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## Activists and Non-Activists: Differential Activist Identification in the Tea Party and Occupy Movements

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## Activists and Non-Activists: Differential Activist Identification in the Tea Party and Occupy Movements

### Abstract

Semantically, “activist” and “activism” are convenient descriptors for participants in social movements and are commonly used by social movement scholars. This study demonstrates, however, that these labels obscure the complex decisions participants make in negotiating their involvement. Few researchers examine the importance of deconstructing traditional assumptions of activist identities and the nuances in activist negotiation and identification. Using qualitative research methods, this paper explores whether social movement participants engage in complex identity negotiations wherein they interactionally situate and critically assess their involvement. This research draws on in-depth interviews conducted with 58 social movement participants from two local-level, contemporary social movements: The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street Movements. Respondents provided complex narratives about their activist and non-activist identities, which became apparent through analyzing the interviews using thematic coding. The findings show that respondents do negotiate their identities along a spectrum from activist to non-activist through interaction with other participants and critical assessment of their own involvement. These findings also reveal that the process of differential activist identification has short- and long-term implications for participant involvement and collective identity where disagreements over the activist label can fracture the organization and sustainability of a movement. By assessing the ways movement participants identify with activism and how they use their identification through interaction to promote or deconstruct group solidarity, we can begin to explore the consequences of this type of identity politics for contemporary social movements.

### Keywords

differential activist identification, political participation, social movements, Tea Party Movement, Occupy Wall Street Movement

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## **Activists and Non-Activists: Differential Activist Identification in the Tea Party and Occupy Movements**

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Semantically, “activist” and “activism” are convenient descriptors for participants in social movements and are commonly used by social movement scholars. This study demonstrates, however, that these labels obscure the complex decisions participants make in negotiating their involvement. Few researchers examine the importance of deconstructing traditional assumptions of activist identities and the nuances in activist negotiation and identification. Using qualitative research methods, this paper explores whether social movement participants engage in complex identity negotiations wherein they interactionally situate and critically assess their involvement. This research draws on in-depth interviews conducted with 58 social movement participants from two local-level, contemporary social movements: The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street Movements. Respondents provided complex narratives about their activist and non-activist identities, which became apparent through analyzing the interviews using thematic coding. The findings show that respondents do negotiate their identities along a spectrum from activist to non-activist through interaction with other participants and critical assessment of their own involvement. These findings also reveal that the process of differential activist identification has short- and long-term implications for participant involvement and collective identity where disagreements over the activist label can fracture the organization and sustainability of a movement. By assessing the ways movement participants identify with activism and how they use their identification through interaction to promote or deconstruct group solidarity, we can begin to explore the consequences of this type of identity politics for contemporary social movements.

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Despite tremendous variation in social movement tactics and participant attitudes, researchers commonly appropriate the activist label universally to participants in social movements (e.g., Clemens, 1996; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Klandermans, 1994; Leitz, 2011; Teske, 1997). Although imbuing participants with activist identities may conveniently capture their heightened political participation, previous studies demonstrate that what activism means may differ within and across social movements (Kubal, 2005; McAdam, 1986; McCabe, 2005; Munson, 2002; Schiffer, 2000; Stewart et al., 1998; Teske, 1997). Rather than tacitly adopting an activist label, movement participants negotiate their activist identities resulting in a range of activist identifications. These nuances of activist and non-activist identification among movement participants within movement settings have yet to be examined in the literature.

Congruent with the line of research on differential recruitment (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Snow et al., 1980) along with the examples of differential participation (Barkan et al., 1995) and narrative strategies by social movement participants (Braunstein, 2015; García-

Espín & Ganuza, 2017; Polletta, 1998a, 1998b; Sanyal et al., 2019), I propose that participants differentially negotiate their activist identities and construct various definitions of activism. Not only do those who participate in a range of movement activities differentially identify as activists and non-activists, but participants provide elaborate reasons for their identity alignment through narratives and identity negotiations.

Herein, I question the processes and extent to which movement participants assume activist identities by ethnographically exploring differential activist identification, the complex negotiation of identity wherein movement participants interactionally situate their involvement, define associations with the activist label, and question what activism is, who activists are, and whether they view themselves as activists. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 33 Tea Partiers and 25 Occupiers as well as ethnographic participant-observation at The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street Movements' rallies, protests, meetings, events, and online forums, this paper examines how participants define their involvement, why some participants identify as activists and others do not, and how this variance influences participation and identity.

### **The Case Studies: The Tea Party and Occupy Movements**

Between 2009 and 2011, in a mid-sized southeastern capital city, a local Tea Party Movement (TPM) and Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS) emerged. These two movements are comparably political in nature relying on passionate political interest and a desire to influence institutional systems (Mausolf, 2017). Both movements target large populations with their messages of non- or bi-partisanship, which contribute to a diverse movement population. Studying differential activist identification in these contemporary movements offers a unique opportunity to analyze the presence of identity politics within political rather than identity- or status-based social movements.

In 2009, nationwide Tax Day protests boosted Tea Party participation and reinforced for millions of conservative Americans that they were not alone in their fears of socialism, economic collapse, and fiscal debauchery (Rohlinger & Klein, 2014). Tea Party groups provided a place for politicians and concerned citizens alike to participate in a national conversation through online venues such as political blogs (Laschever, 2017; Rohlinger et al., 2015). Locally, conservative organizations accommodated the national energy of the TPM and assisted in organizing a Tax Day protest for April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Nearly 300 people attended from all over the state and motivated local organizers to establish grassroots TPM organizations (Agarwal et al., 2014).

The OWS Movement began in New York City on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Protesters from around the city and state flooded the streets of Manhattan in opposition to corporate greed, corruption of government, and economic inequality. Taken aback by the mass of protesters, organizers quickly implemented a horizontal organization based in consensus decision-making, a working group division of labor, and occupying public space. Websites and blogs published the "best practices" of the New York OWS movement and organizers around the country and the globe formed their own movements (Suh et al., 2017). Locally, organizers, mostly students from local universities and colleges, initiated a Facebook page and organized their first general assembly for October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. More than 275 people attended their first meeting, mostly comprised of progressives and libertarians who were "just waiting for something like this to happen."

## Political Participation and Differential Activist Identities

Political involvement includes an array of activities from voting to sympathetic observation to fervent engagement. Research suggests that individuals who fall along this range are very different from each other; that is, individuals who vote in every election are different from individuals who protest or go on strike (McVeigh & Smith, 1999, p. 694; Stewart et al., 1998, p. 88). Scholars vary in their arguments for why this is, citing ideology (Munson, 2002; Whittier, 2002), personal biography or family (Klatch, 2002), previous political involvement (Stewart et al., 1998), education or income (McVeigh & Smith, 1999), or organizational structure (Futrell & Simi, 2004; Gamson, 1996; Leitz, 2011; McCright & Dunlap, 2008). There is substantial ideological variation among groups and individuals within a social movement, and the “illusion of homogeneity” leads many researchers, and organizers alike, to neglect the diversity in activist identities, levels of commitment, and how individuals identify with activism (Snow, 2004, p. 397). Munson (2002) also questions what social movement scholars miss by not considering the “nonactivists,” particularly those who are ideologically aligned with the pro-life and pro-choice movements but who purposefully forgo activist involvement (p. 3). He argues against the assumption that “movement action commonly *precedes* the formation of strong pro-life sentiments among activists” (p.15) and attempts to understand “the boundary between activists who express pro-life sentiments but nonetheless remain uninvolved” (p. 187).

Social movement participants develop identities and frames to assemble their grievances, issues, and boundaries for political involvement and activism. Theorists of new social movements (NSM) posit that individuals seek out collectivities and create social spaces where they can experience and define their identity (Buechler, 1995; Johnston et al., 1994, pp. 10-11). NSM theory ties identity to broader implications for social movements and identifies the processes involved in the strategic deployment of identities within contemporary social movements (Bernstein, 2005, p. 54). Movement organizers and participants construct collective identity to attract and connect individuals to the movement, its grievances, structure, and goals (Feigin et al., 2018; Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285). One-way social movements build and maintain collective identities is through frames, or interpretive schemes (Benford & Snow, 2000). Essentially, these processes develop the cultural underpinnings of social movements and, in many cases, constitute an oppositional culture (Leitz, 2011) and oppositional capital (Wieloch, 2002) that participants can deploy to influence dominant discourse and culture (Leitz, 2011, p. 236; Voss, 1996, p. 262). Movement participants create and maintain identities and boundaries to negotiate the criteria for involvement and commitment (Taylor & Whittier, 1999; Hunt et al., 1994). Cultivating or repudiating activist identities and frames shape the movement’s organizational structure and coordination with other organizations (Clemens, 1996; Gamson, 1991; Valocchi, 2009; Whittier, 2002, p. 298). Ultimately, these processes can influence whether participants identify their involvement as activist or non-activist.

