Political Engagement Trajectories of Youth Activists Following Recruitment into High-Intensity Mobilisation

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Abstract

Using in-depth interview data of young adults who participated in the University of Kent student occupation, this paper 1) explores the process by which young people enter into and engage in high-intensity mobilisation and 2) seeks to understand how this mobilisation (and prior engagement) impacts future political trajectories of these youth activists as they grow into adulthood. Recruitment and initial engagement in high-intensity mobilisation correspond to concepts used to explain civic engagement in Verba, Schlozman and Brady's (1995) civic voluntarism model. Political trajectories following high-intensity engagement appeared to correspond with engagement prior to participation in the occupation, with those who had lower levels of prior engagement able to sustain their activism well beyond the initial high-intensity engagement. Those with greater activist experiences prior to the occupation and earlier in their youth reduced their engagement following the high-intensity mobilisation. While patterns of trajectories from young adulthood to adulthood appeared, the causal mechanisms varied significantly.

Keywords: youth civic engagement, mobilisation, social movements, student activism, life-course changes

Word Count: 8,729

Introduction

Verba, Schlozman and Brady's (1995) civic voluntarism model was designed to understand the factors behind civic engagement broadly defined. The model states that people do not engage with politics "because they can't; because they don't want to; or because nobody asked" (ibid., p. 269) and therefore those who are engaged are more likely to have the biographical availability, desire and opportunity to engage. Once an individual becomes politically engaged, they are more likely to be engaged in the future (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012). This is particularly true of youth who engage in political activity in their formative years (ibid.).

The civic voluntarism model largely explores political engagement within '"regular" legal political channels' (Verba, Nie and Kim 1987) such as voting, electoral campaigning, financial donations, community development, and political organisation membership (e.g. Brady, Schlozman, Verba 1999; Schlozman, Verba and Brady 1999; Verba et al. 1993). Sometimes these channels included acceptable forms of activism, such as protesting but few have used their framework to explore both 'orthodox' and 'unorthodox' political behaviour (Marsh 1974, although see Dalton 2014).

High-intensity campaigning falls under this 'unorthodox' category and refers to participation that involves effort, time-consumption, and risk. The intensity level can lead to activist burnout, "a metaphor that is commonly used to describe a state or process of mental exhaustion" (Schaufeli and Buunk 2003, p. 383). Such exhaustion can both impact the movement (Gorski and Chen 2015, p. 386) as well as the individual's activist trajectory (Gorski 2015) and has been a recurrent theme in explaining the difficulty of sustained youth engagement (Camino and Zeldin 2002, 219; Kennelly 2011; Kennelly 2014). Given this distinction between low and high intensity mobilisation, this paper questions whether the civic engagement model is effective in predicting high-intensity campaigning and in the persistence of engagement for young adults following their initial intense participation. As McAdam questions in his study of Mississippi Freedom Summer participants (1986, 67), can the "same mix of factors that explains riot participation account[ ] for the signing of a nuclear freeze petition"?

To begin understanding the recruitment to and trajectories following high-intensity political participation we can explore a central framework for understanding general civic engagement. Biographical availability (i.e. 'because they can't') refers to the 'absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities' (McAdam 1986, p. 70). Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, p. 271) break this down into three components: does the individual have the time, money, and civic skills (such as relevant knowledge and communication skills) to participate (and to use time and money efficiently) (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 1999, p. 430). Absence of political interests or concerns, political inefficacy or "a belief that activity can make little or no difference" or a lack of prioritisation of engagement (i.e. 'they don't want to') (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 1999, p. 431) can also explain non-participation according to the model. Lastly, "because nobody asked" refers to lack of participant recruitment and, with that, a distance between the non-participant and recruitment networks (ibid).

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The civic voluntarism model is useful for asking questions pertaining to civic engagement from a wide range of activities from those who "volunteer, raise funds for causes, and....[work] on local projects with other people in their communities" to those "engag[ing] in global activism, ... lifestyle and consumer politics" and digital activism (Flanagan and Levine 2010, p. 162-3). We will examine if the model is also helpful in understanding youth recruitment to high-intensity engagement. In addition, we will explore the trajectories of youth activists following such engagement.

High-intensity engagement

The literature directly referring to 'high-intensity' engagement has largely been left to those discussing institutionalised political activities with relatively low levels of conflict. I argue that high-intensity engagement is useful in describing certain forms of participation in 'protest politics' involving the following variables: time-consumption, activeness, and risk.

While Gary Stoker (2017) views high-intensity engagement through the lens of professional activists within political parties and citizen lobbies, we can expand this definition to refer to actions that are not only time-consuming (ibid. 104) but involve high levels of what Verba, Nie and Kim (1987, p. 52) refer to as "activeness", or "how much effort they put into political participation". While Verba, Nie and Kim, like Stoker, focus primarily at engagement in voting, political campaigning, lobbying - Dalton (2014) expands this to specifically include protests. Dalton (2014) places types of protests on a continuum of activeness with three additional, albeit problematic, thresholds: direct action, illegal action, and violence (Dalton 1988, p. 64). Finally, risk can play a role in high-intensity engagement when activeness and time-consumption are low. While any form of political engagement may pose *some* risk, those activities with greater levels of risk reshape the meaning of 'effort' and 'time-consumption'.

