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## A Clean, Green New Zealand? An In-Depth Look at the Personal Experiences of Animal Rights Activists

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## A Clean, Green New Zealand? An In-Depth Look at the Personal Experiences of Animal Rights Activists

### Abstract

This study explored personal experiences of animal rights and environmental activists in New Zealand. The stories of participants provided insight into the challenges activists face in a country where the economy is heavily dependent on animal agriculture. A qualitative methodology was utilised and several major themes emerged: (1) emotional and psychological experiences, (2) group membership, (3) characteristics of activism and liberation, (4) the law and its agents, and (5) challenge to society. Participants of the study represent a group of individuals engaged in acts of altruistic offending triggered by exposure to the suffering of non-human animals. Their moral philosophy and conscience overrode all considerations for legal repercussions, and through their activism they not only challenged the status quo, but also called upon non-activist members of society to make meaningful contributions to the world around them.

### Keywords

Activism, Animal Rights, Altruism, Altruistic Offending, Empathy, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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### Introduction

My attitude is, if I've gotta break a wall or smash a lock to get in and save lives... don't care if I'm operating outside the bounds of what society tells me is right or wrong or legal or illegal because I believe I'm a good person and I'm operating under my moral conscience. (Betsey)

Altruistic behaviour is often thought to encompass human to human interactions. Such behaviour, however, can occur in human to non-human animal interactions as well such as in the case of animal rights activists. By definition, altruistic behaviour involves acts which are selflessly motivated to improve the welfare of another without expectation of personal gain (Bar-Tal, 1976, 1985; Batson, 1998; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Krebs, 1970). Altruistic behaviour may involve acts which are illegal, such as liberation of animals used in animal agriculture. Illegal altruistic behaviour, referred to as altruistic offending, is an example of a much rarer form of altruism, one not influenced by societal norms but rather by the "self" (Rosenhan, 1970) or an overriding moral conscience to correct an injustice.

Previous research into animal rights activists focused primarily on surveying the views and attitudes of activists and looking for common trends in decisions whether to partake in or abstain from activism (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Erben & Balaban-Sali, 2016; Gomes, 1992; Herzog & Golden, 2009; Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014; Plous, 1991). Little in-depth exploratory research had been carried out investigating the personal experiences of animal rights activists (Gaarder, 2008, 2011; Kerstin & Jonas, 2013; Shapiro, 1994). This is particularly the case for activists operating in a country (New Zealand) which presents itself internationally as "clean, green" (Martin, Durmic, Kenyon, & Vercoe, 2009). Further, there is a lack of research exploring the concept of altruistic offending as applied to animal rights

activists. It was of interest to explore what kind of challenges animal rights activists face in a country so heavily dependent upon animal agriculture and presenting itself as environmentally friendly. Thus, the rationale for the study was to address a gap in the body of knowledge relating to the in-depth exploration of personal experiences of animal rights activists and address a larger dilemma of an incongruence between a “picture perfect” presentation of a country as “clean green” and the reality of factory farming through the stories of activists. Such research is intended for a varied audience – firstly, activists and those sympathetic to animal rights, researchers involved in the study of socially progressive movements, and an overall wider audience of non-academic readers. The findings of this study are beneficial to an academic and layperson knowledge of challenges faced by animal rights activists within the context of an intensive agricultural industry, and the underlying motivations for their activism.

The aim of this study was to explore participants’ own accounts of their animal rights experiences and the meanings they attached to these. The objectives were to investigate how they made sense of their personal development and role as activists and the experiences specific to this role. The research question was: How does someone make sense of their personal experience with animal liberation and activism? A phenomenological approach was adopted to address this question.

The phenomenological approach recognises the involvement of the researcher and does not require an objectivist standpoint (Shapiro, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In my approach, I, as the lead author, engaged in a reflexive process by identifying my own personal standing in relation to the study. The idea to carry out this study appealed strongly to me as I had prior interest and engagement with animal rights philosophy and activism. My intentions with regards to carrying out this research were to raise both academic and public awareness of the challenges faced by animal rights activists and to provide a personal in-depth insight into their experiences through their own words and my analytic interpretations.

During this study, I saw myself as both an insider and an outsider. Specifically, I was an active supporter of animal rights and activism. Having a philosophical allegiance with members of various animal rights organisations allowed me access to potential participants with relative ease. I was also aware of my position as a university researcher which placed me in an outsider group as participants may have viewed me from an official perspective. I found myself shifting during the interviews (and post-interview interactions) between the frameworks of being a researcher and being an animal rights supporter. Regardless of similarities with the participants, I may have been treated as an outsider simply due to my position as a researcher (Mohammad, 2001).

My views on animal rights facilitated the collection of participant stories and their level of comfort in disclosing details of their experiences. Had I not had these views, the process may have gone differently. Indeed, this was a valued resource (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994). Thus, the experience of exploring this topic, which was of high personal significance, and engaging with participants, fostered personal development and change for me (Banister et al., 1994).

## **Methods**

In line with the work of Shapiro (1994), for the purposes of this study, an animal rights activist was identified as an individual (1) who is primarily concerned about the welfare of animals; (2) who is primed to see suffering in animals; (3) who investigates situations in which animals are suffering; and (4) for whom caring about animal welfare becomes pervasive in most aspects of daily life, embodied in his or her lifestyle and intimately linked to his or her philosophy. Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Reference number 8479).

