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Persisting or Withdrawing? An Insight into the Psychosocial Processes Underlying Sustained Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the roles of commitment, emotional stress, and interpersonal relationships in sustaining individuals' engagement in collective action. Two collective action cases, differing in duration, issue, and territorial rootedness, were analyzed. The processes underlying sustained engagement were probed in 32 semistructured interviews conducted with antiglobalization activists (N = 13) and opponents to a high-speed railroad (N = 19). Our findings showed that collective action can be stressful, but that there are proximal and distal factors that can counterbalance the disruption and sustain engagement. The proximal factors are embedded in the circumstances of involvement, and these factors concern interpersonal relationships, organizational mechanisms, and the psychological interface between the individuals and the concrete collective action environment. The distal factors are related partly to the individual and partly to the broader community from which the individual absorbs general values and norms. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: political engagement; collective action; activist retention

Notwithstanding the consistent amount of literature on social movement and collective engagement, very little is known about the factors promoting the sustainability and the persistence of personal and collective engagement over time. Community psychology and community development literature consider citizen participation a positive event both for people and institutions (Montero, 2004) and for society at large (Clary & Snyder, 2002), acknowledging that citizen involvement can play a significant role in many community domains, from work places to health programs and from urban planning to public policies (Wandersman & Florin, 2000). At a community level, engagement can be defined as the collaboration of groups of people to address issues that influence their well-being (Fawcett, Paine-Andrews, Francisco, & Vliet, 1993). Indeed, communities can develop specific skills because of citizen participation. Involvement in action can help people gain a deeper

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knowledge of the issues at stake; mobilisation can bring different individuals and groups together, thereby facilitating acquaintances and reducing or at least modifying the target and contents of preexisting prejudices and stereotypes; people mobilising for the same cause can share emotions and develop a sense of collective identity, which can in turn strengthen solidarity and facilitate the exchange of support and resources (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000; Campbell & Murray, 2004). Further, people involved in groups or movements increase their ability to take control of their lives and to achieve higher levels of empowerment and political efficacy (Yeich & Levine, 1994), thereby influencing decision makers and fulfilling broader societal needs. Despite all the evidence in favour of the civic and political engagement of community members, community psychologists have also detected in participation a pathogenic potential. Kagan and colleagues (Kagan, Castile & Stewart, 2005; Kagan, 2006; 2007) in particular highlighted that the high-commitment forms of participation, such as those displayed by community activists, can be overloading and exhausting and can result in burnout and disruptive relations. They have argued that participation is not only time and energy consuming but also psychologically demanding and requires internal and external resources. For these reasons, although civic or political engagement can be a source of gratification for engaged individuals, the risk of dropping out is real. Such a risk represents not only a personal defeat for individuals but also a social loss for the community. Hence, we believe that a deeper comprehension of the factors that sustain the engagement of community members and prevent them from withdrawing into the private sphere stands out as a relevant concern for community psychologists.

FACTORS SUSTAINING ACTIVISTS' PERSISTENCE

The social and psychological factors associated with the willingness to take part in collective action and the factors associated with the outcome of such action are well known to social scientists (e.g. Turner & Killian, 1972; Klandermans, 1997; Drury & Reicher, 2005; van Zomeren, Spears, & Leach, 2008). What have been less explored are the psychosocial processes that sustain engagement over time. The social movement literature has highlighted the role played by individual factors (e.g. changes due to life cycle; McAdam, 1988), interpersonal variables (social networks, Diani, 2005; collective identity, Klapp, 1969; Owens & Aronson, 2000; Johnston, Larana, & Gusfield, 1994) and organisational characteristics (e.g. level of centralisation, routes of communication, relative influence of individuals on the organisation, e.g. Snow, Zurcher & Eklund-Olson, 1980). From a community psychology perspective, Kagan (2006; 2007) emphasised that lack of information and hard resources along with a poor social support can weaken commitment and threaten the psychological well-being of engaged individuals. Among the variety of processes and conditions that affect activists' persistence, our study focused on a limited set of aspects, all of which concern the 'internal' side of participation: commitment, emotional sustainability and individual-organisation relationship.

