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## “We may be pirates, but we are not protesters”: Identity in the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society — [Source link](#)

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## **Abstract**

Radical activist organizations face the complex task of managing their identity so as to draw political attention, but also to appear legitimate and thus gain public support. In this paper we develop a picture of the identities of Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS) members, a group mostly known for their direct action against whaling, via a thematic analysis of material from the SSCS website and interviews with SSCS members. In online commentary founder Captain Paul Watson establishes several deliberately paradoxical notions of who the Sea Shepherds are. We relate these identity statements to interviews with core activists to examine how they manage the identity conflicts resulting from the group identity, such as being seen as “pirates” and “hard lined vegans”. It is found that SSCS position themselves as a diverse and unstructured organization, yet distinctively passionate and willing to take action where others will not. The implications of this research are discussed in relation to the importance of understanding the constraints and conflicts around political activist identities.

Key words: political activism, collective identity, environmentalism, conservation, multiple identities

## **“We may be pirates, but we are not protesters”**

### **Identity in the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society**

“Sea Shepherd may not be everyone’s cup of tea. We are a no-nonsense, in-your-face, activist organization that rocks the boat, upsets the status quo, and pins the bell on the rear end of corrupt and ineffective politicians. We get called names, and we recruit enemies faster than we recruit supporters, but the one thing we do better than any other organization on this planet is that we champion and risk our lives for our clients, the creatures of the sea, as if they were our family – which when you think of it, they are.” *Captain Paul Watson, 2008.*

The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is a non-profit direct-action marine wildlife conservation group, founded by Paul Watson in 1977 (SSCS, 2010). Their most high profile missions are directed at preventing Japanese whaling vessels from operating in the Antarctic whale sanctuary. Their missions have had temporary success as the Japanese whalers suspended their 2010-2011 operations due to “harassment” from the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, although they have since returned for the 2011-2012 whaling season (SSCS, 2011). Sometimes branded eco-terrorists (a label heavily refuted by the SSCS; see Nagtzaam & Lentini, 2008, for a further discussion), they have a high profile in international politics and were recently the subject of a Animal Planet channel series titled *Whale Wars*. Despite their high profile in international environmental politics and the environmental conservation movement this group has hitherto received relatively little research attention.

This paper explores the identities of Sea Shepherd Conservation Society members and the ways in which they negotiate meaningful ‘symbolic’ identity boundaries that enable them to distinguish themselves as uniquely effective, but also retain a level of legitimacy and justification for their approach to conservation. We begin by briefly reviewing research from sociology, social psychology and the political sciences, which describes the central importance of social or collective identities in participation in social movements which aim to achieve social or political change.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, we follow the lead of Stryker, Owens and White (2000) who argue that a (sociological) focus on social structure and ideology can be usefully integrated with a (social psychological) understanding of individual psychological

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<sup>1</sup> The terms ‘social identity’ and ‘collective identity’ can have different understandings and tend to be used by different disciplines (where sociology has tended to prefer ‘collective’ and social psychology has tended to prefer ‘social’). In this paper we are referring to the identity of a person as a member of a collective, as discussed by Simon & Klandermans (2001).

processes (see also van Stekelenberg & Klandermans, 2010a). We then consider recent developments in that literature, which increasingly emphasise the nuanced ways in which individuals can manage competing or potentially conflicting aspects of their identity. This work is then related to the case of environmentalist identities, and in particular the SSCS members, through an analysis of commentary published on the SSCS website and in-depth interviews with committed members. Our goal is to describe the ways that members of the SSCS negotiate these prescriptive identities through their talk, emerging as both 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' in their commitment.

### *Social Movements and Collective Identities*

The concept of identity has been central to the study of social movements and activism in sociology (see Polletta & Jasper, 2001, for a review), and social psychology (e.g. Klandermans, 1997, 2002). In the sociological literature there is now widespread agreement that social movement groups choose strategies for change that are not merely instrumental but also expressive of their identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). That is, social movements form not only to meet pragmatic needs (organization, co-ordination), but also to enable expression of more intrinsic, symbolic aspects of self-hood (though there is some disagreement as to whether collective identities exist prior to participation in collective action, or form around participation in action; see Snow & McAdam, 2000). In the social psychological literature too (most notably social identity theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1979, and self-categorization theory, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987) it is understood that a collective, group, identity forms the psychological basis of a common cause (Klandermans, 1997, 2002; Reicher, 1984, 1987; Thomas, McGarty & Mavor, 2009; see van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008, for a recent meta-analysis). This is because collective identities link the grievances of individuals to a collective cause, and in doing so act as the psychological link between individual and group. Collective identities allow for a re-description of "personal" interest into collective interest (Blackwood & Louis, in press; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010a) and provide a set of content or norms that define 'who we are' and 'what we do' (Turner, 1991; Thomas, Smith, McGarty & Postmes, 2010). As such, examining the identities that bring groups of people together, or that are formed in social movements, is important for understanding the foundation on which the movement rests and the ways in which they seek to create political and social change.

While there is a now relatively widespread agreement about the importance of collective identity in social movement research, recent developments in both sociology and social psychology call for increasingly nuanced understanding of the role of *multiple* identities (e.g. Amiot et al, 2007; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Swann, Gomez, Seyle, Morales & Huici, 2009), and how personal and collective identities relate to each other in social movement participation (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Jasper, 1997, 2004; Snow & McAdam, 2000). This issue seems particularly important in the study of social movements where identities are often strongly ideological and we might expect strong potential for conflicting or opposing identities. For example, consider the extent to which someone who identifies as an environmentalist, and is also employed by the mining industry, would be able to flexibly negotiate various social contexts without the identities coming into conflict. The current research can be seen as a contribution to these calls for an examination of how people negotiate, manage and experience their overall sense of themselves, particularly when some aspects of self might come into conflict. Similar to recent studies (e.g. Hopkins, 2011; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), we argue that the examination of rhetoric is one avenue that enables an understanding how personal and collective identities relate, and how people manage conflicts among their multiple identities. Before we can describe how our research tackles this problem, it is first necessary to outline two concepts (employed somewhat similarly by sociology and social psychology) which are relevant to our approach: identity boundaries and identity content (norms).

### *Managing Multiple Identities*

*Symbolic identity boundaries.* Symbolic identity boundaries are the conceptual distinctions made by actors to categorise and order the social world into groups of people, creating a sense of “us” and “them” (Lamont & Molnar, 2002) and, according to the social identity approach, are also represented at a cognitive level (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Identity boundaries are often made visible through developing practices for communicating group based identities (Hunt & Benford, 2004; Lamont & Molner, 2002). For example, environmental movements can create distinct ‘green’ identities by adopting behaviours and lifestyles that are developed within the cultural and political spaces of contemporary environmentalism, and are demonstrated through everyday practices (‘environmental citizenship’; Horton, 2006). The ‘green’ philosophy of environmental movements is generally known to be anti-consumerist and advocates sustainable use of resources, reusing/recycling goods, living “local lives”, and involves

“visibly shared habits” such as a distinctive dress style (Horton, 2006, p. 3; see also Carter, 2001). Such symbolic identity boundaries serve to create a distinct identity around which develops an activist community or culture separate from mainstream culture, as well as highlight the claims of the social movement to the public. Bernstein (1997) argues that social movements deploy their identities strategically; sometimes to highlight similarities to the majority identity, at other times highlighting their differences.

In the context of environmental movements, Wright (2009) argues that they usually adopt a conversionary model that is focused on including more people in the ‘in-group’; the message put forward is that “everyone should be an environmentalist”. As such, the boundaries and barriers to entry into the environmentalist identity are lowered and softened. The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, however, seems to differ in some respects from this conversionary model. SSCS adopt a high-risk confrontational approach to conservation, characterised by a focus on placing themselves between the whalers and the whales. SSCS and similar grassroots movements arose from the sentiment that larger organizations, such as Greenpeace, had lost their ‘radical edge’ (Carter, 2001). Therefore SSCS has arisen from and is ideologically centred on direct action, a frustration with supposed inaction, and a minimal marketing model. This means there seems likely to be more prescriptive identity boundaries as members engage in a political struggle of “us” against “them” - the outgroups being whaling and fishing industries, the regulatory agencies (e.g. the International Whaling Commission), and even other conservation groups (e.g. Greenpeace). Thus, SSCS members take on a somewhat distinct and oppositional identity from the mainstream culture, engage in behaviours that are often met with disapproval (because they are seen as potentially violent), and they are required to continually justify their actions. These relations must be continually negotiated, and one way this process of negotiation can be understood is through the rhetorical strategies used to manage identity.

