (2007) calls the "perfect standard" of activism. In her research, many of the activists who did not claim the activist identity felt that they did not or could not live up to the expectations of an activist (Bobel 2007). Unlike Bobel's findings where the participants she interviewed rejected an activist identity, *Reconcilers* tended to define "activist" in two ways: changing the definition of "activist" to accommodate the level of their work in the movement or redefining activism so that their career outside of a social movement organization qualifies as activism. I call this latter term "occupational activism."

Reconcilers were more likely than those in other groups to either be "members" who donate time and/or money to the organization sporadically as time in their lives permitted (42%). Three out of five (60%) were recent additions to the movement, joining within the past year at the time of interviews. Two were past-chairs of their organizational chapter (67% of all past-chairs across all categories). *Reconcilers* often described their activist work in ways that highlighted the challenges of work-life balance in activism, noting how their

involvement in the organization was restricted by their home and professional lives. This differed remarkably from *Emphatics* who described this activist work-life imbalance in more rewarding ways.

Twenty-year-old Trey (in 2003), among the youngest participants and a recent addition to the SAGA chapter in the Pacific Northwest, represents the first type of *Reconciler*, which is the one who tends to be a newer member and trying to resolve the dedication necessary to be an activist with the amount of work that he can dedicate to the movement. He conceptualizes “activist” as an achieved status that has a minimum threshold that needs to be met (he describes it as “becoming an activist”) by first recognizing the social issue, and then acting upon it:

Someone who feels strongly enough about an issue to act on it. And I think that before you become an activist, ...you really have to feel strongly about something. And once...you realize that it needs your help and it needs your energy, that's when you start acting on it, and that's when you're an activist.

Trey evaluates his participation and, although he qualifies his response at first, he concludes his explanation after redefining what an activist is:

Yes, to a degree. ...I think I could choose to be more active, and I think every activist makes that choice, to the extent of how active they're going to be. But I think that by being involved in [SAGA], and taking the opportunities to do some activities, that is being active.

Trey describes activism in terms of degrees and one could be an activist by having the “frame of mind [and] putting forth some energy” as the first step in activism.

...I think it's an active choice to join SAGA in the first place, and then what you choose to do from there on, is obviously to what degree you're going to be an activist. Sometimes being an activist could be just a frame of mind...thinking that there needs to be change...and that you're willing to put forward some energy to help that. So, sure, yes, I'm an activist.

At first he is an activist “to a degree” and then, upon redefining the qualities of an activist to have a lower threshold to qualify—in his mind—as an activist, then finally claiming with certitude that he is an activist. Trey's ambivalence demonstrates that he wants to identify as an activist and, so, rather than claiming that he fails to meet an ideal he sees himself as not accomplishing at this moment, he proceeds to lowers the threshold of what he considers an activist to being “just a frame of mind.” With this redefinition, Trey is able to

reconcile his current participation in SAGA with a more broad definition of “activist” than perhaps *Emphatics* may have used to describe their work.

Eric, a 58-year-old gay man (in 2011) and an active NORM member since 1998, spends most days of the week standing with an “intactivist” sign in front of the university hospital nearby. The signage changes somewhat, but usually promotes something like “genital integrity for all.” At our interview he proudly wears a t-shirt that claims “I want my foreskin back!” and is worn at almost every public event he attends. One would think that he is an *Emphatic* based on his fervent dedication to intactivism. When I ask him if he is an activist, he says:

I have never marched for anything or about anything before. This is the very first and the only thing that I have ever done. I mean, I grew up in the 60s when you were supposed to be out in the streets doing all of these things, and I never did. ...It is such a personal issue to me that it has been in the background of my entire life the whole time. ...Not that I don't care about the other things, but you know, there are other people doing work on some of these other issues that I care about, but very few people are doing this one. So, this is what I'm going to do.

My assessment of his ambivalence rests on his facial expressions and body language. He looked down at the table and away from me and spoke in a slow, measured tone that seems to regret his non-participation in movements in the 1960s when “you were supposed to be out in the streets;” He cries as he describes how he failed twice to “save his nephews” from routine circumcision in the 1970s, and; “something in the back of [his] mind keeps telling [him that he does not] deserve to have a foreskin” because he was not involved in intactivism earlier out of fear of his family learning about his sexuality. For Eric, his activism is never good enough. It is always too little and too late, and he feels like he can never undo the damage that happens from his perception of “not doing enough.” Eric's behavior epitomizes the internalization of a cultural standard of the “perfect activist” that is elusive for many activists to achieve. Eric sees himself as never truly achieving this “perfect standard” of activism because no matter how many times he speaks up, “kids get cut...and that's devastating to me.” Despite all that he does to stop male circumcision, the fact that little boys still get circumcised devastates him to a point where he never *truly* feels like he has met an ideal standard of activism that he has set.

