Activists and activism success: towards a grounded conceptualisation

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Abstract

Success is an important aspect of evaluating activism because the latter is a vehicle for political change. However, the idea of 'success' has proved difficult to capture in easily measurable ways. This has led some analysts to overlook its complexities and others to avoid the idea altogether, instead focusing on impacts, consequences and other seemingly less loaded terms. The definition of activism success therefore remains unsettled and under-studied. This article argues that an important perspective in evaluating activism is that of the activists themselves. What constitutes success (or not) for them must be an important consideration in defining and analysing it because it underpins the sense of purpose and value they put on what they do and helps to sustain them in the longer term. A workshop conducted with grassroots activists in Liverpool provides useful insights towards this. The analysis of their reflections on successful activism suggests that it is still an important idea, but a complex and nuanced one that is multi-dimensional, political and contested. It reflects attitudes to a wider range of outcomes, the value of participation and attitudes to power, factors that analysts should consider incorporating into future studies.

Introduction

The concept of success in activism has for some time been a concern of scholars of social movements, motivated not just by scholarly curiosity but by a desire to justify movement activism as 'rational'. If effecting social and political change is 'the ultimate end of movements' (Giugni 1998, 373), then for participation to be interpreted as such, they 'must succeed fairly often' (Burstein et al., 1995, 275). Moreover,

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'only when … success and failure are commonly understood and their determinants are identified can reliable and valid results be detected' (Helmig et al., 2014, 1532). For this reason, the study of success has been primarily focused on tangible outputs, for example acceptance or recognition by authorities (Gamson 1975), realising specific, articulated goals or 'net benefits' (Burstein, Einwohner and Hollander 1995; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Salmon and Murray-Johnson 2013).

While measurability is useful, it privileges the analyst over the perspectives of activists. Where clearly identifiable material benefits are *not* sought, where outcomes do not align with publicly stated intentions (for example, a union publicly asking for a higher pay-rise than it actually hopes for as a negotiating tactic), or where they change during a campaign, measurement can be much more difficult. Not all movements want mainstream acceptance (Saeed 2009)—indeed some might regard it as failure—and the focus on ultimate outcomes and policy shifts overlooks the distinction between explicit and unintended outcomes, and 'spillover' effects on wider society and culture. Above all, they tend to overlook the perspective of participants.

Despite the pursuit of objectivity, then, success in activism remains a highly evaluative and subjective idea. This has led some, including advocates of the 'political mediation model' (Amenta et al., 1992) and the 'joint effect model' (Giugni 2004), to dispense with the notion in favour of 'impact' (Amenta and Young 1999; Kriesi and Wisler 1999), 'effect' or 'outcome' (Giugni 1998), and 'consequences' (Bosi, Giugni and Uba, 2016). Many of these have also narrowed their focus to specific spheres (Giugni et al. 2013), including political (Amenta et al., 2010), cultural (Van Dyke and Taylor 2018), economic (Giugni and Grasso 2018), and biographical (Passy and Monsch 2018).

Contribution

This work is, in part, a response to the literature on 'success' and that on outcomes and consequences that have succeeded it. It welcomes the shift in emphasis in some of the literature towards activists. However, rather than unfolding biographies or trajectories, it approaches conceptualisation of success on the basis of the *meaning* activism brings to its participants. In-depth discussions between and with activists reveal the importance of values, purpose and community, a sense of empowerment and agency to the activist's perception and feeling of success. Six key contributions that this research makes can be highlighted:

Firstly, it addresses an imbalance in the literature concerning the definition of success in activism and who judges it. It rests on the argument that activists, not just analysts, should play a key role in determining what success consists of, and takes an approach to conceptualisation consistent with that.

Secondly, it recognises that 'social movements' and 'new left' movements are not the only legitimate vehicles for 'activism' nor the only ones worth studying. Activism may include legal acts of civic engagement with political institutions (Verba, Nie and Kim 1978) or more rebellious forms of defiance against them (Baumgardner and Richards 2010). It may involve challenging the status quo or defending it

(such as protecting local amenities or opposing development projects). What counts as 'activism', who is involved and the kind of challenge made will depend on the issue, context, and other factors, including the person describing it.

Thirdly, it recognises apparent ambiguities and the lack of precision that comes from conceptualising success in activism as anything other than meeting concrete, measurable goals (or similar kinds of measure). However, rather than seeking to avoid or overcome these ambiguities, it embraces them as a feature. 'Success' is understood as a contested and political term, which thus resists a precise, universally applicable definition. It arguably has the characteristics of an 'essentially contested concept' (Gallie 1955). It is certainly, at least, 'appraisive' in character and, as such, contest over its meaning is 'part of the political process itself' (Connolly 1993, 36).

Fourthly, therefore, it contends that despite the complexities, we should not avoid the terminology of 'success' (for example by adopting alternatives such as 'consequences' and 'outcomes'). Success is important to activists, and is part of the language they use to describe their activity, but it is a more nuanced and subtle idea than many analysts concede.

Fifthly, in consequence, it takes the view that 'success' is better understood as a heuristic tool for supporting inquiry. Moreover, it takes the claims and intuitions of activists as a key input into the development of this heuristic and thus it grounds theory about activism success in the perspective of those engaged in it.

Sixthly, while there is utility (despite the methodological difficulties) in being able to establish a causal link between activism and its effects on activists, this study takes a different approach. It explores how activists understand the consequences and value of their activism. In other words, it is concerned less with establishing the precise causal mechanisms that link activism and outcomes and more with the meaning that activism has for those participating in it.