Regarding effort, we can use the crude example of a trigger-happy cowboy playing a game of Russian roulette. The cowboy may not normally exert much effort into pulling the trigger of a gun when shooting at glass bottles, but when the risk skyrockets in a deadly round of Russian roulette we can assume the effort of pulling the trigger increases dramatically. Likewise, risk reshapes the meaning of time-consumption as it redefines the temporal realm in which an action and its effects take place. For example, Chelsea Manning's downloading and transfer of classified government documents to Wikileaks was itself not particularly time-consuming, but the high-risk situation meant that the 'side-effects' of her engagement were potentially lifelong.

We can understand the level of engagement intensity as a product of the equation Time-Consumption x Activeness x Risk, where no variable can equal 0. This equation can be used to shape participant samples as has been done here to understand youth recruitment into high-intensity activist engagement and the trajectories of activism amongst youth before or after the event.

Methodology

In order to gain a sufficient understanding of the various variables involved in impacting activist trajectories, and to process-trace (Brady and Collier 2004) those trajectories as well as the recruitment processes, a single case was selected in which the author had intimate knowledge. This intimate knowledge is understood through relational engagement and shared experiences, where "acute awareness of each other" takes place (Raffles 2002, 330). Such awareness allows for "knowledge of the language and styles that code in-group/out-group perceptions", the "special knowledge of individual and group situations, and with the legitimacy and credibility to ask and to be told about intimate [ ] details" (Chesler 1991, 764). This is particularly important when discussing high-intensity mobilisation. While the benefits of such an approach allow me greater access into the lives of the individuals involved needed to effectively answer the research questions, it also limits the pool of potential interviewees.

The high-intensity case selected was the student occupation of the University of Kent campus building in 2010-11. This case allows the youth participants to easily fit the definition of high-intensity engagement while still being distant enough in time to assess the impact of such engagement on future trajectories of these participants as adults.

The occupation took place at the University of Kent in the city of Canterbury, England between 8 December 2010 and 5 January 2011. Students occupied a stand-alone building, the Senate Building, in the centre of campus. While many went in and out of the occupation, few would be labelled as high-intensity participants. Those participants that would qualify were those who engaged in the occupation in a sustained manner over a significant time during the period of occupation, those who exerted particularly high degrees of effort when present, and/or those who engaged in (additional) extra-legal activities as part of the protest. Thus, all three components of the high-intensity equation were taken into account. An initial sample was selected based on a private Facebook group of approximately thirty individuals[1], which was created for those engaged with the occupation over a significant period and which the author was a member. Individuals from this group were contacted and requested a semi-structured interview. Those interviewed were asked about other participants they recalled engaging in the occupation, producing a snowball sample. In total, 12 participants were interviewed. As these high-intensity experiences are relatively rare – particularly those that last that long - and often have few participants, the sample size and response rate was in line with expectations.

Within the interviews, participants were asked about the experiences as youths during the occupation, their level of intensity of participation, their previous experiences of youth activism, and their activism following the conclusion of the occupation in January 2011. The data provided a rich set of materials through which to test the wider

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[1] A study of the student occupation in Newcastle University also found that their core group consisted of approximately 30 students (Rheingans and Hollands 2013).

claims made by more general civic engagement models and to understand the impact of high-intensity youth engagement on future political engagement.

The particulars of any given engagement experience may impact on the trajectories of participants. One event was selected in order to minimise confounding variables. While such an approach limits the generalisability of the findings, such generalisability is better achieved following detailed small-N investigations that may be able to process-trace and be in a better position to pinpoint causality (Lange 2013, p. 128). As the research on the impacts on participation of such high-intensity youth engagement is limited, in-depth small-N research will provide the depth necessary to better investigate questions with regard to breadth. As a means of increasing the depth of the present research, the next section will describe and contextualise the action in question.

2010 Student Protests and Occupations

The student occupation of the Senate Building at the University of Kent came at a time of political change in the UK. A newly elected coalition government came to power in May 2010 made up of the Conservative Party under a centre-right leadership and the centrist Liberal Democrats following years of New Labour governments; the Con-Dem coalition began a series of austerity initiatives focused on cutting government spending in light of the economic crisis. Higher education became one of the first sectors addressed for reform following the publication of the *Browne Review* (2010), and independent report on funding higher education commissioned by the neo-liberal Labour Party which wanted to create markets and competition within the education sector. The *Review*, released 12 October, recommended removing the existing cap on the amount universities could charge for tuition for domestic students, which stood at £3,290 per year. The government, it was recommended, would provide loans to students who would have to repay them once they earned an annual income above £21,000. The *Review*, like other Labour policies on education, would "help deliver an 'aspirational' society in the belief that this would help reposition Britain as a highly skilled and well-educated competitor in a flexible global market place" (Stevenson 2011, 74) but at a high cost to the student.

In general agreement with this logic, the Coalition government put many of the recommendations into a policy announced by then Minister of State for Universities and Science David Willetts on 3 November 2010 (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Willetts 2010). The policy stipulated that universities could charge up to £9,000 pounds per year for tuition. The National Union of Students (NUS) and University and College Union quickly organised a mass protest march in London that took place on 10 November with approximately 50,000 in attendance (Lewis, Vasagar, Williams, and Taylor 2010; Lyall 2010; Rheingans and Hollands 2013).