Participants in the study needed to have engaged in animal rights or environmental activism long-term (over ten years) and have faced legal consequences as a result of their activism (such as criminal convictions, prison terms). In line with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the sample was selected purposefully using the snow ball technique and targeted advertising (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). I, as the lead author, placed advertisements within organisations particularly relevant to the research (animal welfare organisations) and information about the research was spread by “word of mouth” among prominent animal activists. Thus, I selected participants on the basis that they offered access to a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study (Smith et al., 2009).

When interest was expressed in the study (either by phone or e-mail), I engaged in some initial screening to ensure that the potential participant represented the required population of interest for the study. This screening took the form of a series of questions which were used to determine whether the potential participant met the criteria for having (1) actively engaged in animal rights activism for ten or more years which (2) carried with it legal consequences for them (such as criminal convictions, imprisonment).

The resulting sample was small and homogeneous, consisting of four participants (Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). A small sample allowed for a more detailed investigation of each participant’s experience while allowing for ambiguity (Denscombe, 2003; Smith, 2008). Here, ambiguity refers to elements of a participant’s story which may differ from other participants. Phenomenology and IPA allow for contradictions in the stories of participants as each one is interpreted as a unique lived reality without attempting to achieve consistent similarity between accounts (Denscombe, 2003).

I conducted a series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with the four participants. I audiotaped and transcribed the interviews with participant consent. An interview plan, which I prepared earlier, guided me through phases of the interview and the participant was given an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the plan. This was done to ensure that both participant and I, the interviewer, stayed on track. The interview plan was used as a guide only (Smith, 2008) and participants were free to move back and forth between phases as they saw fit. The phases in the interview plan included asking the participants to discuss their personal history (such as their childhood), their introduction to animal rights activism (how they first got involved and their early activist experiences), their overall experiences as an animal rights activist (specific activist experiences, how they developed as activists, how they see themselves in the future), experiences with the legal system (how they view the legal system, specific experiences and how that has developed over the years), and finally, they were asked to give a message to the world. The length of interviews ranged from one to two hours.

Data collection and analysis were informed by phenomenology and IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Due to the small sample size and methodology used, the study was of an exploratory nature (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Shinebourne, 2011). After all four interviews were complete, I applied a series of steps in the IPA analysis. Firstly, I transcribed the interviews. Secondly, I read and re-read the transcripts until I was intimately familiar with the material. Thirdly, I created margins on either side of each transcript page and took descriptive notes alongside the transcript (Denscombe, 2003). Fourthly, I noted emergent themes alongside the transcript. Finally, I combined all emergent themes together (clustered) and engaged in the process of condensing and eliminating certain themes (Smith, 2008).

The results were five superordinate themes with several sub-themes within each. I then proceeded to select a quotation, which was the most representative of each subordinate theme (Ryan & Bernard, 2010). For example, the superordinate theme Emotional and Psychological experiences contained the sub-ordinate theme of Desensitisation and Detachment (illustrated by the quote below).

Betsey: After so many years of campaigning for these issues, and so much exposure to factory farms and I've been to slaughterhouses... you become desensitised... like I go into a factory farm now and I don't, unless I have to articulate what I'm seeing, and that makes me cry because it, you start making the connections. But you go in and you're just business. You're like, oh there's a dead one, film that or like this one's got a fucked wing... becomes like a business type operation.

It is useful to note that I sought feedback from other researchers regarding the extracted themes and whether they were representative of the selected quotations. Specifically, a list of themes was provided together with a range of quotes and opinion sought as to how well these matched.

Unlike previous research with regards to gender distribution, participants were predominantly male (Richard, John, Tim; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Plous, 1991; Shapiro, 1994), with only one being female (Betsey). All four participants had been involved in activism long-term (over ten years). Two of the participants were over the age of forty (Richard, John), and two were between the ages of thirty and forty (Betsey, Tim). Participants' names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

## Findings

What follows is a presentation of findings of the study. Specifically, five superordinate themes were extracted from the data. Each superordinate theme contains subordinate themes with participant quotes to illustrate. The study had two objectives. The first objective, how the participant made sense of their personal development and role as an activist, was reflected in the superordinate themes of Emotional and Psychological Experiences, Group Membership, and Challenge to Society. The second objective, namely, how the participant made sense of the experiences specific to their role as an activist, was reflected in the superordinate themes of Characteristics of activism and liberation, and The Law and its Agents.

### *Superordinate theme one: Emotional and psychological experiences*

Various aspects of emotional and psychological experiences emerged as sub-themes during the interviews. This superordinate theme encompassed psychological development, experienced emotions and emotional growth. It played an important role in how participants made sense of their experiences as activists. Participants described both negative and positive aspects of personal experiences.

The experience of emotions such as anger and guilt featured in the accounts of all participants. Guilt was associated with deception, of having to deceive non-activists as to the origins of rescued animals.

Betsey: So we'd basically lie and we'd turn up at these people's houses... and they'd have no idea they came from factory farms. So they were unknowingly taking, accepting stolen goods, is how the law would see it and I did feel guilty about that.

