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Patterns of engagement: identities and social movement organizations in Finland and Malawi

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Abstract Based on interviews with climate-change activists and NGO workers in Finland and Malawi, this article reconsiders the ways in which the coordination of identity projects and action is approached in social movement scholarship. Rather than beginning with personal and collective identities, we take our cue from recent work by Laurent Thévenot and trace actors' forms of engagement—the various ways actors produce commonality. As we show, doing so in vastly different social contexts allows us to see permutations in such forms afforded by participation in a transnational social movement and to identify patterns of collective action that we would otherwise be apt to miss. Finnish activists narrated their activities by way of engaging in the forms of the common good driving the climate movement, but coordinated various situations also through engagement in familiarity, comfort, and ease. Malawian activists and NGO employees also spoke of the common good the movements worked to achieve, but principally created common ground by engaging in shared individual choices and projects, which were jointly consecrated by fellow NGO participants. Ultimately, we argue that tracing forms of engagement enables more in-depth understanding of what is at stake when people act together in social movement organizations: moving away from collective and personal identity to patterns of engagement allows a vantage point into the processes through which commonality is created and generates new hypotheses regarding the coordination of action in social movement organizations.

Keywords Climate change · Engagement · Finland · Identity · Malawi · Social movements

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It has become commonplace in the sociology of mobilization and social movements to note that "identity" is an important aspect of the construction of movements: why people join them, how they find meaning within them, and why they do not leave (see, e.g., Melucci 1989, 1995; Stryker et al. 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001; della Porta and Diani 2006; Reger et al. 2008; Viterna 2013). Although this was a crucial move, and collective identity has become one of the key concepts in analyzing social movements, the use of "identity" has been problematized on different fronts. Methodologically, utilizing notions of collective and personal identity, researchers often explicitly or implicitly operationalize identity with the formation of "I" and "We-narratives," thus effectively merging actors' categories of practice and sociologists' categories of analysis; theoretically, such formulation risks making what is a collective, contingent accomplishment, into an overly reified category (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

Rather than construing ever more sophisticated notions of personal and collective identity, this article focuses instead on patterns of collective engagement. We thus develop the core insight of social movement identity theory—that we need to understand what a movement means for the people in it and how they create commonalities with others—by focusing on the processes through which commonality is enacted. More specifically, we build on the theoretical work of Laurent Thévenot (e.g., 2001, 2007, 2013, 2014). This neo-pragmatist approach directs us at different dimensions of creating commonality on a scale that runs from the most intimate affinities to individual interests and to public expressions of collectivity. By paying attention to the patterning of actors and actions in narratives—how social movement actors define themselves, their actions, their futures, and their place in social space—we go beyond the emphasis on "personal" and "collective" narration forms, and argue that emphasizing the plurality of forms people engage in to create commonality gives us a much more detailed account of the interplay of the personal and the collective in the complex social world that carries the label "social movement."

We ground our theoretical suggestion on a comparison of narratives told by sixty five participants in social movement organizations with a similar cause, fighting global warming—part of a global network of civil society actors struggling to raise consciousness, pressure governments, and improve societies' potential of fighting against and adapting to climate change (see, e.g., Smith and Johnston 2002; della Porta and Diani 2006; Ylä-Anttila and Swarnakar 2017). We do so, however, in two very different contexts: comparing narratives of activists in Finland (one of the wealthiest countries in the Global North) and Malawi (one of the poorest in the Global South). Opting for such a "comparison of edges" allows us to show how participation in movement organizations can be mediated by very different forms of commonality. Rather than downplaying the different contexts and histories in the quest for Mill's criteria of difference and agreement, such a comparison is an optic through which we can trace how engagement establishes commonality in different contexts and the modalities of such engagement.

As we show, in the Finnish case, activists and NGO workers mostly melded two forms of commonality: a shared narrative of collective engagement that highlighted the social good they pursued, and an equally shared narrative of engaging in familiar, even intimate relations, marked by a sense of ease with others "like them" in the movement, emerging both in the activists' descriptions of their personal biographies and in accounts of the movement's organizational practices. Their Malawian counterparts,

on the other hand, linked their identity to volunteering and NGO work primarily through a highly patterned moral mobility project they shared: climate activism allowed them to engage as individuals in construing an imagined trajectory as upwardly striving, aspiring-elites, and following a shared "plan of action." Such individual projects, we show, were recognized and consecrated by others—a way of mutually engaging in the production of both a common good and a mobile subject.

Moving away from collective and personal identity to patterns of engagement, we ultimately argue, both allows us a better vantage point into the processes through which commonality is created, and may generate new research hypotheses regarding the coordination of action in social movement organizations.

From identity narratives to forms of engagement

Since the 1980s, a deluge of literature about "New Social Movements" put the notion of collective identity at its center. Complementing rational choice, political economy, and opportunity based approaches (see, e.g., Offe 1985; Cohen 1985; Kitschelt 1986; Tarrow 1994; McAdam et al. 1996; Benford and Snow 2000; Armstrong and Bernstein 2008), scores of researchers have shown that collective identity is important in explaining why people join social movements, how deeply they are engaged in them, and whether they stay or leave (see, e.g., Taylor and Whittier 1995; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Melucci 1995; Snow and McAdam 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Simon and Klandermans 2001; Meyer et al. 2002; Reger et al. 2008; Goodwin et al. 2009; Corrigall-Brown 2011). People join movements not (only) because they think they can achieve their goals, but because the experience affords them the possibility of becoming recognized as a specific kinds of people and as members of a broader entity that shares similar values, interests, world views, or affective solidarity-ties—whether this notion of identity is pre-existing or whether it emerges in the context of ongoing activity (Taylor and Whittier 1995, 172; della Porta and Diani 2006, p. 92).

