

Being active, but not an activist:  
Managing problematic aspects of activist identity by  
expressing individuality, or taking alternative forms of  
collective action

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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### **Thesis Abstract**

Drawing on social identity and self-categorization approaches to collective action from social psychology, and social movement theory from sociology, the empirical studies in this thesis investigate the identities and experiences of those engaged (and disengaged) in various social movements in Australia - including environmentalisms, international aid and development, human rights, and animal rights movements. The participants were at various points of commitment to these social movements - from being sympathetic, to actively engaged, and even in leadership positions. The two research aims were to: 1) expand current understandings of the ways that problematic aspects of social identity content and identity boundaries can prevent sympathizers from engaging in collective actions; and 2) examine strategies those committed to collective action use to manage problematic aspects of their social identities, and how they establish a unique contribution to social change in contrast to other social movement groups. Each of these questions speak to the other in that they centre on the ways that a narrowly defined but shared understanding of the “activist” or “protester” constrains and shapes alternative means of pursuing social change.

The empirical work consists of four studies. Study 1 is a qualitative analysis of materials and interviews with members of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. I examined how members rhetorically construct their identities in order to frame their cause as legitimate, and how members come to personally identify themselves as members of the organization in a way that allows them to manage potential conflicts between multiple identities – as individuals, and as group members. Study 2 uses an inductive open-ended survey to understand how social barriers can shape people’s willingness to participate in collective actions during their early socialization into social

movement groups. Study 3 is a quantitative analysis of survey data, using themes from Study 2, which demonstrates how stereotypes of activists can influence individuals' identification as activists. Study 4 is an interview study with experienced activists, coordinators, and advocates of various social movement organizations. In this study it was found that people experienced in collective action can distinguish themselves from a primarily protest-based activist identity in order to establish their unique contribution to the broader movement, and also maintain feelings of personal satisfaction.

The contributions of this thesis are that it establishes a more nuanced understanding of the types of identity routes available to people who want to engage in collective action – such as an advocacy route, contrasted to the activist route. The thesis also concludes with a discussion of the need to understand transitional socialization processes when people attempt to join social movement organizations, and it makes suggestions for developing a model of conversionary collective action – which is what participants termed the “quiet” approach to social change.

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