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What Motivates Student Environmental Activists on College Campuses? An In-Depth Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Public concern for the natural environment continues to grow as complex environmental problems emerge. One avenue where concern for the environment has been expressed is through activism. However, research on environmental activism, often aimed at understanding the motivations behind activist behavior, has largely focused on older adults. In this study, we extend the state of knowledge on environmental activism further by focusing on college students. We use qualitative methods (in-depth interviews and observations) to examine the motivations behind student involvement in environmental activism on a state university campus. Our findings underscore that young people's activist motivations are not stand-alone phenomena; they work in tandem with other processes and factors in a dynamic way and are influenced by an individual's history, previous experiences and passion, a sense of community, existing incentives, and self-satisfaction derived from activist behavior.

Keywords: environmental activism; pro-environmental behavior; college students; qualitative study

1. Introduction

Public concern for the natural environment continues to grow as complex environmental problems emerge. One avenue where concern for the environment has been expressed by different individuals is through activism. Consequent to the growth of environmental activism in the United States, there has been considerable research on the reasons and motivations behind activism, particularly among adults (Chawla and Cushing 2007; Fielding et al. 2008). In this study, we contribute to scholarly knowledge on environmental activism by focusing on emerging adults. Specifically, we use a qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews and observations, to examine the motivations behind student involvement in environmental activism on a college campus. Understanding what motivates young, self-identified environmentalists may be useful for researchers, policy makers, and other activists to better approach interventions and educational activities aimed at provoking activism.

The literature on youth civic engagement provides some insights into why college students may participate in environmental activism. This article is thus predicated on the view that among emerging adults on college campuses, participation in environmental activism can be understood broadly as a form of youth civic engagement. Civic engagement is the sum of knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors broadly aimed at improving a local community or society (Guillaume et al. 2015; Adler and Goggin 2005). Since the 1960s, scholarship on civic engagement has grown extensively, largely seeking to understand the motivations behind young people's engagement in civic activities. These studies consistently show that not only does youth civic engagement benefit society, it also reveals that young people who participate in civic activities develop other competencies, increase their self-esteem, and are less likely to participate in risky behaviors (Balsano 2005). Young people

who participate in different civic engagements also tend to be more active in political movements (Galston 2004; Quintelier 2008). Young people's interest in civic engagement is motivated by, among other factors, family history or culture, school environment, and exposure to mass media; these are important factors shaping young people's interest in civic engagement (Ménard 2010; Andolina et al. 2003).

Emerging scholarship in sociology and environmental psychology points to a worrying trend over the last two to three decades: among young people, the extent of civic engagement (Delli Carpini 2000; Torney-Purta 2002; Harris et al. 2010), including in environmental causes (Twenge et al. 2012), is in sharp decline. School environments are important spaces where interest in civic engagement develops (Flanagan and Levine 2010). The undergraduate college experience can be an ideal time and space for individuals to cultivate and foster pro-environmental behavior. Many argue that university students may end up becoming leaders and policy makers of the future, and therefore should be an important focus of activities aimed at sustainable environmental development (Vicente-Molina et al. 2013). Our paper is built on similar sentiments and recognizes college as an important time in an individual's life in so far as developing an environmental interest is concerned. For students who already are environmentally-minded, college can be a place that provides the necessary institutional and infrastructural support that researchers have found to be important factors behind environmental activism and other pro-environmental behaviors (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Clark et al. 2003; De Groot and Steg 2008).

Activism is often described as an effort by individuals or a group of people to stand up to injustice or stand for a cause—whether it be social, political, or environmental—with an ultimate aim to achieve societal change. In other words, activism encompasses a wide range of actions or activities that aim to provoke social change (Sherrod 2006). Environmental activism behavior is often expressed in a collective environment with other people of shared ideologies about environmental protection (Lee et al. 2014). Activism can also be conceptualized as a function of pro-environmental behavior, that is, any action aimed at protecting or conserving the environment, including the desire to join an environmental organization for a shared cause (SGuin et al. 1998). We draw on SGuin, Pelletier, and Hunsley (1998)'s definition of activism, and use the term to represent activities aimed at raising awareness about the environment or deliberate campaigns to bring about positive environmental change.

In a world where wicked and transitional environmental problems continue to grow in magnitude, scale, and complexity, activism is often seen as a grassroots method for creating change—something that non-elite citizens can turn to as a form of power and influence (Vukelic and Stanojevic 2012). Individuals and groups such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movement organizations (SMOs), and other non-profit organizations engage in environmental activism for different reasons. Among the myriad reasons, potential environmental consequences, concern for future generations, and personal satisfaction rank high among the commonest (Hansla et al. 2008). Concern for the environment and a willingness to act to protect it through activism originate from different value orientations, which generally fall under egoistic, socio-altruistic, and attachments to the biosphere (Hansla et al. 2008). Tindall, Davies, and Mauboules (Tindall et al. 2003) show that the strength of network ties to environmental activist groups and group members could also trigger activism for a shared environmental cause.