The notion of "collective identities" captures the importance of the meanings social movements have in SMO actors' lives. However, as a term, "collective identities" remains analytically underdeveloped despite numerous efforts to tackle the problem (see, e.g., Hunt and Benford 1994; Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker 2000; Ghaziani 2011; Ruiz-Junco 2011; Valocchi 2013). This may be partly because the notion of identity does not draw extensively enough on research in social psychology and interactionism (see, e.g., Stryker 2000), but mostly since it is often not clear what "a collective" refers to in terms of identity. A great number of otherwise powerful analyses use the notions of personal and collective identity without pushing further the question of what these identities are, in what ways exactly are they "personal" or "collective," and what kind of consequences they may have for people's engagements to the movements and actions in them.

Instead, the conceptualization of identity in the study of social movements often *practically* converges (whether explicitly or implicitly) on the operationalization of collective identity in terms of stories of shared goals, values, beliefs, or activities. This is both because such a focus seems obviously collective, but also for historical reasons: The study of identity in social movements emerged as a way to take identity struggles

into account (see, e.g., Melucci 1989; Gamson 1995), and these identities were already couched in the language of identity-politics, in which the bridging from the personal to the collective is at the service of defining the collectivity and its claims (see Hunt and Benford 1994).

Thus, Melucci speaks of collective identity in terms of "shared definitions" and in a recent, highly sophisticated overview, Polletta and Jasper define a collective identity as:

> … an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly.… (Polletta and Jasper 2001, p. 285)

This quotation shows one of the recurrent operations that take place in tackling the questions of collective identity: whereas the first sentence raises the question of a "collective identity" as an analytic category defined by the researcher, the second couches these questions squarely in the realm of actors' own perceptions. In other words, the notion of "collective identity" explicitly merges a category of analysis with a category of practice (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

This, in itself, is not necessarily a weakness. This experience-based operationalization and the tensions, interplays, and imbrications of these forms of narrative sustain a sophisticated literature and provide common grounds for analysis, as it allows sociologists to ask questions about how different forms of narrative affect each other, how they correspond, and the tensions among them (see, e.g., Snow and McAdam 2000; cf. Bobel 2007). A large body of scholarship extended and refined these insights about the importance of collective definitions and categories to see how perceptions are transformed through charged moments of effervescence (see, e.g., Polletta 1998); how emotional and cognitive vectors interact in specific cases (Goodwin 1997; Jasper 1997; Polletta 1998; Polletta and Jasper 2001); how to conceptualize the importance of frames and narratives in action, along with their moments of extension, consolidation, etc. (e.g., Snow and Benford 1988; McAdam 1986; Benford and Snow 2000; Ruiz-Junco 2011), and how social movements bridge personal and collective identities (Valocchi 2001; Oyakawa 2015; Simi et al. 2016).

But by focusing on identity—whether collective or personal—these accounts may miss the way in which collectivity is performed through the coordination of situations. That is, rather than beginning with identities and getting through them to the forms of engagement, we can begin with the forms of engagement while being agnostic about whether creating common ground is made through narrative of collectivity, through personal identities, or through implicit and "intimate" ease of coordination that never becomes articulated in the language of identity. Thus, as "identity talk within movements may be aimed not only at building solidarity but also at changing selves and relationships in ways that extend beyond the movement" (Polletta and Jasper 2001, p. 296), different formations may prove to be important. Different narrative patterns and forms imply different kinds of engagement of actors in their social world, an aspect of social action that has been recently brought to the fore in order to understand the possibility of coordinating action between individuals (Thévenot 2007, 2013, 2014; Archer and Maccarini 2013). Concentrating on engagement provides us, instead of a

continuum between "personal" and "collective," a multi-dimensional scale of possible ways of creating commonality:

> [The persons and things in human communities] are not social in the sense of resulting from convergent collective beliefs or representations. They are social by virtue of a certain shaping of reality, which guarantees coordination with others but also with oneself. Thus, they are also not social in the sense of being collective versus personal or private things…. Engagement is not reducible to a subjective or personal matter. Through communication and composition of a commonality in the plural, invested forms are transformed, established or downgraded, according to metamorphoses that are not limited to what the literature on social movements brings to light. The dynamic of the various regimes of engagement, with their combinations in personality and community, helps us go beyond any dualism between agent and structure, and all active/passive formulations like "structuring/structured," to consider the powers and oppressions of invested human beings. (Thévenot 2013, p. 175)

The plurality that this approach puts forward is a key feature of our argument. At stake is the situation-to-situation coordination of living together that people engage in with themselves, with other people, as well as with the material environment. To analyze the different levels of engagements of SMO activists, we must thus examine the narrative constructions in which the actors describe who they are and what they do: How do they describe their engagement in the climate movement? Who are they working with, and in what terms? How do they see the purpose of this work, and where do they hope their activism will propel them to in the future? What do they see themselves becoming through these engagements? And, finally, what can the patterns traced in these narrated accounts of engagement tell us about acting in a social movement in different contexts?

As a way to systematize these questions, Thévenot (e.g., 2007, 2013, 2014) has proposed a typology of different grammars of commonality and relating regimes of engagement. First, the *grammar of close affinities* is in use in situations of some degree of intimacy and personal attachment; creating commonality based on shared emotions and a more diffuse feeling of ease of interaction. Second, a *grammar of individual interests* (on terminology see Eranti 2018)—is at stake when people build commonality by way of mutually accepting each other's stakeholder views and brokering deals in order to follow a plan, and when engagement is predicated on the acceptance or even sanctification of individual interests and choices in the construction of a shared good. Third, the *grammar of justifications* (see Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006; on methodological use see Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio 2016) is used when people justify their claims and strive towards some form of a common good—the definitions of which are multiple and subject to tests and challenges within and between these definitions—as typically happens in situations of conflict and in politicized action.

As Thévenot argues, engaging in action by deploying these grammars is not simply a subjective "feeling" the actor has, nor is it a "trait" that follows automatically from the (structural) position where the actor finds herself. Instead, people encounter each other and the world in the multiple situations of everyday life and it is in these encounters that the different engagements take shape, alternate, co-exist, and affect each other.

Engagement is a shared act, both in the sense of being collective and in the sense of being mutually recognized. Our engaging with others and the world is, thus affected and shaped by the engagements of others.

