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Separating Social Science Research on Activism from Social Science as Activism

Anna Kende*
Eötvös Loránd University

This special issue illustrates that for a better understanding of activism, we need to look at activities that differ from one another in their means and goals. As the topic is inherently politically contentious, reflection on what, why, and how we study activism becomes especially important. Drawing on the findings of the studies in this special issue, this concluding article outlines five propositions for areas of self-reflection from scientific and policy perspectives. The propositions touch on (a) broadening the scope of activism research to include movements with politically antagonistic goals, (b) the importance of examining activities that contest the social structure as well as those that work within the system by providing support and services, (c) the necessity of testing traditional theories of activism in a technologically changing context, (d) endorsing methodological plurality in activism research, and finally (e) researchers' responsibilities for the practical implications of their findings.

What is activism? How is it different from collective action? Is understanding activism the same as knowing what sort of people become activists? How does activism contribute to social change? What do activists think they are doing and why do they do it? These are some of the questions that the contributors to this issue have grappled with.

The common grounding for the papers is Curtin and McGarty's (2016) definition of activists "as people who actively work for social or political causes and especially those who work to encourage other people to support those causes" (p. 3), in contrast to van Zomeren's (2015) perfectly serviceable but operationally narrower definition as "members of social movements or action groups" (p. 3).

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anna Kende, Department of Social Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University, Izabella utca 46, 1064 Budapest, Hungary. Tel: +36 1 4614500 [e-mail: kende.anna@ppk.elte.hu].

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The wider definition allows us to incorporate a wide range of actions and issues in which activists engage. This richness, however, creates some challenges that social scientists need to address to establish scientific explanations for when and why people engage in activism. In the current article I will present some propositions that emerge from the process of dealing with these challenges.

The thematic focus of research presented in this special issue reflects current trends in collective action and related research, such as the positive and negative consequences of the role of ideology and identity—marginalized, advantaged, multiple, shared or superordinate—in building social movements and achieving social change (Cakal, Eller, Sirlopú, & Pérez, 2016; Curtin, Kende, & Kende, 2016; Hartley, Lala, McGarty, & Donaghue, 2016; Louis, Amiot, Thomas, & Blackwood, 2016); these contributions build on previous research on politicized collective identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001), the role of privileged identities in social change (Case, 2012; Montgomery & Stewart, 2012), and multiple identities (Phalet, Baysu, & Verkuyten, 2010). The papers also extensively deal with the psychological and societal benefits and pitfalls of engaging in ally activism (Curtin et al., 2016; Droogendyk, Wright, Lubensky, & Louis, 2016; Russell & Bohan, 2016; Wright & Lubensky, 2009), and offer a critical look at intergroup contact and collective action engagement (Cakal et al., 2016), and especially at seeking intergroup harmony for promoting social change for its sedative/demobilizing effect (Droogendyk et al., 2016), recently also discussed in connection with confronting sexism (Becker, Zawadzki, & Shields, 2014) and racism in various societal and cultural contexts (Durrheim, Jacobs, & Dixon, 2014; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009).

The papers address the psychological side of broad macro-social concerns such as the relevance of cultural contexts (Cakal et al., 2016), social structure (Hartley et al., 2016), institutional agents or organizations (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & Akkerman, 2016; Russell & Bohan, 2016, for similar issues discussed in connection with sexism see Buchanan, Settles, Hall, & O'Connor, 2014), and the microlevel processes of activism as they relate to social relations between individuals, for example, in the studies about ally action and the role of multiple identities (Curtin et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2016; Russell & Bohan, 2016).

Five Propositions

Thematic special issues offer a unique opportunity to reflect on the scientific assumptions of a field. This is important to do when the topic of study is ubiquitously present in the world around us but research on that topic is rarely, if ever, integrated in one place. Moreover, such a reflection is especially relevant as the topic of study is inherently politically contentious. Activism is all about changing or preserving the social order and the work of activists will almost inevitably be contrary to the (perceived) political or economic interests of powerful elements of

the society they operate in. Here, I make an attempt to offer a critical reflection on what, why, and how we investigate in connection with activism as psychologists (but clearly working at the boundaries with political science and sociology) when we look at the demand for activism created by the societal context, at the unjust and hierarchical intergroup relations that activists seek to change, at intragroup processes that facilitate group based actions, and at consensus-building. Specifically, I will draw conclusions about the focus on social change (what), the often unacknowledged motivations of social scientists (why), and some of the methodological concerns in the field (how). Based on this overview, I will make five propositions about the implications of activism research for science and society.

