

Fighting together, fighting each other: The role of multiple identities in activist group conflict



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Introduction

Aim: investigation of the role of multiple social identities in reactions to an intragroup conflict among activists

Unique characteristics: flat, non-hierarchical structures of activist groups breed structural ambiguity and internal clashes (Ackland & O'Neil, 2011; Hoggett & Randall, 2018; Reykowski, 2014)

Identity and conflicts: activism is embedded in an individual’s self-concept (Corrigall-Brown, 2011)and perceived intragroup discrepancy poses a direct threat to identity, thereby amplifying conflict intensity.

Two types of identifications: This project is focused on two identifications possible to adopt for activists (e.g., Ackland & O'Neil, 2011; Biernat et al., 1999; Corrigall-Brown, 2011):

- identification with the activist group**, where individual self-identify as a member of the group (Carmona-Moya et al., 2021),
- identification with the cause**, where individual self-identify as a person dedicated to a certain issue or a set of values, followed by incorporating those issues or values into overall sense of self.

- Research questions:**
- How does the type of identification (group vs. cause) shape activists' perceptions of conflict?
 - How does an activist's identification type relate to their preferred strategies for dealing with conflict?

Methodology

Participants: Eighteen semi-structured interviews, self-identified activists, 7 right-wing (RW) and 11 left-wing (LW) participants.

Recruitment: Communication platforms and snowball sampling (due to the closed nature of groups, especially right-wing ones). No additional criteria (e.g., experience) to capture a broad spectrum of experience

Procedure: semi-structured interviews were conducted in various regions of Poland (online/in person). Recorded with consent, transcribed (Trint), and anonymized. After the interviews, participants completed a survey (demographics, political orientation, level of engagement).

Analysis: A critical realist Thematic Analysis (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021) using MAXQDA 2024

RESULTS: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN IDENTIFICATIONS

GROUP IDENTIFICATION		CAUSE IDENTIFICATION
Perceived threat to cohesiveness, positive group image: “ <i>We share the same values. [...] we have many things in common. We are similar.</i> ” (RW_P13)	Reason to start a conflict	Perceived threat to effectiveness: “ <i>[Not excluding other] is not beneficial for the effectiveness of actions</i> ” (LW_P09)
Protecting cohesiveness of the group, sustaining the prototypicality: “ <i>I see that this person does not fit in with us</i> ” (RW_P13)	Goal of the conflict resolution process	Resolving problems which are lowering efficacy: “ <i>Unless the conflict paralyzes the activities in some way, I am not involved</i> ” (LW_P06)
Group has value in itself, other activists are friends: “ <i>We are able to connect with each other emotionally, these people replace family for me</i> ” (RW_P04)	Perception of a group and group members	Group instrumentally serves a cause, other activists are co-workers: “ <i>For each other we are [...] work colleagues.</i> ” (LW_P09)
Binding strategies: mediations: “ <i>The most spectacular was probably the mediation between cities for 19 people.</i> ” (LW_P09) reconciliation circles: “ <i>We sit in circles until we get to the point of simply getting that perspective</i> ” (LW_P02) striving to improve relationships: “ <i>We sat down and talked about what he could do next time</i> ” (LW_P01) Punitive strategies: call-outs: “ <i>Sometimes [...] a person can be cancelled.</i> ” (LW_P03) punishing: “ <i>People stopped talking to me</i> ” (LW_P03) exclusion: “ <i>Some [people] are very strongly opposed to exclusion. [...] But it is precisely for such reasons that these groups fall apart.</i> ” (LW_P08)	Preferred coping strategies	Pragmatic strategies: preserving time/energy by avoiding the conflict: “ <i>I decided that if the matter was important enough to me, I would suffer.</i> ” (RW_P11) engaging in problem-solution: “ <i>We often postpone it, or put these on hold, because we have to live normally</i> ” (LW_P02) ignoring emotions/problem: “ <i>I'm tired of other people's emotions [...] I would focus on fighting for environmental protection, not on emotional circles</i> ” (LW_P07) leaving the group: “ <i>I felt that more energy was going into arguing than into action, so I went somewhere else</i> ” (LW_P06)

Discussion & Key Takeaways

The prevalence of conflict: Conflict is an inherent part of activism. High ideals and expectations of unity often create rigid behavioral demands and pressure to take sides.

Identification with a Group: Individuals who strongly identify with a group prioritize team cohesion and view other members as friends. In conflict situations, they experience strong negative affect and choose either binding (unity) or punitive (exclusion of dissidents) responses.

Identification with a Cause: Goal-oriented individuals prioritize efficiency, treating others as collaborators. They tend to respond pragmatically: they ignore minor disagreements or leave the group if conflict paralyzes action.

Citations

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Declarations vs. Practice discrepancy: There's a clear discrepancy between statements and practice. While activists claim that criminal justice is a last resort, the reality is rife with mass cases of "callouts," ostracism, and exclusion of those with differing opinions. This leads to disillusionment and a loss of trust.

LW vs. RW comparison: The LW opposes violations of group norms such as equality, care, non-hierarchy, and transparency; calling out individuals who violate them serves transparency. On the RW, group itself and group loyalty are important, so showing intragroup conflicts in a general forum does not serve the purpose of protecting the group. Confining discussions to the involved parties mitigates the visibility of these conflicts.