## Collective Identity and The Activist Label

Collective identities shift and evolve as new groups of individuals enter or leave a movement and provide ways for individuals to “construct a more desirable self” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 290; Klandermans, 1994, p. 169; Whittier, 2002, p. 298). Researchers argue that identity-based theories that define activism as a way for individuals and groups to change the public for the better are outdated (Lichterman, 1996, p. 5) because activism in contemporary movements may yield more benefits for individuals than for movements or society (McCorkel & Rodriguez, 2009; Teske, 1997). There is also the tendency to infuse contemporary activist

identities with extreme, militant, disruptive, or self-righteous attributes—producing negative associations with the activist label (Teske, 1997, pp. 32-33). Researchers of feminist labels show that while dissociations with the feminist label are common, this does not preempt participation in feminist groups or the internalization of feminist values (McCabe, 2005; Schiffer, 2000; Schnittker, Freese, & Powell, 2003). These studies reflect the challenges that labels, placed on participants by movement organizers or leaders, and identities, negotiated and internalized by participants, pose for social movement participants and the constraints they experience in constructing their involvement and commitment.

Social movement cultures that emphasize activist lifestyles or value highly committed participation risk precluding individuals who repudiate the activist label despite their internalized commitment or active participation or vice versa. Movement participants engage in movement activities and may agree wholly or in part with the movement's goals or strategies but may still not identify their work as activist. Distinguishing between participants' identifying with the activist label versus the negotiated collective identity has implications for movement cohesion. Individuals may identify with the constructed movement identity without viewing their work in the movement as activist, which may cause tension among participants. Participant identification with movement structure, goals, or styles of protest "may exist alongside both movement identities and preexisting collective identities, interweaving with them in complex ways" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 293). Thus, unilateral explanations of participation do not accurately depict how participants interact with each other or with the movement.

Conceptually, differential activist identification builds on differential recruitment (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Snow et al., 1980), which demonstrates why some individuals participate in social movements and others do not. Differential recruitment reveals an elaborate process of recruitment and contends that participation in social movements is more complex than previously assumed in the literature (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Snow et al., 1980). Building on this concept, differential activist identification can begin to unravel the complexities of why some participants identify their involvement as activism and others do not. For instance, a population of highly committed activists in a social movement may assist with the movement's progress and identify with the movement's collective identity, but disagreement among participants about whether their involvement is activist or non-activist can cause fractures in the movement's ability to organize. In the event of inconsistent identities, frames, or discourses, movement participants may choose to leave the movement, or the movement may factionalize into separate ideological groups (Clemens, 1996; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Rohlinger & Quadagno, 2009; Saunders, 2008; Voss, 1996; Whittier, 2002). In addition, if participants view their involvement as not essential to social or political change, they may choose to seek other forms of political involvement (Borshuk, 2004; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Zald & Garner, 2003).

Typically, "activist" and "activism" are handy descriptors for participants in social movements; however, it obscures the complex decisions participants make in negotiating their involvement. Few researchers examine the process through which movement participants define, adopt, or repudiate their activist identities. To challenge the rigidly demarcated boundaries of participation in social movement research, McAdam (1986) shifts his focus to the characteristics of high-risk and low-risk activism stating that the inclusion of a constructed activist identity is integral in participants' identity development within social movements. In their examination of participation in the contemporary Antihunger Movement, Barkan et al. (1995) expose the simplicity of activist identification of movement participants arguing, "participation is thus viewed as a simple, dichotomous measure. This operationalization obscures the fact that those who do join a movement or social movement organization will inevitably differ in the forms of participation they favor and in their rates of involvement in

these forms” (p. 114). This is an issue of preference and commitment, where individual identities may dictate what forms of participation are acceptable and the “perceived costs and benefits of participation” may preclude future involvement (Klandermans, 1993, p. 385). Nepstad (2004), in her analysis of the Plowshares Movement, notes the lack of research on activist retention and on “how people maintain an activist commitment once they have been successfully recruited” (p. 43). Akin to the other researchers’ concerns with the minimalism of activist identification in the literature, she finds this gap troubling. These researchers attempt to challenge the restrictive universal conceptualizations of movement participation in different ways, each contributing to a greater understanding of differential recruitment and participation. However, taking these studies as notable exceptions, research has paid scant attention to movement participants’ identification with activism and its implications.

Building and expanding on this literature, this paper examines how movement participants differentially identify and interactionally define their political involvement as activism. This paper contributes to an alternative conceptualization of activist identification and considers its consequences for social movements. Based on an analysis of 58 in-depth interviews and supporting ethnographic data from two localized social movements, the Tea Party Movement (TPM) and the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Movement, I find that participants do not universally view their involvement as activist, despite their commitment or attitudes toward their respective movements. This divergence in activist identification among participants suggests that social movement researchers and movement organizers reconsider how they define and impose activist labels.

### **Researcher Context**

When these two social movements emerged, I was in my first and third years, respectively, of graduate study in sociology. Undecided on a specialization track, I was assigned to a research assistantship in my first semester with a prominent social movement scholar who trained me in various qualitative research methods and encouraged additional study outside of my courses to refine my interests. The emergence of these two social movements provided a perfect opportunity for me to gain hands-on, team-based qualitative research experience and contribute to the discipline. In both cases my intentions were to provide a platform for participants to share their narratives and use qualitative research methods to develop a rich understanding of participation in contemporary social movements. Conducting research with these movements was invaluable to me as a researcher and young sociologist, and further shaped my interests in methodologies and social justice.

### **Data and Methods**

#### **Research Design**

Despite researchers’ understanding of necessary resources and political opportunities that produce a conducive environment for social movement activity, social movement emergence remains relatively unpredictable. This makes studying social movements an interesting endeavor, especially when movements such as the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street emerge rather quickly.

For this paper, I primarily draw on in-depth interviews to demonstrate how respondents negotiate their activist identities and whether this influenced their involvement. However, this data comes from two larger ethnographic studies, which are important to describe for situating the interview data.

This study relies on over a year of interviewing and fieldwork with the local TPM and eight months with the local OWS movement. In both projects, I worked as part of a team, comprised of several graduate peers (at the time) and sociology faculty, where I collected ethnographic data and conducted interviews with participants. All members of both teams were trained extensively in qualitative methods and analysis, which contributed to our predisposition to acquire as complete an ethnographic capture of the movements as possible. It is important to note that the TPM occurred before OWS and therefore the decisions we made in developing the TPM project translated easily to the OWS research design. Moreover, this temporality gave us an opportunity for comparative data collection and analysis between the two movements. These data include in-depth interviews with 33 Tea Partiers, 25 Occupiers, ethnographic field notes and videos from events and organizational meetings, and archives of organizational websites and social media forums. Although several settings, such as meetings and events, were similar in both movements, the TPM held monthly meetings at local restaurants whereas the OWS movement held daily and weekly meetings on the capitol lawn and at the Occupy camp, a legally permitted commons area located near the seat of local and state government.

For the separate projects, we submitted our detailed research design including consent forms, elaborate questionnaires, and analytical strategies to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Florida State University under expedited review. In each instance we described the urgency of getting into the field to research the movements' emergence and we received approval within two weeks.

### ***TPM Research Design***

We employed several methods to examine the Tallahassee TPM before and after the November 2010 election—an important organizing milestone for the TPM. First, monitored organizational websites, public forums (e.g., the movement's Facebook pages), and e-mails for local TPM groups daily. Anyone could join various email listservs for local groups, so we reached out to the organizers, identified ourselves as researchers from FSU, and asked to be added to the email lists. Then, using Lexis Nexis, we collected media coverage on the TPM in the state of Florida weekly. Third, using participant observation and fieldnotes, we attended more than a dozen meetings, rallies, and events hosted by local TPM groups between April 2010 and May 2011. We identified group leaders during our attendance at rallies and negotiated access by providing a statement of research intent and goals at the beginning of each meeting and delivering consent statements via group listservs. Any member uncomfortable with our presence was encouraged to tell the leader or ourselves and we agreed we would leave immediately. However, throughout our year of attendance we received no such response. Our last method was conducting semi-structured interviews with supporters of Florida TPM groups.