In the example above, guilt was experienced by Betsey as a result of deception. She was able to reconcile her experience of guilt by seeing her actions as means to an end.

Anger was discussed as occurring episodically or as pervading throughout the experience. Outbursts of anger during early animal rights activism were described as leading

to more anger, perhaps also powerlessness. Tim discussed understanding the experience of anger which he developed in his role as an activist.

Tim: It was an angry action and I don't think angry actions really dissipate anger... I think when you carry out an action out of anger, I think you just feed more anger...I mean nine butcher shops in one day, clearly if it was about dissipating anger, we would've you know, been less angry...

For Tim the expression of anger initially involved vandalism and a high risk of police apprehension. As he got older and gained more activist experience, he came to view emotional outbursts of anger as counterproductive and ineffective, and learned to channel it into more productive activist pursuits.

Participants described desensitisation and detachment during animal liberation. Desensitisation resulted from repeated exposure to animal suffering. During liberation, behaviour became goal-focused and removed from any emotional experience.

John: ...We're in the back seat of the car, and we looking at the footage, that's when it hits you... it sounds weird, but at the time you're focused... But when you're looking back on it you think, oh my god that chicken is dying and suffering... And that happens when you're out of the shed.

John described desensitisation and detachment during animal liberation. For him, behaviour became goal-focused and removed from any emotional experience which may have assisted him in dealing with what otherwise may have been very traumatic experiences and also allowed him to maintain focus. After the activity had been completed however, he experienced feelings of horror regarding what he had seen. Thus, detachment during animal liberation was used as a coping mechanism and both desensitisation and detachment served an adaptive function.

Despite later developing desensitisation and detachment, participants described feeling overwhelmed during early animal liberation experiences. The experience of being inside a factory farm for the first time was described as extremely emotional, over-powering and extremely traumatic. John was overwhelmed by the scale of a factory farm he visited during a liberation and the contrast it created between individual and masses of animals.

John: It's just the big, just the scale of it... it's kind of weird because you're focusing on one or two chickens and you get them out and you look around and there's a hundred thousand more...

For John, the feeling of being overwhelmed was negative and occurred during early first-hand experiences as animal liberators in factory farms. John and the other participants reported experiencing extreme aversion to the environment (factory farm). The scale of factory farming was overwhelming, and contrasts were made between focusing on a few animals while being surrounded by thousands of them. The mass scale of animal agriculture that participants discussed highlighted for them the inescapability of death and suffering for the animals involved and their powerlessness over industry demands.

Participants described experiencing frustration resulting from feelings of powerlessness over the scale and power of the animal agriculture industry. This led to acts of vandalism as a way of venting frustration and regaining control over a situation.

Tim: Drove us to at least get a sense that we had done something, even if it was as disconnected as breaking the window of a butcher shop. Which we could cognitively create a connection saying, well we're costing the butcher money.

Tim was overwhelmed with frustration after witnessing the suffering of animals in a factory farm he visited and this spilled over into physical aggression. He attempted to regain some control over his situation through acts of vandalism directed at businesses which were dependent on the animal agriculture industry. He made sense of these experiences as a way of learning more effective animal liberation strategies.

Participants discussed the experience of hatred. The target of Betsey's hatred changed from farmers to executives who profited from the animal agriculture industry. This shift was influenced by her experience of meeting individual farmers.

Betsey: You get to meet them and talk to them, and I hate to say it but it makes things a lot more grey ...then you've got executives... the ones that sit on the boards. I have no sympathy for the suits, the ones that make money... they're just dicks and they deserve everything they get.

Initially, participants described experiencing hatred towards individuals (such as farmers, whalers). However, when participants encountered these individuals face-to-face, their hatred changed for the most part, and became generalised instead towards elements of the animal agriculture industry. All participants described experiencing an intense dislike of the animal agriculture industries as well the system which propagated what they viewed as prioritising financial profit over well-being, thereby causing suffering of animals. The system to which participants referred included any corporate or governmental structures that profited from the activity against which participants fought. Hatred as an emotion was experienced as both abstract and personified.

Being analytical and willing to question established societal norms featured in the accounts of participants, for some, this began in childhood. Willingness to question involved an appreciation of vulnerable populations and a generalisation of principles from one philosophy/cause (feminism) to another (animal rights).

Betsey: I was big into feminism for ages... like women are vulnerable, and then I thought, well what else is vulnerable in society that I care about and then I started to think about animals... I love animals but I eat meat so what is it that makes a vegetarian a better animal lover than me?

Participants discussed the onset of realisations of animal cruelty they saw as inherent in society, such as the slaughter and consumption of animals, as occurring prior to their adoption of an activist orientation. It can be said that questioning the status quo is what assisted participants in their adoption of the role as activists.

### ***Superordinate theme two: Group membership***

Certain characteristics of activist groups were an integral part of all participants' experiences. Participants described what they saw as essential components of group membership which assisted them in making meaning of their roles as activists and which, in turn, influenced how they perceived certain experiences.

Meeting other activists served several important functions. John felt that being surrounded by like-minded people provided him with support and encouragement, which he felt he needed.

John: One of the reasons I haven't dropped out is because I have a little scene around me... people that think like me. I think that's really important for sustaining people...