*Identity content (norms).* In addition to identity boundaries (the “us” and “them”), the content of identity (the sense of “who we are”) makes an understanding of boundaries more meaningful (Lamont & Volnar, 2002), and determines the extent to which different identities impinge upon each other (Baray, Postmes & Jetten, 2009; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). The content of the identity creates constraints on the level at which an identity can be flexible, and how identities can overlap. For example, Baray et al. (2009) explored the identities of members of an extreme right wing political group, and found that strong, prescriptive ideological identities like these have implications for all levels

of self, including personal identity. Indeed, they found that members of such groups often report a stronger sense of personal identity, representing a blurring between ostensibly personal and social levels of self. In the environmental conservation context an example of this might be that some groups have norms for behaviour that include prescriptions on personal behaviours (e.g. not eating meat). However, Hunt and Benford (2004) argue that it is not so much a question as to whether collective and personal identities relate, but how they are negotiated, managed and experienced. Other qualitative research speaks to this point, illustrating the ways in which these potential identity conflicts can be managed rhetorically (e.g. Antaki, Condor & Levine, 1996; Hopkins, 2011; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). For example, Hopkins (2011) identified rhetorical strategies used by British Muslims to understand their superordinate (British) identity that allowed them to retain subgroup (Muslim) distinctiveness. We employ a similar approach in this research to demonstrate how conservation activists negotiate the potential conflicts created by their collective identities.

#### *“Extreme” Social Movement Organizations*

Given these points around the cultivation of symbolic identity boundaries and the role of identity content, or norms, in managing multiple identities, it is timely to consider what this would mean for the identities of people committed to social movements and particularly more radical or extreme factions of a social movement. Indeed, identity is central to how groups come to develop a sense of themselves as political actors, and also more extreme, potentially radicalized, sense of themselves as collective agents. Recent developments in the social psychology of protest have sought to distinguish between those groups that are politicized (Simon & Klandermans, 2001) and those that are radicalized (Simon & Ruhs, 2008; Simon & Grabow, 2011; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010b). Politicization of identity is understood to have occurred when a struggle becomes embedded in a broader societal context; a battle between “us” and “them” for the hearts and minds of a bystander public (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Importantly, because politicized groups – and politicized identities – are embedded in a societal context, politicized identity promotes activism which usually falls within the accepted rules and laws of mainstream society: so-called “normative” protest (Becker, Tausch, Spears & Christ, 2011; Simon & Ruhs, 2008). Conversely, radicalization of identity is understood to have occurred where groups come to reject the involvement of (or feel rejected by) mainstream society and with it “normative” methods for bringing about social change (Simon & Grabow, 2011; van



Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010b). Radicalization tends to be associated with an ideology which suggests that ‘the means justify the ends’ and a lack of voice which leads to dissatisfaction and disenchantment with processes which might promote more mainstream forms of activism (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010b). Given its separation from (and in some cases, rejection of) “mainstream” norms, it stands to reason that a radicalized identity would require significantly more rhetorical work to manage and negotiate than a politicized one.

This is not least because the term ‘radical’ often has pejorative and contested connotations (see Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2009, for a discussion of this point). Opposition groups can frequently work to illegitimise, repress, or sometimes even criminalise activists (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Linden & Klandermans, 2006). For example, Adair (1996) documented the subtle ways that supporters of nuclear power worked to re-define the (anti-nuclear) activist identity, with the eventual result that members of the movement no longer identified with the cause. In the anti-whaling context that forms the basis of the current research, Japanese authorities and others routinely label the activities of direct action groups like SSCS as ‘ecoterrorist’. In the current paper we consider the actions of SSCS as radical in the sense that they adopt more extreme, direct-action measures (e.g. confronting whalers) as a solution to combating whaling, but we do not wish to imply that their activities are illegitimate (indeed, as we will see, this is a notion that is hotly contested within the group themselves). Rather, given their endorsement of more extreme actions we seek to interrogate how group members negotiate an understanding of themselves and their group without passing judgement on those strategies as ‘radical’ per se (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2009).

The implication is that people who take on these identities have to be prepared for the positive and negative “baggage” that accompanies them, and that activists’ engagement with oppositional others plays an active role in the development of their identities (Einwohner, 2002). Indeed, we argue that the management of identity boundaries and conflicts can aid activists’ ability to attract political attention by distinguishing them within broader social movements. However, as illustrated in the opening quote by Paul Watson, they can also result in backlash and social ostracism: ‘we recruit enemies faster than we recruit supporters’. In this paper we aim to investigate the content of the identity of members of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, and the extent to which there exist constraints that opens them to the risk of public disapproval that needs to be managed and mitigated.

### *The Present Study*

Consistent with the renewed focus on the ways in which multiple identities are negotiated, some recent research has sought to consider the rhetorical strategies that can be deployed to manage conflicting identities. The concept of ‘framing’ has been employed extensively in social movement literature to analyse the dynamic discursive/rhetorical processes involved in mobilizing ideas, and for understanding the mechanisms that facilitate the alignment of personal and collective level identities in social movements, in which the personal meaningfulness of collective action can be understood (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford, 1986). Similarly here, through the analysis of commentary and interviews with the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, we aim to analyse the discursive framing of the identities of these conservation activists, and to understand how such identities are experienced, negotiated and made meaningful.

Many researchers thus now recognise the value of using qualitative methods to understand the production, negotiation and management of social identities (e.g. Antaki et al., 1996; Hunt & Benford, 1994; Hopkins, 2011; Linden & Klandermans, 2007), and the ways in which narrative can demonstrate the complex internal and external conflicts people face in their commitment to activism (e.g. Barr & Drury, 2009; Mills & Smith, 2008; Polletta, 1998). Antaki et al. (1996, p. 488) argued that studying talk allows researchers to see how identities shift in context, and how identities are deployed to tell stories, “the speakers are...invoking social identities, negotiating what the feature or boundaries of those identities are and accumulating a record of having those identities”. The approach employed in this research is to demonstrate how conservation activists negotiate the potential conflicts created by taking on their SSCS identity.

This study involved two separate data sources: first we analyse web commentary published on the official Sea Shepherd website, written by Paul Watson. We focus this part of the analysis on the organizational identity statements Watson makes, and create an understanding of the framing of the public identity that SSCS promotes and that a SSCS member would then need to regulate. We seek to establish if, and indeed *how*, being a SSCS member poses the potential for social ostracism and thus how conflict is managed. We use this data to set the scene for the next section, in which we analyse interviews with key members of a local SSCS chapter. In the interview section we investigate how it is that particular SSCS members adopt and negotiate their identification with the collective identity of the SSCS, as framed by Watson, and how they manage the particular identity conflicts that occur as a result. We seek to find out

how they balance the complex task of managing their identities so as to both draw attention to their distinct (and often controversial) approach to conservation, yet be seen as legitimate and justified in their strategies. Doing so will shed light on the symbolic boundaries and possible constraints that exist around their multiple identities. This research therefore aims to respond to Snow and McAdam's (2000) call for greater understanding of the ways in which identities are constructed and maintained at individual and collective levels.

## Method

### *Data Collection*

*Web Commentary.* Twenty-one editorial and commentary articles written by Paul Watson (except Article 13) were selected from the official SSCS website (<http://www.seashepherd.org/news-and-media/commentary-and-editorial.html>), covering the time period of June, 2009-March, 2011 (catalogue in Appendix A). To hone in on the symbolic identity boundaries and content associated with the SSCS identity, we selectively chose articles that made “we” statements about the SSCS, rather than reports on their activities.