Perceptions about potential and growing environmental threats have been shown to significantly increase the tendency to engage in environmental activism (Lubell 2002). Botetzagias and van Schuur (2010) found that Green Party members' activism is an artifact of network, particularly membership in other environmental organizations and involvement in other social movements. Other work shows that education, awareness of future environmental consequences, and personal attitudes can influence interest and participation in environmental activism (Marquart-Pyatt 2012). Research in developmental and environmental psychology demonstrates that moral values and identities underlie people's involvement in environmental commitments, including

environmental activism behavior (Jia et al. 2017). More recently, activism has also been found to predict people's sense of global citizenship and the idea that they are connected to other people who share similar sentiments (Reysen and Hackett 2017).

Cultural factors also play an important role in environmental activism behavior, as does surrounding oneself with like-minded people (for example, being a part of on-campus environmental organizations may help foster these behaviors as well). Similarly, exposure to such groups may build upon environmental knowledge and concern. Environmental organizations are important vehicles in effecting large-scale, societal impacts. Individual actions are important, but limited unless they are "combined with organizing for collective public change" (Chawla and Cushing 2007, p. 438). The combination of individual action and peer support can be an effective tool in enhancing one's capacity to incorporate behavioral changes into one's daily activities and in working towards a shared goal (Brody et al. 2012). Despite the extensive body of work on environmental activism aimed at understanding motivations and drivers underpinning activism, much of this work focuses on older adults (Marquart-Pyatt 2012). Emerging adults—such as college and high school students—have not received nearly the same level of attention (Chawla and Cushing 2007). Environmental activism among young and emerging adults or youth has not received sufficient scholarly attention (Matsuba et al. 2017), with few existing studies tending to focus instead on motivations for pro-environmental behaviors such as recycling (Kelly et al. 2006), attitudes toward environmentally friendly behaviors (Levine and Strube 2012), and their perceptions about environmental issues and problems (Gigliotti 1994). There is insufficient literature that explicitly focuses on student environmental activism on college campuses.

Findings from the few existing activism studies that focused on emerging adults or students have been mixed and fragmented. Such studies point to prior family experiences, including time spent outdoors, and broader family norms as important determinants of environmental friendly behaviors among emerging adults (Sivek 2002; Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2012). A study of incoming first year college students in central Pennsylvania revealed that subject major can also influence environmental attitudes and behaviors (Lang 2011). A study on the relative importance and perceptions of environmental issues among Cornell University students showed that a willingness to take action does not vary between environmental issues; students ranked environmental issues as equal in importance (Gigliotti 1994). Using a sample of college students at a sustainability conference and drawing on the theory of planned behavior (TPB), Fielding, McDonald, and Louis (Fielding et al. 2008) discovered that greater student involvement in environmental groups was associated with stronger intentions to engage in environmental activism. Among Chinese college students, education, prior natural experiences, and life principles significantly influenced engagement in environmental activism (Li and Chen 2015).

In a recent study, Jia et al. (2015) show that a generative concern in young students (referred to as emerging adults in their study) is a strong predictor of pro-environmental behavior (or environmentalism in general) during adulthood. Their findings are consistent with that of (Li and Chen 2015) in demonstrating that, among other factors, exposure to nature through earlier family experiences fosters greater environmental concern among young and emerging adults (Ménard 2010). The important points of departure of our study from existing studies on environmental activism are twofold. First, we use an in-depth qualitative approach to examine the drivers and motivations of activism, in contrast with the predominant, traditional, quantitative, and scaled-based methods (see, for example, Dietz et al. 1998; Lubell et al. 2007; Dono et al. 2010; and Li and Chen 2015). Such quantitative studies draw conclusions based on an assumption that the relationship between socio-cultural and psychological variables and pro-environmental behavior is necessarily linear (McFarlane and Hunt 2006). We view a qualitative approach as useful in allowing for greater nuance and in-depth understanding of the motivations behind activism. As Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) have described, the determinants of pro-environmental behavior and activism are complex and impossible to disentangle with one single approach or framework. Second, we focus on college

students—a group less often studied in the scholarship on environmental activism—to explore the motivations behind involvement in environmental activism.