Originally, meeting others with similar viewpoints influenced the initial commitment of participants to a group, in turn fostering feelings of belonging and identification with others. Furthermore, being surrounded by like-minded people helped participants sustain commitment to the group, avoiding burnout and, in turn, sustaining motivation to the cause and nurturing a feeling of community. Additionally, identification with others in a group created feelings of pride.

They saw themselves as being outside of mainstream society and societal rules and norms. Participants also discussed belonging to fringe and sub-culture groups.

Betsey: I went and joined this group... and I immediately had this affinity with these people that were all misfits and unconventional. Yeah I just kind of felt like family...

Wanting to belong or "fit in" were strong motivating factors for participants when they transitioned into the role of activists and joined activist organisations. Identification with other "misfits" from society assisted participants with personal development as activists through a new-found social support network.

It was also exposure to new ideas through literature, music, and the expansion of the Internet which had an effect on participants with regard to their identification with and understanding of the role of an activist. Betsey described how her exposure to activist literature shocked her and pushed her into changing her lifestyle.

Betsey: I was totally horrified to know that chickens were farmed in cages and that dairy cows were made pregnant ten times a year... And I had no idea cause I honestly did think that they all lived in barns with grass and I was just completely ignorant. And so I went vegetarian from that day forth...

These influences became routes to new ideas and possessed elements of revolutionary, critical, and alternative thinking styles which participants adopted willingly. Furthermore, participants made sense of early exposure to new ideas as enlightening and a removal of their ignorance. In this way, the clean, green image of New Zealand to which participants were exposed earlier in their life dissipated.

They saw their role as activists being long-term and involving commitment regardless of consequences. Betsey's long-term commitment was reflected in her readiness to accept any consequences of her actions, regardless of how undesirable they might be.

Betsey: You have to even be prepared to go to jail. Like you don't just do this willy nilly and then cry when you get arrested, you go into it a hundred percent, committed to whatever the outcome...

Participants identified a particular cause about which they felt passionate and, through their experiences as activists, devised strategies for advancing that cause that they felt to be effective. Commitment to their chosen cause arose voluntarily as well as out of a sense of obligation.

Outside acceptance was important to all four participants even though they felt themselves to be somewhat different from other members of wider society. It was also important to the participants that they not be identified as criminals or radicals. Betsey felt strongly that acceptance and identification from wider society was necessary in order to generate changes in the cause for which she was active.

Betsey: We're never gonna win the war as a fringe... we need people, we need them on our side to make change.

Outside acceptance was aided by media and participants viewed this as an effective strategy for influencing members of wider society. Thus, participants, whilst identifying themselves as outside mainstream society, also depended on it to further their cause and raise awareness.

Being a member of an activist organisation came with certain challenges for some of the participants. One participant described experiencing frustration and disappointment when his values and priorities clashed with those of the organisation of which he had become part.

Richard: Look at what I sacrificed... I did five months in prison and willingly. And there was always a chance I was gonna do a decent lag...

This loss of common ground came about through disagreements in strategy and resulted in him feeling a loss of freedom and being labelled an outsider. For this particular participant, it meant leaving the activist group and creating his own organisation.

### ***Superordinate theme three: Characteristics of activism and liberation***

Participants discussed various aspects and characteristics of their roles as activists. Certain characteristics of activism and activist culture were seen by participants as central to their roles and without which they would be ineffective and redundant in their cause. Liberation, specifically animal liberation, was an essential part of the role participants played as activists and was a goal of paramount importance for them. Liberation was a key experience for the participants as activists. Participants discussed at length various aspects of their liberation experiences. Furthermore, liberation occurred on both a small scale (individual animal liberation acts) and large scale (changing public behaviour and beliefs to affect industry and society overall).

Early activism was strongly influenced by grassroots philosophy and strategy.

Tim: It was the first real protest I'd been to but it wasn't like a real protest... there were no placards, there was no message, it was just disrupt the whole restaurant.

Grassroots tactics were well suited to their needs as young activists as they provided an outlet for anger and frustration, such as when they engaged in property destruction. After maturing as activists through experience, a shift to what they saw as more productive and less explosive forms of activism occurred however, at the same time, damage to property and disruption of business remained part of the strategy for some.

Participants discussed their development as activists and learning to focus their energy on more productive strategies.

John: I think I've gotten a lot more sensible since I was young... when I first got into it I was very angry, had no strategy... I wasn't really thinking about what's the most effective? It was more like... what's gonna make me feel better now?

By changing strategies, participants did not see themselves as backing down from what they viewed as fighting the system. Rather, they learned to do this more effectively with fewer negative consequences. In this way, they noted an improvement in their strategies through experience and adapted their roles as activists based on the contexts in which they were operating. Imprisonment, for one of the participants, also allowed for the opportunity to reflect on activist strategy by allowing for a re-evaluation of one's role as an activist.

Participants held strong beliefs about being effective in their activist roles. For Betsey, effective activism comprised coming up with new tactics of raising awareness in the public through media.

Betsey: We can't even get media for chicken rescues because the media are like that's boring, you've done that ten million times give us something new. Which is really sad, I mean you've gotta try and keep it fresh...

