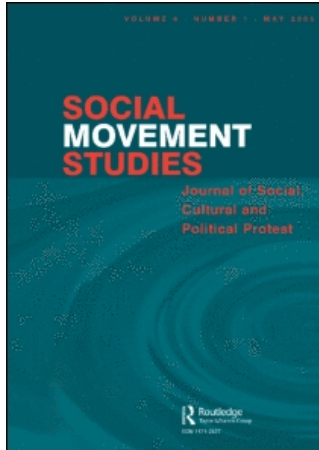


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# ‘I’m not an activist, though I’ve done a lot of it’: Doing Activism, Being Activist and the ‘Perfect Standard’ in a Contemporary Movement

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper, based on in-depth interviews with thirty-three individuals involved in the burgeoning Menstrual Activism movement, explores why the identity ‘activist’ is resisted among some social movement actors. Drawing on a ‘perfect standard’ of politics and activism grounded in the core values of rigor and humility, an activist must ‘live the issue’, demonstrate relentless dedication, and contribute a sustained effort to duly merit the label. This conception of activist effectively places the label ‘out of reach’ for many social movement actors. This analysis raises questions regarding the assumption that collective action necessarily depends on the alignment between personal identity and collective identity and calls for a more nuanced and complex conceptualization of collective identity in the context of social movement action.*

**KEY WORDS:** Personal identity, activist identity, Menstrual Activism, values

To most people, the image of an activist is someone who is out of the ordinary – someone who hoists picket signs in front of the Pakistani Embassy, marches on the Washington Mall demanding money for cancer research, or chains him- or herself to trees. Given these images, it’s easy to imagine that activists are ‘other’ people – weird or dauntingly benevolent. (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 282)

In their book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000), concerned about the future of feminism, exhort women to actively engage the feminist movement at the start of the twenty-first century. One strategy that the writers employ involves expanding the definition of activism, calling it ‘everyday acts of defiance’ (p. 283), which, by extension, expands the definition of *activist*. To them, a ‘regular woman becomes an activist when she rights some glaring human mistake,

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or recognizes a positive model of equality and takes the opportunity to build on it' (p. 282). This engagement with identity and social movement participation is not new. Indeed, students of social movements have long been fascinated by the relationship between identity and social movement participation in the context of collective action. In particular, social movement theory has consistently suggested that social movement participation necessarily produces enduring changes in one's personal identity. Many theorists, including Rupp and Taylor (1987), Klandermans (1994), Taylor and Raeburn (1995) and Whittier (1995), argue that through engaging in social movement work (activism, mobilization and various organizing efforts), movement participants modify not only the way they see the world but also the way they see *themselves*. Indeed, as Polletta and Jasper (2001) assert, activists' very biographies are impacted in meaningful ways, even among so-called casual participants. But is the claiming of the identity *activist* necessarily part of this personal transformation? Is it appropriate to assume that social movement participants self-identify as activists? And relatedly, what are the consequences if a social movement actor does not see him/herself as an activist?

In much of the social movement literature, being an activist is a *collective* identity linked to participation in a social movement/collective action. A particular collective identity locates people as members of a group and this identity is fortified by virtue of participating in collective action, especially action that carries risk (Rupp & Taylor, 1999). But why should the construction of such an identity matter? Some theorists, including Klandermans (2004) claims that the relationship between collective identity and movement participation is 'overwhelmingly supported' in existing empirical studies, and Hunt and Benford (2004) characterize the dependent relationship between collective identity and movement participation as 'rather straightforward' (pp. 437–438). But Melucci (1995) critiques the reification of the concept 'collective identity' in much of the social movement literature. He argues, instead, for a more processual characterization of this key concept, one which takes into account a constructivist view of collective action (and carries epistemological and methodological implications). Later, MacDonald (2002), resisting what he terms the 'new orthodoxy [of] the collective identity paradigm' (p. 109) challenges the assumption that the goal of social movements is the construction of solidarity. Rather than seeing action as the product of mobilized collective identity, MacDonald theorizes that action is itself 'shared struggle for personal experience' (p. 125) and argues for a shift from 'solidarity' to 'fluidarity' and from 'collective identity' to the 'public experience of the self'. These discrepancies in the literature point to the need for a more nuanced, more complex conceptualization of collective identity, one that interrogates rather than assumes the importance of collective identity as merely an instrumental resource and thus is better equipped to tease out the relationship between personal and collective identities in the context of social movement activity.

