7   Unruly Narratives: Discovering the Active Self

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In this paper, we will discuss the findings from research which explores the biographical experience of adults who have been involved in activism[1] across their lifetime. The age range of those involved extended from early twenties to late seventies. The material is drawn from nineteen in-depth interviews that illuminate how disparate experiences of activism over time acquire continuity and coherence within a reflective narrative which builds and communicates a mature self-identity. Sociological research on social movement activism has followed a trajectory which echoes the wider shifts in the discipline. Early research on social movements tended to focus on the evaluation of the 'effectiveness' of particular campaigns (for example, McCarthy and Zald, 1977). More recently, research has followed theoretical interests in the cultural struggle for meaning and the social relations and identities which have emerged from activism (see Melucci, 1989; 1996; Touraine, 1995). While this has instigated research that focuses on social innovation and social networks, research still tends to be based on specific campaigning moments and social constellations. Key aspects of theoretical models of contemporary activism – that activism is about critical reflection and social identity, and that the 'effects' of movements are not limited to specific campaigns but create radical actors and ideas that ripple out into society, what Melucci (1996) terms latency – are still relatively under-examined. The aim of this project is to contribute to such critical examination, and to throw light on the shifting subjective significance of being active over time, through periods of activism over the lifecourse and transitions between campaigning issues and styles.

Unruly Narrative 1: Just Start at the Beginning

The narratives which developed within these interviews were chronologically and thematically 'unruly' in that they tended to move back and forward in time and make untidy links between life-events. At the beginning of the interview we asked participants to create a timeline which mapped their activism plus important personal events on one side and important world events on the other. It might be expected that this would impose a chronological forward movement on narratives but this was not always the case. Instead, it perhaps illustrated

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how autobiographical narratives are difficult undertakings. The interviews were hard work for respondents while we had to say little and listen with concentration. Collins points out that engagement implies a willingness on the part of the interviewer to understand the interviewee's response to a question or prompt in the wider context of the interview(s) as a whole. The interviewee might develop a narrative thread almost regardless of the [disparate] questions put to them. Such 'meta-narratives' may or may not relate to the research agenda and provides the interviewee with a ready means of countering and undermining the unequal relations of power which are said to typify all interviews (1998, 1.6). The narratives which developed in these interviews were very idiosyncratic, full of twists, turns, and musing. There is a gulf between the passive sounding experience of 'being interviewed', responding to questions, and creating an account of the self over time. Burnett (2003) reports the parallel between 'being researched' and the expectations of disclosure nurtured in today's confessional media culture. However, 'disclosing' experience, or airing opinion, is very different from communicating a sense of the active self, particularly if we are talking about a self motivated to step outside expectation and move against the grain of the surrounding society. The biographical frame required the narration not just of an 'acting' self (I did this), but the reasoning, questioning, changing self (why did I do this?) whose understanding of the need for action and outlooks on the world evolved over time. This interior self, appeared to be more difficult to uncover and more difficult to put into words. In many ways most of those interviewed seemed to be pleased to revisit younger selves; they were often amused, sometimes critical, sometimes sad but worked hard to disinter the motivating forces that animated their past.

Unruly Narrative 2: Reflecting on Previous Selves

The chronological creativity that emerged was often because of the impossibility of moving through life on all fronts. So while it was possible to move forward from a to b to c for a time, eventually something important would have been missed in the narrative and the respondent would nip back to pick up a theme which now became important in order to make sense of their actions. However, the need for information, the lack of sense was not necessarily clear to the interviewer, only self-knowledge made the narration inadequate. More serious diversions were made back to the past from time to time, as respondents 'delved back' to pick up a motif moment that could explain their actions. More specifically these moments of reflection seemed to be 'trying out' an explanation that would make sense of action. In this way, rather than building a chronological picture of different selves at different times, the narrative builds layers of over-lapping meaning which creates depth

through using memories which establish core of continuity that is the self. We should not ignore the conceptual work which was necessary to rescue into language lost moments which had often never been shared before. The subject's own theories about their actions, their private narratives show intense engagement, and depth of critical-thinking.

Beginnings or Awakening

It was interesting that unprompted, when asked about their earliest experiences of activism most of our respondents recalled moments from early adolescence of critical reflection on the world. The form these accounts of 'beginnings' took was interesting in its lack of structure. Peneff (1990) discusses 'mythical frameworks' such as 'the self made man', which enable individuals to fix and work on their own life stories in relation to the social context they are part of. While our interviewees certainly did not reject 'activist' as a relevant category for their own experience, there clearly were no pre-existing frameworks against which to set their own beginnings as activists. It is interesting that despite very varied ages of first participation in organized activism, most began their description of their activist selves in their adolescence. Research on the motivation of activists has posited a number of influences from class, educational and professional contexts (Bagguely, 1992) to political socialisation within the family (Chatterjee, 1999). Only a few of those interviewed reported a straightforward influence from their family context, and, in fact, for several respondents, it was their reaction against the family context which mattered. These descriptions convey very strong emotional responses to the external world, yet a response that was strongly individual, deeply internal, not shared with others. Many of these reflections were deeply emotional, for example, this interviewee recalling the anger that she felt as an adolescent in a violent home, discussed the role this played in projecting her into activism.