Participants used teamwork, critical self-appraisal, and effective use of media to send a message. They felt themselves to be in touch with the opinions of the general public and aware of their potential impact on society and the system.

Change and growth occurring in both themselves as activists and in their wider activist movement were also seen as important for combatting the public de-sensitisation to an issue that results from repeated exposure. In this way, effective activism had an adaptive function.

Part of their experience involved the realisation of the enormity of their task as activists. This was related to what participants described as the colossal scale of the targets of their activism, such as intensive farming and shark finning.

John: When I was young I thought, I was just gonna kick some ass and get arrested... and eventually we'll win. And now I kind of realise, it's gonna take way more than that... it's gonna take changing society... to change say the meat industry... it's the way humans eat throughout most of the planet, it's a huge thing... It's changing all society from top to bottom. And when you think of it like that, it's quite depressing.

Participants were overwhelmed by the magnitude of their ambitions and by the realisation that they opposed a majoritarian culture. The large scale of the issues created a perceived impossibility of making a significant impact directly through animal liberation, which in turn caused significant stress, feelings of powerlessness, and perceived lack of control.

Participants also described being aware of the inherent difficulties associated with their activism caused in part by unfair advantages for the system and industry in terms of financial capabilities. As a result, participants redefined their roles as activists and either in part or wholly directed their efforts into what they saw as more achievable tasks and goals.

While illegal direct action formed a significant part of how participants' saw their role as activists, legal activism such as peaceful protest, also featured in their discussions. Often, a combination of both illegal and legal activism characterised participant behaviour.

Tim: I'm interested more now in concepts of community building and concepts of personal empowerment... I don't wanna get arrested again, I've had my seven years since my last conviction...

Some participants saw illegal direct action as achieving what legal activism could not. Some, like Tim however, redefined their role as an activist and developed a strong preference for legal activism because it carried fewer negative consequences such as police repercussion.

Moral philosophy and activism went hand in hand for the participants. They strongly believed that their philosophy and way of life (veganism) had significantly influenced their adoption of an activist role. Participants also felt that other members of society should commit to their beliefs by acting on them.

Tim: There's a sense of powerlessness I think in that like, cool now we're vegan but that's not really doing that much...if you're in Nazi Germany and you're opposed to like the concentration camps, it's not enough to be opposed to something.

Participants saw this progression from philosophy to activism as natural. Once they adopted the activist role, regression back to how they were previously was described as impossible. Action guided by moral principles was a way of overcoming feelings of powerlessness and resisting the system, be that governments or major industries. Participants saw their beliefs as the guiding principles behind all of their actions as activists. Moreover, this provided what they saw as meaning to their existence, not just as activists but as human beings.

Life was valued more than laws by participants, and they did not distinguish between human and non-human animal life. Participants felt that all life had value.

Tim: There is no real animal welfare act in New Zealand... I've been involved in campaigns against factory farming for over fifteen years and we're really no closer to stopping that. So why would we not take illegal activities to at least save the world for one hen, or one pig, or goat.

Participants saw current laws as inadequate and this inadequacy justified illegal direct action. Regardless of whether laws were being broken, participants felt they had been doing the right thing and experienced no doubts or regrets about their actions, even if this had resulted in negative consequences for them.

In this way, current laws were not viewed as being guided by moral principles but rather by industry and profits. Illegal direct action for the participants was a way of fighting the system and exercising their moral principles. Participants viewed illegal direct action as characterising part of their activist role and believed strongly in the effectiveness of illegal action in enacting change and affecting society.

Participants did not enjoy having to make choices regarding which animals were rescued and which were left behind during liberation.

Tim: It was actually worse feeling... you had to randomly pick who you took. And it was kind of like, this chickens' now gonna have a life and the one beside it you just can't take...

Participants made sense of their role as activists as seeking to save (animal) lives, so having to decide which animals lived longer than others (given that they were destined for slaughter), created conditions of extreme stress.

As part of their liberation experiences, participants described their exposure to extreme cruelty.

John: It had a hundred thousand chickens in this section we were in and... they were kind of approaching what they call end of lay... they had no feathers, they were all bald and some of them were dead... it was the first time I... really got the idea of the cruelty of factory farming.

This exposure became a powerful driving force for their activism. Early exposure also created feelings of shock. Participants felt that these experiences were almost a form of initiation into activism and also saw them as learning experiences.

Participants described an identification process which occurred for them following the liberation of individual animals.

John: ...they're individuals intellectually but you don't see that when they're in the farm... for me it's difficult to get my head around the mass scale of it versus individuals and you only really get to know the individuals once you've got them out of the farm...

Once participants liberated animals, they formed attachments to them, were able to attribute positive psychological characteristics to them, and these animals became individualised. Participants also drew a contrast between seeing animals as individuals with worthwhile lives versus as unidentifiable commodities in large numbers to which participants were exposed during their liberation experiences. In essence, they were able to see animals as individuals only once they had liberated them; *en masse* in a factory farm they were unidentifiable.

One participant described the occurrence of change in her role as an activist in terms of being able to identify herself publicly.

Betsey: It was all ALF [Animal Liberation Front], undercover, we don't want to go to jail... let's hide our faces... feeling so repressed cause I want to stand up, I'm not ashamed, it's the industry that should be hiding their faces, I wanted to stand up and say, yes I go into these farms and I rescue animals cause this is a moral crime.