Thus, this paper enters this debate surrounding social movements and identity by pointing to a puzzling gap in the extant literature, that is, the assumption that social movement participants necessarily and automatically identify as activists. Here, drawing on in-depth interviews with participants in a particular social movement, I explore the resistance of some social movement actors to self-identify as 'activist'. This resistance reveals a disconnection between what I call 'doing activism' and 'being activist' and, in turn, challenges the de facto characterization of collective identity as a means to stimulate movement action. By pointing out the lack of alignment between personal and collective identities, I challenge the assumption that such an alignment is crucial to

movement participation. In other words, one can 'do activism' without 'being activist', and this discrepancy begs a more complicated account of identity at the center of the study of social movements.

### The Tension between Doing Activism and Being Activist

An emerging body of empirical studies demonstrates that not all social movement participants claim the label 'activist'. For example, Becky Thompson (1997) found a conceptual divide between 'doing' and 'being' among a group of long-time white women anti-racist social movement participants. In her description of a meeting called to gather a group of such women, she recounts: 'When we first began meeting, many of us weren't sure if we really "belonged" in the group: perhaps we hadn't done "enough" or were not "really" qualified, and we certainly knew of others whose contributions exceeded our own' (p. 355). Relatedly, and adding a gender dimension, the breast cancer volunteers/activists that Amy Blackstone (2004) studied rejected the label 'activist' because '[they] may be unable to think of themselves as activists; for a positive vision of women's activism is difficult to construct alongside stereotypical notions of gender and feminism' (p. 362). More precisely, Blackstone found that the women at the core of her study – volunteers for the Susan G. Komen Foundation – situationally shifted the way they presented their gender identity. For example, when the women hosted a woman guest speaker, they appeared more engaged and willing to pose serious questions during the talk than when the guest speaker was male. In the latter instance, the women tended to portray a more 'carefree, positive and faint-of-heart image' (p. 362). For them, Blackstone argues, this situationally bound behavior display demonstrated how the Komen women linked the identity activist to questioning 'normative notions of gender' (p. 363), something they were unwilling to do. Thus, the Komen women resisted being seen as activists in spite of doing activism, and certain closely held values were fundamental to this discrepancy. Blackstone resolves this analytic tension by adapting Mary Pardo's (1998) designation 'border feminists' (women who engage women-centered social change work but do not define as feminist) and deeming the Komen volunteer/activists 'border activists'. This nomenclature works to reconcile the contradiction between *naming* the work and honoring the self-identification of those *doing* the work. That is, mere social movement participation may not be adequate to determine who does and does not self-identify as activist, thus forcing us to delve more deeply into issues of identity and their link to social transformative work.

As argued by activism scholar Debra King (2004): 'Activists have the potential to be social actors par excellence; they can provide insights into how identities are managed in order to create social change' (p. 74). Since the mid- to late 1980s, issues of personal identity have emerged in social movement studies. This important development inaugurated a new approach to collective behavior by drawing on social psychological theory that bears on a sociological understanding of collective behavior (see, most notably, Stryker *et al.*, 2000). Thus, comprehensive social movement analyses can account not only for structural conditions that compel individuals to act but also reckon with the diversity among actors that distinguishes them from one another in terms of their social locations, identities, and other features of selfhood. But as Stryker *et al.* (2000) posit, the current popularity of the concepts of self and identity has led to an imprecision that fails to grasp the full conceptual complexity.

Viktor Gecas's (2000) tackles this complexity by drawing on both social psychological and sociological theory, arguing that we must necessarily approach identity as more than social location (such as social relationships and memberships) and advance a study of identity that is value based and culturally focused. Gecas, drawing on the work of Rokeach (1973), Schwartz and Bilsky (1990) and Shamir (1990), defines values as

conceptions or beliefs about desirable modes of conduct or states of being that transcend specific situations, guide decision making and the evaluation of events, and are ordered by relative importance. Values serve as standards by which to live, as well as goals for which to strive. (Gecas, 2000, p. 95)

Identities, he claims, are 'anchored in values and value systems [and] are important elements of self conceptions, perhaps among the most important, since values give meaning, purpose and direction to our lives' (p. 94). When we understand the values associated with one's identity, he suggests, we gain insight into activist commitment and authenticity. Values figure prominently in the construction of personal identity perhaps across the population of social movement actors. Indeed, it is values that shape the very definition of who is and who is not appropriately considered an activist.