Other protests took place in different cities around the country following the demonstration. The next national demonstration was called on by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) for 24 November. NCAFC, a group formally organised that year, called on a student walk-out to coincide with a protest march to be

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held in London. It is estimated that 130,000 college and university students participated in the actions across the UK (Hensby 2014 p. 23). That same day, many universities around the country went into occupation including University of Oxford, University College London (UCL), Newcastle University, London South Bank University, University of Birmingham, University of Warwick, and Cardiff University. Between protests scheduled on the 24 and 30 November other universities, including Cambridge, entered occupation, while many of the occupations that began on the 24th closed on their own accord or through police evictions.

9 December was set to be an important day for the student movement as it marked a vote on the policy of increased tuition fees (*The Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2010)* in the House of Commons. Organisations representing university students and staff had organised a mass demonstration in London for that day. On 8 December a major UK newspaper published a letter signed by many university Vice-Chancellors arguing that a fee increase was needed in light of cuts to higher education (Smith et al. 2010). Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kent, was among those who signed this letter, providing a justification for students at the University of Kent to occupy a university building, calling on Goodfellow to retract her support for a tuition fee increase and to fight the higher education cuts[2]. On that day, students attended a University of Kent Student Union meeting equipped with sleeping bags and pillows hidden in backpacks. The Student Union was set to vote on a statement of support for the student protests and after it had voted in favour and the meeting concluded activists announced that they were occupying the room. While the original plan was for a 24-hour occupation similar to many of those that occurred at other universities, the level of support for occupiers spread across the campus and activist decided to stay indefinitely.

Within the first day, members of staff supporting the occupation were able to negotiate an open-door policy with campus security, allowing students to go in and out of the occupied building which resulted in a number of additional supporters joining the occupation. Major activities in the occupation were daily 'general assemblies' and on-going recruitment drives. Recruitment took the form of digital broadcasting, leafleting, and photos in solidarity with the occupiers. Other public-facing actions included news interviews, guest lectures, and a large banner dropped from the university's library building (see Figure 1). Others engaged in maintenance and support activities such as replenishing the food supply, keeping the space organised, and washing up dishware. Despite protests around the country, the bill to increase tuition fees was voted into law. In light of this verdict some university occupations shut, including UCL and Newcastle University. Across the UK, approximately 50 universities had experienced a student occupation (Rheingans and Hollands 2013)

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[2] However, plans for an occupation were prepared prior to the publication of this letter.

Figure 1 – Banner drop from Templeman Library, University of Kent (Still from video by Author)

The occupation at the University of Kent continued protesting the legislation and further possible austerity measures, forming a group called UKC Anti-Cuts (University of Kent, Canterbury) which used the space taken over by students as a base for wider activism, as was the case in other occupations (Casserly 2011). The occupation lasted into the winter holidays, at which point the university's Executive Group issued policies to prevent students from freely entering the occupation and took legal action to seek a possession order, allowing them to forcibly evict the occupiers and sue occupying students for costs and damages. A hearing at Canterbury County Court on 7 January 2011 was scheduled, prompting the activists to leave the occupation on their terms and holding a press conference on 5 January 2011. The University of Kent occupation was one of the longest running university occupations within that protest cycle, lasting nearly a month, and the only university to stay in occupation over the winter holidays.

Findings

We will explore the political engagement imitation and trajectories of youth engaged in this occupation and the context above will help shed light on causal processes of subsequent engagement. The findings presented below are divided into an examination of recruitment and trajectories. Respondents were asked directly about the process of being recruited and/or their initial experiences of learning about and participating in the occupation. The first section presents the data from this set of interview questions. The second section is interested in the activist trajectories of these participants across three time-periods: prior engagement, activist engagement in 2011, and activist engagement between 2012 and 2016.

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Initial Participation and Recruitment

According to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) civic voluntarism model, civic engagement of any kind is dependent on availability (both biographical and financial), interest, and/or recruitment to participate. While respondents were asked generally about their initial participation in the occupation and the factors that played a role in this early engagement and their unprompted responses appeared to overlap significantly with the model's variables, particularly regarding interest/concern and recruitment.

Biographical availability appeared somewhat salient in explaining initial participation in the occupation. Regarding time constraints, no student respondents reported being employed during the occupation, mirroring UK-wide trends showing a large majority of UK university students not in any term-time employment (NUS 2010). Regarding financial availability, the act of occupying had no financial costs in itself - on the contrary, food was often donated to occupiers. In addition, the data suggests that academic responsibilities were not considerable constraints on student participation. Only one participant stated that university assignments prevented them from participating in any stage of the process, while another regretted their full immersion in the occupation, partially for its negative effects on academic pursuits. One respondent stated: "... it was my fresher's year so I don't know how much [studying] I would have done [anyway]" (Fiona)[3]. Another first-year student however expressed a view that clashed with a typical reading of the civic voluntarism model, stating that his participation "contributed significantly to my academic progress" (Leon)[4] due to conversations held with other occupiers. This resonated with the literature on the student occupations, which noted that the occupations provided an opportunity to discuss alternative education amongst the participants (Rheingans and Hollands 2013; Casserly 2011). Interestingly, all interviewees entered the occupation and began their initial engagement within the first week of its commencement despite its relative longevity. However, initial participation may have been a product of what may have originally appeared to be a short-lived protest, providing a subjective sense of the limited cost of time that would be involved in participation.

