

Tales we tell, speaking out loud: understanding motivations of social movement activists through auto-biography and story

Mike Aiken

Abstract

Social movements from below attract attention for the important roles they play in sparking social change. Such movements are propelled by large numbers of activists who exercise their agency amid their specific personal, social and cultural contexts. This article explores the role narratives played within activists' biographical stories to motivate their engagement. The research was conducted using a qualitative analytic approach to provide individual case studies. It examined the role of emotion, ideology and autobiographical stories in activists' political trajectories. The findings contribute to an understanding of the importance of ideas and emotion as motivational factors for activists' work with autobiographical stories as socially situated resources to sustain their action.

Keywords: Activists, social movements, biography, emotion, ideas and stories

Introduction

Social movements can be studied in relation to many different dimensions including, for example: their collective identity, the veracity of their cause or tactics; their persistence or diminution over time and the strategies of 'famous' individual activists. This article, however, draws on a different body of social movement research that turns the lens on individual activists situated in their contexts who are not famous in media terms. It draws on a growing literature that examines the inspirations and motivations for their activism by using a biographical and story telling approach.

Oral history, testimonies and biographies of activists have been an important concern within political and social history in England (Thompson, 1963/2013; Hall, 2001) as a way of understanding counter narratives to mainstream accounts of social change. Further, Thompson (2009:30) traced the role of testimony and 'communal memories...of beleaguered groups' back several centuries. Indeed, the Dictionary of Labour biography (2018) held in the UK's national archives maintains important accounts of renowned activists who contributed to social change. In relation to 'unfamous' activists, Klandermans and Staggenborg (2002:102) point to the importance of research strategies involving oral histories gleaned from employing semi-structured interviews with key informants. Indeed, life histories and key informant interviews are widely employed in social movement research with oral histories offering, from an anthropological point of view, the 'thick descriptions' of events to help examine the linkage between 'public and private histories' (Portelli, 1997:ix).

This research draws on narratives collected at the micro level from semi-structured

interviews with a range of activists. It draws initially on a framework from Costalli and Ruggeri (2015) and Ruggeri (2016) in order to examine activists' ideas and emotions as motivational factors. To this is added the important role that personal experience plays, as encapsulated in biographical stories, in motivating people to (potentially) seek causal changes to the social context. Later it is suggested that such stories may also themselves have a causal affect in sustaining activism. In short, the article, asks: to what extent do activists' ideas and emotion, underpinned by autobiographical stories, motivate and sustain their activism?

The context for this investigation was England, although many activists that took part in this research had roots in different cultures and states. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that differing patterns might emerge elsewhere, particularly in post-conflict settings where memories and stories may involve high degrees of political or psychological danger for individuals or communities.

This article is structured in the following way. In the first section, the importance of biography and stories for activists in social movements is considered. The next section summarises some theoretical issues relating to activists and social movements. The following section explains how the research was conducted. The main empirical results are presented in a fourth section by considering the cohort of activists and thematic elements from their biographies and stories. This is analysed in the final section in order to draw conclusions concerning activists' engagement in social movements over the lifecourse.

Social movements and activists: understanding the importance of biography and stories in the lives of activists

This section briefly reviews, first, the nature of social movements, activists and 'famous activists'; and considers the importance of biographical stories between activists and within movements as motivational resources. It then considers the role of emotion and ideology as mechanisms operating alongside, or inside, these stories.

Social movements and activists

Social movements are seen as important for progressive social change for people (and social issues) that are excluded from the conventional political sphere (Chomsky, 2012; Powell 2013). They can be understood as places where people can develop 'a shared collective identity', help create meaning, and mobilise values and beliefs (Diani, 1992). Further, they hold the potential for having a causal affect upon social change (Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994). Nevertheless, social movements are neither unconditionally 'progressive' nor stable phenomena to study (Touraine, 1991; Martell & Stammer, 1996). The focus of this paper is on activists and their motivations for engagement in 'social movements from below' (Cox & Nilsen, 2014). This terminology is used here to acknowledge (and distinguish) the fact that our attention is not on elite and powerful groups in social movements 'from above' such as those that seek to accrue wealth and power for privileged groups or 'high net worth individuals' (George, 2012). It also points to a concern with actions that are not necessarily directly part of political parties.

The term 'activist' is used in this article to refer to any person active in social movements from below. They are contrasted with 'famous' activists who will be well known in the media or political forums. The activist will often give up significant portions of their life, or face risks to their career or families, for the social movements in which they are involved, and may be little known in the public eye. Political work in action groups may be fitted in between - or may be entailed within - caring for families, employment or personal battles with authorities. Within such groups - or alongside colleagues and family members - there may be little time to 'indulge' in personal stories that have shaped their own political engagement. Faver (2001) sees activists as taking action to affect social change through a variety of methods from petitions to raising awareness and organising demonstrations. This may also be undertaken within the ordinary activities of their life, such as in caring or in conversations with neighbours (Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss, 2017). It can refer to those particularly devoted or engaged in the praxis of a cause. Following the earlier work of Touraine (1981), this article examines the *meanings* actors attribute to their activism, understood here as purposive 'work' rather than basic 'labour' (Arendt, 1998) and as work that is mostly unpaid.

The classic formulation of Bullock & Stalybrass (1983:7) understood 'activists' across a spectrum of meanings ranging from those who form 'the active core of political parties' to those engaged in 'revolutionary movements'. In between these two poles the term refers to those 'directly involved in politics', those operating (partially or wholly) outside the formal 'conventional politics' of official representative structures, including those engaged in 'direct action including demonstrations [and] sit-ins' (Bullock & Stalybrass, 1983:175) and other actions. They may be, however, simultaneously be 'insiders' or 'outsiders' working in corporations, academia or media; but also through their families or communities (Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss, 2017).