### ***OWS Research Design***

It is important to note that all OWS meetings (e.g., general assemblies, working groups, direct action planning) and direct actions occurred within public spaces. Thus, there was not an inherent access issue to Occupy Tallahassee. However, despite all movement activities occurring in public space, we needed to uphold the integrity of our university and ethics as researchers and created protocols for introducing ourselves and the project to anyone involved. We were well-received by everyone and our research welcomed for its intended depth and breadth in understanding the movement. The access we received enabled us to collect data in all areas of our IRB approved research design: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and internet archives of the organizational website, FB page, and YouTube website. This design translated to ethnographic participant-observation in various meetings, events, direct

actions, and at the Occupy commons; daily monitoring of the social media FB pages and movement websites; and both brief and in-depth interviews with movement participants. In my role as primary investigator, I assisted the team in collecting data at 19 weekends of action with 21 general assemblies ranging from two to fifteen hours in length, 29 working group meetings (e.g., tactical, outreach, media, legal, education), archives of the main FB page and associated pages from September 25th, 2011 until April 6th, 2012, three nights of camping at the commons, attendance at 6 direct action events, and conducting 25 in-depth and 4 brief interviews with movement participants.

## **Recruitment and Sampling Methods**

Both teams used varied methods to recruit respondents, including email, online surveys, presentations at meetings, handing out and posting flyers in online and offline locations. For these ethnographic studies where the populations of interest were smaller and more accessible via gatekeeping in local groups and online forums, we decided that a non-probability, snowball sampling method was most appropriate. The success of earlier interviews and word-of-mouth produced more respondents interested in contributing their voices and stories to our research. The team structure allowed us greater capacity to interview everyone who responded to our recruitment messages.

Through our regular attendance at rallies, assemblies, and various group meetings, respondents looked at us as regulars within the movements' structure—the research team dedicated to telling their stories. This proved beneficial to our research overall, as this rapport prolonged our access to the settings and enabled us entry into private planning meetings and conversations. The respect afforded us by participants by their invitation to these meetings amazed us and we garnered a deeper understanding of the tactics and identities of these particular contemporary activists as a result.

## **Data Collection**

Research designs using team collaboration necessitates constant communication throughout data collection and data analysis. We decided that after several meetings as a team to calibrate our observation parameters and research goals, we would then attend a range of meetings separately to get a more complete ethnographic capture of the movements. At first, we attended every meeting together, each taking separate notes and observations. Immediately upon exiting the research setting we came back together to debrief as a group—most of the time in a local 24-hour coffee shop. We discussed how each of us approached the setting, the types of interactional behaviors we observed among participants, the language and symbols were used, ideas about how knowledge and meaning were created within the settings, as well as each of our note taking strategies. Within each team we were bound to have different styles of jotting notes in the field and taking more in-depth field notes, so this calibration period was crucial to balancing our different styles with the larger goals of the project.

Even after this calibration period, when we would all attend the same meeting, we would still take audio and notes to continue our triangulation of data collection efforts. Ultimately though, the strength of these projects and of using teams, was to separate our data collection among simultaneous group meetings and larger rallies. The team structure, once calibrated in the setting, was the only way this triangulated, ethnographic research design could have worked.

### ***Participant Observation***

The frequency of activity was significantly different between the TPM and OWS movements. TPM groups met once or twice a month, local and state supporters planned monthly rallies at the Tallahassee Capitol, and were always active on social media and emails. In these settings, we took written and audio notes for writing up more detailed field notes afterwards. With consent, we audio recorded meetings using multiple recorders throughout the room to capture as much of the discussion as possible. For rallies held in public and private (with consent) spaces, we video recorded from multiple points of view throughout the event and triangulated transcriptions and observations after we exited the setting.

OWS weekends of action typically began on Fridays around 4pm, lasted through Sundays at 4pm, and entailed protests, demonstrations, general assemblies, educational forums, and camping and organizing at the commons. There were separate working groups that held weekly meetings and lasted between two and four hours. These meetings often attempted to enact decisions previously made at general assemblies or elicited new proposals for the next general assembly. At general assemblies and working group meetings, each of us in the research team audio and video recorded where appropriate (i.e., the size and location of meetings and assemblies), took detailed written and audio notes and memos, and volunteered to participate in different roles to get a better sense of how participants interacted with these roles in facilitating the movement's consensus-based decision-making process. Video recordings of all attended general assemblies and direct-action events allowed us to further analyze group dynamics and discourse.

### ***Internet Archives***

Examining social media is important in contemporary social movements because it often serves as an organizational and communication tool that reaches across localities and membership bases (Rohlinger, Bunnage, & Klein, 2014). Both the TPM and OWS used Facebook for their online presence and created FB groups for specific decisions and events, which we monitored and archived daily. The movements also had organizational websites that we monitored daily for updated meeting announcements, the calendar of events, and links to relevant national and international TPM and OWS news. The posts on public forms and Facebook were copied and pasted into a word document. This information was organized chronologically so that we can see changes over time. Since emails were dated, standalone texts, they were archived and sorted thematically for later analysis. In OWS, individuals and the movement's online moderators also maintained an organizational YouTube website where they would post videos of meetings, interviews they took at protests, and direct-action events. This provided a convenient additional point of triangulation for us as researchers, since many of the data provided by participants through these online mediums were easily comparable to the data we collected daily for our research.

### ***In-Depth Interviews***

As per IRB-approved documents, we provided consent letters detailing the project and purpose of the in-depth interviews and had participating respondents fill out a consent form. In total, we conducted in-depth interviews with 33 Tea Partiers, 25 Occupiers. TPM respondents were interviewed beginning in August 2010 and in-depth interviews ranged from 35 minutes to two and a half hours. I began interviewing OWS respondents in October 2011 and in-depth interviews ranged from 45 minutes to three hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. All respondents are referred to by pseudonyms. In order to collect comparable data

sets from both movements, the semi-structured interview questionnaire asked respondents similar questions about their range of political involvement (e.g., voting, petitions, protests, etc.), when and why they joined the movement, the kinds of activities and events (online and offline) in which they have participated, their impressions of how the group and practices has affected their political involvement, and their feelings about activism and politics in the U.S. more generally.

For this particular paper, I primarily draw on the in-depth interview data to demonstrate how respondents negotiate their activist identities and whether this influenced their involvement. Respondents' identifications with activism come from combinations of questions about the following: their political involvement prior to TPM or OWS, changes in their political involvement since joining TPM or OWS, advantages and disadvantages to grassroots structure of the movements, what activism means, what activists do, and whether they identify as an activist or not.

For demographics on the TPM and OWS respondents, see Table 1 and Table 2 respectively. The lack of racial or ethnic diversity within these movements is important to note, and I would suggest that future research tackle issues of limited racial diversity in contemporary political movements.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Tea Party Movement Interviewees (N=33)**

	%	N		%	N
<b>Sex</b>			<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Male	70	23	White	82	27
Female	30	10	Asian	0	0
<b>Age</b>			Middle-Eastern	3	1
18-35	30.5	10	Latino	9	3
36-50	30.5	10	Multi-racial	6	2
51+	39	13	African American	0	0
<b>Employment Status</b>			<b>Relationship Status</b>		
Employed	61	20	Single	24	8
Unemployed	6	2	Partnered	6	2
Retired	27	9	Married	48	16
Student	6	2	Divorced	19	6
Employed	50	1	Widowed	3	1
Unemployed	50	1	<b>Parental Status</b>		
			No children	37	12
			One child	21	7
			Two or more children	42	14

*Note:* The student category shows both employed and unemployed students within that category.

**Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Occupy Movement Interviewees (N=25)**

	%	N		%	N
<b>Sex</b>			<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Male	60	15	White	88	21
Female	40	10	Asian	0	0
			Middle-Eastern	0	0
<b>Age</b>			Latino	0	0
18-35	68	17	Multi-racial	12	3
36-50	4	1	African American	0	0
51+	28	7	Jewish	4	1
			<b>Relationship Status</b>		
<b>Employment Status</b>			Single	32	8
Employed	28	7	Partnered	32	8
Unemployed	8	2	Married	32	8
Retired	4	1	Divorced	4	1
Student	60	15	Widowed	0	0
Employed	66	10			
Unemployed	34	5	<b>Parental Status</b>		
			No children	72	18
			One child	20	5
			Two or more children	8	2

*Note:* The student category shows both employed and unemployed students within that category.

### Data Analysis

For initial data analysis, we relied on the tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) in developing our research design. Grounded theory is an inductive sociological tradition based on the “discovery of theory from data—systematically obtained and analyzed in social research” and bridges qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 1). From Max Weber’s large organizational studies of bureaucracy to Emile Durkheim’s demographic analysis of suicide, grounded theory has been particularly useful for analyzing vast amounts of data “on structural conditions, consequences, deviances, norms, processes, patterns, and systems” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 18). The research team collected a vast amount of data that pertained to structural conditions, consequences, and processes, thereby making grounded theory in the qualitative tradition an appropriate analysis strategy.

We first worked through the data individually, discovering codes and patterns as we went. For the TPM team, we created individual project files using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, for initial coding and then merged the projects later to analyze collaboratively. In the OWS team, we created individual project files for initial coding using NVivo, another qualitative data analysis program, and then merged the projects to compare codes together. These Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) programs allowed us to manage, code, and analyze significant amounts of data. They are also beneficial insofar as they allow users to enter and analyze a variety of data (e.g., newspaper articles, archived online data, interview transcripts, audio, video, photos, etc.) and verify the frequency and consistency of qualitative findings among team members.

The resulting codebooks for these projects stemmed from those collaborative efforts in that quite often we would all observe a theme or code emerging from the data and that would then become a point for further analysis. Interestingly, in contrast to my prior individual ethnographic research, I found that the team structure afforded a more holistic coding and analysis process. As a research team, we had varied interests in aspects of emergence, participation, tactics, interaction with social media and news media, previous protest and political experiences, perceptions of movement goals and strategies, personal identifications and demographics, and interpersonal conflicts into participant observation, interviews, and internet archiving. With our different interests accounted for and as complete an ethnographic capture as we could imagine needing for the type of analyses we hoped to complete, we each proceeded to analyze the data based on our own research questions.

Having been the only member present on both teams, patterns across both movements became apparent to me during data collection and our collaborative coding. One pattern that piqued my interest was participants' negotiation of their identities within movement environments and during their participation in events. Participants' activist identity narratives were not as uniform as I expected given the literature and were negotiated throughout the interviews, not just in responses to specific questions about activism.

The second phase of coding was motivated by this interest in whether participants constructed various definitions of activism and differentially negotiated their activist identities. Searching for themes across the openly coded data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89), I found that not only do those who participate in a range of movement activities differentially identify as activists and non-activists, but participants provide elaborate reasons for their identity alignment through narratives and identity negotiations. Through previous political involvement and feelings about their current involvement, respondents weave narratives that reveal their reasons for identifying as activists or not (Davis, 2002; Polletta, 1998b). Narratives are important for collective identity and for individuals' recollection of the events, physical or psychological, they feel contribute to their identification or commitment to a social movement (Polletta, 1998b). Participants negotiated their activist identities and definitions through these narratives. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I collated previously coded data into parsimonious groupings in NVivo. The versatility of thematic analysis empowered me to be creative in identifying manifest and latent themes across the data. These further developed into the themes and sub-themes presented in my analysis that focused on interviewees' differential identification with activism and are used to frame my analysis. Table 3 describes the spectrum of thematic codes from activists, or those who were comfortable identifying as activists, to non-activists, or those who were not comfortable identifying as activists.

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**Table 3. Thematic Codes for Differential Activist Identification**

<b>Activists</b>	Preexisting activist lifestyle or experience
↑	Responsibility to political or social change
↕	More active than ever before
↓	Problems with the activist label
<b>Non-activists</b>	Participation is obligation or civic duty
	Less active relative to others' participation

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**Analytical Considerations**

This paper evolved from two multi-year, team-based projects that involved many moving parts. In each project, I focused on ways to enhance the transparency and quality of the

research design and data collection including, most prominently: reflexivity, data management, and triangulation.

### ***Reflexivity***

The scope of these projects was too complex to not develop an analytical strategy along with our research design that we would revisit throughout the project (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Each member of the team kept their own memos and we would also schedule time during debriefings to check-in on our larger analytical goals as individuals and as a team. The data from our memos—written on napkins or post-it notes, typed documents, voice recordings, emails or texts to ourselves—were all crucial when we started coding broadly and refining the data into themes. We noticed operational things related to methodologies, sampling and recruitment, negotiation of access, privacy concerns, and technical protocols. As most of us were students, we also discussed links to literature in our courses and discipline in general. If any of us struggled with our personal identities in the field or around specific political issues, we took note of that every step of the way. The diversity in our memos, especially analytical notes, shows us constantly checking in with each other, with the research design, with research ethics, and possible research questions—a practice that facilitated transparency and thoroughness.

### ***Data Management***

Two lengthy ethnographic projects meant we were generating and managing a lot of data. With such an extensive amount of data—notes, memos, audio and video recordings, internet archives, emails, consent forms, photos, flyers, rally signs—it was essential to develop a data management strategy for organizing and analyzing the information. To do this, I created a Microsoft Excel worksheet to manage information throughout and after the data collection periods to keep a record of each piece of data, including metadata for: date and time collected; geographical location of collection; collected by; original file name and physical and/or digital location; updated or analyzed files names and digital locations; physical and/or digital backup locations; file types and extensions; and whether it had been imported into our analysis program file. All data generated by each of the following methods was logged in the data management sheet and tracked throughout the project, which in and of itself became a piece of data as well. This strategy also made managing data in NVivo much easier, with classifications and other metadata already complete I just had to assign them to data files, which allowed for more complex queries and project mapping in the program. These steps are also necessary for preserving the de-identified data from these projects for data sharing and reproducibility (Hammersley, 1997).

### ***Triangulation***

Mentioned previously, the research design for this study relied on triangulation of methods, data, and team members. Triangulation is described in the literature as a strategy to help researchers ensure rigor in their qualitative work (Barusch et al., 2011; Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). Faced with many settings, events, and people, we decided to utilize several methods to more fully capture the complexities of movement participation. Data derived from these methods provided a “checks and balances” mechanism that enhanced the credibility of our observations and analyses. We also used each other to further triangulate observations, codes, and findings. Every team member was involved during every step of developing the research design, collecting the data, and initial coding. Even when we moved forward with

thematic analyses based on our own interests, we checked in with each other to triangulate our perceptions of validity of each other's claims. Triangulation was necessary at every step of these projects to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of our findings.

### Organization of Findings

The findings for this study begin with a brief section on respondents' definition of activism and the activist label. Understanding their perspectives on what activism means and what activists do was an important precursor for analyzing whether they identified as activists. The analysis is then grouped by activist and non-activist main themes. Although I explain that these identities fall on a spectrum rather than in dichotomous categories, a meaningful organization of these findings necessitates two groupings. Within each of these main themes, the sub-themes for identity negotiation narratives provide a clearer representation of the spectrum described in the section on data analysis.

### Self-Reported Activities of Respondents

Before moving into the results, it is important to note the levels of physical participation among respondents. Table 4 shows the range of activities in which individuals participated.

**Table 4. Self-Reported Activities of Respondents**

	<b>Activists (N=15)</b>	<b>Non-activists (N=18)</b>
<b>Tea Party Movement</b>		
Attended rally/protest	14	17
Attended meetings	14	14
Organizing or leadership position	6	2
Participated online (Facebook, Twitter, Website)	9	4
Donated resources	7	2
<b>Occupy Movement</b>	<b>Activists (N=14)</b>	<b>Non-activists (N=11)</b>
Attended rally/protest	14	11
Attended meetings	12	7
Organizing or leadership position	9	1
Participated online (Facebook, Twitter, Website)	8	4
Donated resources	8	2

**Note:** Columns do not reflect the totals of both groups because almost all individuals participated in more than one activity.