> ... I can remember my blood boiling, you know and I think that had something to do with not wanting to be like him … and … I think that it is important in this angry feeling kind of drives you to do things, … and one of the things it meant for me that … it was directed into feminist activity and challenging the notion that girls couldn't do various things and it made me do things I didn't want to do.
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> (N)

The development of critical understanding in adolescence and passionate idealism, for most interviewees preceded their debut in activism. Often the initial forays that translated their intellectual and emotional awakening into action were recounted with humour as in the following extract:

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> …. My parents were passive … so I don't know why I started becoming politically active ... when was it … I must have been about 14 or 15 … and I set up this thing called the 'world citizen society' at school, and I got very excited by the concept of world citizenship but I couldn't … emm … in the end it was sort of like a glorified geography society, which is funny because I didn't ever like geography … but it was just simply WHAT TO DO! What to do (laughs) … and then I joined CND and then I decided I was an anarchist …   (K)

The memories that were uncovered here, often relate to moments of epiphanies when an image a film and event crystallised and impelled the actor to a wider analysis/understanding of the world and also to some kind of action. The following is a short extracts from much longer passage of musing at this stage, which conveys the disparate even chaotic sense of awakening, rebellion and reflection on a number of fronts:

> … well a big political event for me was when I was at school in the sixth form, emm there was a famine in Ethiopia, it was pretty dreadful and it was one of many that had happened and at the time I was reading emmm … books about third world development and underdevelopment and emmm … I was involved in anti-apartheid, I think I had a growing awareness of my gay sexuality although it wasn't expressed. I felt different from other kids at school always. I always saw myself as an outsider I always felt that I was an outsider … And during the famine there was a lot of stuff going on in the school to raise money and I read this book about what causes famine and why do people die from starvation in poor countries and part of the thesis of the book was that we live a very inefficient lifestyle in the way that we produce food and … so … the upshot of that was that it decided me that I would stop eating meat just because meat production is very inefficient compared to grain production. So I became vegetarian …   (P)

The return to childhood or early adult memories uncovered forces which had shaped the core self, which provoked a spark of recognition every time that aspect of the self surfaced in the narrative again. These descriptions remained as touchstones throughout the interview, they were returned to in several ways. The intense narrative labour involved required participants to work in a sophisticated way with memory and emotion. The narratives that emerge are at the same time discontinuous, littered with discarded identities, yet profoundly continuous as well. The self that launched into activism, is the same self that withdrew from movements and later embarked on new forms of activism. The following quote is from a man in his sixties who moved from left-wing and union activism towards environmental and anti-globalisation groups in middle-age:

> Right I think when I joined the International socialists and the SWP, this sort of middle-class people being in charge of me had come up again because ehh … … though the IS and the SWP said they were for the workers … most of them were quite middle-class … and I had become aware quite early on that … laughs … one

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of the reasons they had difficulty recruiting workers was because of their attitude towards them, they still had the … what do you call it … I call it patterns, the middle-class patterns of talking down to people … emm so that was quite important. I thought that … I think that I sussed that quite early on but I didn't actually move on it for quite a long time …   (R)

What looks like disengagement from a movement is in fact continuity within a life, as the active self reflects and makes decisions, just as critical of the movements they are part of, as of the world they hope to change.

Transitions and Endings

Our interest in researching activist life stories was partly in the question, were there collective kind of 'endings'? And did it really end there, or did the activist motivations and values transform into something else, other forms of active engagement with the world? And endings sometimes of course are more gradual, less deliberate – where periods of more heightened activity give way to other priorities.

Interviewees 'make sense' of endings and transitions in various ways. The following extract describes a distressing time following the end of marriage and stopping involvement with peace campaigns – due to having to work and provide for children. The experience was more than simply lack of time or too many commitments, it was a kind of profound 'burn out'.

… it was very PAINFUL because it was, it almost you know felt as though so, why did I/ what was all that about? You know when actually I am not doing it now, I OUGHT to be doing it now. You know because I did BELIEVE in it, it wasn't as though it was something … but then it was inappropriate because it wasn't right for ME … work still needed to be done. Umm but I understood it more in a sense of it being you know like a RELAY – race or what I mean this isn't a race, but the fact that you know you actually RUN with something and you pass on – something to somebody else and then you/ you hope that others will/ because I was aware that I'd picked up things from meeting other people who I assumed weren't as involved as I then became. So, that was/ I kind of made sense of it that way, but I also had a sense that maybe I was just copping out. Umm and I struggled with that. I have struggled with that for the last 16 years.   (H)

The same person discovered a little later through the narrative process of the interview that she had in fact channelled her activist motivations into new kinds of political engagement, such as ecologically-sound living initiatives which were more integrated into her personal and professional life – "*I haven't really stopped, have I?*" This same recognition that 'activism' itself had come to mean something different through time and experience can be traced in the account of another interviewee who described herself as having been troubled

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by seeing herself more on the margins of visible social movements for much of her life. In the course of the interview she reflexively reformulated activism, so that she could be 'counted'. She now claims a clear activist contribution that is integrated with her professional life.