Proposition 1. *To adequately reflect on prevalent forms of activism, research should broaden its scope to include movements with politically antagonistic goals.*

Research on activism is especially sensitive to actual societal processes and problems because people engage in activism on real political and societal issues. The focus on real-life movements, as reflected in the current issue, entails that research is less bound to laboratories and student samples, and can therefore claim greater ecological validity. But more importantly the focus on movements with different goals, and different means to achieve these goals, can guarantee that activism research accurately represents the most prevalent and influential forms of activism.

Hartley et al. (2016) for example look at two movements concerning Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians that chose different courses of action: the first promoting reconciliation between the groups by means of offering economic development for improving the health status of Indigenous Australians and thereby working toward equality between them, and the second one seeking the protection of Indigenous children through more coercive interventions. Louis et al. (2016) examine the concept of activist identity as a generic one, and search for the conditions of cross-domain activism. Finally, the plurality of activist goals appears in the interviews of Curtin et al. (2016), including the narratives of activists across the political spectrum. Their analysis concludes that similar identity processes facilitate activism across domains.

Social psychological analysis should be able to deal with all forms of activism, especially as some of the most understudied issues actually constitute larger and (for the time being) more successful social movements than many of those studied by social psychologists. For example, extreme right wing mobilization may be among the most successful and substantial forms of activism currently in Europe (Klandermans & Mayer, 2005), but appears less frequently in research, as social psychologists still mostly focus on movements promoting egalitarianism and democracy within a social justice framework (for a review see Wright & Lubensky, 2009). We also see a rise in reactionary activism, especially but not exclusively in the United States, that intends to conserve traditional values, opposing

multiculturalism and immigration. Reactionary activism falls outside the focus of most social psychologists, with some notable exceptions such as research on transforming intergroup relations between climate change "believers" and "skeptics" (Bliuc et al., 2015). The papers of this special issue point out that we need to broaden the scope of activism research for a better understanding of issues that more accurately reflect prevalent forms of activism. Future research need to systematically test the applicability of theories to politically different issues to fully grasp the social implications of these findings.

Proposition 2. *To adequately reflect on the different actions in which activists engage, research on activism should broaden its scope to include both protest and service-type of actions.*

The papers of this special issue highlight many different aspects of social change activism, and point out the importance of testing our theories in different cultural contexts (Cakal et al., 2016) and across domains (Louis et al., 2016). However, it is clear that most papers are more concerned with social change activism than with activism toward social cohesion. In other words, the papers regard intergroup conflict as the essential basis of reaching social change through collective action as opposed to interventions and services with the aim of working toward the well-being of all members of society by fighting social exclusion and building trust (Wright & Lubensky, 2009). This latter approach fits more closely with the concept of volunteerism (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). However, volunteerism and activism are not always so clearly separable, and volunteerism actually constitutes a substantial part of the activities activists engage in, and fits into the broader category of engaging in social action, that is to "take action for the benefit of other people, their communities, and society at large" (Snyder, 2009, p. 227). Yet, we know very little about the psychological processes distinguishing between political activism and volunteerism; or to put it differently, between engagement in forms of activism that contest the social structure and those that work within the system by providing support and services. This absence is all the more problematic as volunteerism and providing support can fulfill goals similar to those reached by means of protest. For example, a person volunteering to distribute food and arrange shelter for refugees actually takes over state responsibilities by offering these services, and by taking over these tasks, the volunteer may also express political dissent. However, only by addressing the structural causes of inequalities can charity organizations and volunteers offer services that—beyond improving the situation of the individual—can also lead to social change (Penner, 2004).

As all helping relations necessarily entail a power hierarchy between helper and help recipient, engaging in volunteerism can actually maintain rather than challenge existing intergroup hierarchies. Furthermore, people can engage in volunteerism for other, more individualistic reasons than achieving social change,

such as personal relationships (Russell, 2011), or the quest for personal growth (Omoto & Snyder, 1990). The theory of intergroup helping as a power relation, and specifically the concept of dependency-oriented helping (Nadler, 2002), as well as the theory of strategic intergroup helping (van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2010) explain that people actually engage in helping relations *in order to* reinforce in-group superiority and maintain intergroup distance.