Because a college campus contains a broad mix of student demographics—and one may assume that activism happens against competing demands on time for work, school, extracurricular activities, health and fitness, social relationships, and other considerations—there are important lessons to learn about the most important motivations for environmental activism. We specifically focused on the motivational factors that fuel self-identified environmentalists to engage in activism on college campuses, despite constraints and barriers that might discourage them from activism. As earlier work has shown, college students are mentally preoccupied with getting a job and making money after school (Levine and Hirsch 1991). The question, then, is what motivates their involvement in extra-curricular activities aimed at protecting the environment. Our findings have implications for understanding the core, underlying reasons behind student activism; identifying the conditions and individual contexts within which activism may emerge on college campuses; and for understanding how activism may lead to environmental conservation.

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

The conceptual framework that drives this report (Figure 1) is based on seeking people's motivations for action and the barriers to action. This is illustrated in the following diagram:

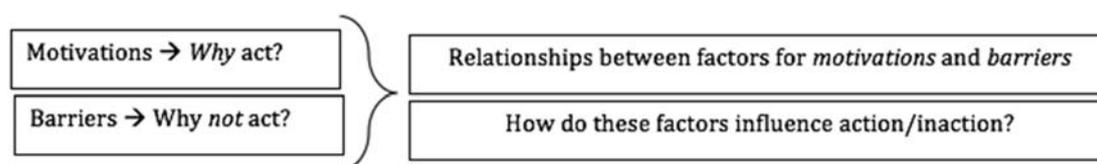


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for activist motivations and barriers to action.

The framework depicts the two main components of this study: motivations for being an activist and barriers (or hindrances, detractors) to action. Our assumption is that the factors that influence these two components interact to affect an individual's decision-making process, which results in either action or inaction. We investigate the following primary research questions: What motivates self-identified environmentalists or activists to take action? Why might self-identified environmentalists choose not to take action?

2. Methods

2.1. Data Collection and Research Design

The study used qualitative methods to evaluate college students' perceptions, experiences, and motivations as environmental activists. Qualitative inquiry is useful for understanding phenomena in greater detail, even with small sample sizes (Patton 2005). Qualitative techniques allowed for the evolution and emergence of themes and research foci early on during the data collection process, and allowed us the opportunity to glean detailed information about individual experiences with activism, along with underlying motivations.

We conducted two rounds of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two self-identified environmentalists, Annie and Beth (aliases used to protect confidentiality)—first to explore motivations for activism, followed by a second round of interviews for a more detailed discussion of emergent themes. The semi-structured format of the interviews provided opportunities to follow up on questions as they emerged during and after the interviews. Overall, four in-depth interviews were conducted, lasting an average of one hour. Next, we sought and were granted permission to attend a weekly meeting of a student activist group against the use of coal for power generation. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim; the observation was not audio- or video-recorded for

confidentiality purposes. Supplementary to the transcribed interviews, we took detailed handwritten notes during the interviews as well as during the meeting observations to help contextualize the results.

Next, we interviewed Beth, the president of the anti-coal student activist group. The purpose of this interview was to evaluate Beth's perceptions about activism and to understand the operations of the activist group she belonged to, involvement of students, strategies for recruiting members, and what their core agenda was. This was an opportunity to understand her own personal motivation and drive to lead a student environmental activist organization and her views about what the predominant motivations are for other student members. The final phase of data collection was the observation of the student activist group's weekly meeting. The purpose of the observation was to assess aspects of the group's planning strategies, key discussion points on activism during their meetings, and strategies for getting their voices heard across the college campus.

2.2. Participant and Study Site Selection

As stated earlier, one major criterion for our selection of study participants was that they self-identified as environmentalists. Because we were more interested in an in-depth understanding rather than drawing conclusions from numbers, we focused on two individuals and one organization. One of those two individuals is a female graduate student (alias "Annie") who is active in the local food movement, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), and community gardening. She self-identifies as an environmentalist and actively works towards minimizing her ecological footprint. She volunteers with a local neighborhood's garden house and is passionate about topics related to place-making, community building, and how food (the production and distribution of it) interacts with place and communities in positive and negative ways. This made her a good candidate for the study. The other individual was "Beth", a senior undergraduate Social Policy major and the president of the anti-coal student group, an environmental organization fighting against the university's heavy use of coal. Their core campaign is to get the university to transition away from coal to instead focus on cleaner energy sources.