Affective, continuance and normative commitment

Although commitment has a behavioural side (as behavioural persistence), the attention of researchers has been drawn mainly to the psychological state that characterises members' relationships with their group or organisation and the consequences of their decisions to

stay or leave. Following Meyer and Allen (1991) and Klandermans (1997), this study recognises three types of commitment related to desire, need and obligation to maintain involvement, respectively: (i) affective commitment is the 'partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values, and to the organisation for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental work' (Buchanan, 1974, p. 533). The high levels of affective commitment make people feel that they want to continue being involved in the group or organisation. (ii) Continuance commitment refers to the perceived costs associated with leaving the organisation. The deeper a person's involvement, the less visible and attractive are the alternatives to staying with the organisation and the stronger is their commitment. People whose primary link to the group or organisation is based on continuance commitment experience a need to stay on. (iii) Normative commitment reflects a feeling of obligation to maintain engagement in a group or organisation on the basis of the belief that it is 'the right and moral thing to do' (Wiener, 1982). It is the result of both long-term socialisation processes (Klandermans, 1997) and of the internalisation of normative pressures (Wiener, 1982). Individuals with a high level of normative commitment go on with their involvement because they feel they ought to.

Emotional sustainability

Cox (2009a) has proposed that emotional sustainability is part of a broader concept called 'personal sustainability'. Research on personal sustainability has highlighted the interplay of two dimensions: biographical availability, including financial and temporal pressures, caretaking responsibilities and health, and the supportive role of family and social networks. Specifically, emotional sustainability refers to the resources people can use to cope with the stress and strain experienced in their civic or political engagement. It includes resources such as a strong religious culture, class or political ethics, a supportive group culture, emotional management skills and so forth (e.g. Nepstad, 2004; Cox, 2009b). Following a similar line of thinking, Downton and Wehr (1991) have pointed out that coping strategies are typical of persistent activists who have the ability to address issues that can disrupt their own participation. Collective action scholars have also pointed out that positive feelings, including the 'pleasures of protest' (Jasper, 1998), can make engagement more emotionally sustainable by preventing individuals from seeking exit strategies, a common reaction when participation is perceived as stressful (Klandermans, 1997).

Individual–organisation relationships

Among the many factors that may sustain civic or political engagement, the relationships that individuals establish with the group or organisation should also be mentioned. Indeed, notwithstanding the importance of personal coping abilities, Nepstad (2004) has underlined that some groups can intentionally implement practices to reinforce commitment (through rituals, for instance). In this way, they can provide cognitive and emotional support during the uncertainties of activism and function as sites for ongoing political socialisation. Moreover, trust, circulating in interpersonal relationships, is supposed to reduce the perceived costs of involvement (Benson & Rochon, 2004) and to provide social support. In general, we can agree that groups that foster the creation and maintenance of strong ties between group members through interaction have more possibilities to keep individuals participating in their group or to strengthen their commitment to the movement

as a whole over time (Corrigall-Brown, 2006). In turn, strong committed individuals, called persisters, help the group or organisation to increase cohesion, to manage diversity and to achieve success (Downton & Wehr, 1991; 1997; 1998).

STUDY RATIONALE

The study was grounded in the authors' previous research on the factors fostering protest (Mannarini, Roccato, Fedi & Rovere, 2009) and the effects of protest on the local community (Fedi & Mannarini, 2008). While exploring the antecedents and the outcomes of collective action, questions concerning activists' persistence arose from the data, leading the authors to carefully consider this aspect of the phenomenon under scrutiny. As a result, we decided to engage in a qualitative exploration of the roles of commitment, emotional stress and interpersonal relationships in sustaining members' engagement in collective action within organisations. Although these factors have been separately investigated in a variety of case studies, alone or with sociological factors, to the best of our knowledge, little research has hitherto provided a comprehensive overview of the most prominent psychological and psychosocial underpinnings of sustained political and social engagement. Our study intended to take an initial step towards a deeper comprehension of the role of such factors and of their reciprocal interconnections.