This paper uses a case study of participants in a small but growing social movement called 'Menstrual Activism' to illustrate how a particular set of values shape the personal identity *activist*. In short, I argue that the conception of activist is anchored in key values of humility and rigor expressed as a 'perfect standard'. And this standard, I show, places the esteemed identity activist out of reach for many social movement actors who deem themselves unworthy. In turn, they preserve the moniker for, in the words of Baumgardner and Richards, 'other people – weird or dauntingly benevolent' (2000, p. 282).

### **What is 'Menstrual Activism'? Who are the Menstrual 'Activists'?**

A persistent presence in the women's health movement since the early 1970s, later championed by women-centered spiritualists, herbalists and 'new age' proponents and more recently connected to the environmental movement, the 'punk scene', and anarchist communities, Menstrual Activism begins with a scathing critique of the dominant cultural narrative of menstruation. Various rooted in feminist, Green and anti-capitalist ideologies, the menstrual activists resist the framing of menstruation as dirty, shameful and something best hidden and work to make menstruation, as documentary filmmaker and menstrual activist Giovanna Chesler puts it, 'audible and visible'. This counter-narrative explicitly politicizes the personal, demystifies the experience of menses and ultimately values women's bodies (Bobel, 2004, 2006).

The Menstrual Activism movement is home to a primarily white, college-educated/middle-class population, of (mostly, though not exclusively) women under forty, nearly half of whom identify as queer. But tactically and ideologically it is tremendously heterogeneous, manifesting itself in a rich variety of styles, spanning the terrain from the sacred to the ribald and the practical to the abstract. For example, it involves a mother–daughter ceremony in preparation for a young woman's first menses in San Francisco, a 'Tampon Send Back' campaign at the University of North Carolina, a small group of women hand-sewing their own reusable cloth menstrual pads in rural Ohio

and the mounting of Judy Chicago's installation 'Womanhouse', which includes the controversial 'Menstruation Bathroom' in New York City (Bobel, in press).

But in spite of the vitality of the movement, a large number of its participants do not identify as activists. Specifically, more than half of the respondents in my study of thirty-three menstrual activists pointed out that they did not define themselves as activists. I heard statements like: 'I am not an activist, per se' and 'I've never defined myself as a menstrual activist, though I've done a lot of it.' These comments suggested that my basic definition of activist was in dispute. To understand this dynamic more deeply, I provide a case study drawing on data gathered as part of a much larger investigation of Menstrual Activism. During the period May 2003–June 2004 I conducted a combination of focus group-, phone- and email-based in-depth interviews with thirty-three 'activists' associated with the Menstrual Activist movement. I approached each of these individuals because I regarded them as activists, as individuals consciously and strategically creating products and materials and staging actions designed to raise awareness and challenge the 'menstrual status quo'. More precisely, I approached this research armed with a rather broad and inclusive definition of activist, drawing from the varieties of ways this term is defined by others. For example, Oliver and Marwell (1992) define an activist as someone who 'care[s] enough about some issue that they are prepared to incur significant costs and act to achieve their goals' (p. 252). Lee (1984) refers to an activist as one who engages in "direct action tactics" [bringing] issues that have been trivialized, passed over, and neglected into direct and immediate importance' (as quoted in Kramarae & Treichler, 1985, p. 33). The participants included producers of zines<sup>1</sup> called 'zinesters', filmmakers, authors, an artist/poet, several campus and/or community-based organizers, the (now former) Co-Coordinator of the Student Environmental Action Coalition's (SEAC) National 'Tampaction' Campaign, and the founder and owner of a business that makes a reusable cloth menstrual pad. These interviews are contextualized by ongoing fieldwork including participant observation of activist events (mainly menstrual health workshops and information tabling) and textual analysis of print and Web-based materials produced by movement participants.