*Interviews.* One of the authors made contact with SSCS members through local networks, such as through a café where many members spend their time. Participants then passed on the researcher contact details to other members of the SSCS. The interviews were conducted in public places (usually a café). The participants were core members of a local chapter, and therefore we gained valuable access to highly engaged activists.

Six interviews took place between August and September, 2010. They ranged from 39 to 113 minutes (average of 77 minutes), participant ages ranged from eighteen to sixty five (average just under forty). There were five men and one woman, and they self-identified as activists for an average of two and a third years. Two participants reported having been on the anti-whaling missions to Antarctica, the others were land-based and responsible for marketing and fundraising. One participant was paid an income by the SSCS. Informed consent was gained from all participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed orthographically. All names and identifying information have been removed or changed.

The interviewer used an interview guide but oriented the questions towards participants’ responses, and referred to previous interviews as a guide to the subsequent ones. The main interview questions this analysis centred on were, “do you think it takes a particular kind of person to be involved in SCSS?”, “do you feel like becoming a part of SCSS changed you as a person?”, and “would you say there are any qualities that Sea Shepherd members have in common?”.

### *Methodological Approach and Procedure*

The thematic analytic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used as a guide for both of the data sources. This approach is highly flexible and has no pre-existing epistemological or theoretical framework. As such it can be used within any chosen epistemology, so long as the chosen epistemology and its assumptions are made clear and consistent. The process of undertaking thematic analysis involves identifying, interpreting and analysing repeated themes or patterns within talk. The interpretations that can be made from these themes again depend on the epistemological position (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We adopted a critical realist epistemology, which acknowledges that people actively construct their identity and meaning through language and social context, but that also believes that social reality while jointly constructed, can be known and analysed within certain limitations (Sullivan, 2010). Critical realism rejects the notion that language simply reflects 'reality' (Sullivan, 2010), while also creating a path forward from some of the restrictions of the social constructionist perspective, in particular the difficulty in asking questions about social structures that could constrain or influence discourses (Marsh & Smith, 2001; Sims-Schouten & Riley, 2007). The critical realist thematic analytic approach we have adopted therefore could be considered a hybrid method, one which is being developed by qualitative researchers in order to move beyond the 'relativism-realism debate' (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sims-Schouten & Riley, 2007; Sullivan, 2010).

The hybrid approach allows us to both attempt to interpret participants' sense of subjectivity and meaning-making, and the ways in which such reflected their belonging to an existing social organization (a socio-political reality), while also identifying discursive practices and rhetorical devices (as in discursive psychology, Edwards & Potter, 1992). In our analysis of how participants rhetorically construct their identities, rather than focus on the within-interaction talk, we refer to the broader context, or non-discursive element in which the SSCS organization fits; for example, the ways in which Watson's collective level construction of the SSCS identity may be a reflection of the organizations' position and history within the conservation movement. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that while thematic analysis may not allow interpretation of the functionality of talk as much as discourse analysis may there is still the ability to identify certain discursive actions, such as the deflection of criticism or the establishment of reasonableness.

The analytical procedures for the web commentary started with identifying the most common statements Watson made about who the SSCS are, and what distinguishes them from other groups. Many of these articles were written by Watson in response to either critical media coverage or correspondence between SSCS and Greenpeace, and conveyed arguments by Watson that functioned to justify and legitimise SSCS actions. Therefore, these articles allowed us to address research questions regarding how the SSCS collective identity is constructed in response to public and other social movement groups' perceptions of SSCS. It also created an understanding of the types of conflicts and criticism that individual members are likely to have to rhetorically work with, and thus grounds the second part of our analysis.

For the interviews we focused the analysis on identifying themes which were directed both by our research questions and our adaptation to what the interviewees said. We focused our research questions on: how members joined and fitted in with the organization; the perceptions of the organizations' influence on their identity; how ideological conflict, and conflict over labelling strategies, are managed both within the group, and between the group and the general public; and how much 'space' or flexibility they had in their identities as members.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### *Web Commentary Analysis*

We structure the commentary analysis around the main organizational value statements and "we" statements Watson made. It can be seen that Watson establishes several striking, apparently paradoxical, claims about who the SSCS are. Firstly, Watson explicitly owns (and reinterprets), the "pirate" label often ascribed to SSCS, as seen in the following response to an editorial in *The Australian* newspaper:

I have no problem with the headline of your article that "Whaling protesters are behaving like pirates", except with the word "protesters." We may be pirates, but we are not protesters. I hate that name actually, it sounds so submissive, "please, please don't kill the whales." I've never seen a banner, petition, or a hunger strike that has saved a whale - not a one. We on the other hand have cut Japan's kill quota by a quarter to a half each year for the last five seasons. No Natalie, we don't protest. We intervene against illegal whaling. We don't like coming down here year after year. But we come because the signatories to the treaties and laws are doing nothing, just as the British did very little to stop piracy in the Caribbean in the 17th Century. Governments are doing even less today to stop the pirates diminishing life in the sea. Thus we have no choice than to be pirates of compassion in opposing the pirates of greed. (*Article 16*)

The identity of SSCS as pirates, as stated by Watson, was self-chosen. He states that they had “no choice” but to become “pirates of compassion” because governments do nothing to stop “pirates of greed” from killing marine life. Watson, in fact, objects to being called a protester because he claims it is submissive and ineffective; thus he distinguishes SSCS from other conservation groups (c.f. Greenebaum, 2009, who found that the animal rights workers actively disavowed the label “activist”). The “pirates of compassion” rhetoric is one example of the deliberately paradoxical labels the SSCS have adopted; another example is the notion of being “gentle terrorists”, in which SSCS position themselves alongside other activists who have been labeled as terrorists and criminals.

It's a funny world where vegetarians who have never injured a single person can be denounced as terrorists by nations that have committed gross and horrific acts of genocide and habitat destruction. It's killers flashing peace symbols as they denounce the “viciousness” of writers, poets, philosophers and teachers.

In a world where the Dalai Lama is a “terrorist” then there is only one possible thing to be ourselves.

And so I stand with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in the noble memory of Gandhi and King, and in respect for gentle terrorists around the world from Nelson Mandela to Aung San Suu Kyi.

For in the end, it will be the pirates that bring down the pirates, the outlaws that will uphold the law and the gentle terrorists that will prevail over the brutal terrorism of nation states, corporations and organized crime. (*Article 19*).

The danger the SSCS face is thus positioned as selfless sacrifice, ‘us against an unjust world’. Watson argues that in fact they are the ones who are being treated violently by the ‘real’ terrorists and pirates, and that SSCS, like few others in the world, will work to “prevail over the brutal terrorism of nation states, corporations and organized crime”. The rhetorical work distinguishing SSCS and justifying their choice in strategy is furthered by another seemingly paradoxical notion, of “aggressive non-violence”. In the article below, in response to accusations of violence from Greenpeace, Watson draws on a Buddhist notion of “compassionate wrath” in which they practice “intimidation without injury”.

**Greenpeace:** We believe that throwing butyric acid at the whalers, dropping cables to foul their props, and threatening to ram them in the freezing waters of the Antarctic constitutes violence because of the potential consequences. The fact that the consequences have not been realized is irrelevant.

**Captain Paul Watson:** After three decades of operations, we have proven our expertise in getting results without causing injuries or committing felonies. The test of non-violence is consequences, and Sea Shepherd has exercised extreme caution to save lives without causing injury. We practise non-violence in the spirit of Hayagriva, the Buddhist idea of aggressive non-violence or the exercise of compassionate wrath. In others words, intimidation without injury for the purpose of achieving enlightenment. (*Article 6*)

The constitution of violence differs- Greenpeace state that violence is determined by its *potential* consequences, while Watson states that violence is determined by *actual* consequences. The key to the concept of aggressive non-violence seems to resolve around intention; they do not intend to cause injury, despite the fact that their actions put people at risk.