Success in the literature

Classic studies

Studies of success have been most associated with the social movement literature. Early studies draw a relatively clear line between success and failure, although precise definitions vary somewhat. William Gamson defines this 'elusive idea' (Gamson 1975, 29) in terms of two 'clusters' of outcome: first, the acceptance of the challenging group as 'a valid spokesman for a legitimate set of interests' by antagonists (Gamson 1975, 29) indicated by consultation, negotiation, formal recognition and inclusion (Gamson 1975, 31–2), and second, the advantages that accrue to beneficiaries during or in the aftermath of a campaign (Gamson 1975, 35). The key judges of success here are, therefore, the analyst and the antagonist. Piven and Cloward (1979) are both more radical and pessimistic. Their proxy for success is the concessions granted by the targets of challenging groups. However, they argue, these concessions are very hard to win, are likely to be limited, and even harder to hold on to. In any case, they will often advantage the targets themselves. Well-organised, successful campaigns will tend to compromise with or become co-opted by

the establishment, thus acceptance is a sign of *failure* rather than success. This also seems to favour the antagonist.

A common approach to determining success compares observable outcomes against stated objectives. Jenkins and Perrow's (implied) definition concerns achieving publicly stated 'immediate goals' linked to a group which "should be able to secure at least some part of their program through bargaining and compromise" (Jenkins and Perrow 1977, 251). There is an instinctive common-sense to this and has the benefit that data will more likely be available in the form of public or publicly accountable statements. However, this overlooks partial achievement, unstated, unarticulated or informal goals and other 'impacts' or by-products.

Schumaker (1975) takes a more nuanced approach. As a proxy for success, he places the policy responsiveness of political systems to protest activities on an ordinal scale, from 'repressive' to 'responsive'. While this presents more subtle criteria and recognises that success may be partial or mixed, it still privileges the analyst, meaning key elements of success from the activist's point-of-view are overlooked. Organisations achieving anything other than explicitly stated goals, partial or otherwise, would be considered objectively unsuccessful.

Perspectives: analysts and activists

Burstein et al. (1995) address the impact of these choices on observed outcomes: how do we define what goals *are*? There are a multiplicity of actors with differing views: should our source be the sentiments of rank and file participants, the demands of campaign directors, movement actors and leaders, or their targets or observers? Furthermore, as Burstein et al. (1995, 281) observe, campaign goals and targets can change. Moreover, the stated intention of the action taken is not always what the goal actually *is* (or not the only goal). For example, Sauter (2013) notes that for digital activists, a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack might be viewed as an 'auxiliary political act' in which whether or not it succeeded in bringing down a website was far less important than the awareness and media coverage generated.

Banaszak's (1996) study of women's suffrage movements is more sensitive to the idea that activists' perceptions and values shape responses to political opportunities. She argues that what activists themselves *see* as success contributes to how they make decisions and, by implication, to the definition of success itself:

> The necessary connection between values and beliefs on the one hand, and the success of social movements on the other is their tactical decision making. It is in the decisions of a social movement to take a distinct course of action, to expend its resources in a particular way, or to take advantage of a specific opportunity that values and beliefs increase or decrease the chances of success (Banaszak 1996, 223).

Thus, while analysts have shaped approaches to understanding the concept of activism success, there is recognition that the perspectives of activists, and a consciousness of their priorities and values has been overlooked.

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The activist has been more prominent in the growing interest in 'biographical consequences' of activism (Passy and Monsch 2018; Fillieule and Neveu 2019; McAdam 1999; Giugni 2008). This turn signifies an increasing concern with the micro-level of collective action. Such studies focus on 'the personal and biographical consequences of protest activity' (Fillieule and Neveu 2019, 3) and the 'ways in which political commitment generates or modifies dispositions to act, think and perceive' (Fillieule and Neveu 2019, 23). In other words, it highlights activism's socialising effects, shaping worldviews and identities, interpersonal networks, and behaviour (including further participation), and even wider culture and society through its impact on family, work, and friendship (Passy and Monsch 2018, 683–4). However, it is still more oriented towards effects *on* activists than in their subjective experience.

Others have addressed more directly the perspectives *of* activists, particularly their perceptions of success. Suh (2001), based on a study of Korean Labour movements, argues that success is in significant part about perception and framing. The perceptions (which may be mistaken) by activists of success or failure, and of whose responsibility it is, is key to ongoing mobilisation and movement dynamics. Indeed, failure can actually mobilise and encourage activism if it is seen to be a result of the antagonist's intransigence (Suh 2001, 455). An experimental study by Carvacho et al. (2023) discovered that both participation in actions and the perception of success has effects on feelings of group efficacy, but not always in expected directions. Participation may not always be about 'effectiveness' in terms of goals versus outcomes. For some, with a history of 'non-normative' participation, apparent failure might even increase the perception of efficacy. In short, political participation is not always about meeting rigid measures of 'success' or 'failure', and what activists consider 'success' may be more complex and varied.

Evaluation and measurement

Addressing activist perspectives should provide the basis for a richer understanding of what constitutes successful activism. However, it also means having to address less tangible or more uncertain outcomes, which creates problems for measurement. Some studies have avoided this by sticking to blunter measures of 'the full achievement' of stated goals as 'a direct result of the campaign's activities' (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 21). Others, like Kanter and Paine (2012), argue that while outcomes like building awareness, trust, relationships, and so on are difficult to quantify or measure through standard means, it does not mean they cannot be tracked at all: it is a matter of identifying the right indicators and developing the right kind of reasoning. For example, they create a model that follows the chain of causation in order to understand where certain actions or activities lead (Kanter and Paine 2012, 74–5). The lesson is that analysts need to be clear about strategic goals and prioritise the right criteria, not only what is most conducive to measurement.