Here, I have noted whether they identified as activists or non-activists. The table illustrates that despite adopting the non-activist label these individuals did participate in a range of activities. This counters the assumption that individuals who participate in social movements are active and those who do not participate are not active. By taking a more fluid approach to both identification and participation, researchers and organizers alike can be careful not to preclude valuable participants at either end of the participation spectrum. In fact, interaction and perceived sanctions by those identifying as activists appear to be more important in

participants' identification with non-activism than a perceived lack of participation on their part.

## **Findings**

### **Defining Activism and Becoming Activists**

For many respondents, it helped to negotiate their activist identities if they first specified what activism meant to them. Activism meant “to act” or “to stand up for what you believe in” and activists are “catalysts for social change,” “responsible citizens,” or “rabble-rousers.” Activism also meant civic responsibility, being progressive, and translating previous involvement to current involvement. When asked about her views on activism, Occupier Dinah, a 21-year-old college student, said that activism was about responsibility:

Personally, the way that I think of activism is that I am a citizen of this community and I think that to be a responsible citizen I feel like if I don't do something, I'm not positive that it'll get done otherwise and that would be unacceptable to me. So, I think that feeling of responsibility for your community is what motivates most activists, or at least what motivates me. (Dinah-OWS)

Bryant, a 23-year-old student Occupier, also felt that activists should stand up for what they believed in and “do something about it.”

Assessing risk associated with the activist label was another way in which respondents defined activism. Tea Partier Mark, a 52-year-old engineer, thought that activists were those who were “not afraid to get involved [because] they believe they actually have a chance to make a difference.” Twenty-six-year-old Tea Partier, Jacob, indicated that there was a substantial difference between liberal and conservative activism in terms of risk or association with these two political standpoints:

I would say that being part of the tea party, or being conservative, or being republican is a little more risky than saying ‘I’m a democrat’ or ‘I’m a liberal’ or ‘I’m a progressive’ or ‘I’m a socialist’...saying [you’re] a democrat...I don’t think [that] sounds [as] risky as if you were going to say, ‘Yeah, I’m a tea party activist.’... I think you’re more at risk being a tea party or republican, than you are being a liberal, progressive, or a democrat. (Jacob-TPM)

This association of activism with participants in liberal or progressive movements, whether positive or negative, was present in other respondents' explanations of activism. For instance, in two separate interviews, 54-year-old Occupier Daryl and 57-year-old Tea Partier Lillian defined activism in reference to the participants in the Anti-Vietnam War protests. Daryl stated:

It's hard not giving more support than we are because they are fighting for us. They're so many of us that know that [others] don't support the Occupy, they see them as rabblers. It's kind of like with my parents saw the folks against the Vietnam War. (Daryl-OWS)

Lillian corroborated this association in her response when she said that during Vietnam “activists were those really bad liberal people.” I revisit Lillian's response in a later section. To

build on this, 24-year-old Occupier Jacqueline elaborated on what she felt were the negative connotations with activism during her interview:

Well, there are several, and they come from different angles and perspectives. I think that activism is associated with militancy and radical behavior and that's, you know, a problem, because it diminishes your ability to do good political action because if you're painted as a militant [then] no matter what you do, you're gonna have to fear your involvement from those views against you. I think there is also this activist as a fad connotation where "Oh, you're an activist. You say you're an activist because it's cool to be an activist." (Jacqueline-OWS)

In some instances where respondents were either hesitant or did not identify with activism, they used these negative connotations in their non-activist narratives. Some respondents had difficulty deciding whether they viewed their participation as activism. Emery, a 55-year-old psychologist and first time Occupier, offered a narrative that shows the gray area of adopting the activist label:

Activists get people like me out! But maybe everybody who was out there is an activist, you know because maybe I have to think of myself that way. Maybe it doesn't matter how often you do it. Activists do everything from what I did to organizing and doing the Facebook stuff, the technology stuff. You know, I should go on and volunteer, it's what I want to do. I'm going to be more of an activist now, possibly. So, yeah, I'm an activist. (Emery-OWS)

While he initially hesitated to identify as an activist, he negotiated an inclusive activist definition from which he identified as an activist.

On the other hand, 27-year-old Occupier Cliff negotiated the activist definition as being more exclusive, privy to only those who were "actively working for change doing more than "normal, everyday stuff." His activist definition came down to, "I see an activist as somebody who's actively working towards change. Everybody shouldn't just be going around saying 'I'm an activist' when they're not doing anything, but if you are actively working for change why not consider yourself an activist?" Cliff's identification with activism was moderated by his desire for exclusivity.

Differential activist narratives also negotiated personal shifts in political involvement. For example, Tea Partiers Beth and Deborah moved from social or religious activities to being participants in the TPM, a shift they had not yet fully negotiated. For most of her life, 26-year-old Beth was involved in faith-based organizations and although she identified with the conservative ideology, she did not "come out" as a conservative until the TPM signaled that it was acceptable. She expressed this when she said, "...having these groups together you realize all of the sudden 'okay, I'm not the one crazy person.' There are people who kind of think the way I do and they agree with me. And it makes you feel connected." Similarly, 55-year-old Deborah was involved in social issues and shared her experiences picketing abortion clinics and being vetted for entrance into the Mormon Church. The TPM also gave her an avenue to transfer her knowledge of conservative issues into political activism. Her forty-year commitment to religious struggles translated well into her work with the TPM, "Politics isn't something that just stays stagnant...I think one of the most important messages was the message that...[we] made a forty-year commitment. You know, this is going to be a forty-year commitment. And I've seen that in other political struggles." Both Beth and Deborah translated their previous religious agendas or involvement to their political participation in the TPM.

Their familiarity with activist-like activities played a part in their willingness to identify as activists.

These negotiated definitions of activism and activist narratives expose the complex work that goes into participants' definitions of and identifications with activism. Respondents' definitions and perceptions of activism clarify the context in which some respondents adopt or repudiate the activist label. The following sections further explore the nuances of differential activist identification and reveals the complicated work that movement participants put into negotiating theirs and others' involvement and commitment.

### **Negotiating Activist Identities: Activists**

Respondents negotiated their activist identifications in both movements based on their preexisting activist lifestyles, having an activist responsibility to political participation, and being more active than ever before. Table 5 offers the numbers of respondents identifying their participation as activist.

**Table 5. Respondents Identifying with Activist Codes (N=29)**

Activists	TPM		
	(N=15)	OWS (N=14)	Total (N=29)
Preexisting activist lifestyle or experience	7	5	12
Responsibility to political or social change	6	6	12
More active than ever before	2	3	5

#### ***Preexisting Activist Lifestyle or Experience***

Some respondents identified as activists because their previous political involvement enhanced their willingness to identify as activists. They participated in presidential campaigns, protested or picketed for different causes, donated money, voted, participated in faith-based initiatives, or led or organized non-profit organizations. Occupier Quincy, a 55-year-old policy analyst, said activist awareness “can be a curse and you can have it eat you up to some extent because you want other people to know what you know and you want there to be, in my view anyway, a greater good accomplished” through educating others and teaching the values of “egalitarianism and altruism.” Occupier Dinah, who shared a long history of student activism and upholding an activist lifestyle explained how she felt when she missed going to OWS meetings:

If I don't go to a meeting and I don't know what happened, it really is debilitating to me participating in the future. I think there's a big part of like activist guilt, like if you have committed your life to this and then you miss out on things, if you have any spare time you're doing something wrong it feels like. Or sometimes I feel like if there's an event happening and it's a difference between 7 or 8 people being there and I'm that 8th person then I really have a responsibility to go especially if it's something that I helped to organize. (Dinah-OWS)

Many respondents in both movements shared this “activist guilt,” yet they expressed it in different ways. Here, Dinah expressed it in terms of maintaining her activist lifestyle and others discussed it in terms of not getting the movement's message out to others. Tea Partier

Katherine, a 47-year-old state worker and leader of a local TPM group, conveyed this when she was asked what it meant to her to be in the TPM:

What does it mean? It means that you're aware, you're active, you're paying attention to what the government is doing. For so long, Americans have not been paying attention. And it's our own fault. We have not been keeping an eye on the government. We've just been trusting them to do what's right. So we've been slacking. And our responsibility as citizens is keeping an eye on the processes to make sure that the freedoms and liberty are maintained. (Katherine-TPM)

These two respondents identified as activists because of a deeply seated need to be active in change and their physical participation in their respective movements contributed to their feelings of efficacy as activists.