2.3. Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was a multi-step, iterative process that involved lots of organization and brainstorming to create a workable set of codes to apply to the raw datasets. The first step after collecting data, as described above, was to either transcribe audio recordings or expand handwritten notes. Memos were created after each data collection; these usually consisted of emergent themes and concepts from the data, restating the purpose of that data collection, and noting anything else that was memorable. After reviewing raw and expanded data, as well as any relevant memos, we developed a list of themes and concepts that occurred repeatedly in the data. From these themes, we created a set of codes, a definition for each code, rules for applying the code, and examples of how to use and *not* use each code (Table 1). Codes were developed by analyzing data for common and recurring themes based on our research questions. Summary statements were created for each code, and conclusions were drawn based on the common themes found throughout the summary statements and grand summary statements. After coding all data, we extracted codes into word documents (sorting) and organized data by relevant codes. These conclusions reflect some of the interrelationships between each code, their relevance to each other, and how they pertain to our research questions.

Table 1. Research questions and relevant codes and definitions.

Research Question	Code	Code Definition
Main RQ: What reasons do self-identified environmentalists or activists give for taking action against environmental problems that concern them? That is, what is their motivation?	EXPERIENCE	One's previous experiences and education (can be formal education, learning on one's own, learning from others, indirect education) that influence one's desire (or lack thereof) to participate in activism
	AWARENESS	Being made or making others aware of an issue, idea, concept, problem, etc., by any method (talking to someone, reading, education, etc.)
	SELF-IMPROVEMENT	Doing something because of a desire to improve one's own life/character or to further one's self-interest
	PASSION	Doing something because of a connection with that subject and/or because of one's passion for that subject
	INCENTIVES	Having an external (that is, outwardly-motivated) reason to do something. Usually this involves getting something in return, but that is not a necessary condition to be met
	PWYP	The desire to take action against a concern to "be the change you want to see"
	COMMUNITY	The desire to do something in order to improve or become engaged with a community, or to get the community involved in one's cause
Sub RQs: What prevents or discourages self-identified environmentalists (SIEs) from taking action on their concerns (environmental or otherwise)? That is, what thresholds or barriers, if any, exist for taking action? Why?	INVOLVEMENT	The perception of being easily able to become involved with a group, project, campaign, etc.
	TIME	Having or not having enough time to become involved in something, or to do something, related to one's activist concerns

3. Results and Discussion

Our results and discussion are organized around our research questions; that is, the main research question (What motivates activists?) and the sub research question (What prevents action?), which are separate but overlap significantly. We discuss how emerging themes from our coding process and interconnections among the codes helped to address our research questions. The relationships of these themes are presented diagrammatically in Figure 2.

3.1. What Motivates Environmental Activists on College Campuses?

To answer this question, we considered seven main themes from the interview transcripts. These seven themes are depicted by the yellow boxes on the left side of the framework (Figure 2) and interact with each other in dynamic ways to influence an individual's decision-making process about whether or not to take action on a particular environmental concern.

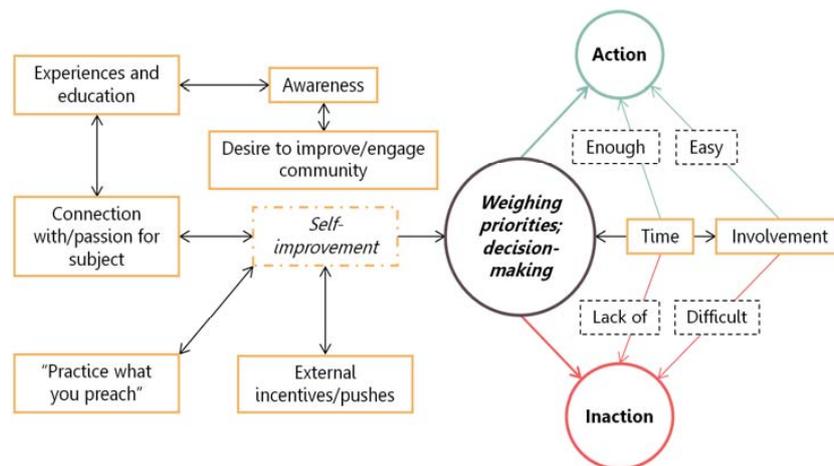


Figure 2. All the factors in the yellow boxes are things that motivate action or inaction. They all converge in the individual’s mind, where factors are prioritized and decisions are made to take action or not. On the left-hand side, almost all of these factors point to self-improvement, but the yellow dash-dot box represents that they do not necessarily have to flow *through* self-improvement (i.e., not all of these factors are based in an individual’s desire to improve oneself) in order to make it to the decision-making point of the framework. Double-headed arrows indicate a two-way relationship.