This remains a challenge for analysts (March and McConnell 2010, 580). Normative perspectives, for example whether one is more inclined to 'responsive', participatory or deliberative models of democracy and participation, will determine what one regards as appropriate participation and successful outcomes, and therefore what should be measured or evaluated (see Teorell 2006, 803). Moreover, what appropriate data can be collected or accessed in the first place, and how should the problem of attribution be addressed? How is it possible to 'establish a causal relationship between … social movement actions and an observed change in society, be it minor or fundamental, durable or temporary' (Giugni 1998, 373)?

Helmig, Ingerfurth and Pinz tackle this head on, arguing that success should be understood as 'a multi-dimensional construct' (Helmig et al. 2014, 1531), accounting for the 'input' of resources conducive to healthy organisation, 'transformation' into effective organisational functioning, 'outputs' such as mission accomplishment and effect on the environment, meaning external actors such as stakeholders. Their 'theory-based investigation' provides a view of success reflecting different dimensions of campaigning, including less tangible effects valued by activists themselves. This is an important step, but the perspective of activists themselves needs to be engaged with more directly.

Similar imperatives are reflected in some of the more recent studies of success which are more sophisticated and multi-dimensional. Useem and Goldstone (2022) argue that 'a broader social movement field', including counter-movements, potential partners, and the wider public need to be recognised. Social movement outcomes 'cannot be understood without analysis of how the movement field as a whole has changed' (Useem and Goldstone 2022, 35). A campaign 'victory' like getting a law changed is, on traditional measures, unequivocally successful, but it is not enough because.

> Such victories do not lead to the broader success sought by the movement unless the wider social field of legal interpretation, implementation, and popular support become realigned to support both the goals of the law and the methods of its implementation (Useem and Goldstone 2022, 53).

In other words, success is about changing the consensus and bedding in more permanent change, and so the attention of analysts must go beyond the immediate issue and to the wider environment. However, the effect of this is to make what is considered 'success' more elusive and distant from activists themselves. It gives substantial power of interpretation to an uneasy alliance of analysts and antagonists.

Jasper et al. (2022) also recognise that a black and white notion of 'success' or 'failure' does not reflect the realities of activism and take a more inclusive approach. Rather than seeing success as a quantitative measure, they regard it as a 'heuristic toolkit of mechanisms to understand a range of political action' (Jasper et al., 2022, 19). The field of study is conceived as a network of players (including campaigners, their opponents and even bystanders) interacting with each other across a range of metaphorical and physical arenas. Rather than revolution and regime change, there is a focus on the 'microsocial' (Jasper et al., 2022, 32). There are ongoing dynamics (including emotional ones) between protestors, opponents and others, within and between institutions and arenas (the targets of protest fight back!) and

'because strategic interactions are continual, so are the gains and losses that accompany them' (Jasper et al., 2022, 37). So, rather than a straight line between intentions, actions and outcomes, the latter emerge as 'packages' of gains and losses (Jasper et al., 2022, 38) over time (with knock-on effects, backlashes and unintended consequences) and 'reflect clusters of trade-offs and dilemmas' (Jasper et al., 2022, 45). Crucially, this includes the perceptions of the activists themselves (Jasper et al., 2022, 35). Perceived success, or optimism about its possibility, brings confidence and hope, a sense it is worthwhile, and sustainable momentum.

As Marsh and McConnell (2010) observe in a public policy context, success or failure depends on perceptions and perspectives on outcomes, as well as on temporal, spatial, cultural and political factors (government will favour shorter timeframes than academics in evaluating policy success). It is, in short, political, contested and subject to power relations. This is why understanding the importance of *meaning* to participants is so important and why, although different analysts have variously recognised the perspective of activists and the ambiguities of defining success, they have not fully addressed the role the former can play in the latter.

Bringing activists back in

There are, then, strong reasons for making the activist more prominent in defining and analysing success, each of which I will deal with in turn: the importance of *perspectives* (particularly of activists) to defining success; the political and contested nature of *claiming success*; and the *constitutive nature of participation*.

Perspectives: while the definition of success or 'effectiveness' may be simple on the face of it, it is more complex and more diverse an idea than initially apparent. The perspective of analysts has dominated, but this can vary greatly. For some radical voices, genuine change is severely limited by the structural constraints of a capitalist system (Piven and Cloward 1979). Others, like Ganz (2006), are more sceptical of grand ambitions and radical change, arguing that movements are better off focusing on immediate, tangible goals—however small—than bigger systemic questions. Success on Ganz's terms seems much more likely than on Piven and Cloward's. While each would claim to take an 'objective' view, both overlook that success is often subjective and contextual, depending on the audience (self, supporters, bystanders, third parties, or opponents) and timescale (immediate, short to medium or long-term), for instance.

Gulliver and colleagues define effectiveness very simply as "the extent to which any one single collective action or series of such actions achieves the intended goal(s)" (Gulliver et al., 2021, 6) but at the same time recognises that the "sheer multitude" of goals and perspectives means the viewpoint of activists is vital. Success may be about self-affirmation, or expressing group values in the immediate term, coalition building, preventing counter-mobilisations and so on in the medium term. Focusing purely on stated overall goals linked to policy change or even system transformation treats these as the subsidiaries of failure. In summary, 'activists may seek to achieve different goals and tasks for different audiences' (Gulliver et al., 2021, 11), and thus what is successful or not will depend very much on the activists

themselves and audiences they are targeting. Indeed, perceptions of success or failure 'are themselves important gains and losses' (Jasper et al., 2022, 34–5).

