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Where did the Indignados go? How movement sociality can influence action orientation and ongoing activism after the hype

Leticia Prado Galán & Barbara Fersch

Abstract

This article focuses on the Indignado protesters in the city of Valladolid (Spain) as a case study, drawing on retrospective qualitative interview research six years after the ‘hype’. Our analysis explores how forms of interaction and participation during the events could have had an important influence not only on the motives of the participants’ political engagement, but also the long-term durability of such engagement. The findings offer insights on the different forms of sociality present in the various types of activism and how these contribute to forming diverse understandings of collective action. Consequently, activists show tendencies for diverse forms of long-term engagement that appear to follow patterns that align with their experienced type of sociality and how it is remembered.

Key Words: Indignados, long-term engagement, sociality, social movements, understandings of collective action

Over the last decade, social movements have evolved in many different countries. These so-called anti-austerity movements have contested the political and economic measures taken in the context of the financial crisis and its aftermath and have introduced alternatives to traditional forms of protest. Scholars have argued that these movements have shared several characteristics, for instance concerning their spatial form – the occupation of a public space – or their use of social media (Castells, 2012; Flesher Fominaya & Cox, 2015; Juris, 2012; Della Porta et al., 2016).

In retrospect, another commonality appears to be their relatively short lifespan, as most of these movements have not only emerged but have also dissolved again quickly. In this paper, we study this issue through the case of the (former) Indignados movement in the Spanish city of Valladolid from an individual, biographical perspective. How did the activists experience movement sociality and how did they make sense of it, including in the context of their own biography? What patterns of subsequent activism (if any) have emerged and how do the interviewees explain this?

Some of these issues have been discussed in the literature in the context of collective identity (eg Flesher Fominaya, 2010a and see discussion below), among other things focusing on the new patterns of sociality and activism found in the newer waves of movements. In this paper, we take a step back to look at several aspects of collective identity and their relevance for longer-term political engagement among activists. Thus, we hope to contribute to a further examination of the new movements’ sociality and their individual consequences. More broadly this study might also contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary forms of sociality in general.

In the next two sections, we present the relevant scholarly discussion within the field of social movements research, followed by a discussion of methods and case and, finally, our empirical analysis and findings.
Collective identity and political engagement after the hype

The concept of collective identity has been squarely on the agenda of social movements research for several decades. Collective identity is seen as important for the existence of social movements, creating common meaning and a sense of cohesion among activists (e.g. Hunt & Benford, 2004; Poletta & Jasper, 2001). However, while the concept has been used within many traditions, there is no universally agreed upon definition (Fominaya, 2010b). Whereas Poletta and Jasper (2001) refer to it as the individual’s connection to a broader community, a more common understanding locates it as existing between individuals as a shared sense of ‘we-ness’ (Glass, 2009; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996; Snow & McAdam, 2000) or as ‘the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences and solidarity’ (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 105).

The concept of collective identity has not been without criticism. One line of critique emphasizes a certain societal change, which Lichterman terms the shift from community-based activism to ‘personalized commitment’, including individualized forms of engagement and a focus on self-actualization (Lichterman, 1996). His findings seem to mirror this general societal development towards individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). In this context, McDonald (2002) has questioned whether the concept of collective identity is still of relevance. In his study of the alter-globalization movement, he finds several new characteristics of movement culture and action which in his view are incompatible with the notion of collective identity – namely, the significance of affinity groups and friend-like relations, the question of representation, network culture and ‘fluidarity’, and the narrative structure of action.

Fominaya (2010b), who has found similar patterns in her study of autonomous global justice activists in Spain, however, disagrees with McDonald’s proposal to exclude the collective identity perspective. According to her, the fact that some of these newer movements are not characterized by a set of shared principles and affiliations does not mean that collective identity (in any form) does not exist. She argues that it might be the rejection of any fixed identity among autonomous movements that constitutes their collective identity.