The most important criteria of biographical availability for the interviewees appeared to be civic skills. As will be highlighted below, some had civic engagement skills that they developed earlier in their youth which may have also been a factor in their involvement in this high-intensity action. In addition, 10 of 12 of the interviewees were doing degrees in fields that may have developed intellectual skills pertinent to engaging with confidence (e.g. politics, philosophy) while, unlike student respondents from research on the Newcastle occupation (Rheingans and Hollands 2013), few were undertaking science degrees. However, four of the 12 respondents were first-year students who would have had less time to develop relevant knowledge, having started

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[3] "Fresher's year" refers to the first year of university which is typically not counted towards the degree classification (similar to the grade point average) in universities in the U.K.

[4] All names of interviewees have been changed to preserve anonymity.

their undergraduate studies just months prior to their engagement. However, their selected degrees may act as a proxy for their desire to participate and all respondents noted some interest in politics, broadly defined, prior to their engagement in the occupation.

Desire to participate often regards both civic values and political beliefs (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). A vast majority reported being leftist or socialists and many had family members with similar political beliefs. The party-political division around the issue of university tuition fee increases appeared roughly along the left/right lines of the political spectrum where the left-leaning Green Party and centre-left Labour Party stood opposed to the increasing of fees, and the right-leaning Conservative Party in favour (The Public Whip 2010). One interviewee reported holding conservative political views prior to engagement in the occupation but was a strong believer in free higher education as a product of growing up in an EU country where higher education was free and largely an issue that did not neatly divide left/right parties.

Both the desire to participate ('because they want to') and the request to participate ('because they were asked') appeared to be particularly important reasons for initial participation. Individuals were asked to participate through various channels that influenced their decision to become engaged. Some came to the occupation after hearing about it via social media where occupiers called on others to participate or joining their friends or acquaintances who were either already in the occupation or on their way to explore it. "In the morning [after the first night of the occupation], I read on Facebook that several of my friends were involved in an occupation…. One status update ended with 'Come come!', and that is what I did" (Leon). This supports the view that the dialogic functions of Web 2.0 have increasingly facilitated movement engagement broadly (Nulman and Ozkula 2016) and specifically within the student occupations (Theocharis 2011).

Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson (1980) established a conceptual framework for such recruitment options, creating a table divided along lines of public/private domains and face-to-face/mediated interactions with recruitment information and motivational frames (see e.g. Mcentire, Leiby and Krain 2015). Recruitment through social media challenges this conception as it blurs the lines between public and private channels of communication (see Figure 2). Depending on the platform and user-specific settings, social media communication can operate through a quasi-public and –private channels (Baym and Boyd 2012), which produce forms of the 'networked private sphere' (Papacharissi 2010, p. 133), and being "privately public" (Lange 2007), which allows recipients to interpret public communication as being more specifically targeted rather than universally broadcasted. Thus, recruitment to social movement activity can be both broad and specific at the same time. Facebook in particular allows users to 'tag' other specific users in public messages ('posts') or comments to get their (specific) attention regarding the post, allowing that message to be decoded in a more private way (i.e. form of personal communication) while at the same time appealing to a broader audience. Likewise, tagging specific people within a public digital space can place their response in a publicly open space, allowing for greater social pressure to form (see Chong 1991). While the potential of such mediated public/private

communication for recruitment is massive, the data shows that it only appeared to be particularly useful following networks made in 'real life'.
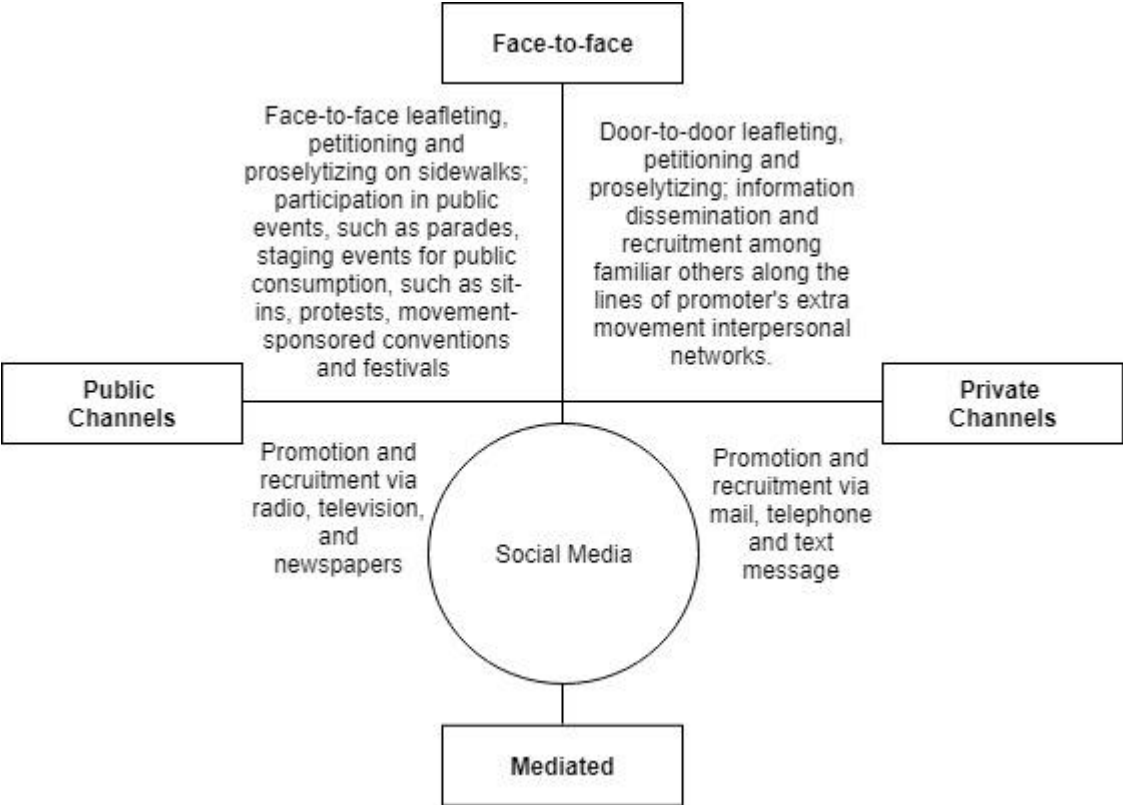