The biographies and stories of the lives of 'famous' activists in celebrated social movements can be an important resource for activists. Such accounts can provide accessible insights into dramatic social and political changes, explain the development of ideas and strategies, and provide learning and inspiration for activism. Indeed, it is suggested that 'biographies and autobiographies are almost certainly more widely read by movement participants than formal social movement research' (Waterman, Wood & Cox, 2016:2). Indeed, biographical work has an important pedigree in social movement accounts. The collection by Mulhern (2011) of 17 famous activists engaged in notable 20th century struggles provides insights into, and analysis of, the complexity of political change around the world at critical junctures. These accounts relate to events in the lives of famous activists as well as tales they tell about themselves or others that were vital for their political development. They provide illuminations of the dilemmas and conflicts all activists may face, as in Thompson's (1963) words, agents in 'history making'.

Famous activists' tales can involve oft practiced and well shaped tales. Nelson Mandela's (1995:5) auto-biography, for example, recounts that there were '...many stories that I was in line of succession to the Themba throne...' but he points out that 'those tales...[were] a myth...I was groomed like my father before me to counsel the rulers of the tribe.' Phoolan Devi's auto-biography recounts her poverty, humiliations and resistance against how society was organised, first, as a bandit and, later, as a senator in

the Indian Parliament (Devi, Cuny & Rambali, 1996). Satish Kumar (2012:14), describes himself as 'a peace activist...from a Jain family...' who, at the age of nine, persuaded his mother to let him leave home to 'live and learn the principles of peace' (Kumar, 2012:14). Gioconda Bella, a privileged woman in Nicaragua but with a leading role in the Sandanista revolution, recalls the 'lesson of dignity' that a poor woman taught her which she recalled 'many, many times over the years' (Belli, 2003:58). Stories about famous activists often recount such tales and these also resemble those told by activists in this research.

Telling stories: the biographical approach

It is important to examine the biographical approach (Williams, 1999/2015; Mulhern, 2011; Thompson, 1963/2013). For example, Andrews, Cox and Risager (2015) point to the growing importance of this arena. They argue that activists' access to movement auto-biography provides significant knowledge transfer to newer activists. Further, biographical approaches to famous activists' lives have not been uncommon. Raymond Williams' (1999/2015) own political development is explored through his biography and interviews. These offer narratives that hold important meanings and understandings concerning historical national and international historical events. In these contributions he argued that 'language is a continuous social production in its most dramatic sense' (Williams, 1999/2015: 176) while dominant ideology suggests each person is 'a free-floating individual who makes his [/her] life through a series of encounters, which are really quite undetermined by larger forces' (Williams 199/2015:275).

In fact, the act of remembering can be causative, namely, it can play a part in affecting action and change in the world, following a critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 1979). However, memory can also be complex: it is not necessarily fixed or indisputable as those engaged in testimony to truth and reconciliation processes have illustrated (Dorfman, 2010; Diski, 2012; Sachs, 2005). Nevertheless, sharing biographies and telling the stories in activists' lives remains important: they can serve as a political project of 'resource and remembrance' (Benjamin,1999), and a neglected tool for current and future activists seeking to 'live their own history' (Thompson, 1963).

In this article we are particularly interested in the meanings and causal impacts activists ascribe to their stories. Portelli's (1991:12) investigation into oral accounts of the death of a steel worker in clashes with the police, points to the importance of images that may even be related to 'mythological references' in such testimony. In short, 'oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did' (Portelli's, 1991:50). Further, Castiglia and Reed (2012:77) pointed to the growing visibility of monuments in relation to sexual identities from the 1970s, and argued that these operated as 'spaces of memory [that] were pedagogical as well as commemorative...and consolidated identities in relation to history for gay and lesbian viewers.' They argued that 'memory [lay] at the vanguard of the politics of identity' and pointed to more recent 'unremembering' between different generations of gay men (Castiglia and Reed, 2012:175; 86).

Oral history, as Paul Thompson (2009:6) points out, 'provides a source quite similar...to published autobiography.' Further, in relation to objections that this approach can only

offer partial and selective evidence, he argues that historians of the famous are subject to similar constraints: they examine documents, letters, press reports that are themselves constructions and 'represent either from individual standpoints or aggregated, the social *perception* of facts...subject to social pressures from the context' (Thompson, 2009:124). In other words, oral history is open to this objection as much as any other methodological approaches to history.

Stories and autobiography can also be seen as a route into issues that cause disenchantment. They may encapsulate a kernel of injustice or point to social structures which affect the emotions and ideas of others and provide inspiration for collective analysis and action. Hence, Mills refers to situations where 'issues' about a public matter that cause disquiet begin to surface:

...it is the very nature of an issue...that it cannot be very well defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments...An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements... [and in addition] '...it may not always be easy to crystallise the exact nature because such experience are '...often caused by structural changes...

(Mills, 1959:15; 17)

Using biographic and story telling techniques has been important in research across a wide variety of fields and continents. Winter, (1999) employed creative story telling to aid social workers in reflection about their practice. Viterna (2006) used in-depth interviews to look back at what factors pushed or pulled Salvadorean women's mobilisation during the guerrilla war. Elsewhere interviews were undertaken with key people to reflect on their memories of how the idea of a UK voluntary sector emerged (Harris, 2016). Meanwhile, Devenish (2013) examined identity construction through the autobiographies of India's first generation of women parliamentarians while Baderoon (2015) used both autobiographies and self-writing to explore Lesbian Muslim autobiographies in South Africa. Indeed, Nolas et al (2017:9) argue that an '...understanding of political activism could be enriched through granular, qualitative research approaches, such as life history, ethno-graphic and action research methods.'

The role of ideology and emotion in shaping activists' work

It is important to draw attention to the role of ideas and emotions as mobilising mechanisms for people's activism. Costalli and Ruggeri's analysis of the civil war in Italy, for example pointed to how, in the political sphere as elsewhere, 'ideas shape human behaviour in many circumstances' as well as emotions; they go on to argue that it is the transmission of ideology that can 'rationalize the emotional shift and elaborate alternative worldviews (disenchantment), as well as possibilities for action' (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015:19).