Our purpose here is not to resolve that particular debate. We are primarily interested in how collective and individual understandings and interpretations have an impact on activists during and especially after ‘the hype’, and the biographical meaning-making has taken place. For these purposes, specific aspects contained in the concept of collective identity are relevant. For the purpose of empirical analysis, we focus on (1) forms of sociality and (2) action orientation, and (3) the interrelations between these aspects. Concerning sociality, which can be defined as ‘particular ways of being together […], of engaging in relationships’ (Bookman, 2014, p. 93), we aim to analyse the activists’ relationship forms, kinds of bonding, and ways of acting or being together. Thus, we understand sociality as a combination of the relationships that develop between individuals over time alongside the practices that people engage in together. Concerning action orientation, we will look at activists’ understandings of the meanings, aims and means of movement activism (see also Table 2 below).

Our main analytical focus points are, therefore, usually seen as contained within ‘collective identity’, or more precisely, aspects of social interaction that generate collective identities. We are mainly interested in how these aspects play
particular roles for the activists in our study, rather than their roles in generating collective identities, and therefore have chosen ‘sociality’ and ‘action orientation’ as more precise terms. Beyond these elements, we also examine the relationship between sociality, action orientation and long-term activism; in the following section we discuss relevant research literature concerning this aspect.

**Political engagement after movement activism and the question of temporality**

Movement scholars often have an interest in the outcomes of social movements. This covers more than their failure or success in terms of political impact or influences on policymaking (Bosi & Uba, 2009), also including the immediate and long-lasting effect of the movements on biographical and cultural dimensions (Giugni, 2008). Movements that have not had any impact on politics can still have a very strong impact on the participants’ life course, including their political values and subsequent political and societal engagement (Bosi & Uba, 2009).

Long-term engagement has been investigated through the study of biographical consequences and life trajectories. Research informed by socio-psychological approaches has highlighted how protest participants maintain ideological and political commitment over the years (McAdam, 1989). McAdam’s research on participants in the Freedom Summer Project held in Mississippi during the 1960s shows that in cases of high-risk activism, the effect on post-event engagement was even greater, producing the ‘resocialization’ of the participants: ‘New Left politics became the organizing principle of their lives, personal as well as political’ (1989, p. 758). Other studies do stress the high level of socio-political engagement of former activists as well. (Giugni & Grasso 2016) On the contrary, in her study, Acconero analyses activists’ trajectories during and after dictatorship in Portugal and found patterns of retreatment from political engagement for a majority of her respondents. She finds that their trajectory included a great disillusion connected to the establishment of a liberal democracy, which was not the aim of these activists, as they had the ‘dream of revolution’ (Acconero 2019, p. 319). Thus, she argues that in order to find out about the impact of activism on subsequent political participation one has to take the conditions of it into account, including their individual, organizational and institutional dimensions. (Acconero 2019)

Fine emphasizes the importance of the memory of eventful experiences for subsequent activism: ‘Events in which members have participated provide templates for their ongoing commitments, constituting a shared vision for future plans.’ (Fine 2019, p. 3) He finds that for senior activists the linkage between past, present and future becomes important and the memory of specific protest events up to 50 years ago can play a vital role for their activism. (Fine 2019) As stated above, we are interested in the role and relevance of Indignado activism for present-day activism, and thus include an analysis of several of the dimensions of activism and of the question of memory and eventful experience.

**The Indignados and 15-M**

Before presenting our analysis, we will first introduce the case and present the methods, data and design used.
On 15 May 2011, the virtual platform *Democracia Real Ya*, supported by more than 200 different groups unaffiliated with traditional labour and political organizations, called for demonstrations in the main cities of Spain. Official estimations of the number of participants ranged from 20,000 in Madrid to 130,000 across Spain (Castells, 2012). In the capital, 19 people were arrested, prompting a new call for the protesters to camp that very night in Puerta del Sol Square in support of the detainees, and to keep on protesting until the municipal elections a week later. This action was emulated in all the country’s major cities: ‘*acampadas*’ (urban tent camps) became the origin and centre of a nascent movement.