Therefore, the proposition to extend research on activism to include both protest and service type actions needs to also reflect on the role of these different types of activities in bringing about social change. The understanding that different forms of actions can offer alternative paths to achieving social change is a valuable insight for both organizations mobilizing their supporters for direct political action, and for volunteerism. People may be motivated to engage in social change activism without the willingness to become political activists. Recognizing that service type of actions can also serve this purpose if they take place with hierarchy challenging rather than hierarchy maintaining goals, means that those motivated to help and to change the social structure can be mobilized through volunteerism.

Proposition 3. *Research on activism should empirically test whether current understanding of the psychological mechanisms can adequately grasp activism in a technologically changing online context.*

Related to the previous proposition about the inclusion of volunteerism in activism research, we recognize that in the context of social media, the boundary between offering services and causing disruption is even more blurred. For example, alternative business models, crowdsourcing, sharing of copyrighted materials, and leaking various types of sensitive political or business information can be interpreted both as services and as disruptive processes, that is, as forms of volunteerism and of protest. Therefore, in the study of activism, we need to understand the qualitative change that social media use entails for activism and test whether traditional theories of activism apply to the online context.

There is clearly a growing interest in online activism and online mobilization in recent years. In the current issue, Hartley et al. (2016) elaborate on the influence of developing an opinion based identity through participation in online debates on activist engagement, and demonstrate that apart from the instrumentality of the internet and the use of people's existing social networks for mobilization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), identity formation may be particularly important in the context of new technologies and new forms of online and offline behavior.

Social media facilitates the strategic management of identities according to studies conducted in the SIDE model tradition (Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects; Reicher, Postmes, & Spears, 1995), as participation in online communities leads to higher adherence to group norms and engaging in normative group based behaviors such as collective action (see Douglas & McGarty,

2002; Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998; Spears, Lea, Postmes, & Wolbert, 2011). Therefore, participating in a protest *only* to post a "protest selfie" online can be understood as a form of political participation that fits with the strategic side of the SIDE model. Although only one article deals explicitly with online activism, some of the studies in this special issue also point to topics that are relevant for keeping up with the changing context of activism. For example, Louis et al. (2016) demonstrate the influence of the size and type of existing social networks for mobilization, a particularly important aspect of activism if we take into account that using social media can affect people's social ties and the size of their social network (Donath & Boyd, 2004). Van Stekelenburg et al. (2016) distinguish between the influence of different types of organizations which has changed rapidly as a consequence of people relying on their existing online social networks for mobilization rather than traditional organizations, such as trade unions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

These studies illustrate that moving away from the comparison of efficacy of online and offline mobilization or the substitution/slacktivism hypothesis (Christensen, 2011; Schumann & Klein, 2015, also discussed by Curtin & McGarty, 2016), social scientists should debate the qualitative change that online activism may entail (McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2014), and test the validity of previous theories for current actions. It is no longer a question whether social scientists should pay attention to online activism, as activism is happening—though not exclusively—online. Even if an action includes offline behavior, such as mass protests, people are simultaneously present in their online and offline social networks; furthermore, organization, recruitment, debates, and broadcasting would certainly take place online. The consequences of the rapidly changing technology influencing people's online and offline behavior is still not well understood, but it becomes increasingly clear that the online–offline distinction, also in the context of activism, is futile (Kende, Ujhelyi, Joinson, & Greitemeyer, 2015; Thomas et al., 2015).

The current issue cannot fill the gap that exists in social psychological theory of online activism, and further research is therefore needed to empirically test the applicability of existing theories to the changing technological context and behavioral forms of activism.

Proposition 4. *Researchers should embrace diverse methods to grasp the various levels of influence and understand both the universal human and contextual aspects of activism.*

Questions of methodology are just as political as research aims are, as choice of method, sample selection, sample size, and statistical analysis all influence the findings and their interpretation, and consequently their practical applications and impact (Massey & Barreras, 2013). Social psychology has faced several waves of criticism for its narrow choice of in-lab studies using student samples

(see Henry, 2008; McGuire, 1967). Most research on collective action aims to understand the motivations of nonactivists to engage in collective action (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), for which the use of nonactivist student sample may be an appropriate choice. If we seek to focus on activists, then as Curtin and McGarty (2016) point out, several ethical and practical constraints guide the methodological decisions, while the choice of method is also influenced by the specific population at hand. However, these constrictions can potentially enrich rather than impair activism research, as is demonstrated in this special issue. Authors used a wide range of quantitative and qualitative, experimental and nonexperimental methods to explore activism.

