

Mental health and psychological well-being of people engaging in social and political activism (reanalysis of qualitative data)

Authors
Weronika Badura, Anna Bańbura ¹ , Karolina Bonarska ^{1,2} , Julia Chrapek ¹ , Adam Demczuk ^{1,2} , Karolina Fąfrowicz ¹ , Zuzanna Garncarek ^{1,2} , Kinga Gierula ¹ , Wiktoria Goldyn ¹ , Zofia Goździk ¹ , Joanna Grzymala-Moszczyńska ^{1,2,3} , Maja Jaskółowska ¹ , Klaudia Jurkowska ^{1,4} , Zuzanna Kapka ¹ , Nat Petneki ¹ , Izabella Podłęcka ¹ , Weronika Kalwak ¹ , 1 Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University in Cracow 2 Doctoral School in the Social Sciences, University in Cracow 3 Faculty of Humanities, AGH University in Cracow, 4 Institute of Religious Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University in Cracow
Presenting authors’ contact information:
julia.chrapek@student.uj.edu.pl karolina.fafrowicz@student.uj.edu.pl klaudia7.jurkowska@student.uj.edu.pl
THIS PROJECT IS MADE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH LAB AT THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHOLOGY JU WITHIN THE BEHAVIOUR IN CRISIS LAB JU.

Origins of the project

This project grew as an attempt to **understand the mental wellbeing of left-wing, right-wing and environmental activists**. Initially, the semi-structured interviews that had undergone the reanalysis were gathered for the purposes of four different projects conducted in Poland, which **weren’t focused on gathering data about psychological wellbeing, burnout and fatigue**, themes related to mental health of activists emerged **spontaneously** in the course of interviews. Therefore, we explored these themes and meanings associated with mental health and well-being among environmental, right-wing and left-wing activists, **as they seem important to the participants**. (Mao et al., 2025; Hughes et al., 2020; Vaccaro, Mena, 2011)

Our research shows the way to the **pioneering results in terms of understanding the psychological wellbeing of right-wing activists** specifically, as there is little research on this topic. We took care to approach these interviews with curiosity, as our aim was to understand these activists, not pathologize their activities (Schumann et al., 2022).

Our research project had been accepted by the Faculty of Philosophy’s Ethical Committee (decision nr. 69_2025). Additionally, our project has been preregistered in OSF - feel free to scan QR code to see our submission!



Group positionality - introducing our team

- When working with issues of social and political activism, it is essential to engage in **transparent reflection** on one's own political positioning, as both its similarity to and difference from that of the research participants may influence the analytical process (Corlett i Mavin, 2018).
- We decided to continuously reflect on our positionalities and assumptions in order to intentionally **identify our similarities and make space for our differences in the research process**; we find our diversity to be our most valuable resource and research tool.
- Our team consists of **17 people with eleven undergraduate students, three PhD candidates and three academic researchers and teachers** working as assistant professors at public university in Poland.
- While we encounter and discuss generational differences between us, we also experience **many similarities in terms of our feelings and thoughts, interests and passions, lifestyles, values etc.**
- Despite the differences between us, **we recognize ourselves as a relatively homogeneous group of people**, what may reflect some characteristics of Polish society, but even more the homogeneity of the academic institution with which we are affiliated.

Open Science research project - promises and challenges

The research that provided the transcripts for current material has been an attempt towards **better understanding why people are choosing radical and extremist activism** in the name of social issues that are important to them. However, the research participants **mentioned their mental wellbeing spontaneously, without the researchers’ involvement**. Thus grew the possibility of putting this data into the **realm of Open Science**, and consequently, the project represented via this poster.

- It is important that **gathered data are de-identified** so that it is impossible to identify research participants.
- However, there are some groups, whose **members are easy to distinguish** even though there have been made efforts to anonymise them: for example, people who belong to activist organizations; these groups consist of **small amounts of members**, who also take part in **specific events** that can be recognized based solely on the context of the interview.
- That is why this specific data could not be published online for anyone to see and use. Yet **we consider this project to be Open Science** because we decided to share gathered data with both other BiC Lab members and psychology students, who decided to engage in this research project upon the announcement during classes.
- Moreover **interviews were executed by different researchers**, so transcripts varied in terms of length, style, depth and quality of the data and that could also affect depth and quality of each analysis.