In addition to physical participation in various political activities, some respondents indicated that they were "waiting for a movement" and longing for social change. This resulted in an activist-like mentality that sustained them until "their" movement finally developed. Tea Partier Adrian, a 35-year-old policy analyst, expressed this most clearly, when he said:

Cause I was waiting for a movement to happen. I guess as soon as I was old enough to vote, I became part of the Libertarian Party. I soon realized in political science the Libertarian Party was not viable to make anything happen in politics. Ron Paul's presidential campaign really awakened me when he was ignored...shut out from debates even from Fox News when his message was not accepted. (Adrian-TPM)

Adrian's disappointment in the treatment of Ron Paul in the 2008 election thrust him into mainstream Republican politics where he begrudgingly spent most of his activist energy until the TPM came about. Occupier Kirk, a recently unemployed 64-year-old, echoed Adrian's sentiment in describing his current involvement in the OWS movement, "I've been in training for Occupy for forty years and they finally showed up! I've developed a lot of skills over these years, [so] I've been able to help out a little bit (Kirk-OWS). His experience with the ACLU and with veteran's affairs proved to be helpful in organizing the OWS movement and he participated in a variety of progressive causes to maintain his activist lifestyle.

Respondents also divulged stories from their past that pushed them into activism or conditioned them to be open to activism. After enduring some difficult life transitions, 26-year-old student researcher Occupier Jasper "threw himself into activism" as a way to reestablish an avenue for working towards good in the world. He worked with the Undocumented Workers Movement against anti-immigration legislation and continued on to form student activist organizations. These events led him to the OWS movement where participants called him the "OccuChrist" for his willingness to give to the movement unsparingly. When asked what activism meant to him, Jasper emphatically stated:

It's an intuitive impulse, it's implicit. The realization that you're in love and that's where you should be isn't something that you can question with language and so it's hard to pin down as meaning...What does it mean? Yes is what it means! Yes! Of course! Obviously! Those are the responses. (Jasper-OWS)

Jasper likened his feelings about activism to his feelings about love in that they were inexpressible but deeply felt and obvious. Tea Partier George, a 60-year-old attorney, described

a “long pedigree of political involvement” from participating in his parents’ activism growing up:

They had me standing on the side of the street holding signs. [T]hen I went through a period when I was in college where I had long hair and a peace sign and other things that I won’t say. So I was a bona fide member of the 60’s and early 70’s. Then it’s sort of the old adage of if when you’re young and you’re not a liberal you don’t have a heart. And if after you grow up and you’re not conservative you don’t have a brain. Life teaches you things and life taught me things. I gravitated toward[s] the libertarian [party]...and again I hate to use the word liberal and conservative...[S]ince then a long pedigree of political involvement. (George-TPM)

Although he “hates” using the liberal and conservative distinction, George mentioned the importance of the lifecourse in shifting political loyalties.

### ***Responsibility to Political or Social Change***

Respondents also felt that their activism was “normal,” “a responsibility,” “a civic duty,” and did not consider their political involvement to be in any way “special.” They considered their involvement to be activist because they viewed any active participation as activist. They took the range of activist-like behaviors into account and tied these to a general worldview of active participation. Occupier Madison, a 27-year-old business manager commented on this directly:

I have a problem with people seeing things as different that I think are normal. Like when I’ll be like “I think we should go out and join Occupy” people are like “Oh, you’re radical” and I don’t think that’s radical, I think that’s normal. And your apathy is radical. I’m just being normal and all you who are sitting at home watching whatever you’re watching on TV are just unactivated, like asleep. This is a more human, normal form. (Madison-OWS)

Her frustration with being deemed a “radical” for wanting to be active in the world resonated with other respondents. Occupier Vivian, a 24-year-old student researcher, said, “This is something that I’ve been seeing a lot of people saying ‘Oh, we’ve been waiting for this, waiting for that’ and it’s just like oh, so these people were kind of lying in wait and why were they? I mean they were awake, but not really. It’s like they were sleepwalking or they were aware but just weren’t doing anything.” Both Madison and Vivian saw their activism as necessary to be “awake” and as a way to combat the “unactivated” or “sleepwalking” state of others.

These respondents felt a deep respect for the country and the world. This took the form of feeling proud to be a part of shifting the course of the country or the world and using the privileges of their position in society to be agents of social change. Tea Partier Bradley, a 51-year-old entrepreneur, said it “feels good to be connected” and that his participation in the TPM “feels very American.” Tea Partier Nicholas, a 72-year-old retiree, reinforced this: “The tea party people are people who have their eyes open and they love their country.” Vera and Oliver were a retired married couple in the TPM and during their interview, Vera articulated what being a part of the TPM meant to her:

I think more and more people just hate what is happening in this country. [T]o me, if you want to save the country you’ve got to get involved. And whether

you are a democrat or republican or independent, you know I think we've been too complacent for too long and just let things happen. And I think now the people are wanting to say, "We the people" and this is what we want and if you're not going to listen, we're going to get rid of you. (Vera-TPM)

Later in the interview, Oliver and Vera shared a story about the American flag they regularly brought with them to rallies, which they purposefully mounted upside down. When confronted about the inappropriateness of flying the American flag upside down, Oliver replied that he flies it upside down "because my country is in distress." He used it as a symbol to force others to think about the condition of the country. Occupier Natalie, a 23-year-old student, saw the knowledge she gained through higher education as a privilege and that she needed to use it to educate others:

I wouldn't consider myself a concerned student before this, but I think this has given me the opportunity to be the activist that I kind of always wanted, I felt like I needed to be. Otherwise it just doesn't feel right to have all this information and not do something with it... I have [the] privilege to have the money to be here and to be learning. (Natalie-OWS)

These respondents experienced an obligation to inform people using symbols and their knowledge and they hoped that these forms of activism would shift the direction of the country, the world, and people's actions or thoughts.

### ***More Active than Ever Before***

In these cases, respondents referred to their involvement prior to being in the TPM or OWS movement, such as voting, writing letters to representatives, or participating in local politics, as less effectual or "pathetic" compared to their current level of involvement. Tea Partier Phillip, a 64-year-old retired army officer, was politically involved before the TPM online and by writing letters rather than face-to-face activities and went on to say that the TPM motivated him to get more involved and to help others do the same. For Occupier Emery, participating in the OWS events made him feel like more of a participant in the world and being involved empowered him and changed the way he thought about activism. Tea Partier Louise, a 48-year-old bookkeeper, explained the importance of respecting everyone's differing levels of involvement:

If I hadn't gotten involved, we wouldn't be having this conversation. So, I'm so glad that I did. I'm so glad that I'm involved and doing something, some people can do more and some people can do less. We don't need to judge what we each can do. Sometimes I've beaten myself in the head, "I want to go do this," or "I want to go do that." And you can't. But if everybody does what they can, we'll effect a positive change to this great nation. (Louise-TPM)

She acknowledged the improvement she experienced in her life because of her involvement in the TPM and said that rather than judge everyone's participation, the TPM should welcome everyone and together change will happen. Occupier Jacqueline said that despite the lack of a better word and the negative connotations with activism, she considered herself to be an activist because the activities she was involved in through OWS compared to her previous level of involvement were "activist in orientation."

Respondents also tied their higher levels of activity to the popularity and ideologically resonant social movements in which they participated. They viewed their involvement in their respective social movements as natural extensions of their previous political participation and as an opportunity to develop their political activist skills. For example, Tea Partier Louise had a history of being active in a conservative motorcycle organization that shared many similar tenets with the TPM. She viewed her TPM participation as complementary to her established activities with other organizations that were non-activist in orientation and, when possible, she advocated TPM activism within the other contexts of her life.

### **Negotiating Activist Identities: Non-Activists**

Respondents who identified their involvement in their respective movements as non-activist attested that they had problems with the activist label, viewed their participation as an obligation or civic duty, and were less active relative to others' participation. Table 6 shows the number of respondents within each category.