The diverse methods used in these studies allow us to understand how the interplay between processes at the individual, societal, and cultural level actually operates in and outside organizations, in protest movements, in institutional settings, in volunteer work, and in online social networks. The relevance of social identity theory is reaffirmed by the articles, but its role is refined by the methodological plurality of the studies. People hold multiple social identities, some of which are based on privileged, while others on disadvantaged group membership (Case, 2012; Curtin et al., 2016). Identities develop on the basis of salient opinions (Hartley et al., 2016; McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009) that either reinforce or restrict activist identities and therefore activisms across domains (Louis et al., 2016), and through membership in particular social movements (van Stekelenburg et al., 2016; Stürmer & Simon, 2004). Communities and social networks are more often formulated online than offline as movements begin to show a connective rather than collective character (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Hartley et al., 2016). The studies of this special issue pointed out that for (sustained) engagement in activism, social identity should be understood as a process that is as much the source of activism as the result of it (see Curtin et al., 2016; Russell & Bohan, 2016; van Stekelenburg et al., 2016).

The articles highlight practical strategies for mobilization and sustaining activist engagement. However, more importantly, the diversity of the questions and the plurality of the methods suggest that by understanding activism in different political and cultural contexts, on different social issues, we can get a more comprehensive picture of activism, and an overview of the general psychological processes that are potentially applicable across contexts. Methodological plurality is therefore the only guarantee that the challenging political issues can be adequately dealt with, because it serves the analysis of highly different types of actions, and because it offers a chance for self-reflection to the researcher in justifying the selection of the research tools. Methodological plurality also guarantees that the voices of activists in different domains are represented in scientific research and therefore both policy regarding global and local issues, and practice in general can directly benefit from these studies.

Proposition 5. *The direct practical implications and possible applications of research findings should be thoroughly and responsibly taken into account when designing and conducting research.*

Research on activism grew out of both a theoretical interest in tackling intergroup conflicts by means of collective action (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and an interest in real life cases of activism and protests (e.g., Reicher, 1984). Consequently, the majority of research on activism, including most of the articles in this special issue, deals with movements that promote social change toward more egalitarian, democratic, and environmentally conscious societies. The direct implication of this focus is that research findings can inform organizations with corresponding goals on how to increase their mobilization potential, define the pool of possible recruits, and identify efficient strategies for sustaining action and reaching their goals. After all, the promotion of active citizenship and volunteerism are important pillars of democracy, and research can inform policy to reach these goals. Social scientists can therefore directly serve activists' goals.

The current studies do indeed outline practical implications. For in-group activism, Cakal et al. (2016) identify the positive role of common in-group identity for collective action among disadvantaged group members in the need for more inclusionary policies in both Mexico and Chile. Van Stekelenburg et al. (2016) specify which organizations do and which do not function as stepping stones for political action—the threshold lies between leisure organizations versus interest and activist organizations—and also pinpoint the limits of what civic organizations can offer as a supply for activism.

For ally activism Russell and Bohan (2016) show that for achieving second-order change (following Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974) the myth of the all-positive image of ally activism needs to be dismantled both on the individual and on the institutional level. Their study implies that not all forms of ally activism can achieve fundamental social change, and ally activists need to take into account both the structural aspects of inequalities and their individual responsibilities in it. Droogendyk et al. (2016) outline the pitfalls and dilemmas connected to ally activism, and in line with Russell and Bohan (2016) and others (Case, Hensley, & Anderson, 2014), advise advantaged group allies to reflect on their privileges and support social change by offering autonomy oriented help, and condemning inequality in cross-group contact.

Building on the assumptions of Case (2012) about the role of intersectionality, Curtin et al. (2016) point out that understanding the role of multiple – advantaged and disadvantaged—identities can help movement building among in-group members and allies in much the same way, specifically by strengthening intersectional rather than singular identities. Louis et al. (2016) explain that activism in one domain can be positively correlated with activism in a different domain along opinion based identities, and outline its implications for ally action and forming

strategic alliances. However, they also touch upon the problem of normative fit (or ideological alliance) and its constraints on cross-domain activism, and thereby offer a critical reflection on the applicability of findings across ideological boundaries. Hartley et al. (2016) show that mobilization for various causes may actually depend on antagonistic strategies, as successful movements for reconciliation (and achieving a superordinate identity) require a preexisting consensus, while movements that attempt to build a new consensus (i.e., a new opinion-based group) stem from dissent.

A closer look at these studies allows us to conclude that the findings may be applicable to settings other than social change movements, and also have implications for some of the more understudied areas of activism. In other words, some of the findings may be applicable to both social change movements and reactionary ones, to politically left and right wing movements, and to moderate and radical forms of actions.