3.1.1. Experience and Passion

Of the seven themes under RQ1, experience was the most intuitive in terms of factors that motivate a person to act on his or her environmental concerns. Our finding that historical experience underlies young people’s motivations to engage in environmental activism replicates earlier findings from studies focusing on young people elsewhere (Sivek 2002). Experience is based on the history of an individual and helps shape one’s perceptions, behavior, likes, dislikes, and decision-making process. This was evident from our interviews with Annie, who described her transition from being largely unaware of certain environmental and social issues to becoming very concerned about them, in large part because of her formal education:

... that is the year I started drinking soy milk instead of regular milk. That’s the year I put it together why beef was linked to environmental issues—before, I seriously was really stupid as far as ... I was very uninformed ... and I blame my undergrad career, really, because I was a journalism major and I think we should have had more requirements like human geography and I knew that there were all of these things out there that were wrong, and I just didn’t understand them. So, that’s really why I sought out the International Studies program to try to understand those things ... I had the activist urge in me, but I didn’t have an outlet.

Annie’s educational experiences were intertwined with her curiosity about a subject, and it is clear from the passage above that furthering her education played a key role in building her character as an activist; her education and involvement in an environmental group provided her with the tools to seek out answers to the questions that concerned her (Fielding et al. 2008). The role Annie’s educational experiences played to engender her passion to become an activist relates closely with evidence from other work that having the right set of skills to act influences environmentally friendly behavior (Hungerford and Volk 1990).

The account from Beth, who describes her experiences as a child taking vacations and excursions out to natural areas, and the effect these experiences had on her interests as an adolescent and emerging adult is consistent with work that shows that childhood experiences built on closeness to nature and values underlying broader family norms strongly influences perceptions about the natural environment (Corcoran 1999; Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2012). Moreover, our work shows that not only do such

prior experiences change ideologies around nature, they could motivate young people to go a step further to engage in activism. Similar findings have been echoed in past and emerging sociology literature, which cites prior family experiences, values, and attitudes as central to young people's engagement in civic activities in general (Ménard 2010). Asked why she began to care about the environment in the first place and how that passion ultimately led her to consider activism, Beth shares the following experience:

... it is all probably rooted back to how almost every family vacation we went on we would camp ... I loved driving up north and seeing like all this—so I'm from [a really urban] area, so you don't see that many stars, but—you know we'd go to [a very small town] and like, the sky would be lit up and as a child I would stare at it for hours, or you know, swimming in [the lake] and being able to see all the way to the bottom of the lake because they wouldn't allow any motorized boats. And so, I really loved those vacations where we would just kind of like ... we would camp, and would just relax, so I think I wanted to find a way to make sure that that was possible for my future kids to enjoy things like that as well. That's where it probably started, was when I was a child, and my mom teaching me to clean up the campground so it's nicer than when we left. But since then ... I tried to, you know, how can I work this into my daily life? So, in high school, I started a recycling program at band camp, and you know, all these little things, and then I came to college and I learned that ... the real change needs to happen, like in the fossil fuel industry, because we can be doing all these things and we can recycle and we can conserve water in our house. But it's not going to amount to the amount of carbon like burning coal is putting into our atmosphere, or the billions of gallons of water hydraulic fracturing wastes every day, so it's just ... it's where the change needs to happen.

Beth describes a clear *passion* for the *experiences* she had at a younger age and also talks about how those experiences shaped her activism, both in high school and college. These findings are similar to that of Li and Chen (2015)—who found that natural experiences remain important factors that influence the decisions of college students to take environmental action and Chawla and Cushing (2007)—who noted that childhood experiences of nature are significant factors that shape pro-environmental behavior.

3.1.2. Sense of Community

Although awareness may sometimes be confused for experiences (particularly education), it is in fact a separate concept, albeit with some similarities to education. Raising or creating awareness about a topic is a crucial step in getting others (e.g., a community) involved in one's project, campaign, or event, and this in itself is a form of education. Members of the student group seem to spend a majority of their time brainstorming and implementing ways to raise awareness about the problems associated with the burning of fossil fuels and the university's investment in the fossil fuel industry. In fact, we found that the organization is comprised of four separate components: media, coalitions, grassroots, and events (Beth 2013), each of which play a role in raising awareness about their campaign. Not only do they target the university community, but they also try to get the surrounding communities involved. Beth herself first became involved in the coalitions realm of the organization, and describes the coalitions and grassroots components as the following:

I fell into the coalition's realm and started helping with community outreach. Coalitions is "targeted grassroots," so it's the grassroots realm [that] focuses mostly on educating the students on campus and getting the word out to students about our campaign, and problems with ... whether burning fossil fuels or investing in fossil fuels. And then ... coalitions kind of does that with community groups, and local businesses on [the main street downtown], other environmental organizations in [the area], or faith groups in the community, faculty members on campus, other student organizations, things like that.