Claiming Success: failure and success are themselves contested terms, and it therefore matters how activists respond, particularly to apparent failure. Long-term activists have to sustain motivation despite delay, frustration and lost battles and thus they are more likely to downplay failure and psychologically emphasise where action(s) succeeded. Thus, 'committed activists may be more dismissive of failure signals from outsiders or authorities and more responsive to encouraging messages from movement leaders' (Gulliver et al., 2021, 12). This helps sustain participation despite setbacks and disappointments. Indeed, 'in many cases, all players claim victory from the same engagement' (Jasper et al., 2022, 35).

Some analysts, Gamson and Piven and Cloward for example, have been too quick to give the power to determine success or otherwise to those authorities that activists seek to challenge (see above). This means that, despite their sympathies, they end up largely sidelining activists. The authorities to which a campaign is opposed seems likely only to admit the success of an opposing campaign on its own terms, or at least to be able to spin it in such a way. Taking credit or apportioning blame for outcomes is a political act, and 'the consequences of who succeeds in claiming success are of tremendous significance' (Meyer 2002, n.p.) because the stories we tell about the present, shape future possibilities. It surely follows that activist perceptions are a vital dimension to this, because the stories activists tell themselves about what is important, valuable and successful is crucial to the sustainability of activism in the long term.

Activism as constitutive: while activism is purposive and a rational means of achieving social or political goals, what a literature focused on outcomes or outputs sometimes overlooks is that activism has value in itself as a participatory, human and social activity that contributes to a thriving civil society. While Saul Alinsky agrees that the key to successful action is to focus on specific, tangible, achievable goals (Alinsky, 1989, 119), these are 'proxies' which 'are simply a means to an end': the 'real objective' is 'people power' (Alinsky, 1989, 181). In other words, the very act of participating has beneficial effects on participants, the campaigns they are part of and on participatory democratic culture more broadly. This includes psychological change in participants, both in how people see themselves and in what they do. For example, becoming more 'activist' by developing a set of principles about what kinds of action are 'right' and 'wrong', by becoming more 'radical', becoming more self-confident and developing new skills and knowledge linked to their activism (Vestegren et al. 2019).

This includes values, which are not just a priori elements informing activism, but positive products *of* it. The structures activists participate in are 'invested with meanings that provide resources for insurgents challenging those structures' encompassing cultural traditions, ideological principles, institutional memories, political taboos and so on (Polletta 2004, 102). For women's movements challenging the status quo, for example, 'the development of values and perceptions that encourage confrontation, reform, or challenge of the political system is vital' (Banaszak 1996, 222). These values come from acting together, which shapes a common language, provides a basis for shared social rituals, organisation and institutional rules. This underpins an emergent culture which helps to sustain activism and activists in the longer-term. It is an important basis for establishing organisation, for building

partnerships with other organisations and movements (Banaszak 1996), helping them navigate, respond to and influence the environment, and generating a solidaristic 'power with' (Allen 1998). In short, activism is constitutive of 'activists' and active group members, whose interactions (for example, in meetings and campaigning activities) establish certain structures and patterns of relations that characterise an organisation and its culture (Rye 2014 136–7).

Activist perspectives

Overall, success has been considered an important aspect of understanding activism, particularly in the social movement literature, because movements (and activism in general) are an important aspect of the political landscape and a vehicle for social and political change. However, the difficulty in both defining and measuring success has led many analysts away from it as an idea, instead focusing on impacts, consequences and other seemingly less loaded terms. It means the definition and the analysis of success remains unsettled. However, conversations with activists suggests that success is still an important idea, but a more complex, nuanced and subtle one than some approaches have suggested. It is multi-dimensional and it is contested. As such, it needs to address a variety of perspectives. A key perspective in evaluating activism—whether in social movements, NGOs, more traditional charities and pressure groups or informal local campaigns—is that of the activists themselves. Their perspective of what constitutes success (or not) must be an important consideration when seeking to define and analyse it, because it underpins the sense of purpose and value that activists put on what they do, and helps to sustain them in the longer term. The remainder of this paper proposes an approach to conceptualising success that is grounded in activist perspectives, and recognises it as evaluative and contested. It therefore approaches the idea of success as a heuristic framework rather than a clear-cut objective concept.

Methodology

Inspired by the claim that political theory relating to real life should 'arise from practice' and treat 'people's intuitions, claims and theories' as 'a fundamental point of input' (Wolff and DeShalit 2007, 43), I use original data on what activists themselves value in their activism to build on and propose developments to existing theory on activism success outlined above. Using this kind of material extends the range of representations available to the theorist and thus widens the scope of reflection. In consequence, it grounds theory about activism in the perspective of those engaged in it. The source of these representations is a workshop entitled *Exploring Successful Activism* conducted with 32 Liverpool based activists.[1] Participants

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[1] Represented were: Alt Valley Community Trust, Merseyside European Movement, Green Party, Hope University Student's Union, Justice and Peace Commission, Keep Our NHS Public, Labour Party, Liverpool City Council, Liverpool Against the Cuts, Mental Health and Welfare Reform, Merseyside Pensioner's Association, Momentum, Proud of Liverpool, Socialist Health Association, Women's Equality Party, plus independent activists and community workers.

were recruited by publicising through local networks, the Eventbrite platform and personal contacts. On the day, they were divided into five groups at random which addressed four key themes: defining 'successful' activism; activists and formal politics; widening participation; and strategies and action repertoires. Each topic was discussed in these groups (supported by guide questions), and each group organised, recorded and reported their discussions independently. Group dynamics were thus key to the formulation of shared responses. This was followed by feedback and whole group discussion, minuted and recorded by the researcher and later transcribed. Data were thus intersubjectively generated.