This brings us to the more general question about the ethos of social science, namely whether it has a descriptive or a prescriptive/normative role, and the societal responsibilities that come with conducting research (see Merton, 1973) that social psychologists are reminded of in times of severe social tensions. Massey and Barreras (2013) introduced the term impact validity to grasp "the extent to which research has the *potential* to play an effective role in some form of social and political change, or is useful as a tool for advocacy and activism" (p. 616, original italics). Recent comments by the presidents of The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPPSI) also highlighted the challenges of guiding policy in the context of highly politicized issues (Abrams, 2014; Eagly, 2014). The recent scandal of APA's apparent complicity in torture has forced psychologists to once again review the connection between science and practice, and as Yosef Brody (2015) bluntly raised the question in his APA address, "should psychology serve all human beings or should it serve nations, states, empires?" Avoiding this fundamental question of why we conduct research and specifically research on activism is a strategy that results in a gap in research topics—namely a lack of interest in extreme right wing, populist movements and reactionary activism—and leads to a limited understanding of the implications of research findings. After all, scientists should not just be activists, but people who can critically reflect on the limits of their objectivity, the objectivity that scientific analysis strives for.

Some of the most fruitful periods of social psychology were stimulated by severe societal crises that social psychologists sought to understand and work to solve. Nonetheless, these periods would not have been so fruitful if social psychologists had not reflected on their own political ambitions in tackling these problems. Therefore, we need to answer the question of why we study activism in general, and why we study particular social movements. It is crucial to clarify whether we study social change movements with the same scientific interest as reactionary ones, and whether the questions, methods, and implications of our

findings are formulated differently depending on the goals and means of a particular movement. As long as the political outcome of research is not critically reflected upon, many important research implications will remain unacknowledged. For example, a study about the pro-choice movement may offer valuable information about mobilization, but this information could be equally applicable to the pro-life movement. Social psychologists can adequately inform governments, policy institutions and civil organizations about the challenges of the refugee crisis following the war in Syria and how to tackle them. However, this information is also available to those who perceive refugees as positing a physical and cultural threat and therefore seek to protect their country even by inducing conflict. Research may provide tools for better recruitment among groups that do not promote the kind of social changes that social psychologists seek, but rather fight against them, perhaps even by means of violence and terrorism. Finding a tight, but balanced connection between research and policy is an important and complex issue that needs to be repeatedly addressed under the changing social and political climate that social psychologists work in (see Glick, 2014; Riggs, 2013; Rivera, 2014). Activist goals cannot simply be categorized as fulfilling objectively positive or negative purposes, since a specific course of action may be normative to and thus positively evaluated by the in-group, and nonnormative or negative to the out-group (as suggested by the SIDE model, for a meta-analysis see Postmes & Spears, 1998). Therefore, we can raise the question of whether the evaluation of the goal of a protest should influence the research questions and design, and how the findings are interpreted. The answer may not be straightforward, but the question needs to be asked nevertheless, and the potential impact of our research needs to be thought through.

Conclusions

A critical look at what, why, and how we study when it comes to psychological questions of activism, based on both the articles of this special issue and other research, allowed me to make five propositions about broadening the scope of activism research, methodological concerns in research on activism, and questions of responsibility about the wider implications of research findings. These propositions outline future directions for research to fulfill the goals of ecological validity, more objective scientific outcomes, and adequate answers to current societal problems in the forms of policy recommendations or direct recommendations for practice. The articles in this special issue demonstrated that a theoretical interest in activism and the political aim of social change are reconcilable. Consequently, activism research could benefit from broadening its scope to include not only protest movements but also volunteerism, not only social change movements but also reactionary movements, not only supportive but also disruptive actions, and not only left wing movements, but movements across the political spectrum.

In reaching these goals, findings of other disciplinary fields could inform social psychologists in areas that are yet understudied, taking into account that political science and sociology are highly concerned with reactionary activism (e.g., Tope, Pickett, & Chiricos, 2015), communication studies with the role of social media (e.g., Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012), and social work theory looks at the political consequences of volunteerism and service types of actions (e.g., Fischer, 1995; Powell, 2001). Finally, the political self-reflection on social science as a form of activism as it actively work(s) for social or political causes would guarantee the scientific standards of the field.

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ANNA KENDE is an Associate Professor at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her research focuses on prejudice, intergroup relations, identity formation and political activism from a social psychological perspective. She has carried out several policy research projects about early selection in schools and worked as a policy advisor on educational integration of Roma people in Hungary.