This description makes it clear that the student organization is deeply engaged with the greater community surrounding the university area. Raising awareness among these groups of people takes many forms, including answering “some of those questions that [people are] always asking when we’re out petitioning on campus”, holding forums “to let the campus know that we’re asking the university to divest from fossil fuels”, “phone banking to invite people that were interested in the campaign to come to the forum and learn more”, putting posters up on campus, and creating Facebook events and other social media-related marketing strategies (Beth 2013).

For the organization’s campaign, it was important for members to raise awareness about the facts of the campaign and the issues that were at stake. For example, group members wanted people to be aware that there are alternative investment options for the university that would be profitable as well as sustainable (Beth 2013). For that reason, they have asked experts in the community to come forward and talk about these issues.

... some people are confused about climate change ... what’s happening, and how the university is contributing to that with where their money is. That’s why we’ve brought in somebody to talk about the climate, change as a problem, and we’ve also brought in somebody that can talk about solutions. Like alternatives to investing in the fossil fuel industry. And some people don’t even know what the word “divestment” means, so just like kind of to lay it all out there and explain why this is so important, not only in a worldly context, and how it affects the climate, but also at [the university].

Here, we see a strong relationship between awareness and community. They have asked people in the community to help raise awareness about these issues to others in the community in order to elicit a desire to act in otherwise unaware or not yet activist people. Similarly, during our observation of a group meeting, Beth proposed during the meeting that they conduct a “letter delivery” where they would allot 5 minutes or so at the end of the forum for attendees to write a letter to the Board of Trustees so that group members would be able to hand a stack of letters to the Board during a Board of Trustees meeting, like a petition. This is a knee-deep example of getting a community engaged with one’s cause by first building trust and partnership, attributes that are critical for sustained engagement in any environmental cause (Little 2009). By getting community members so involved with the campaign, it not only creates a sense of community within and among those in attendance at the forum, but, as Beth told us, community involvement proves to the university that it is not just a small group of

... like, 20 environmentalists on campus yelling at them, but it was something the community as a whole wanted to see. [And to show them] that it wasn’t just, like, me, and being like a dirty hippie telling them to stop burning coal, but it was something that, you know, parents of schoolchildren wanted, and local business owners, and professors, and all this larger community wanted the university to stop burning coal.

3.1.3. Incentives and Self-Satisfaction

Motivations related to incentives and self-improvement/self-interest were important underlying factors that sustained the interests of our interviewees in environmental activism. For example, Annie describes what keeps her motivated to work at the garden house on days where she would otherwise be too busy to volunteer. She expresses that her continued motivation is grounded in the self-satisfaction she derives from being engaged in activism. Asked if her involvement in environmental activism is due to personal benefits, she indicated:

but overall, my goal that, when it doesn’t get tampered, or burdened by just being busy and things like that, is to do it not really for myself, but—Well, it is for myself, but I feel like I’m improving myself and also trying to improve the neighborhood and do something that I see as positive.

So it is the interconnectedness of various themes that helps shape and motivate Annie as an activist, as well as a matter of prioritizing values, confounding factors such as lack of time, and external motivators that determine what she does or does not do. Annie's narrative about self-satisfaction from environmental activism reflects a well-established hypothesis that environmental, environmentally significant behavior originates from altruistic orientations and values that motivate individuals to act selflessly for the sake of others (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Clark et al. 2003; De Groot and Steg 2008).

But it is also important to note that in spite of one's value orientations, incentives are indeed powerful tools for motivating action in oneself and others. In Beth's case, she mentioned wanting to find a way to make sure that it would be possible for her future children to enjoy the same outdoor experiences she enjoyed as a child. She also mentioned her close friendships with other members of the student group and how important it was to her to "not let them down", because she wanted to maintain these friendships into the future. This resonates well with Tindall, Davies, and Mauboules (2003)'s claim that network ties and group membership are important determinants of activism behavior and what Chawla and Cushing (2007) characterize as "a sense of collective competence", where young people seek opportunities to work with others in a collective environment.