These data were then subjected to a form of analysis with similarities to grounded theory: organising and sifting transcripts and notes, allowing common themes and patterns to emerge rather than imposing them (Urquhart 2013, 4). The key themes that emerged from this process are outlined below. Where appropriate, illustrative quotes have also been captured. The result is some proposals for adding to the heuristic tools available to analysts for exploring successful activism among activists themselves.

A note of caution should be sounded here. Geographically, the participants represent a narrow population, and I do not by any means claim that that they reflect the universal experience of activists. The perspectives that people take on activism and engagement will depend in part on their own background and experience, for example of poverty, marginalisation, or repression (see for example Honari 2018). That said, the range of causes and activities the participants in this research represent is broad and are not limited to those who would normally be considered 'social movement' activists. This is important, since the argument of this article is that activism as a category should not be limited to 'social movements'. There is a much wider universe of 'activism' as demonstrated by the participants in the workshops. Some have had direct experience of poverty, or marginalisation (as, for example, a member of a racial minority), but these would not be the same experiences that (say) an occupant of a Brazilian favela might have. Others might be more materially and socially advantaged, but are nonetheless active in political and social causes that they care about. As the analysis so far has suggested, the definition and scope of activism is diverse and each has something to contribute to the understanding of success. While all participants were local 'grass-roots' activists, some were party political, some community-based, some considered themselves part of a movement committed to radical social change, others were focused on a specific issue or campaign. While this diversity provides a broader perspective to the very localised context in which the research takes place, I make no claim to universality. Activists in one part of the country may think very differently to others. Activists in different fields and different kinds of campaigns may also have very different perspectives.

Overview

Using the approach outlined above, I have identified three broad elements to consider (from the point-of-view of grass-roots activists in Liverpool) as part of a heuristic for evaluating activism success: Outcomes, Participation, and Power. I will first summarise each of these before going on to outline activist contributions in more detail. They are also summarised, along with key challenges under each heading, in Table 1.

Outcomes: while goal-achievement has been the focus of much of the literature (and this category includes that), activists themselves confirm that the kinds of goals set and what might be considered success in their pursuit can vary enormously on the basis of context. Analysis suggests that we should add to this category the development, establishment and expression of values, a sense of purpose and community in the participants. In general, participants rated these kinds of qualities as a highly important product of their activism and something they would consider a sign of success.

Participation: a very important and highly valued dimension of activism is linked to widening and deepening participation. It is not simply linked to increasing numbers of participants but the quality of participation. I have included under this heading a variety of themes that were discussed and communicated as important by workshop participants, such as cooperation and collaboration, a sense of solidarity with fellow activists—including those from other organisations or campaigns—inclusiveness, participation of a wide range of community voices, and the capacity for expression, to translate desires into action.

Power and control: under-theorised in much of the literature, and yet underpinning everything in the relationship between activists and their antagonists, is power. Activists seeking change aim to challenge power and overcome it. However, power is (like success) a multi-dimensional concept. Power is not just a barrier to be overcome, but a quality to be cultivated. That is, activism should be empowering. Workshop participants conveyed the importance to them of a sense of independence and autonomy, the capacity to act for themselves, along with a sense of ownership of the campaign and its integrity. These are all strongly valued, perhaps even more than meeting specific quantifiable goals. Goals could be achieved at the price of disempowerment. If goals are our only measure of success, then a campaign, movement or community that becomes disempowered directly (or indeed indirectly) as a result, would still be considered a success. However, this of course makes further success (or at least further success that is not agreeable to antagonists) near impossible. In short, activists are mindful that they do not want to gain the world (so to speak) and lose their souls.

I will next elaborate on these themes, drawing on the observations, reflections and insights of workshop participants. I will also briefly mention key challenges that activists face in each area.

Table 1 Key dimensions of success for activists

Dimensions	Outcomes	Participation	Power
Key elements	Articulating and formulating goals, and new political opportunities	Inclusivity and community building through action	Capacity of participants to act for themselves
	Mobilising campaigns and activists	Satisfaction, expression, confidence and self-esteem	Autonomy, sense of independence, ownership
	Developing and expressing collective values; challenging existing values; community building	Solidarity, cooperation and collaboration	Empowerment: capacity to act and achieve goals
	Achieving goals, legitimacy and wider effects (e.g. on the organisational environment)	Resilience	Control and ownership of campaign
	Flexibility and adaptation		
Challenges	Interdependence between desired outcomes, practices and values	Balancing independence and collaboration	Balancing action with values, autonomy with solidarity, empowerment with control

Outcomes

Success for activists is what makes engaging and participating worthwhile, and (for that reason) the idea is multifaceted, including a variety of valuable effects. On one level, success is clearly about achieving goals but this depends on the kinds of goals that are set, which is highly contextual. The kinds of decisions taken about strategies, tactics and the appropriate indicators of success depends on, among other things, resource capabilities, the community itself, the target of the action and the existing organisational landscape. Specifying goals is important for mobilising activists, but it is not enough on its own to sustain it. Activists also cherish the development of collective values, or flexibility and adaptability that might be regarded as contextual, or dismissed as by-products of the main purpose of activism, but which nonetheless contribute to defining and determining goals in the first place.