The encampments were set up by the participants, who organized themselves into committees that coordinated the inner and outer camp areas by function: communication, logistics, strategy, action, and so on. The camps were located in very central urban spaces (squares), were open to public participation, and symbolically held periodic public assemblies at which everybody could support or vote on ideas or actions and express their views. Proposals were approved by consensus and decisions had to be passed by general assemblies.

**The case of Valladolid**

Unlike most of the research on the Indignados and 15-M, this study does not focus on either Madrid (Perugorría & Tejerina, 2013; ) or Barcelona (Castañeda 2012, Postill, 2013), but on the smaller regional capital of Valladolid. Valladolid is located 200 km north-west of Madrid. Its metropolitan area is home to 301,876 people and the total population of the province is 523,679. Here, as in many other Spanish cities, there was extensive 15-M activity.

In Valladolid, 15-M started by occupying a central square in the city (Fuente Dorada). One of our interviewees, Mariana, was an initiator of the occupation: she received information from the Madrid Facebook group about the requirements for legally camping in a public space and she asked online for volunteers to join her in signing the necessary petition in Valladolid – two other people quickly responded. The three handed in a petition to the Government Delegation on 17 May 2011 requesting permission to camp on 18 May; the petition did not specify an end date. That afternoon, several hundred responded to the call to camp. The encampment was, as in the rest of Spain, organized by committees. Assemblies soon started to take place and daily activities were planned: sit-ins, actions, talks and camp maintenance took up most of the participants’ time. At night, a watch was set to protect the encampment from aggression or disturbances.

15-M Valladolid received a lot of outside support: every morning anonymous people brought food to the campers and, according to the participants, even major dairy companies provided products. Wi-Fi was supplied by a bar close by, actions were encouraged by pedestrians and workers occasionally breakfasted at the encampment.

After 64 days, the encampment was finally evicted in the early hours of 21 July. However, the movement continued through the coordination of national initiatives including demonstrations, marches and actions, such as ‘Surround the Congress’ on 25 September. On the local level, neighbourhood platforms that had come together in June were
especially active once the encampment was disbanded. Actions at banks’ headquarters, politician ‘escraches’ \(^1\) and ‘corruption’ tours, for instance, were organized by committees and work groups (anti-eviction, healthcare, etc.) that kept the movement active. Participants gathered for a general assembly every other week.

In 2017 there were still some groups working under the 15-M label, but our interviewees agreed that they no longer represent the movement. From the interviewees’ accounts, the activists in these groups are somewhat homogeneous, tend to be older and, to a great extent, consist of traditional activists and members of leftist parties.

**Researching the Indignados after the hype: design and methods**

Qualitative interviews have been described as especially useful for gaining insights into individual experiences and worldviews (eg Alshenqeeti, 2014; Kvale, 1994), and are thus very valuable for investigating how activists make sense of their experiences. When it comes to social movements research, Della Porta underscores that interviews allow individuals to disentangle meanings, feelings and practices, and to reveal the relationships established with the environment. Interviews are,

> particularly useful when we wish to analyse the meaning individuals attribute to the external world and to their own participation in it, the construction of identity, and the development of emotions. (Della Porta, 2014, p. 230)

The empirical material used in this study consists of 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews with (former) Indignados activists. The interviews were conducted in 2017, that is, six years after the original encampment. Thus, the research approach is at least partly designed as a qualitative retrospective study. One of the focus points of this study was to find out what a past event, that is, the Indignado activism of 2011, means to the individual on a meaning-making, biographical and practical (ie present-day engagement) level. Possible pitfalls of such a design could be the participants’ ‘faulty memory’ and the fact that certain events such as the ‘encampment conflict’ described below could taint an individual’s recall of previous memories (De Vaus, 2006). However, as we are less interested in a correct description of events and more in the subjective meanings and interpretations of the interviewees, these shortcomings of a retrospective design are less relevant.