Ideology can be framed initially using Freedman's four-part (2003:32) typification which sees them as: exhibiting a recurring pattern; being held by significant groups; competing in planning for social policy; while aimed at 'justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangements...' There is a political importance encapsulated in

biographical work but emotion is also interwoven. Thompson's (2013) history of the working classes examined previously neglected action groups in England that formed a resistance whether this was by artisans, weavers, agricultural labourers or factory workers. Thompson (2013:222) argues: 'That working people felt these grievances at all and felt then passionately is itself a sufficient fact to merit our attention.'

The importance of capturing the voices of ordinary people embroiled in emotionally charged areas is underlined by reading accounts from those who suffered tragedies in the holocaust (Lewis, 2012; Smith, 2006); or Ophuls' (1969) filmed interviews with French villagers who lived through the Nazi occupation; or collections of oral history about the resistance and massacre at Tlatelolco in Mexico City (Poniatowska, 1998). Similarly, the tales of the British and Irish people who emigrated to Australia following World War II provide insights into the aspirations of working people (Hammerton & Thomson, 2012). Meanwhile, Deller (2013) illustrates how paintings or writing about poor people's experiences can illuminate neglected lives. An engineer's autobiography in 1883 describes the industrial landscape in the Black Country (near Birmingham) as:

...anything but picturesque. The earth seems to have been turned inside out...Workmen covered with smut, and with fierce white eyes, are seen moving about amongst the glowing iron...

(Deller, 2013:12).

These biographical stories engage an emotional response, in the listener as well as the protagonist.

The exploration of stories told by founders' of voluntary organisations illuminates ways in which biographical stories describe oppression but can also encapsulate an analysis and a theory of change. Schwabenland (2006) argued that one leader was 'not only identifying oppression as a social ill but also proposing the suggestion, or theory-in-use, that oppression is caused by caste, by a hierarchical structuring of society' (Schwabenland, 2006:37). Stories can thus act as a source of analysis that offers power and resistance. This suggests that the storyteller may be able to 'realise agency through the telling of the story' and thereby 'develop a new political identity...' or a 'refusal to accept the identity that has been thrust upon them...' Schwabenland (2006:59). Further, stories often contain 'poetic imagery' and can be 'metaphors of journeys...metaphors of movement and containment' (Schwabenland, 2006:141). Indeed, Ricoeur (1975:5) points out that 'metaphor is the rhetorical process by which the discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to re-describe reality.' Metaphor and narrative may thus play a role in re-shaping an understanding of, and feelings towards, existing structures of social reality: they can act as a political resource for resistance.

There are two important points to summarise concerning biographic stories. First, these tales may not be uncritically 'true.' The recounting of any fragment of biography remains essentially partial because of what it leaves out and what it emphasises. Second, even our own memories - with no intent to deceive - are never faultless. As Dorfman (2010) points out, in relation to truth and reconciliation committees in South Africa, memories can be mis-remembered and mis-recorded. Questions may be asked about 'veracity' (did

that really happen?) and 'selectivity' (why is this story chosen above other more mundane examples?) and 'purpose' (does this set the activist in a favourable and heroic light?).

Research aims

In this article the aim is not to ascertain forensic historical certainty behind a biography or story. The important issue to be explored here is what tales are cited and with what meaning they are imbued. Second, biographic stories – as much as other histories may contain meanings and persuasion. In any struggle against overwhelming odds, stories may be critical to keeping activists going – in that sense they may have causative power. For example, Mark Thomas's (2016) performative and comedic exploration of memory in relation to the UK miner's strike in 1984-5 is noteworthy here. In his story, the precise incident of whether children sang (or did not sing) 'solidarity for ever' to mark the end of this strike became absorbed into a much deeper and layered narrative of working class culture and resistance. Narratives necessarily contend with 'time and mode': they may need to compress or expand the periods of events to make the tale coherent; or draw the tale 'upwards to pure politics or downward to personal life and affections' Portelli (1991:21). The interest here is with the meaning and importance of stories that, along with traditional historical approaches, represent some sense of social construction.

Getting personal

This article focusses on individual activists as a part of wider social movements or causes and examines their stories and biographies. There are dangers in separating the individuals from the movement and their broader social context, particularly, as this can entail the valorisation of the 'romantic self' (Kenny, 2000). It presents a high actor-centred view of how social structures may be changed. Nevertheless, at their heart, social movements often embody broad and romantic beliefs concerning quite large scale social change. And, in some cases, these changes are achieved. Hence, it is important to understand the individual activists who populate these movements.

As an illustration, a small tale from my own history may be appropriate. When I was young my mother, who had grown up in the poverty of 1920s London, told me a story about walking to Sunday school with her brother. They encountered the Jarrow marchers – working people in desperate poverty who walked the length of England to demand action to counter their hunger. She recalled:

I was a child of eight and my brother [was] aged nine. Hand in hand we were on our way to Sunday school just off the Marylebone Road when we heard the band and stopped. We read the banners which proclaimed that these were the Jarrow Hunger marchers. We had heard about them. We were very poor but these men looked poorer. They were very shabby with rags tied round their feet. [We]...decided to miss Sunday School and join the hunger marchers... (CPSA, 1979).

This points to some important features: her family were poor yet, as children under 10 years old in a working class London family, they had an understanding of the Jarrow marches through family discussions in an age before mass-media was prevalent. They noted that these men were even poorer than them. Further, they decided to join the march. The notion of support for, and solidarity with, this cause and its wider ramifications – combined with a willingness to participate – represents some degree of political awareness. The transmission of this story also affected my own later activism. It became one of the tales that I told.

Social movement theory: theoretical underpinnings

Different, and at times overlapping theoretical approaches, to understanding the engagement of people in social movements have developed as della Porta and Diana (2006) point out. In this research it was anticipated that there would be a necessary blending of theoretical approaches to make sense of the role stories and biography played in activists' social movement participation.