Lastly, thinking about activists' engagements in action compels the analyst to extend the scope of her temporal reach. Since temporality is a constitutive element of the narratives in which the activists portray their engagements, it is important to pay attention to the construction of "desirable selves" and collectivities (Frye 2012; Mische 2009, 2014; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013; see also Somers 1992; Polletta 1998; Polletta and Jasper 2001, p. 298). Doing so, we show how people conceptualize the relationship between their "individual" projects—the plurality and formatted consistency of the selves—as well as the ways in which these narratives allow individuals to explain how a "person like me" is compelled to act in a "movement like that," be it by way of a common good, a personal choice, or an intimate affinity to others (Viterna 2013, p. 48; see also Ruiz-Junco 2011).

A comparison of edges: method and settings

This article is based on the analysis of sixty-five interviews with volunteers and paid personnel of social movement organizations related to climate change in Finland and Malawi.[1] The first author conducted the Finnish interviews with the help of a team of graduate students [N=30].[2] Interviews lasted one to three hours and were recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English by the author. The second author conducted pilot interviews in Malawi and then directed a team of interviewers for the remainder of the interviews [N=35].[3] Interviews lasted between forty minutes and two hours, and were translated and transcribed by a team in the field.

In both cases, the authors proceeded by identifying local social movement organizations that claim to tackle climate change as part of their mission. For the most part, the interviewees in both contexts were recruited from groups that qualify as social movement organizations: even though varying in both size and scale of actions, the groups were less oriented to protest than to somewhat formalized influence work (e.g., della Porta and Diani 2006, pp. 145-150). Interviews were conducted with both men and women in the organizations. In addition, the authors also draw on their respective studies among civil society actors in Finland and Malawi as a way to get at the relationship between narratives and local forms of collective action. These include extensive ethnographic fieldwork concerning several Finnish activist groups (Luhtakallio 2012), as well as ongoing research in Malawi conducted by a team of researchers that the second author has been a part of.

[1] The study is part of a larger comparative effort, Climate Change and Civil Society (CLIC), in which the civil society's participation in the politics of climate change is analyzed and compared from the perspectives of media debate, (transnational) NGO networks, and local civil society groups in Finland, France, India, Indonesia, Malawi, Russia, and the US (Alapuro 2010; Ylä-Anttila and Kukkonen 2017).

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The Finnish interviews were conducted during 2009-2012. The groups and associations were chosen so as to cover the field of Finnish environmental organizations: nation-wide organizations were included, as well as a selection of national capital-based local associations. The interviewees were both volunteers and employees of civic groups and associations, depending on whether climate campaigning was volunteer- or employee-based in the respective groups. For most organizations, climate was one of the key issues they worked on, and at the time of the interviews, climate was strongly emphasized. However, the emphases of SMOs may change over time and activists may stay through changing agendas (Corrigall-Brown 2011; Ylä-Anttila and Swarnakar 2017). Attachment to climate was thus important for all the interviewees, but not necessarily the only topic through which they motivated their engagement.

The Malawian interviews were conducted in 2011. As there were, as yet, no major SMO players who specialized in climate change, the researchers approached different CBOs and small NGOs that emphasized climate change as part of their mission statement. Interviews were conducted with volunteers and paid employees of twenty-four different organizations, mostly in Southern Malawi. Interviews were conducted both in semi-rural areas and in the larger cities of Zomba and Blantyre and the capital, Lilongwe. Even more than in the Finnish organizations, the emphases of Malawian organizations varied widely. As we show below, global warming was one of a number of topics both evoked from the Global North and taken on by local NGOs (Ylä-Anttila and Swarnakar 2017).

In both cases, interviewees were asked similar questions about their life course, how they came to act or work at the organization they were currently engaged in, and to describe their everyday activities in the organization. In these questions, the researchers attempted to get at the "how" of career trajectories (see, e.g., Weiss 1994), as well as the reasons for choosing climate politics and the environmental field as an arena of (voluntary and/or professional) activity. Additionally, since the researchers were interested in the narratives interviewees formed and the way this activity fit (or didn't fit) into interviewees' lives, they were asked to imagine where they would like to be in five years. Future oriented questions were asked, in both cases, in order to map the idealized future trajectories the interviewees saw, or wanted to see, themselves occupying (see Frye 2012; Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013), and thus to grasp a more complex relationship between organizational and personal notions of purpose.

Since the comparison between countries as different as Finland and Malawi presents unique challenges and opportunities, some notes on the logic of comparison are in place: The comparative method used in this article should not be thought of as a Millian "method of agreement" (Mill 2002 [1843]). Rather than downplaying the different contexts and histories in the quest for Mill's criteria of comparability, such a comparison is an optic through which we can trace how engagement establishes commonality in different contexts, and the modalities of such engagement (see, e.g., Krause 2014a). When all other variables change, the *meaning* of the variable we trace also, inevitably, changes (see, e.g., Biernacki 2012).

We thus directed our attention to processes and dynamics that have both converging and differing features but that, most importantly, unfold their particularities only once exposed to the parallel case (see also, Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Hantrais 2009; Lammert and Sarkowsky 2010; Luhtakallio 2010, 2012). We are interested, then, not in the *differentia specifica* that produced participants' forms of engagement, but rather in

the spectrum of possibilities that such engagements can take and what these can tell us about the dynamics of coordinating action and building commonality in SMOs. As in Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003), we use the comparison to show that the theoretical optic we leverage can be usefully wielded in different settings, helping us see neglected aspects of both cases. In that sense, comparing cases that are as different as possible—"a comparison of edges"—is instructive.

The juxtaposition of Finland (a small Nordic country) and Malawi (a small country in southeast Africa) is a particularly useful comparison of edges for our purposes. The economic and political situation in the two countries is far apart. Economically, to take one prominent measure, the GDP per capita in Finland for 2013 was $47,219 ranked 18th highest of 187 nations; the same figure for Malawi at this time was $226, the very last one on the same list (World Bank 2013). Politically, Finland enjoys a stable liberal democracy and a relatively generous welfare state; although Malawi has democratized, its government had been marred by allegations of corruption and repression of academic freedoms at the time of the interviews.