Data was collected over the period of a month in the city of Valladolid. The interviews took place either in rooms in the university library or in pubs or coffee shops. An online interview was held via Skype. In two cases, interviewees expressed a wish to attend the meeting accompanied by a 15-M acquaintance who was interested in contributing to the project. Joint interview effects in participants, such as talk dominance or a tendency to consensual responses (Arksey, 1996) were acknowledged, but were not considered to be decisive, since the information coming from such interactions was highly insightful, as the participants were decidedly talkative, making use of shared anecdotes and previous conversations, and some memories were made clearer.
Research participants were found through different channels: three were recruited through direct announcements on Facebook and two more answered an email sent to a 15-M e-mail list (which since 2014 had barely been active). A main obstacle to accessing interviewees was the dormant state of the movement. Even at the public commemoration of 15-M’s anniversary (in Fuente Dorada Square on 15 May 2017), which might seem to have been a suitable occasion to contact interviewees, there was only a small group of activists present. Getting their personal contact data, however, did not lead to interviews. Some participants were reached through ‘snowball sampling’. Interviewees were finally selected to provide diversity concerning age, gender and occupation (9 women and 7 men from 16 to 51 at the time of the activism; see table 1 below).

Table 1: Interviewees’ sociodemographic characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Marta</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student &amp; part-time employment</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lorena</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Part-time employment</td>
<td>Student &amp; part-time employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Paco</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rocío</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student &amp; part-time employment</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Belen</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ramiro</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unemployed (found job during 15-M)</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tino</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Luna</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student &amp; employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Raquel</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Part-time employment</td>
<td>Part-time employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After a first coding of the interviews an initial collection-table was built with interview fragments showing the meanings, expressions and participants’ own arguments relating to their experiences, feelings and understandings of the 15-M movement. These were placed in cognitive, relational, practices and self-reflection frames. Biographical data and factors such as age, occupation and socio-political engagement after 15-M participation were considered in this phase. Additionally, a map of collective meanings was constructed to grasp the differences and commonalities within the group, and to establish collective meanings from individual understandings. In this first round of analysis marked differences between the three emerging groups became visible, including patterns that reflected respondents’ different participation forms and understandings. As a next step, the relevant theoretical approaches were revisited and included in the analysis and new analytical tables were created. Here the terms sociality and action orientation were included. The outlined pattern of practices and connected meaning-making are best understood by the emphasis on their typical aspects – that is, to get a better understanding of how social practices are connected to meaning-making in a social movement, some specific typical aspects have been found, emphasized and analysed. However, this does not mean that every aspect was found in every interviewee’s account. It must also be considered that patterns of movement participation changed for some of the actors – for instance, some campers abandoned sleeping at the camp in the days immediately after its occupation. Taking that into account, only one interviewee was difficult to place initially.\(^3\) patterns of understandings were clear in general. However, the interviews took place years after the occupation of the square and the interviewees told their stories retrospectively – after the eviction of the camp, which proved to be a breaking point for the movement.

As this study has been designed as a qualitative case study, any generalizations drawn in this article are of an analytical nature. Thus, claims regarding the transferability of the research to a more general level (eg regarding the impact of sociability in contemporary movements on action orientation and subsequent political engagement) are made with the help of theory and contextualization. Taking the relatively limited number of interviews into account, the claims drawn from the empirical analysis are limited. The aim of this study is to reveal tendencies that can be investigated in future research.
The Indignados of Valladolid, then and now

In the following we present the findings of the interview analysis. We first introduce the context of the interviewees’ activism, then discuss the question of Indignado identity and introduce the three different forms of sociality we have found among the Indignados of Valladolid. We will then present the findings on action orientations and subsequent political participation and argue that the three forms of sociality are connected to different action orientations and to different patterns of subsequent activism.