First, Roth's (2016:49) analysis points to social movement participation not as a separate life activity but rather '...integrated in everyday life... Everyday experiences - for example, discrimination, inequality and injustice - can be the cause to become active in different ways to fight for one's own interests or for future generations' (Roth, 2016:49). The connection to people's everyday life experiences was anticipated to be central to social movement involvement in this article.

Second, closely related to this approach are affiliation and identity needs and the importance of emotion as motivators for engagement (Jasper, 1997; Melucci, 1989). These are also linked to the importance of the existence of formal or informal networks and personal connections - as possible pre-conditions or enablers - which may facilitate collective action (della Porta, 1988). Indeed, Jasper (1997) argues that people become committed to social movements due to strong moral commitments and, in an existential sense, their lives gain more meaning through such involvement. Further, Jasper, emphasised the need to study the role of emotion with morality, and biography and meaning, as structured by cultural contexts. For activists, engagement also implies attention to the affective and expressive realm: it can involve relations with like minded people and the chance to speak out on issues of importance. Our individual biographies can be situated within this realm.

Third, there are also important insights available from cultural theories. The three part analysis of Fuist (2013:1045), for example, distinguishes three approaches whereby culture is seen variously as: (a) internal traditions and 'solidarity' within groups; or (b) as a force operating 'externally' upon social movements, or (c) used instrumentally as a 'resource' so that social issues may be framed by activists contesting mainstream views. 'Framing' approaches can imply a tactical manipulation of common symbols in order to win strategic campaign aims (Benford, 1997) although, when strategic purposes have been pursued too far this approach has been critiqued as being overly instrumental. Nevertheless, internal solidarity and intense shared experiences of opposing injustice are important products of a shared culture of solidarity within social movement groups. Davis (2002:8), for example, distinguishes personal from collective level stories and

points out that 'at the personal level are the stories people tell about themselves, the self-narratives through which their experience and their selves attain meaning.' In this weaker respect, stories may vary between 'configurations of a whole life to stories of significant life passages, existential moments, and traumatic events' (Davis, 2002: 22).

Attention needs to be paid, fourth, to cognitive approaches that can tend to stress calculative or rational assessments of political opportunities for attracting activists' participation (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). However, the realm of ideas, for example, presents a much larger canvas for making sense of personal biography and stories of oppression by considering underlying social structures while 'grand theory' and ideologies present broader explanative narratives. In this respect, capitalism or fascism, as much as Marxism or Feminism, present an analysis of social and economic organisation. At a micro level personal stories and biography can feed into illuminating or modifying a broader understanding of social realities.

Cutting across - and under - these understandings are Marxist approaches which eschew the position of social movements as 'a particular "level" of political action' that operate somewhere between structured organisations such as trade unions or micro-level resistances...' (Cox & Nilsen, 2014: 25). Rather, social movements are part of 'the way in which human beings create their own society and orientate their priorities and development' (Cox & Nilsen, 2014:26). However, in this sense the 'work' of social movements is not utopian but, rather, consciously attenuating emergent struggles towards fundamental transformations in the organisation of social structures.

Oliver, Cadena-Roa & Swann (2003:214) sought to blend some of these four different theoretical strands with all of them 'addressing different important features of a complex'. Social movements can be a broad container of types of activism - resources of both ideas and emotions. They play an important part in conveying ideas and emotions. 'Real' influence draws from the sense that such stories and biographies can provide a pre-disposition or encouragement to become involved. However, there will always be counterfactual settings where these 'pre-dispositions' are not unleashed.

Taking these elements together provides a way for considering how auto-biographical stories may be one of the elements that captures emotions and ideas from activists' experience. Within social movements, ideas can then offer an ideological and emotional frame for analysis and action. The research in this article draws on a micro-level approach to narratives (linked, for example to the ideas, emotion and personal experience of participants as revealed in their stories) while understanding that these have the potential to have causal power in society.

How the research was organised

This central aim of this research was to explore: to what extent do activists' ideas and emotions, underpinned by autobiographical stories, motivate and sustain their activism?

The research strategy involved purposive sampling with a focus on activists' understanding of how their biographies and personal stories influenced engagement in social movements. It aimed to build an understanding, from their perspective, of how

they relate these stories to their activism.

This was undertaken with a diverse set of activists – by age, gender, class, sexuality etc) who were involved in a variety of causes – in order to examine the importance of autobiographical stories across a dissimilar cohort laterally. A different approach would have been to explore a non-diverse group in a single field of activism. Both approaches have merit but the first approach was taken here with the hope that activists from different fields would throw light on similarities in the ways that ideologies and emotion played out across different activist arenas.

Interviewees were sought initially from activists' networks or contacts known to the author in the south of England to facilitate ease of access for face-to-face contact with the researcher and to keep transport costs low. The aim and nature of the research was communicated through email networks and word of mouth. This led to some snowballing as interviewees suggested additional people to contact. The positionality of researching as an 'insider' presented familiar issues, as Herr & Anderson (2015) note. However, those authors also point to advantages of 'insiders' as holders of existing tacit knowledge. This can help make sense of contextual features and generate 'co-learning' between researcher and practitioner as is familiar in action research (Stringer, 1999). It also presented some advantages in terms of openness and trust with people familiar with my own activism. It may have presented disadvantages if they did not wish to present inappropriate material. However, finding 'bridges between the personal and political spheres' represents an important project in exploring the 'political and public reverberations of what is personal and private', and leads to the open question 'what would happen if one tried to connect the world of feelings and emotions and the world of politics and official culture' (Passerini, 1999:19).

The tales and biographical details of 18 UK activists were examined with each person representing a mini-case study of activism (Yin, 1994). Hence basic profile data was sought from – and similar guide questions were used with – each person through semi-structured interviews. The research approach stemmed from a 'critical tradition' and a 'post-positivist position' which looks both at 'dialogic' inquiry and 'testing' certain propositions (Williams with Dyer, 2015).