The demographic composition of the interviewees follows. Thirty-two of the thirty-three informants (or 97 percent) identified as women (one participant identified as 'gender queer'), 78 percent were under thirty years old when they began doing menstrual activism (a number of the informants are no longer active and/or became active several years ago), 57 percent held college degrees (but most have attended or are currently attending college), 69 percent have taken women's studies courses, 63 percent self-identified as queer, lesbian, bisexual or another descriptor that was not heterosexual (such as 'love everyone', 'somewhere on the continuum from homo to het', ambiguous and questioning). All but two of the activists self-identified as white (both non-white participants were biracial). Thirty percent of the activists performed their activism in urban areas, while 48 percent did their mobilizing/organizing/activist work in college campus settings. The sites of activism were concentrated in the USA (with four active in Canada and one in England). Those active in the USA were roughly equally distributed in all regions of the country.<sup>2</sup> The examination that follows is based on the critical assessment of the thirty-three interviews using the axial coding method of thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to reveal how activists perceive their identity.<sup>3</sup>



## Analysis

### *Differences among Activists?*

My first attempt to better understand the disjuncture between doing activism and claiming the identity activist brought me directly to the demographic characteristics of the menstrual 'activists' I interviewed as interpreted through the social movement and identity literature. Recognizing that less than half of the respondents did self-identify as activists (or in some cases, simply did not balk when I used the label to describe them, but did not volunteer this label when self-describing), I looked for differences between the two groups, but I found none. Whether the individual was attached to an organized group, for instance, was insignificant, in spite of some social movement theory that assumes a direct relationship, as described above. The specific activist tactics (making zines, doing workshops, staging direct actions, or mounting and maintaining websites) also did not emerge as significant. Neither level of activity nor length of time doing activist work differentiated the two groups. Respondent age did not appear a variable. Finding no obvious answers in inter-group differences, I was forced to look elsewhere for an explanation for the identity conundrum I faced. And I found by listening to menstrual 'activists' that they operate with a specific set of values used to determine who is and is not worthy of the title 'activist'.

### *Locating the 'Perfect Standard'*

Interestingly, the menstrual activists do not lack for self-definition, indeed, many clever and diverse ways of naming abound ranging from the playful 'panty decorator' and 'Queen Periodia' to the more academic in tone such as 'menstrual literacy educator'. Yet the particular label 'activist' was clearly problematic. Why? In *Generation at the Crossroads: Apathy and Action on the American Campus* author Paul Rogat Loeb (1994) documents student withdrawal from political activity of all kinds. He argues that this disinterest stems from what he calls a 'cultural climate in which students learned to mistrust peers who take on causes that go beyond their personal lives' (p. 4). Easily dismissing students who did involve themselves politically by reducing them to stereotypes, they further demanded of these students 'a perfect standard of political proof, as though people should not open their mouths unless they were eloquent enough to debate Henry Kissinger on *Nightline* before they might take their arguments seriously' (p. 35). The menstrual 'activists' I studied echoed these very same lofty standards. More precisely, this particular group of social change agents placed high premiums on the values of humility and rigor in the construction of the 'perfect standard' by which they measured activists.

### *Avoiding Arrogance: The Core Values of Humility and Rigor in Activist Identity*

When I asked Kirsten Gavin, known for her activism on a college campus (and the organization of the first ever national menstrual activist conference in 2000), to respond to the descriptor 'menstrual activist' she commented that the very term *activism* is overused, or in her words 'played out'. Interestingly, she *does* use the label *activist* for herself, but does so critically (note how she begins to discuss *activism* and quickly shifts to discuss *activist*). She explained:

KG: I loved the word ‘menstrual’ as an adjective and I think it really spices up the term ‘activism’ which kind of gets played out.

CB: How so?

KG: I just noticed that people got sick of hearing the word and weren’t sure what it was even referring to. Sometimes I would hear a backlash and there was some connotation of better than thou or arrogance attached to *activist*. (Emphasis mine)

Gavin’s observation points to the common discursive problem of language rendered meaningless when descriptive words are deployed indiscriminately. In this case, the term activism, repeated to the point of ‘people [getting] sick of hearing the word’, is gutted of true meaning. When *anything* is activism, and, by extension, *anyone* is an activist, then the definitional power of the word is compromised. Those that do claim it, Gavin claims, do so with an air of arrogance when they assume they can appropriately claim this special status. Notably, her final comment, linking the self-described activist with unflattering self-importance, is especially instructive as it reveals the place of *humility*, or freedom from conceit or vanity, as central to activist identity. This value emerged in other related studies of activist identity. As Eliasoph (1998) discovered in her ethnographic study of American avoidance of politics, individuals identified political talk (a specific form of activism) as the domain of those who think too much of themselves, and those who participated in such talk as ‘riding on their high horse’. This conception effectively devalues those who do engage in public debate, raising issues, and building awareness.