Figure 2 - Classification of General Outreach and Engagement Possibilities for Movement Information Dissemination, adapted from Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson, 1980 p. 790.

Such networks and friendship circles were identified as important reasons interviewees participated in the occupation. In particular, it appeared that formal student organisations helped to shape some of these bonds. According to the data, many of the individuals involved in the planning stage were previously involved in politically oriented student societies including the Socialist Workers Party, a feminist society, a current affairs society, an independent socialist society, a conscious consumerism society, and an anarchist society. Their memberships in these student organisations allowed them channels of communication with likeminded people who encouraged participation. Some individuals stated that they joined due to recruitment directly through these channels. In fact, two respondents were drawn into the occupation through the recruitment efforts of a single activist, Leon, via his with a student society.

Activist Trajectories

A wide range of variables, including the particular social and political contexts that surround them, can shape the activist trajectories of young people. In addition, their own biographies helped to shape their engagement in the occupation as well as their engagement following high-intensity activism. Some had already gone through a politicisation process prior to their participation in such protests. For others, it was their introduction to contentious politics. For many of those who participated, their experiences during this time helped to shape their political, social and professional, biographies as adults.

In order to understand the biographical context of political participation amongst the respondents we will first look at their histories of political participation prior to their involvement in this high-intensity engagement. We then continue by looking at their engagement in the occupation and then look at their subsequent engagement patterns.

To understand the subsequent political engagement, the years following the end of the occupation were split in two: 2011, which marked the height of the anti-cuts movement that was opposing austerity policies, a movement strongly associated with both student and youth activism (e.g. Hopkins, Todd and Newcastle Occupation 2012; Theocharis 2012); and the subsequent years (2012-2016) when the social networks available to activists after differed significantly as a large number graduated, moved, and were no longer be able to directly engage with student organisations.

Prior engagement

Only a small core of the students interviewed had significant prior experience in political engagement while the majority had little to no experience in political activism prior to the occupation. In some cases, this was due to biographical availability, in combination with readily available opportunities for collective engagement. Without being tapped into social movement networks, those who had a willingness to engage (see Beyerlein and Hipp 2006) often did not find locally- or nationally- visible demonstrative actions to join.

When such actions were known to them – such as anti-Iraq War activities (2003) – these activists were often disincentivised at their young age from participating due to a lack of freedom and/or parental (dis)approval. Unprompted, respondents discuss this wave of mobilisation: "I wanted to go and protest against the war in Iraq in 2003 but was too young and the school wouldn't let us out" (Jane). "Truth be told, there wasn't a great deal I could do [during the anti-war protests]" (Duncan). One respondent did help to organise a walkout at their secondary school to protest the war (Brian). While engagement appeared limited, anti-war activities broadcasted through the media helped to embed a notion of protest within the participants' lives.

The limited engagement opportunities regarding social movement mobilisation based on the interview data of those from the UK appears to correspond with research on engagement culture in the country more broadly (Dalton 2014). In a comparative study Dalton (2014) found that Great Britain (which excludes Northern Ireland) did have

relatively high levels of engagement in petition-signing and moderate levels of electoral campaign participation (ibid, 47). However, Great Britain fared worse regarding participation in lawful protests and boycotts (ibid, 54-7), as well as high-intensity engagement, specifically building occupations (ibid. 56). As the national engagement culture could affect student engagement levels, it is also worth comparing the prior engagement background of those respondents who came to university from outside Great Britain.

Approximately 19% of university students in the UK are coming from abroad (UK Council for International Student Affairs 2010) and the occupation at the University of Kent did feature a significant proportion of international students and this was represented in the respondents (unlike other research on the student occupations – e.g. Rheingans and Hollands 2013). Of those interviewed, backgrounds included French, German, and Belgian. Dalton (2014, 54) identifies the levels of protest or boycott participation in Germany, Belgium, and France at higher levels than Great Britain (29%, 31%, 48%, and at 20% respectively). France appeared to have a consistently high level of building occupation compared to the other countries examined (ibid., 56). While it is possible that cultural contexts influenced levels of participation or decisions to engage in high-intensity activism in the occupation, none of the international students interviewed had significant prior activist experience.