The guide questions formed a loose structure for the interviews. In practice, having established the parameters of the research, most interviewees then covered the themes in a non-linear way – moving between their own history of activism, important stories, personal history and mutual dialogue. Most interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours. A script of the typed interviews was returned to participants which they could amend and return. Contrasting themes - using open coding linked to the primary aims - were used in the analysis. A summary of the areas of social movement involvement that research participants named as their current activist engagement is summarised in Table 1. This is consistent with findings from the social movement literature that activists frequently engage in a variety of arenas either simultaneously or at different times.

Table 1: Social movement arenas in the activist cohort

• racial justice and anti-racism • women’s rights and feminism • Gay or Lesbian rights • anti-war and pro-peace • trade union activity • Left political parties • environment • spirituality and religion • conflict resolution and dialogue building • engaged theatre • community development and neighbourhood action • migrants and refugee rights • student activism

• welfare benefits, workers' rights • squatting • indigenous people’s struggles and international solidarity • political engagement in which spiritual or religious involvement played a significant role and was also represented (including Islam, Christianity and Buddhism).

The 18 face-to-face interviews were undertaken between February and May 2016 in the south east of England. The profile of the cohort involved ten women and eight men. Their ages ranged from 19 to 85 years old. So-called ‘basic’ profile questions about ‘ethnicity’, ‘social class’ and ‘sexuality’ were not usually straight forward. These often led to important discussions related to the themes of the research. In two cases, the assignation of gender between ‘man’ and ‘woman’ was queried with the suggestion that gender was more fluid than these two categories. Two described themselves as Gay. Some people resisted classifications particularly in relation to ‘class.’

Others defined themselves as ‘lower middle class’ but from a ‘working class background’ or pointed to their parental background as important. Under the ‘ethnic’ category, many referred to family members from previous generations with a variety of ethnic backgrounds, countries or cultures. Many had entered activism through a specific issue but all had been or were currently involved in multiple causes. Table 2 provides a profile of activists. Names and sometimes other details have been anonymised.

Table 2: Profile of Participants (names have been anonymised)				
Name [code]	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Social class
Laurie [14]	Man	18 - 20	White British/ Irish Traveller	Working class
Morgan [15]	Man	18 - 20	White	South African middle class
Nomol [8]	Man	25 - 49	British Pakistani	Middle class
Anthea [13]	Woman	25 - 49	Not defined	Not defined

Bella [12]	Woman	50 - 65	White- other/ south European	Middle class now (by education)
Corda [1]	Woman	50 - 65	White British	Working class origin/ now lower middle class
Margaret [6]	Woman	50 - 65	Not defined	Not defined
Nora [18]	Woman	50 - 65	White	Working class background
Ogama [5]	Woman	50 - 65	African/Indian/ Scots	British Working class background/ middle class lifestyle
Temlen [16]	Man	50 - 65	Not defined	Not defined
Tivanj [17]	Man	50 - 65	Not defined	Not defined
Emily [4]	Woman	50 - 65	White-British	Middle class and family from owning class
Alan [6]	Man	50 - 65	White-British	Working class background/ now lower middle class
Verity [3]	Woman	65+	White	Working class background
Patricia [11]	Woman	65 - 70	White from the British colonies	Australian Middle class
James [12]	Man	65 +	White from Irish heritage	Working class
Barry [10]	Man	65 -70	White British	Working class aspirant / now centre middle class
Felicity [9]	Woman	80 +	White/ Irish & E European background	Working class

The findings

About the cohort

The cohort of activists' experience presents several important features. First, nearly all

activists had influences, or personal experience, involving injustice to them or their family/friends from childhood. Similarly, there was a significant degree of exposure to activism early in their lives. Such features might be regarded as offering a latent disposition towards activism or a familiarity with the idea of activist networks. However, this was not always the case and some came to activism later in life (eg Nomol).

Second, many of these activists had, currently or in the past, some link to formal party politics or trade unions (Alan; Margaret; Ogama). Very few people had made traditional political activity the centre of their activism but social movement engagement did not entail exclusion from formal political structures.

In addition (see Table 2), particularly with the over 50 years olds, trade union engagement had been important at some point and was credited with skill development in organising.

Third, most of this cohort identified with a theoretical/ideological body of knowledge - including feminism, Marxism, socialism, anarchism, anti-racism, queer theory, radical participatory theatre. Fourth, there was no specific attempt to include faith perspectives or international linkage but both aspects featured in interviewee's responses. Many activists noted an allegiance to spiritual or faith bases which influenced their activism (these included Buddhism (Temlen; Tivanj), Islam (Nomol) or Christianity (Felicity, Alan) and was linked or central to their engagement.

In addition, the majority claimed an international link - through family, friends or movement affiliation - and this influenced their stories. Several had Irish parents or grandparents (James, Laurie, Felicity); or family origins in Poland or Eastern Europe (Felicity, Margaret), India or West Africa (Ogama); some had relatives - or had lived in or been brought up in Canada or the USA (Felicity), South Africa, (Felicity, Morgan), Greece (Anthea), Italy and Switzerland (Bella), or Australia (Patricia).

The activists' ages ranged from 19 to 83 years. Nevertheless, there were familiar 'tactical' dilemmas in common. For example, the relative merit between different methods of action such as dialogue, education; marches and demonstrations; or direct action were cited (Emily, Ogama, Anthea). Activists in their middle years (45 - 65 years) in particular integrated involvement in person-to-person/ therapeutic/ meditative or dialogic aspects alongside, or as part of, causes such as anti-racism, anti-war and feminism (Emily, Ogama, Nomol, Temlen, Tivanj). Explanations for involvement in activism were markedly similar irrespective of age. A tantalising issue was that nearly a third of the cohort were active before the 'traditional' emergence date of new social movements (in the mid-1960s). They had originally been involved, as might be expected, in labour issues (involving trade unions or left-wing parties) yet had also had early involvement in anti-racism, anti-Semitism, feminism or campaigning against homelessness (Felicity, Patricia, Barry, James).