This fostered feelings of self-affirmation and self-assertion. She felt that by removing her balaclava and openly associating herself with the activist role, she had regained a sense of her power, control, and freedom of speech.

Participants described their involvement in animal liberation as thoroughly rewarding, albeit highly stressful.

Betsey: ...it's like you're bearing witness to their suffering... and we'd document... and we'd rescue where we could and it felt really satisfying... factory farming... they are the biggest abused group... in New Zealand, our economy is based around farming so it's relevant to us.

Through their engagement with liberation activities, participants felt themselves actively taking part in saving lives. In a sense, animal liberation provided them with the opportunity to see instantly the results of their activism. Thus, animal liberation acted as reinforcement for their activism.

Animal liberation was often combined with other activist strategies and tactics. Participants described experiencing logistical difficulties when performing liberations of certain animals which increased their motivation to succeed. They also experienced personal development in which they unmasked themselves and learned new strategies such as open rescue.

***Superordinate theme four: The law and its agents***

Participants felt strongly that the misuse of the law and its resulting injustices reinforced the need for activism and resistance.

Betsey: ...once you start looking into these issues and you realise that there's injustice left right and centre. Not just for animals but for all sectors of society... there's only a few at the top that are benefitting... it's just normal and natural to wanna stand up and say, that's wrong... this can't carry on.

They saw their role as activists as requiring them to push boundaries with those who held the power and influence. The law was seen as faulty in relation to protecting animal rights and was seen to exist to safeguard and represent industry and government interests only.

Profit for industries involved in animal agriculture and maintenance of government power were seen as underlying what participants described as out-dated legal understandings of the status of animals in human society as property.

Tim: The Animal Welfare Act says animals have the right to... express natural patterns of behaviour. Which they can't do and so the government has made these codes of welfare... which allows certain industries to go outside of that prerequisite...this code of welfare isn't actually binding, it's just a guide.

Participants believed that current laws were not "up to date" with public opinion. Participants also saw the government and its lawmakers as actively responsible for allowing misuses of the animal welfare laws by purposefully creating "loop holes" in legislation allowing industries to avoid prosecution. Activism was targeted at those in power.

John described how the law does not differentiate between offenders on the basis of their underlying motivations, however individual people do and those involved in the judicial system are sometimes biased, depending on their beliefs.

John: Court is run by humans and so they do treat you differently because it's political... sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad. Some people in the court system see a political thing as much worse than your common criminal because you're a threat to the establishment...

Participants did not view other offenders as markedly different from themselves, instead as being similar in terms of disenfranchisement and alienation from mainstream society. Political motivation, however, was seen as differing from common criminal motivation and participants distinguished themselves as political activists. Distinctions were also drawn between commonly perceived selfish motivations of crimes versus non-selfish motivation to correct a wrong such as animal abuse. Participants recognised personal bias as the cause of differential treatment in the legal system, which either acted in their favour or against them.

Participants represent a group of altruistic offenders – those whose law-breaking behaviour is motivated by non-selfish reasons stemming from empathy and compassion to improve another's well-being, in this case, non-human animals.

John: I've never ever had any doubt that what I was doing was perfectly right and nothing to be ashamed of... breaking the law to save animals has always been the right thing to do for me... I never ever felt like a criminal...

A moral conscience overrode considerations of negative consequences for the self (such as imprisonment) and individuals were driven by a desire to correct injustice and alleviate suffering. Participant actions were guided by a sense of personal responsibility, universal moral norms, were high cost and risk, and often went against societal norms and established laws and practices.

### ***Superordinate theme five: Challenge to society***

The participants saw their role as activists as not only being to challenge established law and industry but also to provide society with information in order to challenge existing belief systems and spread knowledge about their activism. Ultimately, however, each individual member of society was viewed as responsible for his or her own choices in life.

John: ...it's not enough for me just to not eat meat, I have to get involved in stopping cruelty... once I heard this idea and I thought, why did no one tell me this? So I thought, I better go tell other people.

They employed a series of strategies, both legal and illegal, to make available to other members of society information they considered important. They approached their role in spreading knowledge in non-confrontational ways, seeking to create rapport and identification with non-activist members of society. In a way, participants viewed knowledge and information as the missing link between philosophy and activism. Participants felt themselves to be enlightened and this fostered a sense of responsibility and duty.

Stigmatisation and stereotyping were discussed as undesirable by-products of activism by participants.

Richard: They portrayed me as an eco-terrorist and I don't consider myself a terrorist by any means... I'm an activist and I'm a conservationist... but that's often what happens, a lot of mainstream society might look at what we did and think, fuck that is radical but I don't see it that way.

They saw stigmatisation and stereotyping as created by misrepresentation of activism and corresponding philosophy, and media misrepresentation. They experienced difficulties in counteracting negative stigmatisation, which created feelings of stress and anxiety. One participant (Richard) discussed the dangers associated with misunderstanding their tactics and philosophy, including being labelled as radical by non-activist members of society and through media involvement being associated with terrorism.

Participants described attempts at identifying society members overall as compassionate yet ignorant individuals.