Four contextual factors in determining suitable goals were highlighted. First, resource capabilities: how well established is the group, campaign or organisation? How much funding does it have? What personnel are involved? Secondly, it depends on the affected communities themselves and what they are campaigning for—'is it grassroots or community? What level of government are we working with?' [2] Thirdly, what is the target and political context: 'it's about understanding where power is and … where you need to be pushing it … it might be local, it might be industrial, it might be influencing opinion'.[3] Fourthly, the organisational context will have a bearing on how the issue and response to it is framed and articulated, and therefore what kinds of decisions are made and actions taken. This includes the wider organisational landscape more generally, as well as the level and scope of the particular group of activists in question. Size, for example, matters: 'whether we were talking about a huge big group or a small community group […] things became very different […] it's a completely different strategy all together'.[4] Small groups making small incremental change may not necessarily produce radical transformations, but should be considered valuable for their contribution to wider and deeper change in aggregate. Thus the nature of the target, the community, the campaign and its organisation will give shape to what is regarded as valuable and successful.

However, participants were clear that the failure to achieve goals fully, or perhaps at all, does not in itself necessarily constitute a failure of activism. One contributor summed this up as follows:

> What counts as success? How do you define success … in an action or an event, or a campaign? … If you don't achieve your absolute, stated, ideal world scenario … you can still see that was pretty successful because … [of what] happened as a result of it, even though we didn't achieve (the main goal).'[5]

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[2] Workshop Group (WG) 1.

[3] WG5.

[4] WG1.

[5] WG4.

Activists highlighted other positive and successful impacts that activism can have that are indicators of success. For example, the positive and worthwhile effects activism can have on the political and organisational environment was highlighted, including challenging prevailing values, or creating and articulating new political opportunities. Establishing the legitimacy of the campaign 'at least among the immediate membership and then forward audience'[6] is also considered important. Further potential outcomes, including encouraging and growing participation in campaigns, building communities, solidarity and fostering a sense of efficacy (important in bringing purpose and meaning to participants), are addressed more fully when I look at Participation and Power below.

However, articulated goals remain important. Mobilisation is dependent on some sense of shared mission or interest, grievance or purpose, and a desire to do something about it. Without that, campaigns or movements would never form in the first place. However, at the same time, the proper articulation of clear goals is dependent on mobilisation. The initial recognition of issues as threats or grievances to respond to is an essential step towards consciousness of shared interests and values that participants can cohere around. It is a process of participants becoming aware that they share a problem, potential grievance or threat, and recognise the possibility of changing it for the better. The *articulation* of this into goals that will motivate potential activists and supporters depends on an understanding of what is desirable on the one hand, and possible on the other (for example, do we seek immediate, incremental or specific change, or something more radical and systemic?). Thus, there are a variety of considerations in the formation of goals, and goals are clearly important to giving direction to campaigns.

In the immediate term, values matter less: action depends on articulation and judgements about what goals are 'appropriate at the time, and the needs of the community, rather than any moral judgement.'[7] But the development of goals and the response of that community to them provides the foundation for the development of values in the longer-term. The importance of developing shared values to sustaining campaigns is emphasised by participants, with the recognition that these values are a product of working together with others who may be from different groups or communities with different interests. In short, values emerge out of action and practice. When reflecting on the importance of the 'process' of participation versus the outcomes (means versus ends), some participants suggested shifting the emphasis:

> Instead of process versus outcome […] maybe it's more of a process that will lead to a set of values as opposed to a specific outcome so that we can learn to reflect collective values as we move forward.[8]

Thus, achieving goals is not the only measure of success. Collective values are an important effect of activism even if goals are not achieved and will shape and be

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[6] WG4.

[7] WG2.

[8] WG1.

reflected in the means that are acceptable to the group. It may also affect the goals themselves:

'The outcome may have to be flexible. In other words, being able to determine the outcome before you've gone through a process is probably not going to be achieved because that can change through the process.'[9]

Desired outcomes can change for a number of reasons, but broadly, they can do so as the campaign responds to, interacts with, and impacts the context, which shifts and changes in response to the campaign, but also to other factors (e.g. the actions of governments, authorities or key institutions). The campaign may also respond to its own activists and participants. Values are vital to this, because they provide a kind of moral underpinning which guides future goal-setting and adjustment. Thus, a feature of 'successful' and (more particularly) *sustainable* campaigns and organisations is a flexibility and adaptability which is sensitive to the developing and evolving values of the movement and to the changing contextual landscape.[10]

Thus, while a group or a campaign may come together in the first place over a specific issue they share in common, it is in the process of doing so that they cohere as a group with its own specific values, guiding its decisions and actions and providing the basis for an organisation that expresses them. There is an interdependency therefore between desired outcomes, the practices applied in their pursuit and the values that develop in the process, and the key challenge for activists is ensuring that there is an appropriate balance between these, in which the desire for good outcomes does not undermine values and practices consistent with them and the participants. Thus, successful activism is when a programme *and* a community of activism emerges at the same time, articulating not just an issue but a group with common interests, who may not have been aware of this beforehand. Without this, goals cannot be set, developed or adjusted and are unlikely to be met. This points us towards the value of participation in itself, which I will address next.