In terms of societal conditions for social movements and activism, Finland has been placed among the social-corporate countries that are marked by a strong interdependence and integration of state and civil society (Jepperson 2002, pp. 72-75; Luhtakallio 2012). The intertwining of state and society in social-corporate polities results in a low salience of the public-private distinction. In analyses of the Finnish case, the state and civil society have even often been described as completely merged into one another, resulting in a multiply intertwined private and public, as well as official and voluntary spheres (see, e.g., Alapuro and Stenius 1987; Jepperson 2002, p. 74).[4]

While there is a thriving NGO sector in Malawi, it is driven in large part by international NGOs such as UNAIDS, Save the Children, as well as funding by the IMF and the World Bank. Much of civil society is dependent on, and fueled directly by, global forces (see, e.g., Englund 2006; Swidler and Watkins 2009). In this environment, multiple NGOs and smaller CBOs (community based organizations) emerged over the past two decades, appearing and disappearing in quick succession, depending on their ability to supply short term grants and produce tangible "outcomes" to far-away donors (see also Krause 2014b). Concomitantly, a globalized elite, and a much larger "aspiring elite" emerged, composed of local actors who link themselves financially to these global forces.

Another important difference between the cases was that more of the Malawian interviewees received some form of remuneration from their work, if only in the shape of intermittent per-diems (see Smith 2003). Yet, while the authors initially chalked off some of the differences they found to the difference between "work" and "activism," such a neat division was untenable: the Malawians who were engaged with volunteering or per diem payment produced very similar narratives to those produced by paid personnel; similarly, Finnish activists' narratives were relatively independent of their status in the organizations, and furthermore, they recurrently described how their role alternated from that of a volunteer to paid staff and back. A more important

[4] This results in, for example, the particular system of financing of civic associations and NGOs, based largely on various forms of government funding, including the profits of the state-owned gambling monopoly, Finland's Slot Machine Association.

difference could be identified in the activists' more general social position: as we show below, the Malawian activists were struggling to further their education, as well as to secure a livelihood, whereas their Finnish counterparts were mostly people who were college educated or students and, while not necessarily affluent, free of daily concern for their livelihood. It is, however, too facile to speak of "class differences" in this comparative setting, as the respective "class positions" are in relation to the vastly different class configurations in the two countries. To put it bluntly, there is no such class in Malawi that the Finnish activists represent and no class in Finland that the Malawian activists represent.

The theorization we present here was developed in the process of analysis. We came into the field with an interest in the shape that identity-narratives take, and thus tacked back and forth between narratives and theorizations, reading through the interviews multiple times while paying special attention to surprising narratives and differences, through which we then abductively theorized our findings (see Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Finland: the common good and familiar engagements

In the Finnish activists' narratives of the climate movement and their own engagement with it, global warming was unquestionably a thematic priority. Yet the importance of the history of the organizations that partook in the movement before the climate campaign, as well as personal accounts of earlier environmental issues, mattered. Many climate activists had years of experience in environmental campaigns, and shared an awareness of the threat of environmental disasters, often since their childhood. Thus, in the following, an activist volunteering for an urban gardening campaign accounts for his trajectory:[5]

> I remember the talk about the green house effect and global warming and all that and I was at high school then, and I'm forty now, so, this is really not new stuff…. Maybe it's always been this threat of disaster or something, be it climate change or the rise of the average temperature, so not necessarily just that, but also the waves of extinction and such…. [It's] one of the things that have made me wake up.

The activists' personal biographies were also aligned with the climate movement in terms of concrete steps and choices. One after the other, the activists listed their choices of study fields, of Bachelors' or Masters' theses topics, of student exchange locations, and of traineeship employers that had to do with environmental issues and climate politics. However, reflecting on what had drawn them to volunteer or work for the movement, instead of a career strategy, the activists emphasized the people and a certain kind of "atmosphere" they experienced as they participated in the movement

[5] Activists' ages varied from their early twenties to late forties, thus the length of prior experience in social movement organizations also varied significantly. However, only one interviewee had less than two years of campaign experience at the time of the interview.

together. As an employee of a climate education campaign in her late twenties related in the following:

> Q: So when did you begin to work with climate issues?
>
> A: I think it was when I began my studies in fall 2002. That's when I got involved with a lot of organizations, and quite soon also with the [name of project]. Well, it wasn't all directly climate change related, but then again, there is no such environmental issue that would not have something to do with climate change, so, maybe not at once, I didn't have the climate connection. Maybe there were some singular workshops or event but….
>
> Q: But your studies directed you towards that direction?
>
> A: Well yeah, or maybe I just ended up with the kind of people I had fun doing things with.

Finding people one has "fun doing things with" is probably one of the key experiences of social movement actors just about anywhere, and as such also a building block of "collective identity" (e.g., Jasper 1997; Wettergren 2009; Kuukkanen 2018). However, to understand the particular ways of forming both the common idea of the movement and the shared feelings of "fun" that the interviewees describe, we have to take a few steps back and take a closer look at the Finnish climate movement context.

The civil society input in climate politics in Finland is based on a network of organizations working together. On the one hand, it comprises the work of a few nation-wide, large environmental organizations that can be categorized as professional social-movement organizations with stable structures and relatively steady finances (della Porta and Diani 2006, p. 145). On the other hand, there are a host of smaller "grassroots-based" organizations. Organizations are mainly located in the national capital and take part in many of the same efforts from forums and debates to campaigns. Local activists have also organized more "spectacular" activities, such as the monthly "critical bike ride," a local urban-farming showcase, and the annual "snowman demonstration." The majority of the organizations take part in long-term campaign work and lobbying either nationally or at the local level.