THE CASE STUDIES

We analysed two protest movements that, although both characterised by what has been defined as a perpetual struggle orientation (Meyer, 2006), can be differentiated from each other in several dimensions relevant to sustained engagement: (i) duration, (ii) issues at stake and (iii) territorial rootedness. The first collective action case taken into consideration was the antiglobalisation movement, a transnational and heterogeneous assemblage of individuals and groups united in their effort to counter the negative aspects of the process of globalisation. The movement's members champion many different causes, including labour rights, environmentalism, feminism, freedom of migration, preservation of the cultures of indigenous people, biodiversity and opposition to genetic engineering. Mobilisation is triggered by specific international events, before and after which activists either enter a state of abeyance or continue their engagement in preexisting subgroups or associations. As for the territorial rootedness of the movement's members, we have adopted Tarrow's (2005) definition of antiglobalisation movement members as 'rooted cosmopolitans'. The second collective action case was a LULU movement organised to oppose the construction of a high-speed railway (HSR) connecting Italy to France across the Susa Valley (a mountainous area in Northwest Italy). In this geographical area, 37 villages, numbering approximately 75 000 residents in total, began a massive protest movement against the HSR and its undesired environmental, health and social effects. The movement, which has been in development since the early 1990s, gained momentum in the last two months of 2005, when the Italian Government tried to begin work on the project. The government was forced to stop construction and entered into a negotiation with the mayors of the municipalities involved and the opponents. These negotiations actually broke the

cohesion of the protest front. The anti-HSR movement stands out as a locally based, long-duration movement coping with issues that have a direct effect on the everyday life of community members.

METHODS

Instruments and procedures

Thirty-two focused (semistructured) interviews were conducted with antiglobalisation activists and anti-HSR militants. The choice of the tool was based on the need to maintain a balance between flexibility and control. Semistructured interviews enable the interviewer to cover and probe the topics of interest, but they also provide the interviewee the options to take different paths and explore different thoughts and feelings. Interviews were planned to explore the processes underlying sustained engagement. This topic was probed after a set of introductory questions was asked to ascertain (i) the reasons and the circumstances of the individual's engagement; (ii) the nature and type of any preexisting political or civic commitment; (iii) any past or present affiliation to other groups, associations, committees or movements; and (iv) the main characteristics of the individual's current engagement (role, activities, time consumed, people known, etc.). To gather information about the process of sustained engagement, respondents were asked to elaborate on (v) the events or aspects of protest activities that they perceived as annoying or demanding and the ways they dealt with such events; (vi) the subjective importance of being part of the movement and their sense of belonging and membership; (vii) the costs and benefits associated with persistent protest behaviour and with withdrawal from such activities; (viii) the feelings of obligation underlying their protest behaviour; (ix) their relationships with other members and reciprocal acknowledgement; and (x) their satisfaction with the organisational functioning of the movement. The interviews, conducted by the members of the research team in a place chosen by the participants themselves (home, workplace, etc.), were tape-recorded with the permission of the respondents and lasted, on the average, 45 minutes.

We actively selected the most productive sample to answer the research question (purposive sampling), including cases that manifested the phenomenon intensely (i.e. active movement's members) (Patton, 1990).¹ Antiglobalisation activists were contacted during their protest activities against the Group of Eight (G8) 35th summit (Lecce, Italy, July 2009) and interviewed in October 2009, whereas anti-HSR militants were contacted in their protest stations and interviewed in February 2010. We stopped recruiting active members when new categories and themes stopped emerging from the data (according to the data saturation criterion).