Participation

If participation is a rational means to the end of political or social change (Burstein et al., 1995), its value is as an investment and, as such, depends upon the return it provides. However, activists, while motivated or mobilised by a cause, regard participation as valuable *in itself* for what comes from it: a sense of inclusiveness, satisfaction and solidarity through cooperation and collaboration. Participation itself is at least as important as any measurable 'output' of activism. Indeed, it is vital for achieving longer-term goals. Participants were familiar with and recognised that failure is part of the enterprise of activism at all levels and that resilience based on solidarity, and thus sustainability, is built from participation. Indeed, the solidarity built may be more important than the ends pursued in some respects for that reason:

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[9] WG1.
[10] WG1.

> The long term goals that we have means that we are going to experience fail-
> ures along the way before we get to those goals […] (we need to) allow people
> to galvanise and learn to be able to deal with failure collectively.[11]

Thus, the importance of building a community is that it is both a good in itself and something that lays the groundwork for achieving long term goals because it helps sustain the movement through difficult periods. It is not targets, incentives or material resources, but 'human connections […] which helps maintain the campaign over time'.[12]

Inclusivity, that participation should be as wide and as accommodating as possible, is another valued quality: 'there are many different approaches to campaigning which reflect different voices, different persons and individualities and that allow for different perspectives as part of the campaign'. [13] This is important for inclusion, participation and a sense of efficacy because 'understanding this and encouraging different levels of participation enables everyone to be involved and contribute in a way that they can manage (or) are comfortable with'[14] regardless of its profitability. Encouraging participation supports autonomy and ownership within an organised campaign (see next section). Thus, it is important that we do not put up barriers. Not everyone is ready or able to participate at the kind of committed level that others are. Everyone has a starting point that may bring them in to deeper participation.[15]

An important motivator for participation is that 'activists can gain a lot of enjoyment, satisfaction, confidence and personal esteem from their activity'.[16] This is clearly a positive outcome and an element of successful activism for most, if not all, of those who contributed to this discussion. However, it was also recognised that there are potential negatives to this, particularly where activists are working with marginalised communities of which they are not members. This raises important issues of autonomy, control and ownership, which I will address further in the next section on power.

Just as activists within a campaign need to learn to collaborate with each other at the appropriate level, they need to learn to collaborate with others outside too, to build solidarity and alliances across other causes and campaigns. Cooperation and collaboration with other groups may be a source of inspiration, useful allies or partners. In particular, for small or relatively new organisations, such alliances may be a source of experience, complementary resources or skills which is another factor to consider in the making of decisions about tactics and actions and what might be considered realistic goals and indicators of success.[17] Collaboration and building alliances can provide a basis for further solidarity: 'and when we've built that broader structure … we should break down those silos and incorporate more and actually try

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[11] WG5.
[12] WG5.
[13] WG5.
[14] WG5.
[15] WG3.
[16] WG1.
[17] WG1.

to understand each other better'.[18] However, interestingly, collaboration is not seen as an unqualified good. There is some caution expressed, linked to the question of control and independence (see next section). For example, while building tactical alliances, working with rivals or competitors is justifiable in the right circumstances, there was some resistance to this. A relatively cautious approach which recognises that there are specific issues on which tactical alliances could be built (putting aside other disagreements) was encouraged for some potential crosscutting issues (like electoral reform or climate change) that 'were felt to be of benefit to the wider group of people'[19] and for which.

> If there are people we are not used to working with whom we have other arguments … one would overcome those to see the wider picture, to allow a greater involvement … the essential point is, if it is broadening the stage on which one is acting, then one will work with others.[20]

Thus, the key challenge for activists is another exercise in balancing two crucial elements of successful participation, ensuring that independence is not overwhelmed by collaboration, nor collaboration foregone from a misplaced desire for independence.

Power

Power is an under-theorised dimension of activism success. The basic understanding of power drawn on here is a multi-dimensional one which sees it as both a positive and a negative force: one which constrains and restricts on the one hand ('power over'), and which empowers and constitutes on the other ('power to'). In addition to this, the solidarity addressed above can also be regarded as a positive form of 'power with' (Allen 1999). While seeking to confront power is a key part of activism, my focus here is on the positive empowerment effects that activism can have on its participants.

Power comes through as an important theme in the workshops in three different but inter-related ways linked to 'power to': the *capacity* to act and respond to problems and grievances; *autonomy*—that is, a sense of being in control of one's actions and decisions (at a group level, but sometimes also at an individual level); and *empowerment*, the sense that participation makes it possible to do or achieve things that were not possible otherwise.

Capacity: An important dimension of a campaign's success is the capacity to act quickly, to be responsive to threats and opportunities to address them. The overwhelming consensus among workshop participants was that there is little time to consider the niceties of alliances and whether values are strictly aligned when campaigns begin. As we have seen, initial mobilisation usually comes about in reaction to a specific or imminent threat shared with others rather than a fully articulated

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[18] WG3.
[19] WG3.
[20] WG3.

set of shared values or an exercise in testing their compatibility. Shared values are often not articulated or understood until later: 'often when you begin and get going you don't necessarily have a conversation with the people in that group about what are our collective values'.[21] Some express regret about this ('maybe we should have more discussions first'[22]), but the first step is to *act*. Nonetheless, values should not be overlooked since they are crucial to sustaining activism in the longer-term.