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Research questions

- How do activists experience and make sense of their social and political engagement in the context of mental health and well-being?
 - What emotions are related to activism and what is their role in mental health and psychological well-being?
 - How do different temporal perspectives associated with activist engagement influence activists’ mental health and psychological well-being?
 - What are the meanings and significance of values related to activist engagement in the context of mental health and well-being?
- These questions and issues addressed in our study originate from a preliminary analysis of interviews conducted in the initial stage of our project, as well as from our previous studies, academic literature and other professional and personal encounters with activism.

The Aim of Our Study

- The focus of the study is mental health and psychological well-being of individuals who collectively engage in social and political causes, usually referred to as activists.
- The aim of the study is to **describe and understand activists’ experiences of mental health and well-being**. It explores participants’ perspectives on their own and fellow activists’ health, well-being and stress, as well as mental health discourses prevalent among activists.
- The present study focuses on mental health, understood in multidimensional and comprehensive sense.

Method

- A **Reflexive Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2021), situated within the **interpretive paradigm**.
- Enables analysis of a **rich collection of data**, in which we seek for some regularities.
- At the same time a **rich and in-depth description and interpretation** of subjective perspectives of participants can be achieved.
- The research includes elements of **participatory approach and incorporates critical understanding of mental health**.
- Before the factual reanalysis process occurred, students who were part of the developing research group were trained in the method.
- The team of **12 researchers** reanalysed **40 interviews** using the approach to develop reccuring topics in these interviews.
- Researchers who analyzed interviews with the same type of activists (right-wing, left-wing and environmental) compared their results.

Findings

- A reanalysis of existing data collected in four other research projects; therefore, no specific sampling or case selection strategy is designed in the current study.
- The participants in the original studies were volunteers recruited through **purposive and snowball sampling**.
- They were engaged in social and political activism related to different causes and political orientations (right-wing, left-wing, climate).
- Most of them were **around 20 years old**, however the youngest participant was **17 years old**, while the oldest - around **60**.
- Relatively **balanced gender distribution**, comprising comparable numbers of women and men, alongside one non-binary participant.
- Most participants had completed or were currently pursuing **higher education**.
- The sample included recent secondary school graduates, university students, working adults with children, individuals who had experienced marriage or divorce, and a few respondents approaching retirement age.

Research Sample

- Active participation in *3rd Conference of The Association of European Qualitative Researchers in Psychology (EQuiP)* in Lyon, France, where we are presenting symposium titled “Open Science qualitative research project on mental health and activism” which involves presentations on: **Open Science, individual and group reflexivity, burnout and fatigue and mental health of the activists**.
- The feedback we will receive will help us develop our research as well as analysis and integration of the results
- Publication of 3 research articles covering our research and results; they will cover topics of:
1. **Burnout and fatigue in environmental, left-wing, and right-wing activists**
2. **Preactivist and political-engagement-related determinants of mental health and well-being in activists**
3. **Loneliness, close relationships, and mental health of activists**

What is next?

- Active participation in *3rd Conference of The Association of European Qualitative Researchers in Psychology (EQuiP)* in Lyon, France, where we are presenting symposium titled “Open Science qualitative research project on mental health and activism” which involves presentations on: **Open Science, individual and group reflexivity, burnout and fatigue and mental health of the activists**.
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Discussion

- Activists represent a high-engagement population in which psychological **well-being is closely intertwined with sustained political and social involvement**.
- Studying activists allows for examining how mental health is shaped not only by individual factors, but also by **collective identities, ideological commitments, and group dynamics**.
- Activist contexts make visible how **psychological experiences** such as burnout are socially **constructed, named, and legitimized differently across political orientations**.
- The findings highlight that **mental health is not only an individual outcome**, but also a discursive and political phenomenon embedded in broader value systems.
- Understanding activists’ experiences is crucial for identifying **both risks** (e.g., burnout, fatigue, conflicts) **and protective factors** (e.g., sense of efficacy, community support, meaning-making).
- There is a need for further research to better understand systematic **differences in how mental health is discussed, named, and interpreted across activist groups with different ideological orientations**.
- Understanding these processes is important for **developing more nuanced, context-sensitive models of mental health in politically engaged populations**.
- Future studies should examine the social and political **mechanisms that shape these discursive differences**, including group norms, moral frameworks, and perceived legitimacy of psychological language.