Betsey: I'm just no different to anyone else really... once you start looking into these issues and I think people should... people have an obligation, even if it's

just for themselves to be informed members of society... the general public, they're apathetic, they're ignorant, they don't know... if you could find a way to reach people... so that they click on to this, people are better than you give them credit for you know. Like they will start thinking...

At the same time, disillusionment with the goodness of human nature was also evident in participants' accounts.

Tim: I just wish people would think and act more I guess cause I just don't see it... it's what I hate about the world... is that people are willing to continue in ignorance...

Participants experienced difficulties in attempting to reconcile two conflicting views of society. The belief in individual responsibility of every society member was strongly adhered to by participants.

Richard: Stand up for something. Too many people they just, they exist, they never stand up for anything. They consume a lot of resource on this planet, they occupy this planet, they breathe in oxygen and spit out CO<sub>2</sub> and yet they make no positive contribution to this planet. And everyone has a cause that they should be standing up for. Be it conservation or animals or humans rights... Get a fucking cause and stand up for something.

Despite attempting to challenge the system, participants believed that long-lasting change begins at the level of the individual. Thus, participants, through their activism, attempted to send out strong messages to society regarding the need for non-selfish motivation and direction in life.

## Discussion

*What follows is a discussion of the five superordinate themes as they relate and compare to other literature in this area.*

### *1. Emotional and psychological experiences*

Similarly to the present study, previous research with activists has found the experience of guilt and compassion fatigue to be brought on by an enduring commitment to their cause, when behaviour did not match ideals, and taking time off to focus on non-activist pursuits (Gaarder, 2008; Herzog, 1993; Herzog & Golden, 2009; Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013; Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014). The experience of anger and resulting feelings of powerlessness have been reported in other phenomenological studies (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013; Thomas, Smucker, & Droppleman, 1998). It has been noted in previous research that the exposure of animal rights activists to animal suffering had created strong feelings of anger and became a strong motivating force for action (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013; Shapiro, 1994; Thomas et al., 1998). Hatred, much like the experience of anger, propelled participants in the present study into activism similarly to activists in other studies (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Horwitz, 1994; Shapiro, 1994).

The experience of detachment (Mills & Smith, 2008) and feeling overwhelmed at the scale of the animal agriculture industry (Gaarder, 2008) have been reported in previous qualitative research with activists. The realisation and identification of other forms of

oppression have been previously documented with long-term committed animal rights activists (Pallotta, 2008; Shapiro, 1994). Richards and Krannich (1991) found that animal rights activists frequently belonged to several other socially progressive movements such as feminism. This can be referred to as attitudinal availability (Downton & Wehr, 1998) which allowed participants to develop certain convictions and beliefs and propelled them into the activist movement.

## **2. *Group membership***

The reinforcement of fundamental beliefs by community has been previously identified as an important contributing factor to sustaining activism (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Shapiro, 1994). Previous qualitative research on activists has found connecting with like-minded others to be a rewarding experience (Gomes, 1992). Sharing values and purpose contributed to a sense of camaraderie among activists (Gaarder, 2008). Seeing oneself as outside mainstream community and wanting to fit in, as discussed by participants in the present study, resulted in what has been termed as “situational availability,” whereby life circumstances provide the opportunity for individuals to join activist organisations (Downton & Wehr, 1998).

Identification with activism through learning and exposure to literature and information relating to the animal agriculture industry has been previously noted as influential (Horwitz, 1996). Diversification of activities and strategies allowed participants to avoid burnout and ensure long-term commitment which has also been observed with activists in other studies (Downton & Wehr, 1998). For one participant in the present study, disagreements over strategy with other members of his group, resulted in a loss of cohesion within that group leading to separation. The loss of cohesion within the activist group and resulting disappointment has been found in previous studies to be associated with stress and discontinuation of activism (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Gomes, 1992).

## **3. *Characteristics of activism and liberation***

Being effective fostered feelings of achievement and commitment to the cause (Einwohner, 2002). Even small scale successes however, were viewed by activists as rewarding and worthwhile, and activists from other studies have identified as important (Gomes, 1992). Participants in the current study used critical self-appraisal and the media platform to send what they viewed as effective messages to the general public. Similar reflection exercises have been found to sustain commitment of activists (Downton & Wehr, 1998).

Due to the enormity of task at hand for activists in the present study, sometimes progress was alluded to as slow and laborious. Concern over lack of progress has been previously documented as a significant source of stress for activists (Gaarder, 2008; Gomes, 1992).

There was a natural progression from adopting a moral philosophy (veganism) to becoming involved in the animal rights movement. Supporting their beliefs with actions was seen as rewarding and necessary and has been a dominant theme in previous research (Gaarder, 2008; Gomes, 1992; Herzog, 1993; Horwitz, 1994; Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014). Breaking the law to save lives as being the right thing to do has been described in previous research where, similar to the current study, morality overrode laws (Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

Exposure to the suffering of animals during liberation activities, served to sustain their commitment to the animal rights movement. Previous research has found traumatising and re-traumatising as powerful influences on sustaining commitment to activism (Hansson & Jacobsson, 2014). Animal liberation was integral to the activist role. Animal liberation stemmed from an inherent concern for animals which the participants possessed and shared

with activists from other studies (Gaarder, 2008; Herzog, 1993; Herzog & Golden, 2009; Pallotta, 2008; Shapiro, 1994). In essence, animal liberation was part of direct action which is a strategy commonly employed by animal rights activists when animal rights abuses are being investigated (Munro, 2005).