Autonomy: Collaboration and cooperation with other groups, campaigns and communities is considered positive in many respects, helpful not only to the goals of the campaign, but contributing to a culture of solidarity and active citizenship. However, a note of caution expressed by some participants is reflected in the fact that, while some were keen to emphasise the importance of collaborating where beneficial, others emphasised the importance and integrity of their values and autonomy above all. It is ultimately important to many activists that they think carefully about who they work with and ally themselves with people who share their values:

> Ideally, it would obviously be better for each individual within a group to be able to hold on to their own values … we need to ask more questions, not just to figure out what's in common, but also see what are the differences and to really assess those differences and see whether they aren't too much [to] overcome.[23]

Participation and empowerment are key considerations: 'as long as the philosophy of the campaign is actually designed to increase the involvement of other people and empower people',[24] there is good cause for collaboration between groups or campaigns who otherwise disagree.

There is a balance to be struck between solidarity and autonomy: collaboration and cooperation are valued, but it exposes a tension in which autonomy and independence remain important. Activists may therefore agree to work in different groups, reflecting differing interests, communities and priorities, especially if they are already well established and wish to retain their own distinct identity and campaigns.

> Partly in recognition of the fact that we aren't all the same […] different groups or different interests, different communities within a larger campaign […] might be able to campaign as different groups, or different people who want to do things in different ways as opposed to having just one way.[25]

For many workshop participants, integrity, independence and autonomy of different groups, with their own priorities was also greatly valued. At times, this might be in tension with the necessities of furthering campaign goals and the imperatives of building partnerships and alliances. In short, a careful balance needs to be struck:

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[21] WG1.
[22] WG1.
[23] WG5.
[24] WG3.
[25] WG1.

unwillingness to compromise and work with others may put severe limits on what a campaign can achieve, even preventing it from developing at all, but too much compromise may undermine the commitment of value-driven activists and thus the longer-term sustainability and autonomy of the campaign.

Empowerment: A key element in building sustainable campaigns and movements is organisation. Organisation has great advantages and benefits for sustaining campaigns and activists. In other words, it can be empowering for activists and participants since it provides the resources and collective power that can support effective action (see Rye 2015). At the same time, however, it is subject to a more negative power from their point of view that is of domination by professionals and hierarchy, and ultimately a separation between activists and beneficiaries. In particular, ensuring control is in the hands of affected communities or potential beneficiaries, and not full-time or professional campaigners is a key issue of concern. Focused in particular on community organising, workshop participants were conscious of this tension and keen to guard against the problems that can come with it. This, once again, exposes a tension—and a balance to be struck—between outcomes and power or control. Sometimes retaining control and autonomy over the campaign or organisation has a greater priority for activists and the communities they serve than the meeting of goals.

Campaign leaders and experienced activists need to be conscious of the needs of others and to be inclusive in the way that they organise. The nurturing and support role that organisers can play was recognised as important, but leaders or organisers and those in positions of responsibility should know how to cede their power to the communities they support. They.

> Need to be more self aware [...] (and) aware of how power relations work within their own purview. It is important that we build in the processes to manage and cede power, so that individuals cannot just look out for their own self interest with regards to controlling power within a campaign group[26]

In other words, the role of activists, especially experienced or professional organisers, is important in mobilising and establishing a campaign, but their role is to equip people with the right tools to act *for themselves* and to build their capacity to own their actions. If a campaign becomes dominated by professionals and full-timers, and focuses too much on their priorities, it is in danger of losing sight of what—and who—it is *for*. Control and ownership of the campaign should ultimately remain with the affected themselves[27] so that 'the community defines its needs', not outside activists.[28] Thus, a key challenge in successful activism is striking the right balance between autonomy and control.

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[26] WG1.

[27] where possible: refugees and asylum seekers, for example, may struggle to organise and control their own antideportation campaigns.

[28] WG3.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties which are posed by the concept of activism success, it is an idea worth defending. Activism is a valuable dimension of political activity and a central way in which ordinary people can become active citizens. As such, activists—whether they are full-time, sporadic or strategic ones—care about whether their actions are successful or not and, at the same time, have an expansive view of what they consider success to be. My argument here is that this needs to be foregrounded. The analysis of success has been largely driven by the needs of analysts, and we need to include and prioritise the perspective of activists in our understanding of what success in activism is. In doing so, we need to concede that success is often subjective, it is contested, political and multi-dimensional in nature. In seeking to develop a useful framework for addressing activism success, it is therefore better to approach it as a heuristic device to guide the judgements of analysts, rather than as a set of performance indicators designed to provide us with an objective measurement.

I do not claim to provide a complete framework here, but simply to argue that one of the key perspectives that needs to be included in such a framework is that of activists themselves. The research that I have done with Liverpool activists (and again I emphasise that these do not represent all activists by any means), suggests that there are three broad priorities that concern them: outcomes, participation and power. Outcomes includes, but is by no means limited to, articulated goals. Just as important is what goes in to the *formulation* of goals—shaping what is important to particular groups of activists—and successfully mobilising around them, along with other outcomes including the development of collective values and capacity for flexibility and adaptability. Participation, without which goals cannot be set, developed or met, is valued for its own sake, and underlines the desire for inclusivity, satisfaction, and solidarity. Meeting rational goals without this may be considered 'successful' in an instrumental sense, but it undermines the purpose and value of activism, sacrificing the community of participants to the goal. This is linked to the third priority: power. This does not refer to gaining political power in the form of office, or status, but more particularly concerns the productive, constitutive power linked to capacity to act, to autonomy and to a sense of empowerment that comes through acting with others in pursuit of a goal or an ideal. It is not my intention to claim that achievable, rational goals are unimportant. Without them, mobilisation would not happen, values would not be formed through the process of acting together, and solidarity would not be nurtured. However, the clear plea that comes from activists is that we must not—as campaigners, as citizens or as analysts—sacrifice what is socially valuable in activism on the altar of victory at all costs.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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