Nearly all of these activists identified 'pauses' in their activism, due to work or childcare responsibilities, or to recover after intensive engagement (Bella, Felicity, Alan). Some saw activism as integrated within their other activities either with work, childcare or personal development (Bella, Alan, Emily). Some had engaged in periods as 'insiders' - through working in public or third sector organisations (Emily, Alan). Despite deep

involvement in specific social movements all of these activists appeared, over time, to be fairly cosmopolitan in their social movement mobility.

Further, success (or failure) in a given cause while highly celebrated (or bitterly regretted) did not ultimately deter people from involvement in other causes:

As a human rights worker, you are aware that you might not win very often. But it is worth doing anyway, for yourself and those you are supporting. And when you do win it feels amazing! (Corda).

They beat us, but I would do it again. (Anthea).

This suggests there is an expressive role - being active is important in its own right as a significant emotional act.

In the next sections activists' stories and biographies are analysed thematically under: early influences; early experiences of activism; the roles of emotion, ideas and the experience of activism; and the motivations interviewees expressed as important for their activism. Finally, interviewees' expressions about the importance of stories are recorded.

Stories of personal experience and awareness of injustice: Early life influences remembered

Four activists - from 19 to over 80 - illustrated biographical stories of their early experience which they recalled as having influenced their engagement in social movements. Laurie, a man of 19, recalled growing up in a northern working class town on a very typical council estate [public housing] where, generally, people were poor. 'People my age are growing up facing a future of jail, selling drugs...' For him, he was only able to become politically when he was in a better position.

Anthea, a woman in her early 30s, growing up in Athens recalled experiences of wealthy pupils at school who she noticed, due to their social rank, did not get punished. '... It's when I became aware of injustice...I noticed in the school that, for example, children who were wealthy had a different status.' In another context, James, a man in his late 60s, recalled that although he was born in the United Kingdom his parents were of Irish heritage and they struggled financially. This led him to an early realisation of different classes: 'On turning 14 I became aware of my working class heritage, I began to realise there was a "them" and an "us".'

Meanwhile, Felicity, a woman in her early 80s, recalled the period before World War II in London:

My father left school at 11 years old and he didn't get much schooling...[but] I could read quite early, at 3 years old, and saw graffiti on the walls... put up by supporters of Mosley, the English fascist leader in the 1930s... in the backstreets where my Jewish grandpa

lived... Racist signs were still common in the 1950s saying "No Irish, No Gypsies, No dogs. No Blacks. (Felicity).

These remarks point to some of the motivations/early influences that most activists interviewed for this research raised: for example: early perception or personal experience of social disadvantage; injustice enacted through the rank of wealthy people; awareness of class difference; early experience of racism. In some cases the experience of brutality was quite stark:

I spent 10 years in a children's "home". Run like a prison by a religious group, punishment was used as a means of control. Everything was taken from us, but we were given a number. What we did or saw was limited and controlled. We lacked human rights. Completely subjugated, many, like me, left with chronic emotional problems and knew nothing of the outside world. (Ogama).

Activists could still refer to some early experiences as being formative in influencing their actions, or as reminders of the power of resistance that remained with them for many years.

One of the earliest memories...was at primary school. I was 10 years old, we were with the headmistress. She told a boy off [unjustly]. He got up and shouted and slammed the door and left... He was one of my heroes to see him stand up to oppression in that way...He fought back against something unjust and slammed the door. That's always stayed with me. (Emily).

One young woman became aware in her teens of an atmosphere of hostility to her as a migrant:

When I was young, my parents were not very involved [in politics] they kept quiet...they were immigrants to Switzerland... at that time there were two referenda to limit the number of immigrants...it was very nasty, you felt vulnerable, you could also lose your job and be sent back to your country of origin... (Bella).

In one case a woman imagined the power of state officials in a recurring nightmare.

I had a repeated dream when I was 6 or 7 years old...in the dream there was always a representative of the state – a sheriff or policeman. They would come to the house and ask for me because they wanted to take me away to execute me. It was very frightening. And, in the dream, my mother would say "there's nothing I can do to protect you". (Patricia).

Early experiences of activism: family and friends

There were also, many stories of early exposure to activism. This could arise through family, for example, Corda whose parents were both trade unionists pointed out that 'It

was normal for me to go on marches as a child, ' I remember solidarity marches and bucket rattling for striking miners and ambulance ... Marching and protesting didn't feel frightening or dangerous when I was young, it was part of life.' (Corda). Meanwhile Verity learnt her skills in advocating for people facing disadvantage early in life:

My first sister was 3 years younger than me, and she refused to speak. I was her advocate and I've been an advocate ever since...I can speak up on behalf of other people... (Verity).

A young man's father was in the Communist Party in the 1980s '...and went to Mozambique to support the community during the war...' (Morgan).

Importance of ideas

There is no neat line between personal experience of injustice and political ideas. However, many in the cohort did express linkage to ideological or spiritual idea as important for their activism and sometimes through political mentors. Some could identify wealth disparities, even from their childhood:

I was 10/ 11 years old.... my dad ...had never explained Marxism to me before...he said "The Right is selfish" it was very fundamental. He explained the idea of "surplus value" when I was nine or 10 years old. (Morgan).

From a very young age I saw millions starving and others doing very well. It seemed to me that such inequality was wrong. I read a lot. I began to see the conflict between capital and labour and saw it as a major cause profits were always put before people. (James).

Ideas were also transmitted by philosophers, left writers or teachers: activists from 19 years old to those in their late 60s, made specific mention of famous activists or other teachers.

Getting into activism, movement politics - for me it was a bit of Gramsci's Marxism and the lived experience - I experienced class as real as a young person. But that lived experience re-asserted the theoretical view and gave me a pre-disposition to get involved. (Laurie).