The personal becomes political

Most participants recall going through a transitional period in their lives, strongly characterized by a bleak personal outlook at the height of the crisis, which was when they joined the 15-M movement: graduating from university, returning home, unemployment and/or precarious/temporary jobs forced them to undergo a process of questioning and reflection. Many interviewees describe how during their 15-M participation they became more aware of the macro-societal reasons for their individual situations. As, for example, Miriam stated:

Apart from the fact that you are outraged, it means recognizing yourself as an Indignado. I had been numb for so long [...] I blamed myself because I thought I was not putting in enough effort. 15-M changed that, being able to talk, and meeting many people [with the same problems] as you. Everybody needs to be responsible for their life, but you cannot be responsible for everything that happens in your life.

Rocío was 23 years old and finishing her university degree when she joined 15-M. She studied for her final exams in the Salamanca camp and moved back to Valladolid to settle straight into the city’s camp. She described her experience of the movement as one of personal growth through relating the societal context to the struggles in her life:

We feel overwhelmed by the current society, which prevents us from thinking. You get up in the morning and you already have your day sorted: your work, the pending bills, watching a video of some superstar guy, talking to your friend [...] There are so many things going on in your mind that you cannot think; 15-M expressed what we had bottled up inside [...] Being burned out and having no clue why [...] 15-M worked to help us focus on what we were mad at: ‘F***!, my boss is a son of a b**** - yeah, but he is just following the rules the higher ones have agreed upon’ [...] To help us focus, that is what 15-M was for.

Summing up, movement engagement not only provided context for personal situations within a broader societal frame, but also opened up an alternative view of austerity. Participants stated that they became able to understand the causes and effects of the crisis, contributing to the politicization or re-politicization of the individuals.

In search of the Indignados identity

When asked for a description of 15-M, the interviewees were reluctant to give a single definition and they emphasized the movement’s non-ideological (opposing the political frame of left and right) nature. They pointed out how it was a
personally lived movement, experienced rather than conceptualized, as, for example, Rocío highlighted when asked for a definition:

I don’t know [...] everyone lived it in their own way: more politically interested people experienced it as a very political event [...] In my case, as I had studied psychology, I was most interested in human relationships, at a social level. I lived it that way, but it was very personal, there is not a single definition.

The movement is primarily depicted as fundamentally non-classifiable by the interviewees. They described it as new, leaderless, and encouraging expression and the contestation of living conditions. The interviewees also stressed that it offered the possibility of a space outside the traditional organizations (unions, political parties, associations). Political protest without subscribing to an ideological bloc or adapting to political and economic expectations became possible according to the interviewees. For instance, Mariana, 39, who was working as a documentation coordinator for a private museum in the city, was interested in self-organized artistic spaces and saw 15-M as dynamic and creative and removed from traditional political movements:

Most importantly it did not come from a pre-existing movement, because it was about saying ‘I’m fed up with everything, but I am also fed up with this party and this organization’. We felt this deeply [...] many people did not feel represented. [15-M] was new, there was no party base anywhere [...] When we were asked: ‘who are you?’, [we said,] ‘We are the outraged’ [indignados]. If you want to call us the Outraged [Indignados] that is fine [...] in my opinion, to give it a definition was to fall into a trap, it was good to mutate, and it was good to be undefined in areas in which you needed to be cross-representative. We were more concerned about problems than about whether we were this or that.

Thus, most participants did not provide a definition of Indignado identity, though some dared to outline blurred and broad descriptions: ‘someone who no longer wants to be manipulated’, ‘an ethical position’, ‘someone who goes out to the street to gather, looking for something’. They also highlighted how 15-M was lived as an individual experience, personally developed and understood. As Ramiro described it:

You cannot define the type of person that took part in 15-M because anyone could be found there, from crusties to lawyers, everyone with their own ideals and views about things, absolutely anyone could be found there [...] It was also a progressive movement, most of the people were progressive.