Participants

Among the antiglobalisation activists (N=13, 7 men and 6 women; average age = 34 years), 7 were affiliated with a political party. These affiliations preexisted their engagement in the antiglobalisation movement and continued during their involvement. Once the protest activities against the G8 summit were over, they returned to their previous

¹Although we strove for including also critical cases (i.e. dropouts) (Patton, 1990), we were not able to trace individuals who had quit.

activities. All of the remaining activists had experience with political or civic commitment, but none had stable affiliations. Among the anti-HSR activists (N = 19, 12 men and 7 women; average age = 48 years), 10 were involved for the first time in collective action and 9 reported having previous involvement with a political group.

Analyses

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and subjected to a qualitative content analysis. At the first step, the analysis was driven by an inductive approach. The members of the research team read and codified the interviews separately, deriving the coding categories directly from the raw data and providing definitions for each of the codes assigned. Successively, the different lists of codes along with their definitions were compared and discussed. Similarly coded data were reconsidered, and working hypotheses were generated in an iterative process, until a new consensual list was elaborated containing 32 codes for identifying the processes of sustainable commitment. This list was used to code the interviews using the Atlas.ti software. At the second step, codes were grouped into super-ordinate categories derived from the theory, reflecting the conceptual dimensions under scrutiny: investment (affective commitment), obligation (normative commitment), costs and benefits (continuance commitment), social climate and perceived organisational functioning (member–organisation relationship), and stress agents or coping strategies (emotional sustainability) (see Table 1).

RESULTS

For the sake of clarity, we present the results separately for each of the theoretical dimensions considered, outlining the main commonalities and differences between the two cases analysed (antiglobal movement and anti-HSR movement; for a synoptic view, see Table 2). Although we did not quote all of the relevant excerpts nor all the parts of the interviews that were coded to save space, we include excerpts of the interviews.

Affective commitment

In both of the cases studied, the members' identification with the movement emerged as a central underpinning of sustained commitment. For antiglobal militants, a sense of collective identity was hazy, including, as it did, the heterogeneous mass of people scattered around the world. There was, however, a sense of unity in the shared opposition to globalisation, injustice and inequality ('I would say the anti-global movement comes from the bottom, is fluid... The edges are much less precise than those of a party, or a club...'—2/M). In defining themselves and in explaining their reasons for mobilising, this subgroup of interviewees stressed that they needed to undertake action against injustice because of their identities as 'activists' ('If you are an activist, you never cease to be an activist, in every situation, whatever the issue'—11/F) and 'citizens' ('To me being part of a movement results from being a citizen. Being a citizen is not just having an ID card, or voting once in a while, or buying things. To me being a citizen means having a high civic sense, and feeling the need for participation'—1/M). 'Protesting is in my DNA, it's implicit in my political culture'—12/M). Their experiences in other groups or movements had met their

Table 1. Theoretical constructs, superordinate categories and codes

Theoretical construct	Superordinate category	Code	Statements expressing, verbalising, reporting or prefiguring
Affective commitment	Investment	Movement membership	Belonging to the movement and/or feeling of pride for being part of the movement
		Community membership	Belonging to the community, intended as the larger context in which the movement is embedded in
		Affective bond	Emotional bonds to the movement itself, conceived as an independent entity
		Activist identity	Definitions of the self as ‘activist’
		Citizen identity	Definitions of the self as ‘citizen’
		Collective identity	Processes of social identification with the movement
		Interdependence	Interdependence characterising the relationship between the activists and the movement
Normative commitment	Obligation	Duty Responsibility	Inner sense of duty Sense of responsibility and/or feelings of obligation towards the others, either fellow members or external others, or towards the movement itself
		Betrayal	Fear or possibility of betrayal towards either oneself or fellow members
Continuance commitment	Costs/benefits	Abandonment	Feelings of abandonment and/or fear of either abandoning or being abandoned by the fellow members
		Reactions of other members to actual or potential withdrawal	Expected reaction of fellow members and/or significant others to the decision of withdrawing from the movement
		Guilt	Feelings of guilt for actual or potential omissions and failures (deriving from withdrawal) that affect fellow members
		Benefits	Personal and/or collective benefits deriving from engagement
Member–organisation relationship	Social climate and perceived organisational functioning	Costs	Personal and/or collective costs deriving from engagement
		Togetherness	Member-to-member relationship as characterised by union, fellowship and sharing
		Friendship	Feelings of interpersonal friendship arisen among members
		Respect	Respect as one of the prominent feature of interpersonal relationships among members
		Solidarity	Solidarity as one of the prominent feature of interpersonal relationships