This perfect standard is based not only on the value of humility, as shown above, but also on the value of *rigor*. In the most reductive sense, this analysis reveals that an activist is valued for the level of unyielding sacrifice s/he brings to her social change efforts. An activist, in this view, is noted for her/his willingness to go to extremes in the service of the cause – no hardship, no trial is too much. And this, of course, links to the earlier point about arrogance. To duly earn the esteemed title of activist, you must put in your time and demonstrate your commitment. But how much time? According to those I interviewed, only those who ‘live the issue’, working very hard and at great personal cost over a long period of time, merit the designation activist.

Liz Armstrong, a writer who, together with Adrienne Scott, wrote *Whitewash: Exposing the Health and Environmental Dangers of Women’s Sanitary Products and Disposable Diapers – What You Can Do About It* (1992) – a book central in the movement – denied she was a menstrual activist since ‘menopause ten years ago’, thus suggesting that only menstruators can be menstrual activists. This particular perspective implies that an issue must literally be ‘lived’, in this case materially embodied, for true activism to take place. And what is important about embodiment? Armstrong’s comments suggest that if an issue is woven into the everyday, lived reality of an individual, it is inescapably personal. One can’t *help* but care about the issue, implies this logic. But, of course, if this were the case then *all* menstruators would be menstrual activists and no non-menstruators would take up this issue. Yet several so-disembodied individuals do indeed carry the mantle of change against the menstrual status quo, including (but not limited to) three men central to the movement: Harry Finley, the founder and curator of the Museum of Menstruation, Jay Critchley, a performance artist/environmental activist most famous for his Statue of Liberty costume fashioned entirely of reclaimed tampon applicators, and ‘Vinnie’, entrepreneur and self-described ‘tampon case distributor’ (see Vinnie, 2002) to name just a few of the most well known of menstrual activists. Maggie Kincaid, a woman and campus



activist who does not menstruate, is another example of an 'activist' drawn to the issue in spite of physical detachment. For her, it is *because* of her absence of menstruation that Kincaid has chosen to politicize the issue. She says: 'people are so ignorant about menstruation. I don't menstruate and it's okay. People need to hear that.'

Therefore, it is not *only* the presence or absence of lived and present menstrual experience that separates the 'real' activists from the rest of us; it is a set of values or standards beyond embodiment – standards that specify the amount of work an individual must produce. For example, Lily, the student instructor of an experimental course called 'Menstrual Health & Politics', offered for several years at a small liberal arts college, resisted the label 'activist'. When I probed as to why, she replied:

I'd really like to think of myself as an activist. I hope that I am one. I'd be letting myself down if I weren't. But at the same time, I think that I have very high expectations of activists that I'm not living up to at the moment. Though I know it doesn't do anybody any good (least of all myself), I am wracked with guilt at this question because I don't feel like I am dedicating enough of myself towards some form of activism. I think that dedication is key to defining activism for me. An activist constantly challenges and educates others about whatever issue/s they are working towards changing.

Here, Lily's admiration and aspiration are clear but her reasoning is curious. While she admits to having high expectations for activists, her own assessment of herself and her work does not seem adequate to merit the title activist. *Hoping* that she is an activist suggests that the designation activist is bestowed upon an individual, like an award given for exceptional service. In this conception, to be an activist is to do honorable, desirable work *constantly*. And herein lies an important point. While some individuals who perform so-called 'dirty work' such as trash collecting and grave digging work at distancing themselves from the work to preserve a positive self-concept (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), Lily's separation from the label 'activist' is not an act of self-preservation. Unlike those invested in keeping undesirable identities at arm's length, Lily *wants* to be included among those she admires. For her, activism, unlike 'dirty work', is not distanced because her positive self-concept depends on the divide, but because she doesn't believe she measures up.