**Table 6. Respondents Identifying with Non-activist Codes (N=29)**

<b>Non-activists</b>	<b>TPM (N=18)</b>	<b>OWS (N=11)</b>	<b>Total (N=29)</b>
Problems with the activist label	4	1	5
Participation is obligation or civic duty	8	2	10
Less active relative to others' participation	6	8	14

### ***Problems with the Activist Label***

Respondents had several problems with the activist label that resulted in their repudiation of the activist label. Many TPM respondents did not identify with activism because of its associations with liberals or progressive movements. Tea Partier Nancy, a 49-year-old chiropractor, did not think of conservatives when she thought of activism, she thought it “describes someone who is involved with the political left” and although she had heard some individuals say “Tea Party activist,” she still did not think of activism as a conservative label. Tea Partier Matthew, a 55-year-old salesman and self-identified astute voter, expanded on Nancy’s comment when he described the environment at a TPM rally:

So it’s just who shows up, how they conduct themselves, the speakers that I’ve heard are...you know they’re not inciting people who riot. They’re not saying, “Go march to FSU and tear down doors and close down businesses!” I mean we’re not... that’s what democrats do. They go protest and they tear down things. And they boycott and da dada. (Matthew-TPM)

Here, he drew a clear distinction between the behavior of Tea Partiers and liberal activists at rallies in order to further his conservative dissociation with activism. Mentioned in an earlier section, Tea Partier Lillian expanded on her feelings about the increasingly positive association with activism:

I think it’s become a less ugly word. See during Vietnam, activists were those really bad liberal people. I was raised in a conservative democratic south, you know a Christian south. God and country and those people were bad. Because

they were not supporting America. You know that's how we were taught. And now activism is great. In fact it's now bleeding over into the church more than ever before. More openly, I think it was always there but now it's open. And I don't like that at all. You know I think you go to church to learn about God and when you leave church you go execute your God understanding in your life in every aspect. A God understanding familial life, not you don't talk about politics in the church. And I just think it's wrong. Absolutely wrong. (Lillian-TPM)

Her aversion to political activism was in its intrusion into other spheres of her life, including the church and the family—an intrusion she found unacceptable. She and her husband, another respondent, were both involved intermittently in the Anti-War Movement, yet they both repudiated the activist label because of its liberal and negative associations.

While four TPM and one OWS respondent identified their involvement as non-activist because of problems with the activist label, a few OWS participants also expressed issues with the label but identified as activists. First, Occupier Rory, a 60-year-old, long-time participant in political and social change and the only person to yell “bring out the hand-cuffs!” at the first general assembly, identified as a non-activist because of the abuse of the term activist and its contemporary faddish connotation. He expressed this best when he said:

I have a funny time with the word activism. I do what I do because I like to do it, if I didn't like to do it I wouldn't be doing it and I guess I wouldn't be an activist I guess, I don't know. Like I said, I have real hard time when I see the underdog or whatever getting trampled on, and their rights trampled on, and I even have a harder time sitting somewhere listening to people, I have a real hard time with people putting down illegal immigrants...I just have a hard time with that kind of stuff, but by the same token it's taken me a long time to get here... (Rory-OWS)

He referenced the length of time it took him to develop his activist skills including participation in motorcycle rights initiatives and prison drug-dependency programs. Later in the interview, when I asked about his reaction to other individuals calling themselves activists, he said “After I'm [done] laughing inside? [chuckles] Don't tell me, show me! I know a lot of wannabe-activists, a couple of them are wannabe-a-lot-of-things. There are people that can say that they're an activist, they've got the cred, they've got the street cred, they've done it. They can say it.” The “wannabe” use and abuse of the activist label complicated Rory's association with the term because he did not want to be viewed in the same category as “wannabe-activists.”

Although they also identified as activists, Occupiers Dinah, Jacqueline, and Madison all referred to the issues of using the activist label as a status symbol or that it is “cool” to be an activist. Madison articulated this well when describing her issue with the label “I've just met people who [used activism] like a status symbol or something, like ‘I'm an activist, oh my god!’ It was like saying you were a pop star or something and it was like being as pretentious as being about any other things. It makes me move away from persons like that.” The associated pretentiousness of a “cool” activist label needs to be examined further because of its implications for the construction of activist identity in contemporary movements, especially in identity-based movements and movements with college-aged participants.

### ***Participation is Obligation or Civic Duty***

Although similar to those identifying their activist involvement as a responsibility, participants here view their non-activist participation in politics or social change as a natural response to deteriorating values or increased apathy among others. Adopting the activist label, in this case, would deter from respondents' desire to hold *all* citizens accountable for political participation. They feared glamorizing active participation in political or social change by adopting the activist label. Tea Partier Logan, a 68-year-old retiree, said, "Voter apathy and voter ignorance are the two scariest things in the world" and in order to counteract that apathy, he spent his time working with campaigns and organizing statewide TPM groups. Tea Partier Riley, a 49-year-old political consultant, felt an obligation to react to the nation's flippant use of "socialism":

When all this stuff first happened and you were feeling like "Oh no! Our country is being destroyed." It feels like you're the only person that cares about it. Time magazine had a cover saying "We're all socialists now." I don't know if you remember, but they did. And I thought am I the only person who is not a socialist and thinks socialism is bad? (Riley-TPM)

Even though he thought that there was a "delusion that we think what we do has some effect in this world" he continued his participation to combat his own and others' apathy, especially in local politics. Tea Partier Hayden, a 33-year-old and active in the army, shared his feelings of obligation to participate:

I believe the reason why over the last thirty, forty, fifty, sixty years, whatever the case might be that the political movement that is the Tea Party actually came about is because people became so apathetic and [were] not feeling like they had any kind of effectiveness in Washington, and they got too comfortable with their own lives. (Hayden-TPM)

Hayden viewed his identification as not deteriorating his ability or willingness to participate, but rather allowed him to adopt an inclusiveness that did not distinguish between different groups whether activist or non-activist, gay or straight, black or white, or Republican or Democrat.

Generally, respondents in this category acknowledged their involvement or the skills they had from previous political participation as inherent qualities of good citizens, as necessary to their identity as American citizens rather than their identities as activists. In addition, these respondents considered the opportunity to participate with "like-minded individuals" as integral to their political experience. Tea Partier Mark remained very active in voting and contributing to certain conservative/faith-based organizations over time and advocated voting and being educated about voting. Yet, after experiencing several breakdowns in the political system, Mark found the TPM to be an important milestone in conservative political culture. He viewed the TPM's strength in its ability to bring like-minded people together to participate in politics. Sally, a 52-year-old first time Occupier and receptionist, viewed her participation as a necessary reaction to seeing other groups protest over the last ten years and not doing anything about it. She wanted to stand up and "be counted" for her opinion and her voice.

### ***Less Active Relative to Other's Participation***

Non-activists in this group defined their participation relative to others' participation within their social movements. They viewed activists as those who were more active than them and that if they adopted the activist label without increased involvement, more involved participants would sanction them. Tea Partier Jacob identified as a non-activist because he had not participated in many events and went on to state, "I identify myself closely with what they stand for and I would like to be more actively involved, if I had more time." Several respondents shared this wariness to identify with activism because of a lack of participation. Occupier Abby, a 26-year-old state worker, articulated it best when she said:

I mean I guess it's activist-like of me, but I'm not devoting enough time to it so. I just want to do what I can. Activists are active in voicing concerns and issues that affect people or animals or whatever. I think they just heighten awareness as much as they can. I think an activist is really active, like I will talk about Occupy to whoever wants to talk to me about it, but at this time I'm not leaving work early to make it to these things and I'm not putting it on the line. I think an activist is really more out there. (Abby-OWS)

Even though she and other participants physically participated and identified with the movement's goals and identity, not living the life of an activist within their respective movements prevented them from adopting the activist label. Occupier Eve, a 33-year-old post-secondary art student, did not identify as an activist, but explained that she would not be offended if others identified her for her lack of participation:

No. I think I'd be more active if I were an activist. I think I'm sort of half-active. If I were an activist, I'd be here for every single [meeting] and on one of the committees. I've even skewed most of my art projects to be environmentally profound or politically active, but I think there's more to an activist. I'm just a baby activist. I wouldn't be offended if somebody called me that. That's true. (Eve-OWS)

Together, these respondents illustrated a hesitance to adopt the activist label because of their fear of disapproval by the "activists" or even just the policing of their activist label.