(Continues)

Table 1. (Continued)

Theoretical construct	Superordinate category	Code	Statements expressing, verbalising, reporting or prefiguring
Emotional sustainability		Reciprocal acknowledgement	among members Acknowledging or being acknowledged by fellow members as for their ideas, work and contribution
		Democracy	Democratic and inclusive procedures adopted by the movement in decision-making processes
	Stress/coping	Coping strategies	Coping strategies adopted by single members or the movement to face problems
		Stress	Stressors deriving from being engaged in the movement
		Empowerment	Feelings of control and awareness deriving from successful actions undertaken by the movement
		Gratification	Feelings of gratification resulting from being actively engaged in the movement
		Joy	Feelings of joy for being involved in the movement
		Hope	Feelings of hope about the future and the possibility to achieve the movement's goals
		Satisfaction	Feelings of satisfaction for the outcomes of protest
		Inefficacy	Feelings of frustration for failures or unsuccessful actions undertaken by the movement
		Sorrow	Feelings of sorrow for unexpected negative events or outcomes deriving from the movement's activity
		Disappointment	Feelings of disappointment for unexpected events or outcomes deriving from the movement's activity
		Annoyance	Events or behaviours that were perceived as unpleasant and disturbing

needs for contribution, thereby nourishing their activist identities ('[Being committed to the movement] is consistent with my personal history. I've been always doing that, and I'll continue'—8/F). For anti-HSR militants, collective identity seemed to be firmly anchored in the concrete and specific experience of the anti-HSR movement, which was perceived to be high in entitativity. Such identification expressed not only a symbolic membership but also a material membership, entailing tangible implications in the everyday life of the people involved and significant relationships with the other members ('When you fight, those who fight along with you are fellows, they are your brothers... How can you be indifferent to that?'—14/F) and the local community ('I was born in here, I must defend this land... I cannot say 'I don't care!' and go away... I could never act this

Table 2. Synthesis of the results

		Antiglobalisation activists	Anti-HSR activists
Affective commitment	Collective identification Belonging Social identity Personal identity	Identification with an ideal entity Symbolic belonging Activist—Citizen Continuity (unmodified self)	Identification with a concrete group of people Material and symbolic belonging Anti-HSR militant—Susa Valley community member Discontinuity (modified self)
Normative commitment	Sense of obligation Sense of responsibility	Mainly towards the self Mainly towards the self	Mainly towards the fellow members Mainly towards the others
Continuance commitment	Withdrawal (effects) Costs	Changes in self- image (inconsistency) Perceived as negligible	Broken relationships Existential loss Denied or minimised
Member— organisation relationship	Member-to-member relationship Social climate Fit to the organisation (roles, responsibilities and procedures)	Positive interpersonal interactions Conflict perceived as manageable Moderately warm Good	Extremely positive interpersonal interactions Affective ties—friendship Warm Good
Emotional sustainability	Sources of stress Coping strategies Emotional labour	Political conflict Time pressure Individual strategies Moderate	Relevance of the issue at stake Relationship with the counterpart Time consumption Individual behaviours Individual and collective strategies Moderate

way'—19/M). For this subgroup of interviewees, being an anti-HSR activist appeared to be a superordinate social identity that allowed them to overcome individual and group differences within the movement ('I firmly believe in what I'm doing, in being part of the movement: I belong to the anti-HSR movement, I am an anti-HSR person, and people know that'—26/F). They also made clear that entering the movement had affected their identity ('It is as if we were many people with the same heart, separated individuals with different histories but a common goal... so [the protest] actually becomes a part of what you are'—27/F. 'I changed my friends, the movement changed me...'—20/M) and enlarged their social network ('If I were to exit the protest movement, I would break all ties with many

extraordinary people I met—17/F). Moreover, they stressed that the anti-HSR movement was able to attract people and to keep them united around values of ‘collective defense... and fair cause’ (14/F).