The matter of expectations of what it means to be an activist was a theme that ran solidly through the discourse of my informants. Yet these expectations are vague without a clearly identifiable list of criteria that describes a legitimate activist. Rather, exaggerated, even romanticized, abstract allusions to tireless commitment, selfless sacrifice, unparalleled devotion and other conceptions of true activists recurred. During a focus group interview of nine campus 'activists' – all members of a student environmental group on a small, private liberal arts campus that recently initiated a menstrual health campaign – one member, Liz Goldsmith, shared her impression of 'real activists'. Enshrined in what she called '60–70's style activism' she said: 'It suggests that you have to live outside the norm. They give everything up. You know, electricity, kids, marriage.' Goldsmith's peer, Maggie Kincaid, agreed and emphatically offered: 'I want to make change but I also want a house.' The room filled with laughter, then a series of concurring head nods. Eventually, a thoughtful silence fell over the room. Kincaid finally broke the stillness with the pensive statement: 'It's a paralyzing way to look at it.'

Furthermore, the perfect standard so expressed does not stop at the type of work required, but the length of time spent laboring at it. Lily's telling phrase 'constantly challenges' paints a picture of an unstoppable individual who commits her/his life to the issue, never missing an opportunity to educate. This depiction emerged in another activist's response to my query: 'Are you an activist?' Her response was: 'I still consider myself that but I feel like maybe it's a tad bit lame calling myself that just because *I'm not like super active*' (emphasis mine). With a 'perfect standard' such as that described collectively by these informants, is it any wonder so few identify themselves as activists? Does anyone really measure up?

If an activist must be 'super active' and 'constantly challenge[ing]', what is the context for this ambitious work? Is it adequate to educate your mother, your roommate, your partner, and the teenager who rings up your tampons at the local grocery store? A spirited exchange during a group interview was especially illuminating, when, Liz Goldsmith, spoke of 'doing big things'. She stated that 'there's a lot of pressure to be big. The stuff I do all feels so little.' Carolyn Fryberger, menstrual activist via the environmental movement, questioned whether her 'personal was political'. Quickly, Jo Williams, who identifies primarily as a queer activist, stated that of course everything personal is political and, for her, it is part of her activism to claim the label 'activist', like feminist and queer. Doing so, she said, 'is trying to pull it back'. But Williams' reclamation is not typical. More often, I heard a reluctance to claim the identity activist. Cartoonist and zinester Karen Friedland's description of true activism is more representative. She spoke of her impression of *real* or *true* activists who 'take it to the streets', demonstrating her operative definition of social movements protest. When I pressed her, asking why her work contributing to a widely circulated, extremely comprehensive and well-known zine (entitled the *Femmenstruation Rites Rag*) did not constitute activism, she replied, exasperated, and finally concluded with a brief statement of begrudging gratitude:

All right. alright! I guess I DO have a picture in my head of an 'activist' being someone who marches on the streets with a banner! But yes – now that you drive the point home, writers/activists have certainly been activists in a big way too thru' out history. Thanks for the validation! (and yes – judging by the heaps of mail I used to get, world-wide, in response to *Bi Girl World*, I would say I was a bi activist too).

But her last comment, referencing a zine she wrote for several years, *Bi Girl World*, betrays her. Here, she deems her work activist only because of its reach across the world. For her, an activist is someone who reaches 'heaps' of people 'world-wide', thereby highlighting that the number of people touched in far-flung places is what really matters. This characterization of the legitimate activist suggests that small-scale, individual-level effort, such as spreading a message by word of mouth or distributing a small run of a zine, is not adequate to merit the designation activist. Another informant echoed Friedland when she conceded that 'yes I am an activist, but this is definitely not something that I've been doing my whole life'. The ambivalence expressed in this brief statement is important. While she may claim the identity activist, she undermines her own self-designation by implying that a more legitimate activist is someone who has toiled on a grander scale, devoting her/his life to the cause. Again, this 'perfect standard', rooted in values of humility and rigor, speaks through the discourse of social movement actors.