The activists we met were thus involved in an inter-connected environmental social movement organization whose core pre-dates, for the most part, the rise of climate change as the primary concern of the environmental movement in the early 2000s (e.g., Smith and Johnston 2002). The activists recognized a relatively stable set of both movement objectives and actors across specific missions and over time. When they described the activities of the current movement organization, they told a narrative of joint effort and cooperation in campaigning. In the following, a female activist in her mid-twenties from a nation-wide NGO described the principles of campaigning in the association:

> Thinking of our political campaigning, what we do, our main campaign focus has been the Climate Act that we campaign for in the Burning Question coalition. Then we have separate energy-related projects, like one in which we offer energy saving tips and organize events, like a panel discussion that takes place today

> with participants from all parties, so kind of taking part in the public debate. And also the more traditional voluntary association means, like taking part in demonstrations, meeting politicians, [and] lobbying parliamentarians on the Climate Act. And my main responsibility, since the climate actors in environmental organizations have agreed on sharing the responsibilities, like who follows what, … [is] climate and energy strategies.

The above activist's understanding of her organization is embedded in public struggles over a justifiable common good: *what we do* is a list of social movement activities that aim at legitimizing arguments based on their vision of the common good in matters related to climate. Describing her own tasks, she brings up the wider network of climate actors who have an agreed division of labor. Involvement in this network of actors is a recurrent pattern in the activist narratives, and it unfolds as descriptions of repetitive collective efforts to win the struggles of legitimacy over climate issues in public debate and politics. These efforts require coordination of the differences in action-repertoires between the actors and they require actors to co-formulate common good claims that the movement can unanimously present in public. Thus, a climate justice expert of a big umbrella organization linking environmental and development issues returns in her narrative to the notion of the common as an explicit question that activists negotiate:

> There are organizations that take a lot more conflictual stance on this [the REDD program[6]] ... and there are issues like this. The essential thing maybe is that if we want to do something together, we look for the smallest common denominator and work together. I've never seen a situation where people would have left slamming doors, that we would not have found anything in common.

This form of finding "anything in common" was an explicit narrative of building collective common ground. It was, however, also a personal matter to the activists. Working together to build a common base for arguments linked, for many, the collective effort to personal attachments—"slamming doors" was avoided, as the costs of overt conflicts were perceived as too high on all levels, from the organizational to the intimate (on the pattern of avoiding conflicts in Finnish CSOs, see Luhtakallio 2012).

Apart from working hard on the common denominators between groups, the organizational and personal needs and hopes merged in the Finnish activists' narratives more broadly. Indeed, they did not talk about "personal" identities as detached from the engagement with others even when they talked explicitly about their biographies or personal choices and opinions. When they provided accounts of their work history in the organization, phases of salaried employment, volunteering, and (at times remunerated) positions of trust alternated. Activism, when narrated through work, resembled the "personalized politics" Paul Lichterman (1996, pp. 43-47) found among the US Green movement. In these accounts, one's career and even entire life history becomes inseparable from the

[6] The acronym stands for "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation." This issue was first placed on the agenda of the 2005 international climate-change negotiations and has since become both influential and the source of controversy in a global movement (IIED 2018).

course of one's activism, like in the following account from a male activist in his early forties, now working in a local organization for sustainable youth housing:

> On a personal level, of course this [volunteering in the organization] has provided me with a lot, beginning from friendships [chuckles], and then now a job, and it has been in a way really rewarding that I have gotten me a job by what I've accomplished myself.… And also the fact that this has had effect on other people's lives as well.

In the extract, while the remunerated job—a position obtained after several years of volunteering—obviously matters to this activist, he first mentions the friendships that he has made through volunteering in the organization. His engagement is built on an account of satisfaction unfolding within both the collectivity and intimate engagements. In a similar vein, actors recurrently did not describe their trajectories as planned and strategic careers, but as natural courses of action flowing from the engagements that directed their lives, as in the following:

> Well, it's really a kind of civic duty at this point, I don't see another option, you just have to do things and try to find a kind of, your own niche in that activity, where you can be of use. Naturally, one also tries to make one's own life worthwhile, and also efficient, and sharing my own professional know-how or making use of it in association level stuff, but also just, well, making this into a meaningful way of living, in this age, well, it does motivate you. And then there is this, once you've made two kids into this planet.

Personal identity—a salient self and accomplishment of a life that resembles an idealized image—was patterned collectively and aligned with the movement's values. Activism was thus a way of approaching one's ideal self, engaging with others by way of creating common ground both at a level closest to the self and at a level of publicly legitimated justifications to working towards the movement goals. The collectivity built in the processes of engaging becomes a highly satisfying part of one's personal identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001, p. 290).

This configuration of "personalized politics" of the Finnish climate activists illustrates a commonality created by way of engaging with others both at a level of public legitimacy and at a level of close attachments. This alignment of personal engagements with the movement's goals based in the common good becomes clearer when the activists narrate the future. Talking about the future, the interviewees emphasized the movement and the organization more than their personal aspirations, yet constructed a biographically resonant future path, as the following male activist in his early thirties from a local association for urban sustainability:

> I don't know what my goals are regarding climate politics but surely we can open a small café here to enable other activities, to enable the development of things.... But the idea in this project is that A, we can first, in short term, train ourselves from amateurs to these semi-professionals and then we can share that knowledge we've learned, we can ask professionals to our workshops to spur us and we learn

> and get experiences of the farming techniques, and so on. We can share it with everybody that comes to our café, and do small business at the same time. But then, B, the bigger challenge or goal here is to develop this into a direction where there would be these elements that could scale to, at least to the scale of [a neighborhood], and the scale of [the whole city], by that way. The dream is that we could be, for our part, part of this wider network of cells that is clearly taking shape. Be part of making this organic, efficient, sustainable organic farming in cities, on these altitudes and based on the open source code principal so that we share all we learn.

The excerpt portrays a collective dream, "our" dream. From the very beginning, the activist's answer bypasses the personal emphasis of the question—"I don't know what my own goals are"—and draws an enthusiastic picture of "our" future projects. This way of talking about the future was recurrent: it is notable that the future accounts nearly *never included* elements of the activists' lives other than their role in achieving the organization's goals, and yet these accounts carried strong personal engagements with the organizational contexts—the "we" and the "how" the future would be sculpted by the actors themselves. Furthermore, as the above quotation illustrates, expanding the common ground across different actors and beyond one's own immediate group was an important part in how the activists envisioned their futures. This vision was, instead of a utopian dream of people joining the movement in masses by way of similar values or a revelation of the movement's overall righteousness, a very practical and operational one.