Overall Watson continually throughout the web commentary works to create an identity of the SSCS as an altogether different kind of conservation movement. As he says below, “we are not your old school greenies”

The fact is that Sea Shepherd Conservation Society cannot be categorized as a “terrorist” organization, because we are something completely different. We are not your old school greenies. We don’t hold banners, bear witness, sit in trees, hold picket signs, collect petitions, and write to politicians. What we do is get in the faces of those who are illegally—and violently—destroying our oceans. We practice aggressive non-violent direct action. We don’t hurt people, but we have no hesitation about taking out of commission the instruments of death that are used to illegally kill living beings. (*Article 1*)

Indeed, clearly coming through in this example is the frustration SSCS have with “old school greenies” and protesters, as discussed earlier. There is both a strong sense of justification for their choice in strategy, while also distinguishing themselves from other conservation groups, stating that SSCS avoids “categorization”. Therefore Watson rhetorically works to avoid categorization or classification, by establishing SSCS as unique. Further, what is described as unique about SSCS is that they are especially “passionate”, in a way that protesters are not.

I am sometimes simply awed by the drive and determination of these incredible people. They are what makes Sea Shepherd what it is – the most passionate, most active, most effective marine conservation organization in the world. (*Article 10*)

Sea Shepherd could not exist nor accomplish anything without our volunteers. Volunteers bring passion to a cause, the kind of passion that can’t be hired or bought. It is that passion that makes us effective, and defines who we are. (*Article 14*)

It seems clear that Watson develops a representation of the SSCS identity around seemingly paradoxical principles of non-criminal piracy, compassionate wrath and aggressive non-violence; he also represents members as distinctive through their passion. On the basis of this analysis we conclude that there are indeed problematic or controversial aspects of the SSCS identity which require rhetorical management amongst people who take on such an identity. Indeed, the SSCS webpage offers crucial insights as to the sorts of conflicts that are likely to require identity management amongst members of this group (e.g. the use of direct action, the label of ‘pirates’, ‘ecoterrorists’, and perhaps even ‘protesters’). This analysis also yields insights into some of the strategies that may be deployed in this



management. Of note are Watson's use of rhetoric to characterize the SSCS as the aggressed against, rather than the aggressors, and his insistence that the SSCS can't be classified because of their distinctive or unique passion. In the interview analysis, we further interrogate how these identity complexities and conflicts are managed by members of the SSCS themselves.

### *Interviews*

In the interview analysis our aims were to examine how members adopted and negotiated the SSCS identity, how they established themselves as unique and yet also as unremarkable or 'normal', and how they managed identity conflict in relation to their public identity as SSCS members. We present the most common ways of talking about these topics from across the interviews, but we also note some novel cases of variation in talk between the interviewees. We have grouped the findings first into how members negotiate public perceptions of SSCS, and then we examine how the members negotiate their own (personal) identification with the organization.

### **The Public Identity of SSCS**

In this first section of the interview analysis we focus on the aspects of SSCS member identity that the interviewees talked about in relation to their interactions with the public. It was apparent that the self-chosen identity as 'pirates' required continual justification. In addition an expectation that SSCS members are vegans was reported to have caused some issues both within the organization and with the general public.

### *Pirates*

As discussed in the web commentary analysis, the 'pirate' identity is explicitly taken on by SSCS and the use of rhetoric to negotiate around the negative connotations of this label was a key feature of these interviews. In talk about the labels 'pirate', 'hardcore' activists, or 'renegades', instances of public backlash and the implications this has for members became evident. The uses of these terms at times were positive or non-serious, yet at other times identified as something that SSCS need to move away from. There was seen in much of the talk, as the following example displays, a contrast between at times describing themselves as somewhat ordinary or indistinguishable people,

and then also discussing the extremity of some of the groups' actions, particularly when it comes to life endangering missions to Antarctica.

Extract 1

**P3** yeah well it's kinda like, almost like they're [[SSCS]] hardcore, you know, like pirates of the sea, that actually go out and do something and it's all exciting and all that, but in reality it's probably not haha

**INTVWR** yeah

**P3** most of the year it's probably pretty boring

**INTVWR** I imagine so. Yeah I'm dreading the next Antarctic mission there, like err operation no compromise?

**P3** yeah

**INTVWR** just about... just if things keep escalating.

**P3** I think it's going to get rather rough, I think someone will lose their life soon.

**INTVWR** yeah. It's going that way isn't it

**P3** mm. Like Paul Watson says, you know

... his question is, would you give your life for a whale?

**INTVWR** yeah I know. He asks that of everyone on his crew doesn't he?

**P3** yeah. so, well... I wouldn't. haha

**INTVWR** well yeah

**P3** would I give my life for a whale? mmm maybe... would I give my life for Paul Watson if he told me to go and stink bomb a ship? mmm probably not. At all. haha

P3 speaks of the possibility of someone losing their life, and although he clearly speaks of his unwillingness to do so, there is a sense of inevitability of escalating danger in their missions. What is of particular interest in this extract is the mixture of both laughing off the stereotype of SSCS as "hardcore...pirates of the sea", because "in reality it's probably not [exciting]", and then also speaking of the potential of someone losing their life.

As seen above, the issue was raised on occasion whereby non-members and new members expect SSCS to be an exciting 'put your life on the line' organization. The radical image of SSCS apparently attracts some people, but was also said to turn other people away - either because they do not like the idea of being 'pirates' or even in some cases when SSCS does not turn out to be as extreme as they would like. Indeed, P1 described the "crazy" nature of the SSCS as what attracted him to the group originally.

Extract 2

**P1** I was watching the news at night time and there was all this stuff about...what was going on in Antarctica, and they were mainly extenuating Greenpeace, and then they just mentioned there's this other group, down there, who are a little more hardcore... and the more I read about them, the more I thought these guys are CRAZY you know, I gotta support them for sure

P1 describes the "hardcore" nature of the SSCS as an attractive factor to him. The statement, "these guys are CRAZY", is in this context a compliment to their confrontational style. Therefore the labelling of the group as pirates or "hardcore" activists seems to have negative or positive connotations depending on the context. In this case being

“a little more hardcore” or “crazy” was an exciting and attractive drawcard. Yet, as we demonstrate later, sometimes the notion of being hardcore was undesirable.

Overall, it was evident in the interviewees talk the ambivalence they possess towards the pirate identity, and its utility when engaging with the public, as seen below.

Extract 3

**P4** We don't have enough support with our group to do what we need to do. The general public is the mass that we have to move forward. So if we can pull more from the masses into support us and think that we're not a radical group of, you know, whatever, I think that's the message.

**INTVWR** but then, Sea Shepherd's kinda become the radical group, it's like the um

**P4** it has, I mean, the colour, black, with the skull and cross bones, that speaks for itself.

Extract 4

**P2** there's a lot of people out there that... but, I mean, they're just... they can't... they live in their box world where they can't see outside. Umm, I don't know its, the public reaction is always constantly changing, you can't put a finger on it. I mean, most of Australia is anti-whaling, and it's always going to be that way, but yeah, it just seems like, everything constantly changes, like, so one year we'll have the whole... every person who walks past will go yeahhhhh and then one year everyone will be like really, aggressively against us.

**INTVWR** yeah. So do you encounter much hostility when you're at the stalls then?

**P2** yeah a lot. A lot of people think we're criminals

**INTVWR** yeah

**P2** <unclear> if you boarded our ship we'd cut your throat and throw you overboard type thing. He's like, people on... Australia as a society is sort of...very set in their ways I think

Extract 5

**P5** I think even negative media promotes Sea Shepherd? Sure, if they're showing us interfering with the whalers down there, great. You know? If they call that criminal, great.

**INTVWR** and I think a lot of people are even lured to the fact that they're slightly renegade? Just like the flag's a giveaway.

**P5** well Paul... well he said you've gotta send a pirate to catch a pirate. And, he thinks that, this is Watson, thinks that... well doesn't think... we are, we're pirates of passion against pirates of profit.

P4, who has marketing experience, speaks of the desire to move away from the radical image in order to gain the much needed support from “the masses”, yet acknowledges the SSCS flag carries the skull and cross-bones image. P2 tells how the public reactions to the SSCS actions can vary greatly, sometimes the public is supportive while at other times they are “aggressively against us”, and “a lot of people think we're criminals”. Yet P5 says that even negative media helps their organization, “if they call that criminal, great”. This talk varied greatly between members, indicating an intrinsic dilemma for the group as they seek to position themselves as both legitimate and distinctive; as a group that is willing to take necessary actions that no one else will.