### Discussion

In this paper I have argued how the identity *activist* is linked to a 'perfect standard' that places the label out of reach for some social movement actors. Thus, *doing* activism and *being* activist can, in some cases, be seen as distinct and separate and this distinction is linked to a particular set of values that shape the definition of activist. This suggests that the struggle with naming is merely symptomatic of a complicated network of values and judgments that anchor identities, a network arranged hierarchically. A central axiom of Stryker's (1980) role-identity theory is the assertion that all identities are organized into a 'salience hierarchy' (pp. 60–61). That is, according to Stryker, some identities are more desirable than others, and social movement participants are more likely to invoke those identities higher in the hierarchy. Stryker's theory may well explain why trash collectors distance themselves from their 'dirty work' and women doing women-centered activism reject the identity feminist. The 'f-word', denigrated and misunderstood, carries a lack of prestige, placing it low in many salience hierarchies (see Beck, 1998; Nelson, 2000; Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). But the activist label, as I have shown, ranks high in the hierarchy. It is an identity constructed by unrealistic, even romantic, notions of the omniscient, tireless and selfless individual. In this case, the identity is avoided not because it ranks too low in the salience hierarchy but because it ranks too *high*. Activist, as an identity, is out of reach for many who, in spite of doing the work, resist the identity.

This notion of a perfect standard begs a question. Who, exactly, *does* satisfy the criteria for activist? Who *can* afford to devote nearly every waking hour to their chosen cause? And while this mythic activist is off doing the good work, who, after all, is caring for the children, preparing meals, washing laundry, paying the bills? The idea of constant, relentless dedication obviously sets an incredibly high standard, a standard of constancy and commitment that few even self-described activists could satisfy, especially those who do the work of publishing, teaching and other movement work that challenges dominant conceptions of 'in your face' and 'on the street' activism. In particular, Ferree and Mueller (2004) argue that women doing the work of grassroots organizing may not see their work as political, nor themselves as activists. Further, Ferree and Mueller note the failure of social movement theories to adequately take gender relations into account, arguing that 'even women activists themselves, however, may be slow to define grass-roots community organizing . . . as being really "politics" which they may define as male-dominated formal institutions' (p. 589). As Ferree (1997) asserts, there is often a conventional division of labor in social movement communities (e.g. women behind the scenes/men in front of the cameras), a split that obscures women's activist contributions (as cited in Ferree & Mueller, 2004). Historical examples of this dynamic abound, of course. Both the first and second waves of the US Women's Movement were stimulated by abolitionists and civil rights workers, respectively, who grew weary of performing the labor but garnering neither credit nor limelight, and thus began to see gender inequity within their ranks (see, for example, Flexner, 1975; Echols, 1989, respectively). More recently, Smooth and Tucker (1999) have documented how women's background labor, especially that of E. Faye Williams and Linda Greene, essentially produced the Million Man March, though their efforts were not acknowledged publicly. This dynamic, they assert, was reminiscent of a similar distribution of labor in the civil rights movement. According to Smooth and Tucker, 'On the one hand, Black women were kept out of key leadership roles, but on the other hand, they were the sustaining force carrying the movement' (p. 244). Such gendered

dichotomies, such as the paid work/housework division, veils the essential political work performed by women at the local level (Ferree, 1997, as quoted in Ferree & Mueller, 2004), a dichotomy that women may internalize, even when working in social movements dominated and/or led by women. Further research is indicated to address the extent to which the 'perfect standard' is gendered.

Finally, if the identity *activist* registers as 'too good' for some, what are the implications for social movements and the theories that explain them? Theorists who assert a dependent relationship between collective identity and movement activity may worry that the 'perfect standard' will produce a deficit in movement activity. But this worry is grounded in an assumption that the purpose of social movements is the construction of collective identity, without which movements fail. Alternatively, following MacDonald (2002), I argue against the notion of movement action as mobilized solidarity, but rather the convergence of individuals in struggle, as evidenced here by a loose association of social change agents who do *not* unite collectively as activists. The major finding of this paper – the lack of correspondence between doing and being an activist linked to the notion of a hierarchy of values/identities – questions the assumption that identity alignments are crucial to movement participation. Clearly, social movement participants can do activism without self-identifying as activists – a revelation that calls for a more complicated account of identity in our analyses of social movements.

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## Notes

1. Zines are defined as 'noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines, which their creators produce, publish and distribute by themselves' (Duncombe, 1997, p. 6).
2. None of the study participants requested anonymity, though one woman did ask that only her first name be used. Thus, all names used here are actual.
3. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define the axial coding to be 'the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions' (p. 124).

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