Normative commitment

A sense of obligation was perceived by both antiglobal and anti-HSR members as a self-imposed constraint that prevented them from withdrawing their engagement. For the antiglobal interviewees, the commitment to stay was explicable as consistent with the activist identity: Activists were expected to be loyal and engaged. Abandoning the battlefield or the cause would be perceived by antiglobal militants as a serious betrayal of other members of the group (‘Our first duty is towards ourselves, then towards the others, the group’—1/M. ‘I feel obliged [for joining and staying] because I’m an activist... It’s taken for granted’—11/F). Unlike antiglobal interviewees, anti-HSR interviewees expressed the opinion that ‘you cannot feel obliged to an entity that is elusive’ (2/M). They referred to their movement as a physical entity and clarified that they felt a sense of moral obligation (14/F) to themselves, the movement and the future generations (‘You cannot leave, because leaving is betraying the others, the cause, the movement...’—19/M). Responsibility towards others and a sense of mutual interdependence emerged as key factors in sustained commitment (‘I feel responsible towards the others; the movement succeeds because everyone has his own responsibility, even if they don’t realize it’—25/M). In addition, the perceived significance of the issue at stake and the demanding tasks entailed by a long-term and sometimes risky engagement were used by the anti-HSR interviewees as reasons to justify their persistence (‘The changes that will occur because of this installations make you more obliged to participate’—24/F. ‘I’ve been fighting for 5–6 years, I cannot give up’—31/M. ‘When you’re on the barricade you cannot stop... That would be a betrayal’—19/M).

Continuance commitment

For antiglobal and anti-HSR interviewees, any intentions to leave the movement were discarded and labelled as painful (‘a mourning’—5/F), very unlikely and even unthinkable (‘I never give up, I cannot think of giving up, I’ll continue to fight’—10/M). For antiglobal activists, exit choices were regarded as so inconceivable that they even called into question members’ self-image as activists and citizens (‘You cannot abandon an idea, the very idea of your being a citizen’—1/M. ‘Leaving would have been a personal defeat... Being there at the beginning and not seeing the outcome... No!’—13/F). Among the anti-HSR members, interviewees noted that leaving would have resulted in broken relationships and even in an existential loss (31/M). Some of the anti-HSR militants denied the fact that their commitment had cost them anything. Others minimised (‘Costs are not a problem’—23/M) or made up for costs by invoking an overall rich and pleasant experience (21/M).

Member–organisation relationship

As far as interpersonal relationships are concerned, both subgroups reported positive interactions and affective bonds with their fellow members. Even interviewees who had experienced political conflicts within the movement, as in the case of the antiglobal activists, framed such contention as ‘normal’ (9/M), common to many different social settings (4/F) and separated the political from personal issues. Antiglobal interviewees also stressed

that they had met many of the other members in previous mobilisations so that they were already acquainted with them at the time of the most recent mobilisation. Anti-HSR activists emphasised the positive side of their participatory experience ('It's a wonderful experience from the personal perspective'—27/F. 'I'm honored of being part of this movement'—21/M) and pointed out that they felt unreservedly accepted by the other members ('You take part in the protest and no one asks "who are you?"'—20/M). Overall, relationships among anti-HSR protesters were described as being based on trust, sincerity and reciprocal appreciation ('What I think is important not only for me, but also for many other people'—17/F). The loose organisational structure of both movements was framed by all interviewees as a positive feature that enabled members to contribute to the cause in the forms and the measure they chose. The informal distribution of tasks and roles prevented members from carrying out subjectively undesirable activities, yet the individual contributions were appreciated and rewarded ('You contribute as you can; if you are willing to make a proposal you do it, if you feel confident about a task then you accomplish it, but if you can't make it... it's fine'—26/F).