The catalyst for [this] social activism was in 1997.... I discovered an extraordinary event called 'World Work,' founded by... Arnold Mindell... an exciting, effective approach to transforming conflicts. (Ogama).

And there was the youth leader - [M]... he was a great enabler - he let us make mistakes. He was a conscientious objector and a lay preacher. (Alan).

[Many years before] I had seen Gus John talking at the University of London, he talked on equality and diversity - it transformed me. (Margaret).

I started when I was a teenager, I was 17 or 18...living in Switzerland...I joined a reading group. We were reading Engels!...The intellectual running the group was very interesting he was involved in the 'Lega Marxista-Leninista', a Trotskyist I think... I remember I bought a lot of books, Gramsci and all that... (Bella).

Marx and Engels - I consider them to be very important - they didn't have all the right answers but they had all the right questions. I call them teachers. They pointed to... the development of solidarity and alienation. They are still important to me today. I'm still learning. (James).

Others related the importance of ideas from faith or spiritual involvement.

I had also been involved in the Methodist church in a rural area. My father was a local preacher. So I learnt early how to stand up in front of a group.... I was brought up with Christian values. That's always been important... I see them as being aligned to Socialist values... (Alan).

At the Buddhist Centre people also go to some marches - it's not fuelled by anger...You could frame it in terms of love and kindness - when you are angry you often can't think clearly your words get muddled up and you can't be clear. (Temlen).

Spirituality – in some ways it is a space to recuperate and integrate, and to be whole. Social transformation has to reflect wholeness. It has to be congruent to be meaningful, and that has seeped into my activism over the years.' (Nomol).

Direct linkage to political ideas from other movements - and awareness of personal threats was also cited.

By my early twenties I had a strong interest in social justice and had got paid work doing administration in a human rights organisation. I had related interests in women's rights, and... in working class and postcolonial history. (Corda).

... the activism I did, say on Gay rights in the 1980s, it came out of a sense of "first they came for the communists and I didn't say anything because I wasn't a communist etc..." So at that point I felt the finger was pointing at me. I was out of my comfort zone. I felt compelled. It was a personal threat to me. It motivated me. (Tivanj).

Importance of emotions and connections

Many interviewees referred to the energising and emotional experiences of being involved together with people in activism.

So with the demos, they were loud, full of energy, it would get hopes up...in these demos, there was a kindness, a solidarity...There are always the arseholes of course some people are angry, they are angry with themselves, they want to break things. But with the majority of people there's a solidarity...I cried many times, and not just from the tear gas! The energy you feel in the demo, this surge of feeling... (Anthea).

The demonstration in London [against austerity] it is also about group bonding with a quarter of a million people you get this feeling...it has an impact on your own subjectivity. (Laurie).

I'm not strong. I've not thrown a punch. But it is empowering to see when you're in the street and there's a street battle against the police...I've had baton charges and it's scary. I've seen CS gas, mustard gas. (Morgan).

Closely related, the feeling of working together with other activists, including the connections and solidarity were cited

I get the satisfaction in activism from a job well done, if I helped make a leaflet, or contributed to the admin, it's the *esprit de corp* - we're all in it together...we're not motivated by money. (Verity).

... It's to feel the connection, you feel close, smell the sweat, the smell of the stuff we put on our face to protect us from the tear gas the smell of these acid stomach pills, we melt them in water and put on our face to protect our nose and ears... You share so much, there's a connection. And you are looking out for people: "Are we all here"; "Are you alright?" "Is everyone here?" (Anthea).

One activist pointed to solidarity and mutual supportive work in Canada.

There were a lot of Black people in Toronto they lived in wooden houses many had originally come on the 'Freedom Train' fleeing from the US. So they brought me into their campaign a bit - they helped us and we helped them.'(Felicity).

Self fulfilment and the expressive self

Some activists cited an existential or self-fulfilment aspect - closer to Sartrean notions of an expression of the active self.

Being active – it's my 'go-to' place when things are bad, activism...responding, and to be with people who are also like that... (Corda).

When people are campaigning they are letting something out, they bring stories out and that's important. (Tivanj).

My activism is more driven by anti-authority than ideology. This is a society with lots of things I disagree with but it is the arrogance of authority I disagree with more! (Barry).

I gradually became disappointed. So I looked for other approaches...That's when I looked at theatre as a way of social change. I started with children...using theatre as a tool for empowerment. (Anthea).

Motivators

Activists were directly asked what they felt lay behind their current motivation. Many returned to their experiences and ideas but also mentioned events from their childhood and home.

When my father came back from the Second World War in 1946...I was 5 years old...in the post-war election I said to my father "Which way are you going to vote"? He said: "Labour". (Verity).

From a very early age I wanted to make it a better world, to go beyond and imagine a world where the bosses are not in control. (James).

...what is it that drives anti-authority in me? It's the longevity of the outsider/insider in me - a feature since I was 11 years old. I want to be anti the establishment - and I want to be a part of it - to be successful in changing it! (Barry).

It's a passion for social justice. It started with a childish sense that 'the world isn't fair' and I wanted to make it fair. (Verity).

Importance of stories and biography for activists

Finally, it is also important to draw attention to points that several interviewees pointed out during the interviews. Namely, their own analysis that the telling of their stories - or hearing of those belonging to other people like them - was often absent in their activist groups or elsewhere.

I'm hungry to talk about these things. I can feel jaded and forget why [we do this work]...These stories remind us. (Ogama).

People...don't often get the chance to explore why, more broadly - we do these things. (Margaret).

Further, one interviewee, pointed to a broader political aim here. For her collecting our memories was important:

Working class history has been ignored for a long time...'All history is important - it's all related - you can't have a country all divided up so that we don't know about each other.(Nora).