In this vein, the organizations' joint network mentioned in the beginning of this section had other functions apart from composing the movement's common denominator or a shared argument for public debate. For instance, a young, yet quite experienced activist in her twenties, who alternated between a nation-wide environmental organization as a paid employee specializing in climate protection work and a volunteering campaign chief at a major campaign, described the network meetings as instances of forming common tactics, but also as informal gatherings:

> The way we work in this network is that there are these action-oriented meeting spots, if we for instance go lobbying somebody, so we indeed meet beforehand and talk about what we're going to tell her. In these occasions it often happens that we talk also about other climate related matters than just the topic of the lobbying. And we also have these more informal meetings, like at the end of the summer there will be a strategy day in which we will reflect on what will be the most important foci of campaigning and possibly some division of labor questions.

All the interviewed activists talked about such gatherings in emotionally positive terms, often smiling during the interviews as they reminisced (see Pugh 2013). These gatherings were important for them in terms of advancing the movement goals effectively, but also in terms of a mutually recognized space of familiarity. Many current activists knew each other through these meetings, and their rhythm and durability linked activist generations with each other. As the following activist in his early forties, currently volunteering at an urban gardening campaign, put it,

familiarity in terms of both people and ways of working carried the actors and provided them with a strong common ground:

> Of course it's a small country, so everybody somehow more or less knows each other, and thus those joint projects that have been founded, especially these successful joint projects that go on year after year, they do offer a kind of a place, so even if the people in the steering group change. It becomes like the place we have in common.

Thus, the organization network had a dual significance. On the one hand, it was the principle vehicle of engaging in justifying for the common good: in the network context, the actors solved the movements' internal disagreements, reflected and evaluated the most qualified solutions, built common strategies of action and lobbying, and agreed on division of labor in campaigning. On the other hand, talking about the network, the activists described personal level engagements that were not "individual," and did not even depend on the exact composition of people. Even if some people left and others joined in, the movement offered "places"—recognizable, material or immaterial loci of commonality. These "places" are engagements in familiarity, mutual feelings of ease, common tradition, and memories. They are not the result of personal or collective identities, but of a repetitive, joint coordination of situations.

In terms of narrative form and patterning, this set of interviews thus includes both the public engagement in a social movement collectivity and a patterned personal engagement to a movement that provides an affectionately, even intimately shared common ground. In the narratives they construe, the Finnish activists portray a dual configuration of collectivity: a narrative that stresses engagement in justifying the political views of the movement and a highly patterned narrative of individuals personally engaged with each other through the movement, together striving to meet the standards of a meaningful life.

Malawi: narratives and rituals of individual interests

Compared to Finnish SMO activists, the engagement of Malawian NGO workers and volunteers with climate change followed a very different trajectory. Whereas Finnish activists grew up with news and threats of ecological disaster constantly around them, climate change emerged on the Malawian scene quite recently. Indeed, in a pilot interview, when the second author asked a young man who was enrolled in environmental studies in university how he was drawn to the topic, he answered that he had seen the presidential debates in the United States and realized how much climate was debated. In his words, he then realized that "if it is there [the US] now, it will be here soon." And, indeed, funding agencies, ever in search of novel projects and agendas (see, e.g., Krause 2014b) increasingly fund climate change CBOs (Community Based Organizations). In one town in Southern Malawi, a large sign put it succinctly and seemingly without irony: "Climate Change is the new AIDS."[7]

[7] The authors thank Tom Hannan for this observation.

The Malawian situation was also starkly different from the Finnish in terms of what the activists did and where climate change fit in their overall projects. All the organizations we have looked at depended in large part on ongoing and precarious grants from INGOs (Swidler and Watkins 2017). Workers, especially paid workers, were constantly pitching their projects to potential donors. This also meant that although climate change has increasingly come to be portrayed by national media and by INGOs alike as important, most NGOs tackled climate change as only part of a "portfolio" of social issues that they intermittently worked on, depending on the funding they received for the proposals they were constantly sending out. Introducing his NGO, the director of one rural organization described its mission as follows:

> Confrontation, alleviation of human suffering and social injustice to contribute to social well-being in the community we save, this is our main statement and motto. In addition to this, there are many things that we do, like: Sustainable environmental management; Environmental conservation; Climate mitigation; Forest management; Rainwater harvesting; Fish farming; Bee keeping, and land husbandry practices…. On food security, we are promoting activities that can promote food security. The other is HIV human rights and gender, Early Childhood and Youth development, education, and health where the ultimate goal is malaria control and safe motherhood. Then there is water and sanitation.

Such a diversified mission was the rule rather than the exception. Partly, as NGOs constantly needed to apply for grants from foreign donors, it made pragmatic sense to have a plurality of missions. But this was not simply a pragmatic narrative of maximization of possible profits. The climate-change NGO workers we interviewed conceptualized the different missions as a seamless whole. The missions were unified both, as in the excerpt above, in terms of the ability to "contribute to social well-being in the community," and because, as we show in more detail below, the different missions cohered as ways to embody an image of members of mobile, aspiring elites (Swidler and Watkins 2009, 2017). The "what" and the "who" of Malawian climate change NGO activists were thus deeply connected.

The narratives of Malawian activists were particularly infused with references to education, credentials, and what they have "learned" from their participation in the movement—not primarily in terms of learning about the environmental and social problems they confronted in their work, but in terms of transferable skills. As a university student in her twenties put it:

> Through the years with different organizations, I have built my CV. Different trainings have helped me to understand the country and its different activities. I have done politics, worked with volunteers and nonprofit making organizations. I also know how to handle the youth, mothers, politicians, etc. I can easily motivate people to join different organizations, e.g., Red Cross…. People pay a lot of money for the trainings I have participated in but I got trained for free because of participation in different organizations.