3.1.4. Engagement in Other Pro-Environmental Behaviors

The old adage of "practice what you preach (PWYP)" is a theme that occurred several times throughout our data. It reflects how environmentalists and other activists make appropriate and relevant changes in their own lives, to serve as worthy examples (Kennedy et al. 2009). In Annie's case, "walking the talk" is a big part of her activism. She pays attention to her personal consumption habits and does her best to support local businesses. She puts her money towards "good causes," not so much in the donation sense, but in the sense of ethical consumerism. She also tries to limit her consumption as much as possible and normally shops at thrift stores rather than regular retail stores. Her place of residence is a relatively small apartment (750 square feet) that she shares with her boyfriend, and she states that by living in a smaller housing arrangement, she takes up less land. In her view, trying to make a difference in her own small way has been an important reason to keep up her activism, so as to inform other people about her own 'environmentally friendly' choices. She also gave us some examples of small things she does to try to make a difference environmentally—for example, using energy-efficient light bulbs and turning off the lights when they are not necessary. Additionally, she recycles and has a small worm composting operation at her apartment, so she minimizes the negative impacts of her food waste (Annie 2013a). She stated:

By eating local, organic food grown by a farmer down the road, you're supporting that farmer, you are decreasing the miles that your food traveled, and the environmental impacts of the pesticides and oil and everything that was *not* used in that food's production, and you're just, um . . . it's kind of like that woman said at [*that event*] [she's referring to a talk on food and place-making that occurred at an art gallery in the community] that every time you, you know . . . you kind of vote with your money.

By her description, she is "practicing what she preaches", but that in itself is a form of activism. However, she emphasized that she has a problem with people who engage only in this form of activism. She doesn't think activism should just be about what you consume, or about consumption. However, activism through the local food movement kicks in when people reconnect with and become "aware of the reasons that you're eating local food and organic, not because it's trendy, or it's now . . . popular and expensive, but because a lot of people and a lot of natural environments are being exploited in the way you eat otherwise" (Annie 2013b). So the connections between PWYP, awareness, and community here are strong, and interact with each other in ways that help motivate a person to take action. Clearly, there is a strong relationship between her passion for activism and her decision to engage in

other pro-environmental behaviors. For example, when asked why she would choose a more active form of activism versus “armchair activism,” Annie responded:

Just . . . the feeling that I need to practice what I’m preaching, so if I’m studying something on a daily basis, and I’m, you know, telling people that “You shouldn’t eat that way” or “You should— “not that I’m, you know, demanding people change their habits. But if I’m going to be passionate about these things and want other people to change, then I have to change myself. So it’s like that “be the change you want to see in the world” cliché thing.

Similarly, Beth’s response to a question about choosing to be deeply involved with this student organization over other university environmental organizations included the PWYP theme. Interestingly, one of the reasons she chose to switch groups was that the group she worked with previously emphasized too much (or perhaps made too much the main focus) the need for individuals to take individual action, rather than trying to make “big” changes:

. . . A lot of times, we talked about how we ourselves could make a difference, like to be more environmentally-friendly, and I think that’s important for us, as environmental activists, to kind of live in the way we want to see the world, but at the same time, something wasn’t clicking. “Well I can do all I want, like I can use my reusable water bottle, and you know, I can try to eat foods that are less carbon-emitting, but if the university is burning all this coal right down the street—shouldn’t I be focusing on that?” And that’s where we can really make a difference, for people and the environment. So that’s kind of why I decided to switch.

It’s interesting to note here that PWYP was not enough of a motivation for Beth, even though she did acknowledge its important place in the life of an activist. However, activism for Beth seems to be motivated much more by passion and an intense concern for the world and its citizens rather than by incentives or feeling obligated to do something because it is what she tells other people they ought to do.

3.2. What Prevents Action?

In this section, results are presented around two central themes that address the sub-research questions “Why might self-identified environmentalists (SIEs) choose not to take action on their concerns (environmental or otherwise)?” and “What thresholds or barriers, if any, exist for taking action? Why?” To answer these questions, we draw on two important codes from our transcripts—“time” and “involvement”—which are depicted in the two yellow rectangles on the right side of Figure 2.

3.2.1. Involvement

In the context of this study, involvement pertains to the ease or difficulty of becoming involved with a group, project, campaign, activity, and so on. This becomes an important de-motivating factor in activism if an individual perceives it to be too difficult to take action. For Annie, a lack of transparency about becoming a volunteer at the gardenhouse was one reason she did not get involved with it sooner. In her description of how she found out about the gardenhouse, she discussed how the volunteer on duty did a poor job of explaining what they do there:

. . . I saw a bunch of people kind of close to the entrance and they were just gardening, and there was an older woman working there who just was a volunteer, and I said “Hey, I just wanted to see, you know, what are you guys doing in here, what kind of stuff do you have going on,” and then she was like, “I don’t know.” She wasn’t, I don’t think, a very good volunteer because she was just like, “I’ll get someone else to tell you.” So then, [another woman], who’s the main—the gardenhouse manager—she came and

talked to me, and it wasn't until probably another six months at least until I started volunteering there.