Discussion and analysis

The previous section presented some of the stories and biographical material from 18 activists involved in social movements in the UK. These were examined thematically in order to gain a picture of what had shaped their engagement. Hence, activists pointed to formative experiences of injustice from their background as well as the way ideas and emotions had influenced them. Many also spoke of the importance of leaders or influential figures in their past, the expressive realm of activism, and the importance of their stories and histories.

There was no simple, or singular, reductive theme that could account for their activism. Further, extracting individuals' stories, separate from their collective context did not allow for contestation, additions of refinement, to the material presented. Undertaking that work would represent another project. It should also be acknowledged that the memories and stories illustrated here were necessarily selective, abbreviated and constructed - but their importance lies in why these tales were important to these activists. Many of their stories identified first, second or third generation historical experience covering several continents and multiple causes. They revealed, sometimes in passing, previous struggles against social inequality whether this was, for example, against manifestations of fascism, or in struggles for employment and housing.

Personal experience of poverty and injustice was an important part of the stories and biographies for most but, importantly, not for all activists. Early childhood experiences did not seem essential. However, where these stories did exist - in their school, home or even in a dream - they remained highly memorable and offered an orientation for future action. To some extent these mirrored the tales of 'famous activists' and seemed to encapsulate in shorthand a truth, a rationale, or a theory of change as in Schwabenland's (2006) research and as theorised by Ricoeur (1975). Several activists mentioned the 'normality' of going on demonstrations as children. Nevertheless, there is a danger of post-hoc rationalisation since there are also likely to be competing narratives from the past that are discarded.

Many of the activists were keen to share stories about their activist paths and their

influences. They found relatively few opportunities to reflect upon, to share or to record such stories. For many, this was not just for the individual's benefit, it was also for collective learning. It echoes the points made by Benjamin (1999) and Thompson (1963) where 'keeping the history' (or histories) was part of a political project of remembrance and a resource for future activists. Nevertheless, while current activists *may* be better equipped, technologically, with the tools to store their stories - it is not clear to what degree such tales will remain archived or accessible.

The stories offer illustrations and parables of injustice and resistance while revealing the meanings activists attributed to their actions (Portelli, 1991; Thompson, 2009). They thus hold out the prospect of operating as causative mechanisms in the world (Bhaskar, 1979) albeit in no linear or deterministic manner. In addition, they illustrated the importance of the affective realm of emotion linked to the world of politics as described by (Passerini, 1999). Biographical stories may be used - or even discovered or recovered - post-hoc as justifications for current activism. In that sense, narratives may represent a continual re-working of current life and experience. Indeed, the analysis undertaken here has not focussed explicitly on the notion of 'genre tales' as discussed by Thompson (2009:278) - whereby the style of a tale mirrors particular forms (such as public abstract language, personal self-reflection diary, or dates and chronology).

The interviews supported the notion that both 'ideas' and 'emotions' are important for stimulating and maintaining activism. Some care is needed here as these represent broad descriptors and may not always be mutually exclusive. However, the excitement of being active - for example in demonstrations - was, vividly described in several interviews and bears resemblance to phenomena mentioned by Hobsbawm (2003:73) where there is an intense 'bodily emotion' aroused in such collective settings. Naturally, much activism is more mundane or quiet. But activism based on blunt rebellion of 'the outsider' emerged in the interviews. The narratives discussed by activists draws attention to the way in which emotion and feeling interact with the political as part of their subjectivity (Passerini, 1999). Cultural aspects appear to weave in and out of many of the themes discussed here: the commitment to the group and cause, the affiliation with a group. But one element less referred to in recent literature, but which emerged from several interviews, was an existential element: a sense of activism as self-realisation or actualisation - of not being able to be oneself by *not* taking part in collective dissent. This bears some relation to religious, moral or existential needs traversed by Sartre (1976) - or the imperative to bear witness (in Quaker terms).

Conclusion

The research confirms the importance of emotion and ideas for motivating and sustaining activists' engagement in social movements. However, it also points to the importance of auto-biography and stories for activists. This indicates the on-going accumulation of learning and political analysis that forms a part of the activist's life. The 'tales activists tell' represent constructed narratives, with deep significance to activists' lives, that can provide - in sometimes startling ways - short encapsulations of injustice and injunctions to action. They provide testimony to the lives and actions of activists and - explicitly or tacitly - illustrate or analyse how social structures exert power over

individual or collective experience.

Analytically, while Costalli and Ruggeri's (2015) emotion + ideology framework, may appear reductive, it seeks to combine several approaches. Hence the ideas and emotions discussed above, when combined with an explanative or encompassing ideology, may affect emotional shifts and stimulate alternative worldviews (disenchantment) with the potential for causative action for change. In that sense, stories and biographical memories may provide a metaphorical container capturing, emotions, ideas and meanings from the experience of the activist's lives so that they lead to causal effects. These may be at a level of personal consciousness, of social reality but not as a 'given' or natural phenomena. This may affect activists' understanding and analysis of social injustice as it arises in old or new forms; but can also act as a resource for the potential engagement with others active in resistance. It was instructive, however, that many activists - across the age range - referred to the importance of Marx, Engels or Gramsci in their thinking; or teachers from within trade unions or Left political parties; or faith-based groups; or dialogic approaches; while others talked of informal mentors with whom they had worked. In particular, access to grand explanative theories containing a structural and critical analysis were important for some in providing frameworks for understanding complex social structures. The findings contribute to an understanding of the importance of ideas and emotion as motivational factors for activists' work.

In summary, the 'tales activists tell' may represent biographical stories that act as a repertoire of stored resources which garner the cognitive (and ideological dimension), the emotional (with expressive and group affiliation dimensions), within a culture of social and political work (in solidarity with others). These stories can thus be understood as latent mechanisms that in certain contexts may be triggered so as to promote action against unjust social structures. In that sense, biographical stories represent collective resources with the potential to sustain or inspire activists' work.

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About the author

Dr Mike Aiken is an independent researcher, writer and activist based in the United Kingdom. He can be contacted at mikeloscaminos AT myphone.coop