Of all the activists interviewed who did have engagement experiences prior to the occupation, much of it was limited to either rare attendance at demonstrations in their formative years or activism as part of a university society. For those who engaged in political societies on campus, their engagement often occurred just prior to the occupation and regarded the issue of tuition fees. One respondent had an emotional response after attending a large demonstration in London against the tuition fee increase prior to the occupation. She noted that "it was a great experience I particularly remember that feeling – feeling so much stronger surrounded by so many people who all shared a same opinion about the fees" (Jane).

A few others had additional involvement, including both electoral and social movement campaigning, including door-to-door canvassing for the Labour Party (Henry) and involvement in the squatter movement (Fiona). The generally low levels of experience in political engagement appear to differentiate these respondents from those of other studies on UK student occupations where "[p]rior experience of a number of participants in other such spaces (in climate camps, protests, social movements and previous occupations) gave those who led the taking of the space the requisite skills and confidence to participate" (Salter and Kay 2011)

Subsequent engagement (2011)

The UKC Anti-Cuts group that was created in the occupation served as a base for future activist engagement. The group was dedicated to protesting tuition fee increases as well as cuts to other public services in the name of austerity. While some of the occupiers had already ceased to be active by this time, others within UKC Anti-Cuts attempted

another occupation, this time of a different university building, but this was only maintained for a short time due to internal disagreements regarding its effectiveness.

UKC Anti-Cuts became involved in the actions of UK Uncut – a national, loosely structured organisation opposed to austerity whose diagnostic framing (see Benford and Snow 2000) pointed the finger at corporate greed and 'tax dodgers'. The organisation, "which campaigns… using direct action or civil disobedience" (Kaldor et al. 2012, p. 3), organised actions in two key ways. One involved the specification of a corporate target and, using Twitter, broadcasting calls for action to different specific cities or towns to protest those targets. These actions mimicked UK Uncut's centrally organised demonstrations where they led breakaway events from large national demonstrations to storefronts of corporate establishments. There they would enter the corporate-owned space and occupy it for several hours.

Many committed activists who occupied the Senate Building were also involved in some of these local and national actions. Nationally, some young activists that attended the 'March for the Alternative' demonstration in London (March 2011) ended up occupying the upscale department store Fortnum and Mason, as part of a planned UK Uncut action which resulted in mass arrests (see Cavanagh and Dennis 2012). At the local level, the former University of Kent occupiers organised and participated in local demonstrations that often involved protests inside shops, and typically themed and involved costumes. Such events included setting up a makeshift library at a local branch of Barclays bank, a performance involving a patient representing the National Health Service (NHS) dying of cuts inside a local National Westminster Bank (NatWest) branch (Figure 3), and a classroom setting at a local branch of the BHS department store.

Figure 3 – UK Uncut protest of NatWest in Canterbury (Photograph by Author)

In addition, some participated in a range of other actions following the occupation. This included attendance at national demonstrations, participation in a national organising meeting by National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), electoral campaigning, environmental demonstrations on campus, and participation in political student societies. A significant number of interviewees (8) participated in these local UK Uncut events and slightly more (9) participated in events organised by UKC Anti-Cuts without affiliation to UK Uncut. Such participation appeared to grow out of the social networks developed during the occupation. One respondent had lost this social network and stopped being politically engaged. She stated that this was a result of activist burnout and that her experiences in the occupation affected her approach to future activism, even in a context of readily available opportunities for further engagement:

> I think one of the things that made me drop out last time was like, stress due to activist burnout? I was trying to do too much. So like, I'm not going to do that [again]. Gonna take it slow and see what's happening before I launch into anything. (Fiona)

Subsequent engagement (2012-2016)

Participation in activism during the later period (2012-2016) was considerably less frequent or intense for a majority of interviewees, and it is likely to have been due to the loss of both the activist social networks developed during the time of the occupation and readily available opportunities. Eight of twelve respondents reported considerably lower rates of activism during this period as compared with the time of the occupation. Seven of these had lower rates of engagement than 2011. Of the seven, two stated that they had not engaged in activism at all from 2012 to 2016.

One respondent stated that non-engagement was a result of cutting social ties with political activists at the University of Kent. She mentioned that her break-up with a fellow occupier had a negative impact on her connection with many of the people in the social network. "[The relationship] ended and that was so painful for me that I isolated myself quite a bit for a while, it was hard because I associated everyone with him" (Carrie). She noted her regret for having isolated herself and stopped being politically engaged. After leaving to go abroad for her postgraduate studies, she became a conscious consumer and exhibited her political views in this more individualised form.

Burnout impacted one activist in particular who maintained high-intensity engagement in the years following the occupation. Upon finishing his studies Duncan did not immediately find a job and decided to commit even more time and effort to activism. For him this meant high-intensity participation in Occupy London Stock Exchange (LSX) – an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street based outside the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral. Eventually however this sustained level of high-intensity activism lead to burnout. Duncan felt the need to refocus attention on himself: "I've kinda taken a back seat to it all as it left me pretty run down and burnt-out…[I'm] just having to focus on my life" (Duncan).