#### **4. *The law and its agents***

Participants in the current study reported a strong dissatisfaction with current laws pertaining to animals. Disaffection with institutions of power has been noted to drive individuals to activism (Downton & Wehr, 1998). Participants displayed a general disregard of negative consequences for themselves and a desire to improve the welfare of animals, providing support for theories of true altruism (Batson, 1990; Rosenhan, 1970; Rushton, 1981).

#### **5. *Challenge to society***

Much like other studies, participants were driven by a sense of responsibility bigger than them (Mills & Smith, 2008). Spreading knowledge and information to others, particularly the general public, was viewed by participants' in previous and present research as part of their role as activists (Einwohner, 2002). Similarly to other studies, participants felt themselves to be examples to the rest of society in terms of their own choices and behaviours (Einwohner, 2002; Gomes, 1992; Horwitz, 1994). Furthermore, participants saw themselves as playing an active role (Gomes, 1992) in educating members of society and enacting change.

### **Conclusion**

Animal rights activists aim to direct public attention to the inherent cruelty towards animals used for human purpose such as those in factory farming. Changing mainstream public beliefs and attitudes towards the human treatment of animals was seen by activists as the first step towards changing the legal status of animals. As one participant discussed, "The way we treat animals is something that society has to fix, and the law will follow" (John). Indeed, there are historical examples whereby civil disobedience drew public and legal attention to areas where the law was outdated such as the Stonewall riots of the 1960s.

This leads to the consideration of whether altruistic activism and offending should be sustained and supported. An argument can be made that it should indeed be as it is instrumental in guiding change in legal and social contexts. One only has to think back to historical examples of altruistic offending such as rescuers of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, Black Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and more recent whistle-blowing examples. On a more general note, perhaps an approach of complete freedom of speech and access to information (such as the ability to openly visit factory farms) would diminish the need for such offences as people will be able to make informed choices.

The present study highlighted the need for differentiation between altruistically motivated activism and terms such as "radical" and "terrorist." Neither radicalism nor terrorism featured in how participants made sense of themselves, their roles and experiences. These two terms, however, were widely applied to the participants by media and members of society. This attempt at marginalisation and branding of animal rights activists as extremists has been previously argued as a form of discriminatory stereotyping and as highly inaccurate (Munro, 2005; Shapiro, 1994). Such stereotyping may highlight cognitive dissonance experienced by non-activist members of society in terms exposure to animal cruelty within the animal agriculture industry and continued consumption of animals and their products. Bluntly put,

perhaps this illustrated a cognitive “clash” between the image of “A clean, green New Zealand” and the unfortunate reality.

The participants experienced no remorse for their activism. Their moral philosophy and conscience overrode all considerations for legal repercussions particularly in their early activism experiences. Participants saw themselves as being active agents of change and placed emphasis on individual responsibility. Breaking laws to pursue justice was intuitive, a way to resist the system but also to have immediate benefit for the animals involved. Through their activism they not only challenged the status quo but also called upon non-activist members of society to make meaningful contributions to the world around them.

A wider conclusion can be drawn in relation to intrinsic altruism and human nature, keeping in mind obvious generalisation limitations. Altruistic motivation appears, on the basis of the participants' accounts, to have been activated by one or another form of trigger. A picture emerges of a latent, possibly intrinsic tendency towards altruism which motivates action once the individual is exposed to the suffering of others. In a society often described as selfish and individualistic this suggests hope for a more caring future.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The humanistic approach afforded by phenomenology, in particular IPA, ensured rich data providing an in-depth look into the personal lived experiences of animal rights activists. Transferability from the present study to others is possible. Similar themes have been interpreted in qualitative research conducted with other groups of participants who engaged in altruistically motivated behaviours. For example, congruency between beliefs and behaviours (Herzog, 1993; Horwitz, 1996), bonding to an activist group (Downton & Wehr, 1998), experience of frustration, sadness (Jo, Brazil, Lohfeld, & Willison, 2007), stress and pessimism in relation to activist campaigns (Einwohner, 2002; Gomes, 1992), and strategic action to gain publicity for a cause and to challenge conventional thinking within society (Munro, 2005).

A small sample size of four participants, while suitable for the methodology, may have been unrepresentative of other activists and difficulties with generalisability were thus present. Data saturation was achieved however, by the present study and for this reason I did not recruit further participants. In addition, certain experiences may have not been discussed in sufficient detail or at all, due to the potentially self-incriminating nature of such experiences.

### **Recommendations**

Future research examining the meanings activists ascribe to their roles and experiences could benefit from a number of improvements on this study. The inherent distrust of outsiders by participants, which may have been present in this study, may be overcome by adjusting the methodology to incorporate a more ethnographic approach. Also, a study examining potential differences and similarities between activists operating on a predominantly legal basis and those operating on a predominantly underground, illegal basis could highlight some interesting themes. Lastly, qualitative in-depth research into activists serving prison terms might yield interesting findings and “snapshots” of meanings attached to the experience of activist incarceration.

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