This narrative, which recurred in different forms across almost all the Malawian interviews,[8] is not straightforward. At first glance, it may seem to be instrumental, even cynical. The climate change job is narrated as a way to build the worker's curriculum vitae, and she notes that "people pay a lot of money for trainings I have participated in (…) for free." Indeed, as another NGO volunteer in his twenties put it:

> I was joining all these organizations to [gain] extra skills that can be used in running different organizations. I gained leadership skills, management skills, environmental conservation, climate change, community mobilization, project management, and many more skills in these organizations…. I have just completed my Bachelors degree, so to secure a well paying job, you need to have experience. For the time being, I want to build my CV so that in future, I should secure a well paying job.

Taking part in an NGO, then, was part of an individual mobility project widely recognized within the organizational context. Salary, but even more so education, played an extremely important role in this trajectory. As the narrative excerpts above show, education is linked to future selves. In that sense, NGO work seemed preparatory for a future life, a future self that would reap the dividends of movement participation.

The importance of education in the identity project that NGO workers narrated was thus crystallized most clearly when asked where they hope to be in five years. Except for one, all interviewees had a high school diploma—notable in a country such as Malawi in which only around 7% of the population obtain a high school certificate (Frye 2012). Seven of them had a bachelors' degrees and two of these had a Masters' degree. And yet, for all, including those with a Masters', the dominant narrative was that of an educational project, usually moving by fits and starts, but inexorably towards higher and higher educational attainment.

Complementing the way in which volunteers and personnel spoke of training and certification as key "seductions" of NGO work, the future they hoped for themselves was inevitably marked by education:

> School! I want to continue with my education because I have not reached where I wanted to reach. The only problem at the moment is finance. I am getting less money, but when I get the money, I will go back to school. The other thing is that I want to be an exemplary woman, a woman who is independent.

As in other interviews, the interviewee links education and mobility with the crafting of a specific self, an "exemplary," here also explicitly gendered, self. And, as in the case of most interviews, this project marked both their pasts and their futures. Thus, for the interviewee above, a woman in her early twenties, finishing her high school required incredible dedication. She moved among four different elementary schools and three high schools as her family ran out of money

[8] There were two types of negative cases in the thirty-five interviews where narratives were strikingly different. The first was a narrative-cluster of a few interviewees who were above fifty years old and thus not part of the same generation; the second, the only interviewee who did not have a high school certificate. Although these cases are important, we do not analyze them here for reasons of space.

to pay for one boarding school, sent her to a school near her village, then managed to rally again, moved to one town then another, in search of work. The struggle for education marked most interviewees' childhood and adolescence, and in almost all cases, without regard to the level of education already attained, mobility invariably meant the search for further education. As one interviewee, who was volunteering in a few organizations simultaneously, narrates:

> I would like to improve my education, as I did not do well on my final secondary school examinations. I really want to work hard and go to the university. I really want to be a decision maker in the society. I don't want to be someone of lower class, but be in a managerial position.

This project of mobility was thus not primarily an instrumental one (though of course it was that as well) but a *moral project,* something that defined their lives across situations (see Tavory 2011). The Malawian activists' narratives were engaged, no less than their Finnish counterparts, in the ongoing and shared crafting of desirable selves. Although the actual *topic* of global warming did not feature as centrally, being part of an NGO, being connected to a global world, and receiving training and certificates—legitimate qualifications—were all crucial. The salience of this project can be seen in the ways some interviewees linked the work in the organization to other domains of their lives. As one interviewee, a twenty-eight-year old high school graduate who volunteered in a climate change organization while working as an attendant in a gas station put it:

> I can see that this organization will help me in my career; I got this job as a gas station attendant because of this organization. Besides venturing into business, you can have the passion for continuing with your education. This organization has helped me to develop a passion to continue with my education. With good education, you can be dependable because you can acquire a lot of knowledge that can be used to run an organization…. The other thing is that, when you are at this organization you abstain from promiscuous behavior and you do not have future regrets.

Volunteering was not only linked to education, which was clear in all interviews, but also with work ethic and knowledge, as well as with sexual ethics. In an era of AIDS and constant governmental and NGO messages about sexual behavior, the linking of the three domains—education, work, and sexual morality—is readily available. These three domains are intimately related to the crafting a new, modern subjectivity (see Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2006 for sexuality; Frye 2012 for sexuality and education; and Swidler and Watkins 2009 for education and NGO work in Malawi). The work in the NGO context supplies a shared narrative basis to the promise to become such a person. The interviewees were not simply wishing to become modern subjects, they were actually realizing this wish, *qua ongoing project*, through their participation.

But this kind of engagement was also a way of forging commonality. It was a shared project, buttressed by others on a similar trajectory, and sustaining a cohort of like-minded individuals. Rather than being an individualistic identity project, which may or

may not stand in tension with collective identity, it was itself a way of creating a shared world with others, a common project.[9]

First, and not surprisingly, NGO positions and rumors about openings often spread through networks of such aspiring young men and women. During his time in Malawi, the second author often saw the men and women who worked at a large sociological research project texting each other when they saw a job opening, letting others know when interviews were being held for different NGO and research positions (especially important since these positions were sometimes posted only locally). Indeed, almost half of the interviewees talked about how they found their jobs through other young Malawians who had similar trajectories. The struggle for better positions was a shared, a common ground created by mutual recognition and understanding of what the stakes were for everybody. Interviewees also often spoke of how they worked with "like minded" others. As an NGO district manager in her thirties told the interviewer, she moved to the NGO she currently worked at, leaving a church-based organization where her contract had expired. She was lucky, she said, to pass the interviews to the job and the NGO was a much better fit, "I work with my age mates and it's not difficult to interact and tell them what I feel."

But while this points out that commonality was also a matter of close affinities to "people like me," analyzing the narratives of individual mobility as a way of creating commonality allows us to see how such narratives were connected to other practices. Thus, in over a third of the Malawian interviews—and in almost every case in which one of the founding members of the organization was interviewed—participants spoke about how they were elected to their position and, quite often, about how they were re-elected. Thus, for example, in the following excerpt an interviewee in his twenties, the chairperson of a rural CBO, talks to the interviewer about how he came to occupy his position:

> We had elections when the organization was being formed in 2008, by then we were just a few members and we were voted by people into position.
>
> J: Just so to be sure, you say you were just voted into office?
>
> H: yes by my fellow members….
>
> J: Now coming back to the process of election to elect you into various positions, how many people were you competing against?
>
> H: Ah, there was no competitor; because we were just very few that started the group so there was no one who competed for my position.