... I honestly don't think [the manager] did a[n] excellent job of explaining [either], because if she had explained it better I probably would have wanted to start volunteering before, but she just kind of said, "You know, we have this gardenhouse," and she just—maybe I don't remember but she didn't make it clear that anyone can volunteer if they want, that they have this CSA, which I now participate in, but it was just sort of a more, like, "this is what we're doing" but I didn't get the sense that it was something that people could easily get involved with.

3.2.2. Time

Time, or a lack thereof, is closely related to involvement. A lack of time makes it difficult, if not impossible, for an individual to participate in activities, no matter what other motivators exist. This was a recurring theme throughout all four data collections—a lack of time, or time conflicts (for example, with classes), prevented some group members from volunteering for certain activities (student organization, observation, 2 April 2013); both Annie and Beth explicitly mentioned not having enough time to do everything they wanted to do. For example, Annie described the difficulties in taking a bus to school when time was a constraint—often it would mean being late to a class, meeting, or other important activity. And although she is concerned about the on-campus coal-fired power plant and other fossil fuel-related environmental issues on campus, she stated that she did not have the time to attend any of the student organization's events or meetings. She also explicitly stated that time was definitely the biggest constraining factor for her activism (Annie 2013a).

Beth made less mention of time in her interview, but she did mention it briefly when discussing her involvement with several different environmental organizations on campus:

"There was a point where I was trying to do all three [environmental organizations], and it was just too much, so the tactics and strategy in [this group] were the ones that I could relate to the most".

(Beth 2013)

Again, we see in these statements the convergence of several themes: time, passion, and, possibly, involvement. The interrelatedness of these themes is reflected in all of the discussions above (Figure 2). Activist motivations are not standalone phenomena; they work in tandem with other processes and motivation factors in a dynamic way and are influenced by an individual's history, previous experiences, constraints, values, and other external forces.

3.3. Limitations and Proposals for Future Work

Of course, there are limitations to this work. Even for a qualitative study, we acknowledge that our sample size is quite small, with only four rounds of interviews and a meeting observation of an environmental activist group on a college campus. Nevertheless, the interviews were conducted carefully and in detail, the result of which were insights sufficient to address our research questions and draw our conclusions. In terms of validity, there is potential risk that the unrecorded data (i.e., the observation of the student group meeting) were not described accurately. We relied heavily on our notes, and acknowledge that the interactions and conversations at the meeting may have happened too quickly to capture entirely. Even though interviewees were self-identified environmentalists involved in activism, we do not have mechanisms to verify their ideas and responses to our questions and therefore acknowledge that potential biases beyond our control are possible.

The aforementioned limitations, however, open avenues for future work that can advance our understanding of environmental activism among emerging adults. A more extensive study that focuses on environmental activist groups on college campuses can potentially reveal a wider array

of motivations. Even more robust will be a study that controls for bias by sampling activist and non-activist students (as in recent work by [Jia et al. 2017](#)) to comprehensively explore motivations for student-activist behavior in comparison to non-activists. Additionally, the important question we do not have an answer to is whether motivations will be similar, or different, across activist groups with different goals: for example, will motivations behind groups who stand for recycling be the same as those who stand for climate action? This will be important because prior work shows that there is a significant association between general pro-environmental behavior and water conservation behavior ([Adams 2014](#)), which will suggest a potential hypothesis that students who are activists on one environmental issue may perhaps be interested in being activists on other related issues, and that there could be differences in where their motivations originate from. Even with a small sample size, we have been able to discover subtle differences in the motivations behind student activism for the environment. A potential project will be to explore how student activists balance priorities and decision-making processes involving activism and academic work. A related hypothesis is that mechanisms for balancing time demands between academic and activism work reveal extent of passion for a specific environmental cause.

4. Conclusions

The goals of this study were to assess the various factors that motivate self-identified environmentalists on a college campus to take action on their concerns. To do so, we addressed the following primary research questions: What motivates self-identified environmentalists or activists to take action against problems that concern them? Why might self-identified environmentalists (SIEs) choose not to take action on their concerns (environmental or otherwise)?

Taken together, the study demonstrates that previous experiences and education are related to awareness; becoming aware about a problem can make individuals passionate about a cause. Raising awareness and getting community engagement/participation go hand-in-hand as well, as you cannot achieve large-scale community involvement without first giving people a reason to be interested in your campaign. Incentives and self-improvement/self-interest are closely related, as incentives are often a form of self-improvement, and incentives inherently cater to a person's self-interest. Community and involvement are also tightly linked, because in many cases, achieving community engagement is dependent on making it easy for individuals to become engaged and interested. Of course, when all else (seems to) fail, having incentives and the ethic of "practice what you preach" helps keep activists moving.

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