Even after recovering from burnout, Duncan felt he could not become re-involved in activism easily. As for others, Duncan now had work pressures that prevented him from fully engaging: "with my timetable, I struggle to get involved" (Duncan). Much of this related to the economic crisis since austerity was hitting young people disproportionately (Chalari, Sealey, and Webb 2016). However, one respondent who worked in a precarious job felt their activism helped them challenge their poor conditions in the workplace:

> [I joined] a trade union after being exploited during an internship with a dodgy INGO [international nongovernmental organisation] in Berlin. Without this prior [activist] experience, I think I would have simply lacked the guts to oppose my employer as one of... over 100 interns [at that time] without contract or pay (Leon).

All of those who had not been engaged following the occupation still thought about being engaged and still held strong political opinions. Two respondents in particular built on top of their political views through reading and discussion but did not stay actively engaged. The two respondents (Henry and Isaac) still maintained strong friendships after the occupation and their shared interest in the development of their political ideologies did not lead them to exactly the same conclusions. They both found themselves unaligned to any active, locally available movements or *activist* milieus. Instead, they felt bonded to radical knowledge production milieus and new ideologies. They reported that these political positions did not directly lead to an activist strategy that was being widely employed: "My main problem has been: how do you actually develop this praxis that isn't just going to [reproduce capitalism]" (Henry). While they still acknowledged there was activism to be done, neither felt that there were readily available opportunities that aligned with their well-developed ideologies.

Some respondents went on to postgraduate degrees and often decided to study topics related to their activist experiences. One respondent who recently began a PhD stated that his topic "can be really traced to my experience … in the occupation" and later said that the experience in the occupation had "changed my life" (Arnold). Another activist went on to complete a PhD in politics:

> I think the occupation is super important actually because for a moment you felt so inspired…. The experiences from the occupation…made me consider the alternative of having a movement that doesn't really have a leader and see how that looks. My [PhD] thesis then became the question of whether it is possible for groups to create another form of power without inheriting the old hierarchies or reproducing them in some other way (Eirik).

In total six respondents went on to postgraduate studies. For some, the university environment allowed them to continue to engage politically due to readily available opportunities for engagement. For example, Arnold became a highly active participant

in NCAFC during his postgraduate studies. For others, engagement levels dipped during this period.

Political Engagement Trajectories following High-Intensity Participation

The data collected demonstrates that activist trajectories following high-intensity mobilisation were impacted both by the degree of intensity during the period of engagement and by prior levels of engagement. As Figure 4 shows, respondents who were politically active prior to the occupation experienced a drop in activism soon after the occupation ended or from 2012 onward. Those with less experience prior to the occupation appeared to continue to be highly active immediately after the occupation and some of these continued to be highly active from 2012, although not necessarily throughout the entire period between 2012 and 2016. While both sets of participants were high-intensity engagers within the occupation, it was clear from their comments that this level of intensity affected their future engagement levels, for better or worse.
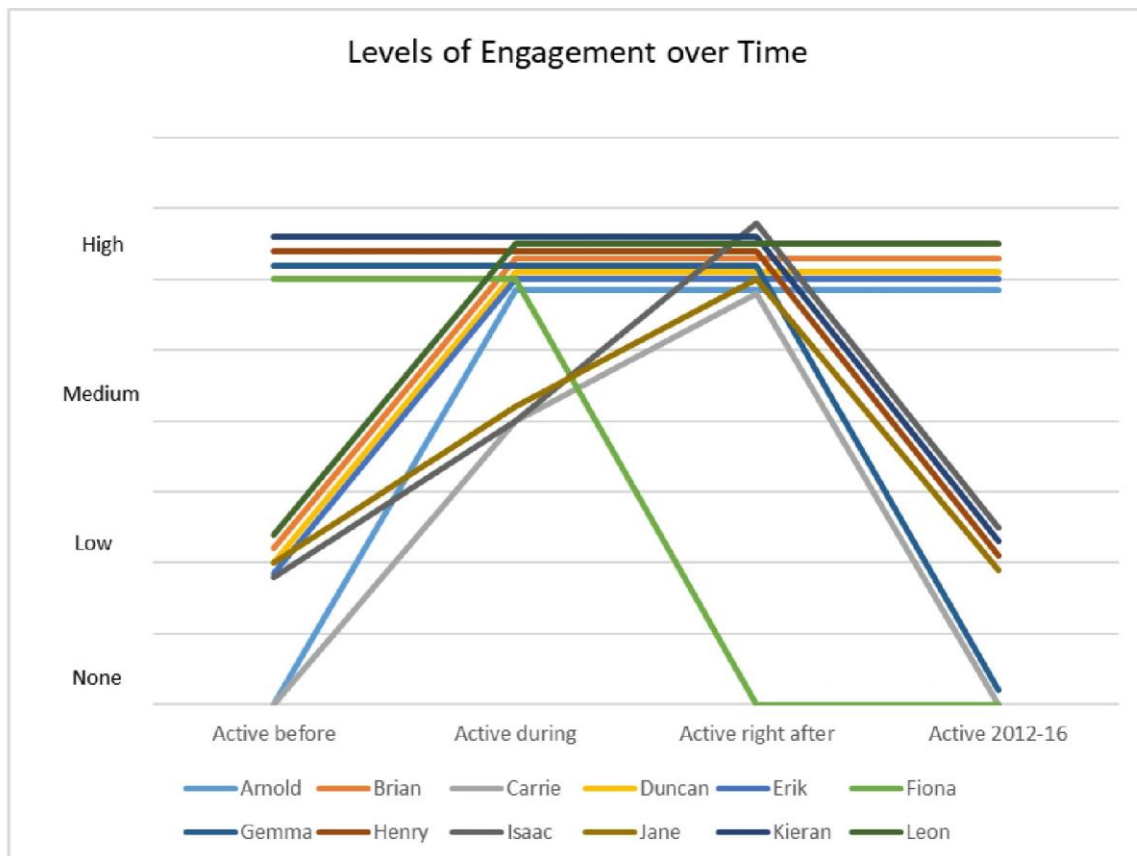

Figure 4 – Differing trajectories for high and low levels of active before the occupation.