Emotional sustainability

The need to manage political divergences (5/F, 10/M, 11/F, 12/M and 13/F) and time pressure (6/M) were singled out by the antiglobal activists as causes of stress. The anti-HSR protesters emphasised that the importance of the issue at stake (19/M), the length of rallies (17/F), the unjustified exhibition of some members and the organisation's relationships with the adversary (e.g. police; 25/M and 31/M) and allies (e.g. local administrators; 19/M, 25/M and 31/M) were their primary sources of stress. At the individual level, coping strategies mentioned by activists varied from irony to patience and mediation. Interviewees also mentioned a range of positive feelings that helped them to cope with unpleasant situations, such as gratification, satisfaction at the achievement of a goal (1/M, 2/M, 5/F, 6/M, 8/F, 11/F and 12/M), hope and amusement (14/F, 15/F and 24/F). Overall, interviewees did not report serious stress problems nor verbalise complaints about overwhelming emotional work. Besides individual coping strategies, collective strategies promoting sustained commitment also emerged in the anti-HSR movement. These included leisure activities ('Every occasion [besides protest] is good to meet and do something together...'—20/M).

DISCUSSION

Our findings provided a general, although partial, frame for understanding psychological processes underlying sustained engagement. Specifically, affective commitment emerged as the crucial factor enhancing the willingness of activists to stay on, whether the feelings of attachment and investment were directed towards a concrete group or to a cause, or in other words, whether activists bonded to the organisation or to the group's principles (Downton & Wehr, 1998). Furthermore, affective commitment seemed to be deeply intertwined with value orientations, assuring that individuals who became engaged because of a strong commitment to the ideals of their group remained active over time (Corrigall-Brown, 2006). The role of value also emerged as the node linking affective to normative commitment, suggesting that the stronger the attachment to the group or the ideals, the stronger the feelings of obligation experienced by activists. According to our findings, such a sense of duty was directed towards a variety of objects, such as the self, the group

and the cause, but the intensity of obligation varied. The obligation towards the self stood out as the prominent component of normative commitment among the antiglobal activists, for whom the need for coherence and positive self-image seemed as the most powerful motivation for mobilising. In contrast, anti-HSR protesters showed a remarkable feeling of obligation towards the group. Hence, we can trace back normative commitment to social norms that preexist their entry into the group for the former, although we also have to take into consideration the influence of specific group norms, developed and internalised in the process of affiliation, for the latter (Wiener, 1982).

Overall, our data on affective and normative commitment indirectly consolidated the importance of social identification processes not only in motivating individuals to join a group (see among others Brewer & Silver, 2000; de Weerd & Klandermans, 1999; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996; Klandermans, 2002; 2005; Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer & Simon, 2004) but also in maintaining their engagement over time. Whether the identification is with a specific group or with a category, attachment, investment and obligation increase as the subjective importance of membership increases. Such data seem to question past evidence claiming that identification with a specific group predicts participation more than identification with the general category the movement refers to (Simon et al., 1998; de Weerd & Klandermans 1999; Stürmer & Simon, 2004). Indeed, among antiglobal activists, identification with the superordinate category of 'activist' seems to sustain engagement more strongly than identification with the movement.

Regarding continuance commitment, our study concludes that when individuals are deeply involved in collective action, they hardly take opportunities to leave into consideration. Our analysis of normative pressure shows that members' willingness to persist was motivated by either the need to preserve the 'activist self' or the need to sustain the collective effort and achieve the collective goal. Hence, we can speculatively deduce that the stronger the feelings of obligation, the less acceptable the idea of breaking the bonds that keep individuals within their group. The interlacement of the three components of commitment were apparent and can be summarised as follows: The higher levels of affective commitment increase the value of norms (either group norms or preexisting socialisation norms), which in turn results in a stronger need for continuance and causes alternatives to be discarded. These relationships among the three components of commitment seem to clash with findings by Meyer and Allen (1991), who found partial overlaps between affective and normative commitment but independence of continuance commitment from the other two components.