In this way, there was an interactional component to non-activist identification because many respondents considered their identification within the context of how others would perceive their label. Respondents feared the accountability of using the activist label since they viewed activists as fully committed and the activist label as a privilege. Occupier Samantha, a 24-year-old student researcher, was envious of her friends who were actively involved (and who did identify as activists in their interviews) and guilty for not being more involved. Although she felt that attending OWS events validated her desire to be more involved, her position relative to her extremely active friends kept her from openly identifying as an activist. She continued in her interview to say:

I guess maybe I don't see myself as legitimate enough to be an activist. [*She points at someone in the setting that is, in her mind, an activist and says "There's one right there."*] I would say short answer yeah, long answer well I'm not as involved, so am I? (Samantha-OWS)

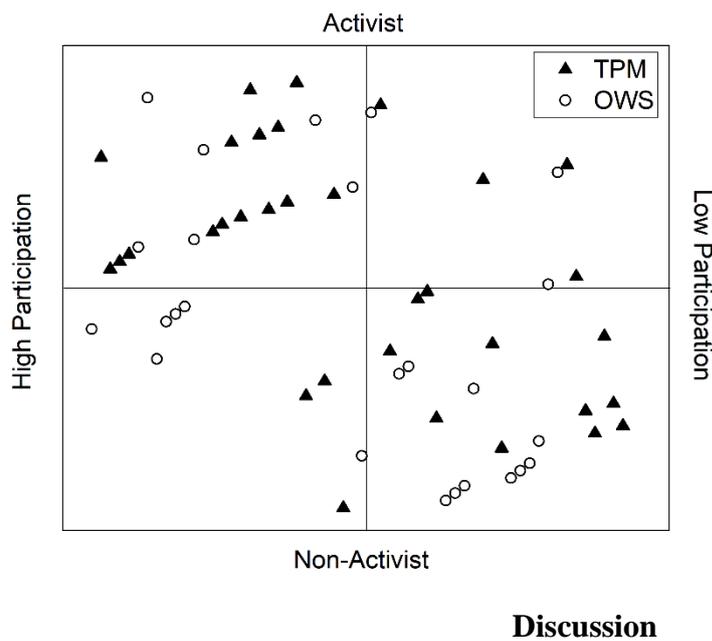
Part of her complicated answer was her questioning of others' reactions to her identification, which ultimately shifted her identification to non-activist.

Interestingly, respondents with preexisting activist lifestyles and who identified as activists *did* hold opinions of participants who, in their view, adopted the activist label without an acceptable level of participation or commitment. In these instances, they viewed participants who were less committed than them as "slacktivists" or as flippantly using the label as a status symbol. Tea Partier Adrian, who identified as an activist with a preexisting activist lifestyle expressed his dislike for people jumping on the "bandwagon" to push their own agendas:

I don't see a lot of those people. I don't see them as being part of the movement. They don't register in my mind as part of the movement. And I'm talking about in person interactions. Cause I see people at party meetings cheering on and I think where were you before dude? Where were you before I had to get involved? I would rather be somewhere else right now, than at this party meeting on a Thursday night. But I'm not. I'm here. But you were here for you know years before. I don't want to see you cheerleading...cause I had to be here now. It kind of pisses me off. Don't say "Yea, rah rah. Yeah tea party." No. Don't go there. If you were on the team, you should have been playin' ball sooner. So, to answer, I don't know. Those people that jump on, in a lot of ways are the republican trash who realize they need the movement to succeed at their goals. (Adrian-TPM)

Occupier Rory, who in an earlier section conveyed an aversion to those who do not have "the street cred" but adopt the activist label anyway, shared in Adrian's reaction to individuals who used the movement "to succeed at their goals." Tea Partier Riley also thought that people in the TPM should be more active at the local level, and even though they identified as Tea Partiers and were more involved in politics generally, he did not feel like they did enough. Also, in an earlier section Occupier Madison spoke to the pretentiousness of individuals who used the activist label as a status symbol, like a "pop star." Dinah, also an Occupier, defined internet activists who were rarely to moderately involved in offline events as "slacktivists." Thus, the interactional fear of rejection was matched with actual opposition by self-identified activists. This demonstrates some of the complicated contexts in which individuals negotiate their activist identities.

While in most of these cases non-activist respondents chose their label out of a general respect to the work of more involved participants, there were participants who identified with activism that did not take the reaction of others into account. Given these contentious definitional negotiations with the activist label, differential activist identification appears to be a necessary component in both constructing collective identity and in resolving conflict among participants. Furthermore, by looking through the lens of differential activist identification, participants of this study do not fit into well-defined activist or non-activist categories but are best characterized multimodally, as a non-discrete label spectrum of activist/non-activist-high participation/low participation, the results of which can be seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Differential Activist Identification by Participation Matrix**

### Discussion

To expand the social movement literature on participation and activism, this paper demonstrates the importance of deconstructing traditional assumptions of activism and considering the nuances in activist negotiation and identification. By assessing the ways movement participants identify with activism and how they use their identification through interaction to promote or deconstruct group solidarity, we can begin to explore the consequences of this type of identity politics for contemporary social movements.

Differential activist identification has short- and long-term implications for participants and movements. Disagreements concerning associations with the activist label, the adoption of the label by less committed participations, or the repudiation of the label by fully committed participants may divide individuals within a movement. Interactionally, these disagreements can accumulate and undermine the constructed collective identity, especially if participants build it around the tenets of highly committed involvement or moderate institutional involvement. The impact of genuine disagreement over the activist label or aspects of activism, fear of glamorizing the activist label, and apprehension of surveillance or sanction by “activists” are consequences of differential activist identification not reconciled in the literature.

Ideological rifts, dissociation with collective identity, inefficacy and contentiousness, poor recruitment, or mismanaged leadership are some of the causes associated with movement decline. Yet, I propose that the interactional consequences of differential activist identification may cause conflicts of self within participants and tensions among participants that could also lead to movement fracture or decline. Thus, when movements construct their collective identity or their tactics, it is important to accommodate the differential activist identification among participants. This is especially important for participant retention, as these individuals are already in the movement and are involved, they just view their participation differently. Understanding the decisions and feelings of movement participants in how and why they arrive at their activist or non-activist identification is helpful information in the movement’s construction of collective identity and in their continued mobilization.

Future research should examine the implications differential activist identification has for movement dynamics, which may include fracture and decline—especially for movements in transition. Without accounting for the negotiated development of activist identities,

movements could become more exclusive towards those exhibiting particular “activist” behaviors, such as sharing experiences from their preexisting activist lifestyle, their feelings of responsibility, or how much more active they are now. Preference to this group could eclipse those repudiating the activist label referencing their issues with the politically loaded label, how their participation is a natural or human response, or that they feel less active or devalued by the “activists.” The possibilities for confrontation between these two groups, given their antipodal stance on activism, are numerous and potentially damaging to the movement’s infrastructure, leadership, and success. Negative connotations with the activist label could fracture participants’ view of their movement work and inhibit non-activists’ interaction with those identifying as activists. On both ends of this potential confrontation, movements risk losing valuable groups of participants. Through emphasizing the value of all forms of participation and welcoming a variety of involvement levels, social movements can transition these antithetical standpoints on activism into a valuable tool in maintaining participatory diversity.

There are some limitations to this study. These two movements differed in their organizational structures and leadership characteristics in that each movement supported different types of tactics, with the TPM focusing more on electoral tactics and the OWS movement using more direct-action tactics. These tactical preferences could clarify some of these variations, but more research would need to be done outside of the scope of this paper. Future research should also consider the ideological underpinnings of differential activist identification across political and identity-based social movements. In terms of reconceptualizing the application of the activist label, there are likely even more levels of distinction regarding the activist label that need exploration. For example, respondents with complex differential activist narratives might have been more comfortable in a non-dichotomous category. The interactional processes and movement consequences of activist identification require more contextualization with ethnographic data than I presented here. Despite the localization of these data, these questions of differential activist identification can be applied to a variety of social movements and across different settings, which I implore researchers interested in differential movement participation to consider.

In conclusion, by examining differential activist identification with 58 movement participants, this paper challenges traditional assumptions about activism and finds that participants carefully negotiate their activist and non-activist identities as individuals and through interaction. Participation in social movements is not monolithic, or even dichotomous, but is rather a tapestry of sympathetic, interested, committed, active, semi-active, and curious individuals who regardless of their ability or availability join social movements to experience and promote social change. By challenging our assumptions of activist labels and questioning the complex negotiation of participants’ identification with activism, we can begin to understand not only why individuals get involved and stay involved in social movements, but also how individuals define their work and interactionally construct their involvement.

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