## *Vegans/Vegetarians*

The other aspect of ‘public’ identity conflict that was raised in all of the interviews was the perception that SSCS is a strictly vegan organization. It became apparent that there is, or has been in the past, an expectation that the organization is vegan both from members and from the general public.

### Extract 6

**P1** ...some of them are vegans, they.... some of them seem to think that Sea Shepherd is a vegan organization... we've had a few, well we've had one guy in particular who thought it was, but then...

**INTVWR** I thought, I thought the diet on the ships was vegan?

**P1** oh don't believe everything out there...

...

**P1** yeah it's not vegan it's vegetarian and there's also rumours of people having meat on board and shit... I think they're trying to get away from that a bit because it's... it's kind of hard to... err... you don't really want to be known as a hard lined vegan

**INTVWR** yeah

**P1** it kind of detracts... you want to be more mainstream, popular, mum-and-dad, and...

...

**P1** we had one, who, as I told you, or think I told you, he disappeared when I bought a pizza for [name] that vegan, a pepperoni pizza, he thought we were all vegans and when he found out we weren't, he was gone like he'd seen the devil was after him

...

**P1** well he thought we were all hardcore vegans.

### Extract 7

**P2** ...the vegan presence in the organization is... it's not what it's made out to be type thing. And like, people are vegan for their own reasons

P1 attends to perceptions of the organization as “hard lined” or “hardcore” vegans, and that there are attempts to pull back from this image. He dismisses the issue as “rumours” and clarifies that rather than the SSCS ships being vegan, they are vegetarian, and that there is a need to be “more mainstream, popular”. Being vegetarian seems then to be indicated as milder, more mainstream. The notion of being “hardcore vegan” appears to imply an unwieldy and inflexible ideological position that they are keen to move away from. Likewise, P2 in the extract above attends to a normative expectation of veganism, and states that “it's not what it's made out to be”, indicating a clear history of discussion around the issue. He also defends the possibility that SSCS may play a role in influencing people's choices; rather “people are vegan for their own reasons”.

In addition to perceptions of the organization as vegan, one interviewee did say it had caused some conflict among group members also.

### Extract 8

**P3** A lot of people are the vegans you know?

**INTVWR** yeah yeah

**P3** and um, there's not many, but a few of them are. And they like to, you know, almost wear a badge. Like I'm a vegan, and so should you be. But people aren't, so... there's a few things like that that people can get a bit narky about, but

**INTVWR** so do you have a regular diet? Or are you vegetarian?

**P3** oh I just eat whatever I want, whenever I want.

**INTVWR** fair enough.

**P3** yeah it doesn't worry me. But if I go off and like, if I take my children with me to a stall, which they, they really enjoy it as well, they like to have Hungry Jacks or something like that,

**INTVWR** yeah sure

**P3** which the vegans don't like, so you can't eat it in front of them?

There is some backtracking in P3's description of the extent to which veganism is normative within the SSCS.

At first he states "a lot of people are the vegans", then "there's not many, but a few of them are", perhaps an attempt to minimise its importance overall. In the story of taking his children to the stalls with burgers he describes a need at times to negotiate social situations in order to avoid a clash of ideologies between himself and "the vegans", who are described as "wearing badges" and quite outspoken.

As seen in the extracts below the interviewees described their own reasons for being vegetarian.

Extract 9

**INTVWR** are you a vegetarian or a vegan or?

**P2** err vegetarian I guess you could call me yeah

**INTVWR** and um, is that because, like, you didn't feel any obligation to um, do that?

**P2** no um, like it wasn't sort of because of Sea Shepherd and all that, just sort of like probably a couple months in, obviously there's animal rights activists in Sea Shepherd and um, I saw a documentary on one of the tables...And I watched *Earthlings*, and was like oh, maybe I shouldn't (be like that) and it's like, it was sort of just, and at the same time it was more like I sort of needed a change in lifestyle to eat more healthy and stuff

Extract 10

**P1** yeah I just discovered that all the people that I that I deal with at the stall, most of them are vegetarians or vegans, they all seem pretty switched on and pretty healthy, thought there must be something in it

Both P1 and P2 within a short period of time of joining the SSCS decided to reduce meat-eating or become vegetarian. However the position they take is that while it often goes hand in hand with being a member of the SSCS, the members are in no way pressured to be vegetarian. They seek to describe the SSCS as an inclusive and accepting organization, in which normal differences and debates exist. In contrast to the excitement of being "hardcore" expressed in extract 2, present in the talk of veganism was a movement away from being known as "hard lined" or "hardcore". This demonstrates how the boundaries of the identity can be flexibly negotiated in response to the connotations resulting from the adoption of that identity, and provides an answer to our question as to how members of the SSCS negotiate prescriptive identities through their talk in ways that allow them to emerge as both 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'.

## Personal Identification with SSCS

This section deals with members 'personal' identity management rather than their management of the public and collective SSCS identity (though it is difficult to truly separate the two; Baray et al., 2009). By 'personal' we are referring to the processes of integration within the overall self with this specific aspect of the collective self. Our aims in this section are to identify how members align their personal identities with the group, what it is that members say they have in common, and also how they distinguish themselves as individuals, which was heavily emphasised throughout the interviews.

### *Adoption of the SSCS member identity*

All but one of the interviewees described a smooth unproblematic transition from being interested in the SSCS cause, to joining and becoming core members of the organization. They described personal motivations for the origin of their interest in conservation. For example:

Extract 11

**P6** I thought there was inherently something wrong with the world and the way that our current system operates in the world, but I couldn't put my finger on it until I started reading a lot of Captain Paul Watson's writings, and then I was like, that's exactly how I feel about the world, and I wasn't alone and there was a group of people out there that saw that there was something wrong with the world

Extract 12

**P3** so I just went down there, take the kids

**INTVWR** yeah that's a pretty good entry.

**P3** had a look around, spoke to a few of the guys there. Went back the next day, bought some t-shirts... and then went down again, and asked how you volunteer. One of the leading directors here said, yep, come down to the next stall, so I did, and then, met all everyone and seemed to fit in quite well, so.

Note that the participants did not appear to experience the joining of the organization as a transitional process, but as an easy alignment with a group that already met their personal values (“[I] seemed to fit in quite well”).

However one interviewee expressed initially expecting an incompatibility between SSCS and her own identity.

Extract 13

**INTVWR** so you identify with them even [[Sea shepherd]]?

**P4** yeah definitely, I didn't, and I've said this to [name], I didn't know much about the truth of Sea Shepherd before I got involved, I thought it was this group of radicals, who went out like pirates of the sea

**INTVWR** yahoos, sort of thing?

**P4** yahoos. And, not in a bad way, in a very political, adventurous, risk-taking kind of way, and I didn't want to associate myself with them, because I thought I'm not that person, would they accept me? Probably not. I mightn't be the right fit, so I didn't join, because I was more concerned with whether they would want me?

P4 describes a concern that she would not be “the right fit” with the SSCS, which she had visualised according to a stereotype; a stereotype that was changed upon meeting members of the group. Her expectation of the group as being “radicals” or “pirates” was not necessarily a negative label but rather did not fit with her sense of herself overall. It can be seen in this one example at least, that people can experience reservations about an activist group based on a socially available stereotype or expectation that has the potential to pose barriers to interested parties joining the organization, in particular with SSCS the idea of being a ‘radical’ or ‘pirate’. P4 however presented her concerns as normal and unremarkable, in which she overcame this barrier and later on described feeling positively integrated with the organization.

*‘It does take a particular passion’*

In our attempt to determine whether participants perceived there to be a typical SSCS identity, we probed interviewees for what qualities or characteristics the members have in common. They seemed to at times have difficulty articulating precisely ‘what it takes’ to be a member of the SSCS and did not identify any particular identity requirements. However as seen in the web commentary analysis previously, an emphasis on “passion”, “caring” and “compassion” arose. In the talk about passion it was at times implied as something extraordinary, which few people possess.