Positive emotions, namely, affects and moods, also influenced activists' persistence. The good feelings were caused in part by successful actions or the expectation of success, in part by the nature and quality of intragroup relationships and in part by the good fit between the needs and the wishes of activists and the organisational structure and functioning. We should also mention emotions that were elicited by the global experience of participation and those that were associated with the sense of self-realisation and self-transformation achieved through the collective action experience. The first group of feelings can be traced back to collective efficacy (i.e. the feeling of being able to influence politics through collective action; see Bandura, 1997), another key factor that has often been invoked to explain why people get involved in collective action (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991; van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004; Hornsey et al., 2006). Our study pointed out that the affective side of collective efficacy is as relevant as the cognitive side of the construct, although it has hitherto been rarely conceptualised. The second group

of feelings (i.e. those related to intragroup relationships and indirectly to collective identity) enabled individuals to use the protest environment as a 'way of saying something about oneself and one's morals, and of finding joy and pride in them' (Jasper, 1998, p. 415). Moreover, these kinds of emotions indicated that interpersonal relationships fulfilled important emotional needs in the lives of the members, such as solidarity, reciprocity and support, thereby contributing to the creation of a positive social climate. In addition, supportive relationships emerged as a factor capable of buffering the stress and strain (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 1986; Wethington & Kessler, 1986) involved in the circumstances of protest, such as internal and external conflicts, time pressures and risks. Along with social support, one more variable that seemed to help activists cope with stress was their feeling at ease with the way the group was organised in term of roles and procedures. Democratic rules, nonhierarchical decisions-making procedures and informal patterns of communication suited the members' needs for contribution and integration, resulting in general feelings of gratification and satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, our study pointed out that strong affective and normative commitment, shared emotions and satisfying interpersonal relationships with fellow members, along with a loose structure of roles and activities, accounted for sustained engagement. These findings enrich and integrate partial evidence that come from separate fields of research, namely, social movement and community psychology literature. As for the former, our study offers an insight into some psychological dimensions and psychological processes that have not been hitherto systematically investigated because of the sociological approach still dominating this research area. As for the latter, our findings integrate the data that community psychologists like Kagan (2006; 2007) have drawn from their community work on disadvantaged groups. Specifically, our study points out that, at least in the high commitment forms of participation, engagement is sustained by supportive relationships, shared emotions and a nonhierarchical setting of activity.

We are obviously aware of the limitations of our findings, which apply to a very specific type of activism, and thus cannot be extended to the generality of participatory behaviours. We also acknowledge that we considered only part of the factors that sustain civic or political engagement, focusing our analysis mainly on the individual–organisation axis and leaving in the background the organisation–community and individual–community axes.

What tentative conclusions can be drawn from the study that can be used for community development? Our findings suggest that participation can be stressful, but several levers can be used to counterbalance the disruption and sustain engagement. In terms of application, the main indications that derive from our work and that can be beneficial for organisers, leaders and social entrepreneurs can be summarised as follows: (i) promoting collaborative relationships while preventing physiological interpersonal conflicts from escalating and becoming destructive, (ii) supporting collective (rather than individual) coping strategies so as to counterbalance the pressure of stress agents (e.g. collective problem solving, collective breaks, etc.), (iii) and finally preserving the organisational structure and functioning from being too hierarchical and rigid in roles and procedures. Although this actions may not be per se sufficient to prevent active citizens from turning in 'passive' citizens, they can reasonably reinforce their commitment. In the end, we conclude with an

outline of research perspectives. A speculative hypothesis suggested by our study is that the relationship between commitment and persistence is mediated by perceived social support, which is inversely correlated to the stress perceived. It is also worth verifying, through the analysis of unsuccessful collective action cases, whether unsupportive member relationships, collective de-identification, stiff organisational devices and heavy emotional work can be invoked to explain why individuals decide to withdraw their commitment. In our view, both these research perspectives need to be pursued to shed light on the processes underlying sustained civic and political engagement.

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