A second type of *Reconciler* is comprised of those who are what I term “occupational activists.” They consider their career in the educational system as activism, challenging the theories of identity competition (Corrigall-Brown 2012; Hardnack 2011; Stryker and Burke 2000), and a remarkably divergent construction of “activist” found in the literature.

Vincent is a 33-year-old (in 2003) gay man from the SAGA chapter in the Southwest, where he used to be a co-chair for several years. After six years in SAGA, he is now just a tangential member due to him having to refocus his energies on getting his Master's degree in education before becoming a school

administrator. Vincent defines activism generally as “someone who is making a positive change in society.” He asserts how his career as a teacher makes him an activist:

Currently? No, not currently. More so in the past. Yes! I change my mind! I am an activist now, even though I'm not *really, really* active in SAGA, I'm doing something *very, very, very* powerful still, and that is serving as an openly gay administrator and teacher in our public school system. And that's probably more active than sitting on a board of [SAGA].

Vincent first evaluates himself against his ‘standard’ for activism, identifies his current work insufficient when compared to the time when he co-chaired the SAGA chapter for six years prior, and then he immediately reconstructs an alternate definition of activism that incorporates his current career as a school administrator. In fact, the language Vincent chooses suggests his work as a co-chair in SAGA was passive; it is as if sitting on a board entailed little in comparison to what is necessary to be an administrator and teacher in a public school, which he sees as being even more active than his being a co-chair in the local SAGA chapter.

Brooks, a 30-year-old (in 2003) gay man, is a high school teacher and a member of SAGA for a year. He is also a member of another LGBT student organization in the Pacific Northwest. Brooks defines activism in a general way as others in the *Reconciler* category:

An activist is someone who goes out and changes someone's mind about a particular subject. That's an activist.

Although his dedication to both organizations qualifies him in his mind as an activist, it is what he does in the classroom—presumably how he changes students' minds about LGBT issues by being a positive role model and through education that makes him an activist:

[Do you consider yourself an activist?] I think so. [Why?] [Long pause] I think that I change people's minds about being gay or being straight with the work I do at SAGA and ...[the other LGBT] organization I work with. I mean, I'm not like a billboard-toting picketer. I mean, I work with kids and talk about their experience, or play a game of pool with them and talking about their day, or something that someone said, and changing their mind about how they thought about how that went. Yeah, I think I'm an activist in that standpoint. Rallying kids up to go out and change the world. In that sense, I am an activist. But in terms of sitting down at the table with the policymakers, no I'm not. Or hanging outside a building, no I'm not. No, not like that.

Brooks's description of an activist as a "billboard-toting picketer...hanging outside a building" could be perceived as a negative. However, Brooks is not boundary-defending or assessing a value to these types of activists but, rather, using it as a cultural example as to why he, as an educator in school, still qualifies as an activist despite not carrying a sign in a protest. Brooks justifies why being a teacher qualifies him as an activist—someone who changes someone's mind—when it does not fit our shared cultural meaning of activist.

The problem with Vincent and Brooks engaging in "occupational activism" is that "when anything is activism, and, by extension, anyone is an activist, then the definitional power of the word is compromised" (Bobel 2007: 153). In the interviews, one can see how *Reconcilers* struggle to reconcile schemas of both "activism" and "activist" so that what they do can qualify as activism. Newer members constructed an activist identity so broadly that almost anyone as members of the social movement, could qualify as an "activist" despite not being able to achieve the mythic selflessness and dedication of a "perfect standard" of activism. When almost anyone doing just about anything can qualify as activism and unintentionally discount the work of *Emphatics* or weaken the cultural meaning of the word "activism" that could weaken the power of the words *activist* and *activism*.

Limitations

Post-hoc research

These findings are drawn from completed research projects on two separate social movement organizations with a different set of questions to answer research problems. These findings are inductively generated from the interviews and I provide a post-hoc theoretical analysis of the findings. Had I intentionally created a set of research question to address the research problem of constructing an "activist" identity, I anticipate many of the identified limitations below would have been satisfactorily addressed.