Extract 14

**P2** I think it takes um someone with a level mind and um, whose. I think there’s a realisation in humans that’s like, it’s hard... like even... how do I put this? I think um, you know, when someone’s like, think about, people are really selfish and divulged into their own lives and couldn’t give a shit about the environment or human rights or whatever it may be, and it’s very commonable now and I think, it takes a person to actually give a shit, or actually care. And it’s like, it’s really rare now I think?

...

**INTVWR** like [[SSCS]] gives you the opportunity to make a difference or?

**P2** yeah I mean it sort of, if you want to positively effect the world around you, or make a change, then yeah, it would, but it’s sort of like, usually the people we’ve come across already done that before? There’s not many people that think oh, this is a new concept, you know

**INTVWR** oh so you’ve found that Sea Shepherd will bring in the people that already care, but won’t get, can’t make other people care?

**P2** yeah I mean like, the thing with Sea Shepherd is, like you really really hate it or you really really like it. And it’s sort of like,

**INTVWR** yeah that’s one of the things we’ll talk about

**P2** those parts of people, the people that are really really gonna like it are those that are caring and compassionate, and.

Extract 15

**P3** um... there's a lot of hardcore people, activists type, who um, you know really feel for the environment and the whales and all that sort of stuff, they obviously like stay and join because they think they're doing something really important. Other people get excited by it. They turn up for... have a look around, say they're gonna turn up but never do, or turn up for the last two hours and think, well this is really boring. You know, standing out in the middle of the street shaking a can, or, um, and that maybe don't fit in with the local members that have maybe been members for a while, so they don't come back.

The interviewees said that the people who like SSCS are those who are caring and compassionate. Passion was described as being “rare”; therefore by association SSCS members are implied to be a rare sort of person. A polarisation of people who oppose or support the cause was also indicated in Extract 14, people “really really hate” or “really really like” SSCS. The terms “hardcore” or “activists” (extract 15) were also often used to indicate a distinctively passionate person, who was likely to become a dedicated member.

Passion was also identified as distinguishing SSCS from other conservation groups, such as Greenpeace. This rhetorical differentiation of SSCS and Greenpeace was a re-occurring theme in the interviews overall.

Extract 16

**INTVWR** Do you think it takes like a particular type of person to be a Sea Shepherd member? Or does anybody, can anybody fit in?

**P5** I think anybody can, but it does take a particular passion to errr... follow it through the whole way I think

**INTVWR** what do you mean by follow it through?

**P5** as in you can put your donations into Sea Shepherd... but... I think Sea Shepherd encourages more of the either ... not so much outspoken but, more of the radicals as compared to Greenpeace, in people that are passionate about wanting to make a difference. Sure Greenpeace has got it, but it does take a different type of person to be involved with Sea Shepherd.

**INTVWR** ok. Um, so if you had to say anything that like, all members had in common, would you say that kind of passion or radical flare or something?

**P5** no I wouldn't say radical flare, I just think they're passionate about the earth, and where it's heading. Ummm... yeah I think that's as close as we can put it. I'm sure there's a lot of Greenpeace members out there that are passionate about what's happening with the world, but umm I guess things don't happen quick enough in big organizations for a lot of people, and therefore a niche becomes available for Sea Shepherd.

P5 draws on comparisons to Greenpeace, by claiming the SSCS organization cares more, are more “passionate about what's happening with the world” (and thus more willing to take direct action) than the Greenpeace organization. P5 pulls back a little from the description of SSCS members as “radical”, and rephrases this to being “passionate about the earth, and where it's heading”. Passion was also translated across to the notion of being action-oriented, in which other types of actions were classed as not doing anything.

Extract 17

**P1** Greenpeace doesn't, hasn't saved any whales they just err just go down and take pictures, they err, I get pissed off 'cause they bring so much money in on the backs of whales, and then they don't do anything.



The style of activism carried out by Greenpeace (such as taking photographs, petitions, through diplomatic channels, and raising public awareness) is described as not doing anything. Thus in the talk about passion we can see hints of the symbolic boundaries that distinguish the committed SSCS members, the defining quality being ‘passion’ which carries the implication of them being people who are actually ‘doing’ something or making a difference.

*‘SSCS is diverse’*

In an ostensible contrast to the emphasis, described above, on the ‘particular passion’ of SSCS members, SSCS was also described by interviewees as a diverse organization that welcomes people “from all walks of life”, and that is composed of a range of people who have different reasons for being members.

Extract 18

**P2** I think Sea Shepherd um attracts people from all walks of life and it’s not like some people are like well I’d rather... it’s like weird, because you get animal rights people that believe you shouldn’t be killing any animals at all, and then there’s also scientists, that say you’re decimating an endangered population, then you’ve got you know redneck territorial guys that are like yeah do it in Japans waters, get the fuck out of you know Australia sort of. So it’s like everyone has a different reason, and everyone’s got different levels of compromise for wanting to support the organization.

P2 says that different sub-groups of people have integrated into the same organization, which he describes as “weird” to have “animal rights people”, “scientists” and “redneck territorial guys” who all support the SSCS. Thus the SSCS was described as an inclusive and welcoming organization, and this was packaged as seemingly contrary to expectation, particularly once again when contrasted to Greenpeace.

Extract 19

**P2** it’s obvious, Greenpeace are out for money, and it’s like, they’re a very cut throat type organization. Like, um, sort of like, they’re very specific in the type of environmentalist they want.

In contrast to extract 16 where P5 said “[it takes] a different type of person to be involved with Sea Shepherd”, in this extract P2 describes Greenpeace as being very specific in the type of environmentalist they want (and by implication that SSCS does not require a specific type of environmentalist). This talk appears to serve a different function to that in extract 15, in that P2 is defending an allusion to the possibility of SSCS placing strict requirements on its members.

In addition, the apparent diversity and flexibility in the SSCS organization was often described by the interviewees to be based on the voluntary nature of their membership, which was also tied to their direct action approach.

Extract 20

**P3** ...the thing is there's no contracts so it's, if people don't, how do you say it? They need members, period. In the local [city] chapter, and they need people who are actually going to do something about it. So they can't, they can't, be allowed to, or want to, say "look if you want to be Sea Shepherd, you have to be this or this or this", because they'll go, the people who are trying to work, will just leave.

Extract 21

**P1** He's (Paul Watson) just... brilliant. He's on a different plane from most of us, the way that, the depth of his thinking, what he's interested in. He writes poems, and he's a hopeless romantic with girls and whatnot... yep. Most amazing man I've ever met.

**INTVWR** sounds like that yeah

**P1** makes it sound like we're some sort of... err... he's the guru or what do they call them? not a clique?

**INTVWR** a cult?

**P1** cult that's it. But it's not that way at all.

...

**P1** But that's sort of our strength, is our diversity, like, everybody, 'cause we're not all cut from the same cloth, everybody has different context. Somebody knows a band, somebody knows a reporter.... and you know? And that makes us makes us, sort of, strong

...

**P1** yeah I don't think we're a movement or a cause

**INTVWR** oh I see

**P1** I don't know what the hell we are.

In extract 20, P3 suggests that the SSCS simply need members who are going to "do something", i.e. are action-oriented and willing to put in the work rather than fit a certain image, and that if members were pressured to fit a particular image they would leave. Additionally in extract 21, P1 says that the organizations' diversity is their strength. This then forms the basis of his next striking statement, that SSCS are not "a movement or cause", he says, "I don't know what the hell we are". He also anticipates the notion that SSCS could be similar to a cult, particularly in their admiration of Paul Watson. Even what would be considered quite loose descriptions ("movement" and "cause"), did not sufficiently capture for him, the unstructured nature of the SSCS. This resembles the statements Paul Watson made in the web analysis; that SSCS is not like "old school greenies". The identity being created in this rhetoric is that of an organization that escapes definition, in which they understand themselves as a 'collection of individuals'.

However, P4, although stating something similar to in the previous extract, implies that there is a certain 'brand' within SSCS.