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Based on interview data, the reason for the divergent trajectories appears to relate to the expectations of and lessons from the occupation. Looking back, one experienced activist stated: "[for me] the occupation… was about the [radically democratic] structure and not the [political] content whereas now my whole thing is more about the content and not necessarily the structures" (Henry), a lesson he learned shortly after the occupation.

Another said:

> the lessons learned from the occupation probably soured me a little bit to that kind of direct action… because of the people that you come across…, because of those kinds of discussions that you end up having. I'm kind of like… I'm too old for that shit… It's a bit like 'that was a phase'… I wouldn't do another occupation now at the age of 26. I think it's a student thing… [but] at the time you think it's this massive thing (Gemma).

Instead, for those with less experience the occupation was a space of community and hope: "I loved learning about [the political issues]… So many brilliant minds to learn from in the occupation. And there was a human factor: I loved the people, I loved their passion and caring" (Carrie); "as someone who didn't do political activism, my first impression was novelty because I didn't know if I belonged there… but then I really quickly adapted. … No one judged me on a moral basis" (Arnold). This was a somewhat similar experience to another relative novice to political activism:

> When I first entered, students and teaching staff sat in a big circle on the floor, deliberating the form this movement should take. I was impressed by the openness with which newcomers were greeted…. I felt that this was not only a political cause, but also a social group I wanted to join. (Leon)

Subsequent political engagement also seemed linked to emotive responses generated through participation (see Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000; Stürmer and Simon 2009). In discussing one of the reasons why they joined another protest years after the occupation, Jane stated: "I was feeling a bit nostalgic about the whole camaraderie that happens when you protest en masse". Emotions also played a role for those who participated less from 2012 onward. Some reported feelings of embarrassment or frustration with the occupation, either because they felt the actions taken or their ideologies at that time were politically naïve.

Those who engaged less in the subsequent periods were asked if they felt this was a result of a lack of readily available opportunities to be politically active. No one appeared to think this was the case. Isaac stated: "I… haven't gone out of my way to find anything going locally," Isaac) while others felt there were opportunities to be involved but that they were not being taken: "look at [the democratic socialist Labour Party leader Jeremy] Corbyn and how wildly popular he is amongst a segment of

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society. He is an opportunity which has been lacking, more or less" (Duncan). Others also agreed, but no interviewee reported campaigning for Corbyn despite many agreeing with his politics and the opportunity being available.

While this may be a question of failure to 'ask' for participation it is more likely a by-product of weakened social networks of activists. While some of these activists maintained strong relations with those who had participated in the occupation, many were no longer geographically close for purposes of engaging in sustained offline mobilisation. Others had lost much of their contact with other occupiers due to burnout, personal quarrels, or new responsibilities that placed additional strains on maintaining those social ties. The inter-personal issues within the occupation that affected engagement did not mirror the findings of the literature which focused more on the creation of "bonds of trust, respect and comradeship between students" (Casserly 2011, 72; also see Ismail 2011).

Conclusion

Engagement in the student occupation at the University of Kent started largely as a result two important factors. First, respondents all stated that they had, at the time of the occupation, a leftward political leaning or holding a strong belief in affordable higher education. Second, many of the respondents became involved in the occupation through existing social networks associated with student societies and friendship circles. These two components were not independent of each other as many of the respondents had built their social networks and selected their student societies based on their political interests. While perhaps uncontroversial, the data suggests that those who are politically oriented were easier to recruit into engagement. However, as all respondents fit the criteria above, it suggests that activists did not successfully reach out to and recruit those who were not politically motivated prior to the occupation.

The trajectory of those high-intensity activists suggests that prior engagement is an important factor in understanding engagement patterns. The data demonstrated that engagement in activism drops off over time. The mechanisms involved in the drop-off of activism varied, not only pointing to the effect of burnout but also to life-course changes as a product of finishing their studies and losing their activist social networks. The drop-off in engagement may apply only to a particular period in life-course events for the generation represented here as their time as students ended. However, some who went on to postgraduate studies did not continue with their activism while others who were in employment did maintain high engagement levels. This suggests that the particular life-course event of university did not itself explain engagement levels. Instead, it appears that high-intensity engagement is hard to sustain and drives to maintain long-term high-intensity engagement could lead to movement dropout. Instead, high levels of engagement can take place even without high-intensity engagement where consistent but less risky, time-consuming, or effort-giving activism is requested. Perhaps it is this burst of vital energy by young activists in the form of high-intensity engagement, that then subsides into other forms of participation or movement dropout, which explains why youth are "regarded as a vanguard of social change" (Furlong and Cartmel 2007, 137).

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