Since I did not collect data with the intent to specifically to understand the identities of movement participants as activists, it would be unwise to make any predictive claims. Although one could argue that I am developing a typology for the sake of developing one, these empirical findings give us greater analysis into what we take for granted (that not all activists see themselves as such), but have not really been intentionally studied. The theoretical framing and typology is a launch pad for further research, and I encourage researchers to reflect upon these findings and their experiences within social movements to build a broader theoretical model to predict activists' identity politics.

Sample size and composition

Due to the limited sample size, I urge caution with generalizing how and why people may fall into a particular category due to their backgrounds or social locations. The three categories in the typology are not exhaustive because the

other categories have too few respondents to establish a pattern with any degree of certitude. The reader should be comfortable that there will be theoretical and methodological limitations with these data that cannot be resolved by these findings.

The reported findings may be atypical for activists in other types of social movements due to the imbalanced sample sizes and groups from which participants were drawn from; the race, gender, and sexuality (mostly white gay men), organizational structure (small chapters within a broader movement organization), and movement industry (tangentially related to the LGBT movement) may affect how one identifies as an activist.

Most of the research I cite in this paper include female-identifying activists as participants and, like my research, their analyses are post-hoc (e.g., no one intentionally sought to analyze “activist” identities). My sample of 35 includes only seven people who do not identify as male. It is interesting to note that I do not find a rejection of activism in the ways that the other researchers do. This suggests there may be a gendered dynamic to claiming an “activist” identity, but it is impossible to draw definitive links to gender without making questionable liberties in the research conclusions. The patterns comport with what others have found in other gender-specific organizations, which suggests that these patterns are not highly-gendered processes, but a part of the activists’ psyche and affect how activists construct their identities around cultural expectations and norms of what an activist is and the standards by which we collectively measure our activism levels to. The social psychological framework, therefore, is helpful to explain my findings of how movement participants claim broad definitions of “activist” so that everything they do is considered activism.

Interviewer effect

Since all of the research out there is ad hoc, it is unclear if activists make these identity constructions of “everything I do is activism” on-the-spot in response to our queries, or are really struggling with these questions themselves, and we happen to uncover them through our questioning. Is the researcher prompting these ambivalent identity claims and their responses are in defense to “prove” their activist identity in response to feeling questioned on their legitimacy? There may be an interviewer effect that prompts the activist to engage in the social psychological processes of meaning making on-the-spot and yielding explanations that they had not deeply considered before.

Although “occupational activism” may be similar in broad category type that Naples (1998) found in everyday activism of women, it is dissimilar in how men in this study claimed the identity. Rather than being modest or seeing what they do as not activism because it needs to be done, the two men in this study (Vincent and Brooks) seemed to make these claims during the interview, which one could interpret as a way for men to avoid failure amongst other men. Connell (1995) shows us that masculinity is tied into what we do and accomplish, and being a male interviewer, the interview itself may have been a

way for the two men to make claims of accomplishing masculinity by not “failing” as an activist despite their lower level of participation in the organization. This interview sample is too small to draw conclusions; it may have been gender, or perhaps the nature of the organization (i.e., taking an “educational approach” to ending bullying in schools) that may have yielded these results. Since I can no longer ask follow-up questions, future research will need to be mindful of these possibilities.

Conclusion

This paper helps makes sense of observed nuances of “activist” construction by exploring the growing body of evidence that contends the collective identity category of “activist” is neither static nor uncontested, and linking these processes to social psychological identity research on boundary disruption, defending, and border work. It may be true that social movement scholars assume not all movement actors identify as “activist”; however, this is the first paper to understand “activist” in multiple ways by explaining how social positions, cognitive processes, and individual personalities of movement actors affect how they construct and identify with “activist” identities.

Whereas *Emphatics* may be the focus in our research on activism, *Reconcilers* and *Demarcators* demonstrate that an activist can espouse an “activist” identity, but it depends on the interpretive processes and meaning making of “activist” before they claim the identity. I argue that these categories need not be distinct as Corrigan-Brown (2012) and Gecas suggest (2000:94). Individually, identity competition theories cannot fully explain the ways in which *Reconcilers* define “activism” to comport with what they do in a movement so that they can continue to claim an “activist” identity despite the encroachment of their lives into the time dedicated to activism, and vice versa. *Demarcators* hold ambivalent definitions of activist, and qualify whether they are activists by parsing “activist” into good and bad categories. *Demarcators* negotiate what Freitas, et al. (1997) conceptualize as “identity not” boundary work to construct clear and distant borders between “us good activists” who help the movement, and “those bad activists” who are a hindrance to achieving movement outcomes. *Demarcators* know who they are as activists and what an activist is by what they are not, instead of how *Emphatics* and *Reconcilers* know how they qualify as activists by what they do.