> … I USED to define activism as kind of Greenham Common, peace action, going on demonstrations ... campaigning type stuff. And I always felt a kind of SHAME that I didn't do it. Um and now at the ripe old age of 56, my definition of activism is whatever goes against the grain. So, it is DOING things that actually SEEK to change the status quo … So, it's anything that's subversive to existing structures.(D)

Many research participants discussed increasing loss of certainty about issues which seemed straightforward when they were young.

> … so partly I haven't got the energy for it and I do need to protect myself, but I also think some of the ways I did it were probably not the most useful, so, and I don't know how I always FEEL about everything anymore, so it's harder if I'm so UNSURE.   (C)

While this made being active more complex, it also allowed this interviewee to develop a more subtle and mature engagement with others that they valued very much. The boundaries between the movement and outsiders which had seemed important in the past were less important in the present.

> I felt very to them, very close to some people and some people became almost enemies though … it was like very clear in those days, you are either for us or against us … I think I was very dogmatic for a long time … And in a way I think … it's better NOW where I'm starting to see other points of view as well … I don't think you CHANGE many people's views if you're too dogmatic, so it's great to have the enthusiasm you know that I had certainly in my 20s and 30s, but … it [activism] means different things at different times, I think, and I can see different ways and let other people do THAT bit now.   (C)

The active selves presented in these interviews were never still, and constantly engaged with issues, such as what was appropriate activism and all the myriad demands of work, relationships and family – yet they were stable. The descriptions that developed managed to convey how the self caught between [swift-] changing historical context and the demands of private and professional lives resolved difficulties, and continued to reflect on the world.

Conclusion

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As Harding (2006) points out the biographical turn in social science has given rise to reflexive questioning and debate about the status of interview material because '… interviews are occasions for producing subjectivity through personal narratives in the present that work on and interpret the past with an eye on the future' (2006, 8.2). She argues that researchers must remain sensitive to the ways that research aims, language and power relations direct the narratives of self that emerge from the interview collaboration. The areas of interview where the interviewees work hard to move beyond a linear chronological framework, and engage with the meaning of activism itself, provide key insights. The elements of experience/reflection/action these narratives tied together conveyed a very rich sense of how the passions, idealism, anger and empathy of young people are transformed through experience to reflective, mature activism. We are aware of the dangers of analysis that imposes order through dissolution, to create categories that can be reassembled in a linear narrative which fits with the preoccupations of the researcher. The linear narrative implies arrows of causality by disentangling and placing single strands in relation to the point of analysis (the active self). However, though the accounts of questioning, emotional and sometimes uncertain actors, whose domestic and social context plays such a strong part in their memory of why and how they were active, may produce narratives that are difficult to fit into our neat models of new kinds of political engagement, the power of their accounts does demand attention.

Vaughan points out that much research is designed to exclude this kind of subjective narrative, as if we don't need to explain what agents do (2007, 395). The thinking changing emotional subject, who comes with personal history and dispositions are hard to reconcile with theoretical models. For example Giddens' (1991) very general picture of subjectivity in high modernity, of individualised social actors increasingly set free from old social constraints of community and family, and able to move towards political action on a number of quality of life issues gives little purchase on lived engagement. Touraine argues that rather than reflexivity being a widely available resource, becoming an active 'subject' capable of creatively acting to challenge authority inscribed on structures and institutions and to protect one's own autonomy is a struggle (1995, 243). The subject needs to become aware of, and counter the control exercised by discourses and structures which constrain their life (see King, 2006). To this end what he calls 'deintegration' is necessary if the subject is to develop a 'will to act and to be recognized as an actor' (1995, 207). This requires reflexive analysis of the social world, a distance from the taken for granted roles that otherwise swallow the lives of modern individuals. The accounts of activism that emerge from our interviews show that being active and critical is far from an analytical, unidirectional endeavour that can be pinpointed in time. Their life experiences and relationships provided catalysts for clearer understanding of being active and new experiments in finding ways

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of challenging constraint within the movement as well as outside it. The tolerance and flexibility of older activists which has been hard won plays an important role in the generation of new movements. The fiercely individual and intensely reflexive work of the individuals in the study also give us material that can be interrogated through and in turn question theoretical models of action.

[1] Activism is understood broadly here, and not limited to any particular campaigning issues, or type of activism. The participants in this study had been involved in many types of activism over time, including the 1968 student revolts, communism, Socialist campaigns, Trade Union movement, the miner strike, anti-nazi league, anti-racist campaigning and action, anti-apartheid movement, peace and anti-nuclear campaigns, CND, women's peace movement (Greenham), feminist campaigns (Reclaim the Street, women's centres, women's refuges, women's discos), lesbian and gay politics, Street Music, Welsh Language campaign, refugee support action, vegetarianism, green politics, consumer boycotts, community politics, Co-op movements (housing), anti-Poll tax, Third World First, local transport activism, animal rights, credit union, anti-globalisation.

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