Extract 22

**P4** and one thing I was worried about initially is that I'm not a vegetarian, and that I work in a corporate world, and deal with mining companies, and all those kind of things, and it doesn't make a difference.

**INTVWR** so potentially touchy things, but it was ok?

**P4** yep... [Australian coordinator] from the top down will say that, you know, that it's your choice to follow us, and you have to adopt our ethos for you know, the planet, but you don't have to be any particular thing, all you have to do is remember you represent the brand, and don't do anything that we wouldn't endorse. But you don't have to be a vegetarian or anything like that.

P4, who as described earlier was the one interviewee who had experienced reservations about whether she would be the right fit with SCSS, speaks further of her initial concerns: of the fact that she isn't a vegetarian and that she works in "a corporate world". She then goes on to say that SSCS coordinators tell their members they "don't have to be any particular thing", however they do have to "remember you represent the brand, and don't do anything that we wouldn't endorse". While explicit rules or expectations of members do not seem to be present, there is the allusion in this talk to an implicit brand or ethos, thus making the boundaries of the collective SSCS identity somewhat indistinguishable.

## Conclusion

This research sought to contribute to an incipient but growing body of literature which considers the ways that multiple, competing identities are managed in social and political contexts (e.g. Baray et al., 2009; Hopkins, 2011; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Our research also contributes to a large body of social movement literature on how collective action frames align with individual actors (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford, 1986). As discussed below, our analysis develops an understanding of the "us" and "them" boundaries drawn by SSCS, and thus the potential identity conflicts that might be experienced by members of the organization. Our focus was on identifying the rhetorical negotiation of identity boundaries at a collective level, and then on developing an understanding of how SSCS members negotiate and manage their overall sense of themselves, given the aspects of the SSCS collective identity that pose the potential for conflict. Below we consider the findings and implications for these two questions.

### *Group-level Symbolic Boundaries*

In regards to the boundaries of the collective SSCS identity defined through the website commentary, we found that Paul Watson made strong and ostensibly paradoxical claims regarding who the Sea Shepherds are: non-criminal pirates; gentle terrorists; aggressively non-violent. The juxtapositions used by Watson serve to avoid categorization as “old school greenies” or “protesters”, despite also somewhat paradoxically owning controversial labels (e.g. “pirates”). By redefining notions of terrorism or piracy in positive terms through the use of a nuanced new language, the sense of “us” is framed in relation to both oppositional groups (“pirates of profit”) and more moderate environmental groups (“protesters”). Emphasising their distinctiveness was a demonstration of how the claims of a social movement group can be expressive of identity, and can be used to rationalise action (Polletta & Jasper, 2001); that is, the identity of a “pirate of passion” allows them to undertake controversial and confrontational activities in a way that refutes (or reinterprets) arguments that what they are doing is illegitimate, irrational or unreasonable. The identity claim that they are ‘aggressively non-violent’ acts to rhetorically re-cast the SSCS from the perpetrators of aggression (as they are accused of being, most notably by Japanese authorities and Greenpeace; see Article 6) into the victims of it. By arguing for an identity characterised by a respectful, strategic use of aggression, Watson characterises SSCS as positively and uniquely committed to action on whaling.

Interviews with core members of the group showed analogous processes whereby interviewees shifted between disavowing and owning the ‘radical’ label. By disavowing a radical identity they normalise their identities, and in doing so they reflect the view that ‘everyone could be an environmentalist’ and espouse what Wright (2009, p.871) would consider a conversionary collective action focus (where the focus is on conversion to the cause rather than confronting un-equal intergroup status relations per se). Here, the sense of “us” was at times defined by presenting the identity boundaries to becoming a SSCS member as being minimal; people from “all walks of life” can become members so long as they are passionate. Yet ‘passion’ seemed to be presented as an essential and un-learnable quality rather than an adaptable behaviour, and although they stated there were no identity requirements per se, the frequently stated view that there are few people in the world who are passionate enough works to account for SSCS’s position on the radical fringe as not a deliberate, exclusionary choice, but as an unfortunate reflection of the scarcity of passionate commitment to conservation.

Therefore, the identity boundaries of the SSCS as defined through the web commentary were shown to be dynamic and *responsive* to the criticisms that were being defended against (c.f. Einwohner, 2002). This belies an identity which needs to be continually defended, maintained and negotiated by Watson and members of the organization, in order to legitimise their (in Watson's words) "completely different" approach to conservation. We found a nuanced rhetorical negotiation of their identities as both 'ordinary' (and thus the boundaries as being minimal), but also 'extraordinary' (and thus emphasising their uniqueness).

### *Individual Level Management of Identity Content*

A secondary focus of the current research was to consider how individual members rhetorically manage their multiple identities, and how they manage an overall sense of themselves ('self'). Here the key findings centred around an emphasis on personal agency and diversity. Interviewees managed the prescriptive social (i.e. being seen as a radical) and personal (i.e. dietary requirements) consequences of their SSCS identity through rhetorically re-positioning perceptions of the organization as individual level decisions. That is, when being 'hardcore' or 'passionate' implied a rigid or extreme ideology, it seemed that SSCS members' method of reducing such implications was to emphasise personal (individual) freedoms and flexibility. In contrast, when being 'hardcore' or 'passionate' highlighted their willingness to create change in marine conservation it was presented as positive and uniting.

The talk about the perceptions of the organization from outside groups also highlighted the need for constant negotiation of the SSCS identity, and it was clear that this identity work was not straightforward for the members to negotiate. For example, before P4 met SSCS members she was concerned that she would not be the "right fit", and that they were "a group of radicals". Further examples were evident in the range of discourses around wanting to be seen as effective and exciting, while also wanting to pull back being too "hard lined" or "radical". The talk around the suggestion that SSCS was a vegan organization demonstrated the members' attention to, and even anticipation of, the suggestion that the organization might impose vegan requirements upon its members. The "vegan presence" they said, was not what it was "made out to be", and veganism/vegetarianism was heavily emphasised as personal choice.

In addition, the talk about 'passion' demonstrates how personal identities can come to be seen as congruent with the collective interest, as the individuals' level of passion was presented as uniting all SSCS members around their

common cause. Although passion was not portrayed as being 'required' by the organization, it was drawn on to explain how these otherwise disparate individuals came together as members of the only conservation organization that sufficiently met their passionate commitment to 'really do something'. In a way this rhetorical work did actually serve to create a particular identity; an identity as freely choosing individual volunteers who are members of the SSCS (only) because of a shared passion for conservation. That is, the predominant way in which members achieved collective identity distinctiveness, while maintaining legitimacy, was to actively disavow any sense of a 'compulsory' or uniform identity, and emphasize the diversity amongst members.

The construction of SSCS identity here also works to limit the kinds of inferences that may be drawn about a person based on their membership; by emphasising the 'amazing' diversity among members, an individual member can distance him/herself from particular behaviours or characteristics in other members that they may not wish to personally 'take on'. This was particularly evident around the question as to whether or not each member is willing to risk their life for a whale (extract 1); it serves as a strategy for reducing danger to an individual level decision, as oppose to attributing SSCS as dangerous. By reducing danger to an individual level decision they demonstrate a rhetorical method in which activists can negotiate the potential conflicts created between personal and collective identities.

Indeed, one striking feature of their talk was a general absence of references to social influence processes or group standards, but at the same time there was a repeated reference to Watson's rhetoric and logic. That is, on the one hand, participants disavowed that group members might have subtle influence over each other, or how they might establish implicit group norms in which standards are not imposed but could create the potential for sanctions for those who do not adapt to these norms (e.g. about meat-eating). On the other hand, members were clearly influenced by the ideological and mission statements of SSCS leader Watson, often citing him explicitly and repeating some of his key phrases to explain or manage aspects of their beliefs (see Extract 21 in particular).