Building upon research on boundary work in movements (Cortese 2006; Gamson 1995; Ghaziani 2011), the *Demarcators* category adds new twist to ways in which movement actors define themselves as a “good” activist versus others as a “bad” activist, based upon their lived experiences of activism. This typology can be used to understand the internalization of cultural perceptions of “activist,” which can have lasting effects on the movement actors, the organizations, and the movement trajectories. Although the United States-based Tea Party (Berlet 2011; Rosen 2012; Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin 2011), Occupy Wall Street (Lewis and Luce 2012), and the Anti-Globalization

(Barr and Drury 2009; Brooks 2004) movements may still demonstrate examples of the “radical activism” in tactics and approaches to forging alliances that *Demarcators* criticize, there is some evidence suggesting the boundary-defending among activists may be occurring in a number of ways (Brooks 2004; Lewis and Luce 2012; Rosen 2012). For example, there are similarities in the ways the women-led Tea Party organizations and the liberal and feminist movements of the 1960s were organized and formed (Rosen 2012). Perhaps social movement scholars and activists do not consider how, why, or even if there are multiple ways to identify as “activist.” The findings of this paper helps future scholars and movement participants make sense of what positions *Emphatics* take on as compared to *Reconcilers* or *Demarcators* in ideological movements, and if these different positions (or others) would have different “impacts” for movements.

To create a more robust explanation of the collective identity processes in movements, establishing direct theoretical bridges between social psychology and sociology can help understand how and why the complexities of multi-dimensional and contested “activist” identities exist in social movements, but do not appear to adversely affect the movement. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 2000; Bandura 2001; Bandura 2002) and Cognitive Sociology (Cerulo 2003) may be a fruitful approach to explain further the hows and whys movement activists might choose one “activist” identity over another. My findings on how *Reconcilers* construct alternate meanings of “activist” to identify with, and the *Demarcators* “identity not” boundary work lay the foundation for fertile new research areas that establish links between the individual’s sense of agency, self-reflectiveness about one’s capabilities, and the broader network of cultural/structural influences on social movements.

Reconcilers consider what they do in an organization—no matter how little or how unrelated to the movement organizational mission—as qualifying them to claim an activist identity, despite differing from the cultural and scholarly definitions. A subset of *Reconcilers* recast the “activist” role into a new concept that I call “occupational activism” that challenged the “perfect standard” of activist by diminishing the tasks they accomplish in the movement when compared to what they do for the movement in their careers as educators. This provocative finding, although comprised of a small subset, merits additional exploration in other ideologically based social movements.

Movement actors themselves can build upon the understanding of *Reconcilers* to help elucidate the processes involved in “becoming an activist” where new members may not yet be able to perform the activist role “appropriately” and measure their own behaviors accordingly so that they can still qualify as activists. *Reconcilers* also bring to light some reasons why movement actors who are “burned out” or fatigued from long-term dedication might choose to construct another, less-intensive activist identity to both affirm their dedication to the movement goals and qualify them as activists by considering what they did in the past.

It is important to note that the current body of research on the collective

identity construction of activist seems to arise serendipitously from broader projects. This paper establishes the importance of considering “activist” as another identity outcome from movements. Social movement scholars should not accept as a given self-identification of activism in the way *Emphatics* do. Having multiple and contested “activist” collective identities likely has implications for movements. In thinking of cycles of contention, how does activist identity construction play in movement insurgence or abeyance? Without further research, we are left relying only on conjecture. This paper aims to help scholars make sense of identity work on activism, and establish new areas of exploration into the micro-level processes within movement organizations.

It is interesting how a number of participants constructed activist definitions on the behaviors taking place in everyday sites of talk and interaction, thereby challenging the “in-your-face, radical” activism that some considered detrimental to movements. Are negative perceptions of activism leading to a change in perception from us-versus-them to us-and-them as Ghaziani (2011) and Cortese (2006) note in their research on the LGBT movements? We are left to wonder if some movement actors believe that activism as we know it is dead, and that the radical activists are the ones who killed it. What effects might that belief have on the life cycle of movements? How might this affect movement strategies, tactics, and mobilization? As social movement participants and scholars, knowing the identity politics of “activist” will be one way to stem the cultural tide that is working against us.

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