[9] Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have suggested that the order of the project is a novel form of justification, in which the common good is adaptability, flexibility, and continuous re-connecting, and the logic of belonging and ordering depends on temporal assemblages of peoples and things. In our analysis, the world of projects does not, however, emerge in this fashion. The shared goals of the Malawian activists did not portray the project itself as a purpose or an evaluated good, but instead the advancing of the plural individual plans and forging the common in the form of shared goals (see Eranti 2016).

In this interview, as in others, the process of voting is largely ritualistic. Rather than having multiple people running for the position, the election consecrates formal roles. As the interview makes clear, the participants in this case first decided who would "run" for each of the roles and then held the election for that role. And although it is possible that activists were also anticipating funding applications in which they wrote about being democratically elected, and perhaps even justifying the *per diems* they would request for specific members by their elected titles, none of the interviewees spoke of the elections in these terms.

Instead, interviewees spoke of the elections in terms of the realization of the movement, a performative ritual that turns it into a legitimate organization. As an interviewee in his thirties who is both the chairman of a local CBO with wide-ranging objectives, and the local network for epilepsy in the area, says when the interviewer asked him about how he came to occupy his role in the organization:

> The issue was very simple; you know I was one of the founders of the organization. We were two, and whenever an organization is starting you find that, it is not the rest of the community members that come together to start this. It takes two or three people who have an idea, then they consult, others agree, then we start mobilizing people. So in our case, it was me and my friend who had the dream and we started telling people of what we dream and people had to agree that we really have these problems and we need to forge ahead. After consultation, five interested youths emerged and we said we are starting this organization, let us have positions. Elections were then conducted to select the office bearers. People had to suggest from the team as to who can be the director of the group and then my name came up and after voting, my name came out with highest votes. We also have the following positions, director of programs, administrative and logistics officer, we also have the finance officer, we also have the field officer, and finally we have field workers.

Once again, the movement from a couple of people with "a dream" to an organization is marked by election. Each of the people who joined the organization was given an elected title and an organization was born. But, more importantly, the elections also turn the interviewee from "a person with a dream" to an organizational actor. Importantly, the first collective act here is the recognizing of the individual office holders. In the context of the individualistic narratives of mobility that we have described, this consecration is thus important. In terms of engagements, the first act in the construction of commonality is the recognition of individual titles and positions.

The narratives of personal attainment, of "CV-building," of educational striving and of hopeful economic mobility are surely important as identity markers. They are, however, also important as a way of constructing a shared world. It is a grammar of individual interests (Thévenot 2007, 2013; Eranti 2018) through which people understand not only their own trajectories, but the way in which shared action is possible. It is not only that being an aspiring individual was a seductive identity project, or that this project was mutually constituted and affirmed, but that in the narratives, the mutual recognition of these individual projects was the way to enact the common and the shared.

From identities to engagements

This article provides a way to approach the coordination of identity projects and action in the context of social movements. Rather than beginning with personal and collective identities and the ways these forms of identity ebb and flow (see, e.g., Taylor and Whittier 1995; Melucci 1995; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Meyer et al. 2002; Goodwin et al. 2009), we focus on patterns of collective engagement and social movement actors' multiple forms of creating commonality. This shift in analytic focus still centers the analysis on the ways in which movements become meaningful for those participating in them, while avoiding some of the problems that have plagued the study of identity in SMOs: the conflation of categories of analysis and practice, and the possible reification of identity in ongoing action. Moreover, as we show, although identity and engagement are closely connected, they are not interchangeable. Identity projects often align with forms of engagement in unexpected ways; engagements may operate in ways that escape a focus on identity altogether.

To gain more precise analytic traction on such engagements, we use Laurent Thévenot's theoretical framework (e.g., 2007, 2013, 2014), which stresses the multiple forms of coordinating situations and the engagements they sustain creating common ground therein. These ways to build common ground with others take shape at different levels, on a scale that runs from publicly legitimized arguments based on shared definitions of "the common good" through sharing individual interest-based definitions of the common, and finally to personal level attachments and shared familiarity, ease, and trust.

Focusing on the scale of engagements helps us to identify empirical patterns that a focus on identity is apt to miss. Finnish activists, as we show, often narrated their activities by way of merging personal and collective identities, as researchers have found in other contexts (e.g., Lichterman 1996). However, in these narratives, their coordination of various situations was patterned by engagements with others through justifying a common good, and through familiar comfort and ease—the latter being, in particular, a level easily missed by analyses of narrative identity. Malawian activists and NGO employees spoke of the common good the movements worked to achieve, but principally created common ground by engaging in shared individual choices and projects, which were jointly consecrated by fellow NGO participants, for example, through election to office. Thus, we observe an unexpected intersection of a (personal) identity project and engagement in a strongly shared common plan.

Our approach and design have also produced a comparative attempt to understand the Northern and Southern ends of one "global" movement in ways that simultaneously address the common structural features and the practice-level differences. While putting these cases side by side helps de-familiarize them and highlights the vast differences between them, our approach, rather than focusing on specific differences, presents a spectrum of possibilities in which the actors' engagements establish commonality. Ultimately, as we argue, it provides a theoretical optic that allows us to see aspects of both cases that would have remained otherwise unnoticed (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

More generally, this article opens up a new way to ask perhaps the most crucial questions that sociologists who focus on identity ask in the context of social movement organizations: What do the movements mean for people who participate in them? How do these meanings, of both self and movement, shape patterns of action? It does so,

however, by attending to narrative patterns of engagement and situations in which actors enact a shared world. This shift in focus, as we show in this article, does not mean that questions of identity are somehow wrong, but that concentrating on them leaves us only half way to understanding the requirements of common action and the contextual *contents* of the collective. Focusing attention on the different ways in which commonality is forged and on a *shared* patterning of the self gives us tools to disentangle the relationship between social movements and their participants as patterns of shared action.

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