### *Concluding Comments and Limitations*

This research explored in-depth interviews with members of the direct-action conservation group, the SSCS. It drew on this unique sample – members of a group with often controversial ideologies and actions – to consider the multiple ways that identity is negotiated and constituted in such high-level social movement organizations. The framing of the SSCS identity (at collective and individual levels) shows signs of having developed a highly dynamic and reflexive identity through interactions between the conservation cause, their audience, and opposition. The expressions of agency and individuality within the SSCS is likely both a cause and effect of frustration with other ‘institutional’, ‘ineffective’ environmental organizations, in which their identities as ‘pirates’ is an expression of an unhindered, action-oriented approach.

We make these arguments based on a smaller number of participants and it is unclear whether the issues described in the interviews here can be generalized to other members of the SSCS and / or other members of ‘hardcore’ environmental conservation movements. It is worth noting, however, that there was strong convergence amongst the themes and ideas across the interviews, as well as many striking parallels amongst their statements and Paul Watson’s writing, which leads us to believe that these are common, consensual features of the SSCS in a broader sense. As such this provides what is a representation of the collective level, in which SSCS members adopt organizational values and norms, as well as demonstrating some individual level variation. It is also the case that the interviews were conducted by an ostensible ‘outsider’, which may have altered participant responses, and plausibly resulted in greater defensiveness. However, given that a key question here is the ways that SSCS engage with and negotiate their interactions with outsiders, this seems less problematic than it might otherwise be. A final concern relates to the external validity of findings: Would results obtained here generalize to other groups? Our suspicion is that the particular ideological nuance expressed by this group is unique (“gentle terrorists”) and largely as a result of the identity entrepreneurship of Watson. We would expect to find similar processes of negotiation and rationalization in other groups which adopt more extreme measures, but we expect that these would take a different rhetorical form.

This research highlights the personal impact that taking a more ‘radical’ or extreme position has within a broader social change movement. For the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society their direct actions aligned with a ‘pirate’ identity shows them to be distinctively passionate and effective at immediately preventing whaling (and there is

less need to expend effort on diplomacy efforts). In turn, however, their conversion of others to the cause becomes more complicated. By turning their back on more traditional forms of action, and by claiming to be unconcerned with how the media or the public view them (e.g. article 16, extract 5) they become targets of controversy even from within the broader movement that shares the same goals as them. This process, which della Porta (1995) calls “double marginalization”, poses the potential for their actions being undermined by both the general public and other, more moderate, groups. SSCS members appear to manage this “double marginalization” in part by making it a deliberate choice to be controversial, but also through dynamic and responsive rhetorical strategies that emphasise both agency and commonality; both ‘personal’ identification and shared, ‘collective’ identification with the organization.

Putting aside the immediate efficacy of the SSCS direct action, it is also the case that this adoption of more extreme solutions to the problem of international whaling may be highly consequential at the macro social level. Dissensus theorists (Piven & Cloward, 1977) in political science distinguish between those groups which follow conventional protest strategies (those that adhere to the norms of an advantaged group or mainstream society) and more disruptive strategies (which violate the norms of an advantaged group or mainstream society). It is argued that, in order to progress social change, the social milieu requires both extreme and more moderate social strategies because the former polarizes public opinion and draws attention to the cause, while the latter is able to capitalise on the new attention in a way that the bystander public find more palatable (see Louis, 2009, for a review and discussion). Thus, the rhetorical interplay between Sea Shepherd and Greenpeace, evident in the talk of participants and the statements of Watson himself, may be exactly what is required to facilitate positive social change in this context.

These processes thus have broader implications for the social psychology, sociology and political science of protest. Perhaps most importantly, the current research points to the ways that collective identity is not a constant, nor is it simply something that people either possess or do not possess (an individual differences variable of sorts). Rather, identity is always dependent on context (Reicher, 2004), and activist identity in particular is often accompanied by a set of motivational rhetoric that helps to maintain commitment to the cause (e.g. Barr & Drury, 2009). While much work in the social psychology of protest emphasises the important role of identity, it is also the case that much of this work also treats identity in rather static ways. An important alternative contribution here, then, is to explicitly recognise that identities are flexible and can be dynamically used in rhetoric to justify strategy and ideology. Indeed,



this work demonstrates that the position advocated by SSCS members is not an easy one to maintain: it requires continual and nuanced rhetorical work.

It is also the case that there is little research that investigates the *consequences* of taking on an activist identity or collective action participation more generally (Louis, 2009; but see Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005). Activist identity adoption (and perhaps particularly for more extreme social movement organizations) is often implicitly treated as a relatively unproblematic transition from sympathy to engagement. In this paper we have contributed to this gap by demonstrating that activists do indeed experience consequential changes to their sense of self-hood as they develop their commitment to a cause (see also Becker et al., 2011). We have highlighted the way activists are required to do rhetorical work to manage conflict among multiple identities, and the possible challenges they are faced with in regards to public scrutiny.

Finally, Klandermans and colleagues (Klandermans, 1997; Oegema & Klandermans, 1994) have discussed the potential for barriers to participation in social movement activities, focusing on the pragmatic (e.g. transport to a protest) barriers that confront potential supporters. Our findings provide a neat complement to this literature by pointing to the strong potential for identity conflict in the early stages of participation in social movements, particularly where the requisite collective identities are controversial. Thus, identity requirements can also be a barrier to action, perhaps particularly during initial stages of involvement. For example, P4's talk (extracts 13, 22) reflects the boundaries of the SSCS identity she perceived before becoming a member. At a practical level, an emphasis on the ability to retain one's individuality (even) as a member of a 'radical' organization, potentially alters the level of controversy or risk involved in joining.

We titled this paper with a quote from Paul Watson denouncing the use of the word 'protester' to describe Sea Shepherd identity and their controversial, emphatic approach to stopping commercial whaling: 'we may be pirates but we are not protesters'. Through analysis of the SSCS website (an organizational statement of who they are) and interviews with highly committed members, we have demonstrated that even people who engage in ostensibly high-level activism often do not identify as 'activists' or 'protesters' as such. Rather, there is a disconnect between the labels applied to people who fight for social justice and the subjective experiences of those who undertake those actions.

This is likely to be even truer of people who are less committed to the cause: further empirical investigation awaits this point.

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#### Appendix A

##### **Catalogue of Web articles** (<http://www.seashepherd.org/news-and-media/commentary-and-editorial.html>)

- 1 - The Terrible Troubling Tribulations of Being Called an (*shudder*) Eco-terrorist, March 2, 2011.
- 2 - Greenpeace mon Amour, January 13, 2011.
- 3 - Will this be Sea Shepherd's last Antarctic Campaign? January 28, 2011.
- 4 - The Art of Hunting Whalers, January 25, 2011.
- 5 - Sea Shepherd and Taiji, January 19, 2011.
- 6 - Greenpeace meets George Orwell: Greenpeace Rewrites History, January 15, 2011.
- 7 - The Confessions of an Insensitive Coldhearted Whale Warrior (Satire), January 05, 2011.
- 8 - Should we Save Paper Whales, Virtual Whales or Real Whales?, December 22, 2010.

- 9 – Sea Shepherd Welcomes the Support of the United States, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Australia in condemning Japanese whaling in the Southern Ocean, December 10, 2010.
- 10 – Passion, Pity, Professionalism, Patience and Perseverance, October 07, 2010.
- 11 – Refuting the Racist Rhetoric, August 19, 2010.
- 12 – Insight into Reality TV by the *New York Times*, August 27, 2010.
- 13 – Remaining Aggressive and Nonviolent, by Chuck Swift, June 04, 2010.
- 14 – Crossing (S)words with the Goliaths of Doom, June 02, 2010.
- 15 – Politics Vs Results in the Whale Wars, February 22, 2010.
- 16 – Letter to the Editor (*The Australian*), February 18, 2010.
- 17 – Hey Japanese Whaler Dudes, Stop Your Pathetic Whining, February 10, 2010.
- 18 - Sea Shepherd is a Fundamentalist Darwinist Anti-God Organization Interfering with God's Divine Plan to Have the Japanese Illegally Slaughter the Whales! January 15, 2010.
- 19 – The League of Extraordinarily Gentle Terrorists, June 11, 2009.
- 20 – Captain Paul Watson Dismisses and Disses the Whale Wars Critics, June 16, 2009.
- 21 – Communications with the Enemy, July 13, 2009.