These commonalities among the statements of the interviewees on the pursuit of personal choice, life cohesion, and on understanding oneself from a common structural context, could be understood as empirical aspects of the Indignados identity, as the personal, relational and environmental understandings that enable individuals to take collective action (Jasper & McGarry, 2015). However, using the concept in this context might gloss over the conflictual character of the identity as expressed by the interviewees, who seem to reject essential, static and representative categories. (Flesher Fominaya 2010b) Rather than describing a homogeneous collective identity, the interviewees appear to define themselves as radically autonomous individuals. (see also Juris 2012)
This finding seems to back McDonald’s (2002) considerations. According to McDonald, contemporary experience of social movement participation is lived as a ‘shared struggle for personal experience’ (2002, p. 125). The lack of identificatory movement symbols (banners, emblems, acronyms, etc.) or ideological assumptions explains the singularity of the participants, which creates a form of experience not subsumed by the group but rather developed through individual self-encounter with the collective (McDonald, 2002). As the author puts it, the ‘relationship between person and identity is fluid, not fixed and transparent’ (McDonald, 2002, p. 118). This relationship is, however, lived and experienced within affinity groups. These are temporary, project-oriented and trust-based forms of sociality, which are constituted by friend-like relations in loose and fluid interactions. Although they speak of a ‘we’ this seems to be exceptionally broad and inclusive as indicated above. Thus, instead of searching for a common Indignados identity, in the following we will look more closely at the different forms of sociality found in the Indignados protest in Valladolid and discuss their possible impact on both the dissolution of the movement and individual patterns of long-term political engagement.

Forms of sociality and action orientation

As discussed above, the topic of (the loss of) control over one’s own life course in times of economic and societal crisis, concerning both the current day-to-day situation and future prospects, was a key point of departure in the interviewees’ narratives for mobilization and politicization. However, this commonality does not mean that collective action was understood in a common way too: their common activism had different meanings for the different actors at the Valladolid camp. Indeed, different understandings of how and why the activism should take place emerged as a source of destructive conflict.

Valladolid’s 15-M worked very much on the basis of affinity groups, which appear to have developed different forms of sociality and action orientation. We found three distinctive types, as represented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Groups, forms of sociality and action orientations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group/type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-campers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
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</table>
In the following we discuss the most important aspects, starting with camping/occupying as a form of protest and the (other) forms of sociality found at the Valladolid 15-M protest, moving on to the roles of skills and empowerment, and ending with a discussion on the emergence of different action orientations among the participants and the conflict this entailed.

**Occupying and camping as a form of protest**

The occupation of a public space and the encampment there entailed a form of sociality shared by all participants and external visitors. However, for the permanent residents it was necessarily a more intense experience. One of the permanent campers, Marta, 22, emphasized the emotional aspects as having a major impact on her life and biography.

She stated:

> There were the ones who shared a common project and then there were the campers, the ones who shared their lives. There were romances, friends, many people, many hours [...] You did not work full-time. We had always fun, because we were happy, this environment made us happy.

Emotional bonding was a general and somewhat central characteristic of the 15-M movement: trust and affection grew, and the participants have tended to maintain close bonds and friendships since. However, these relationships were more intense for the camper group.

Participants described how daily interaction at the assemblies fulfilled the participants’ emotional needs: empathy through understanding the views of others, and awareness and assistance to overcome differences in communicative competence (eg giving others time to clarify their ideas, helping each other to write communications and so on). Ramiro, who was 16 during his involvement with the 15-M movement, regarded the assemblies and the discussions in the camp as a mode of interpersonal communication in which others are acknowledged and understood:

> We shared emotions with people that we hadn’t ever met before, [we were not] judging anyone [...] and if you do things in that way, then bad moments are regarded differently because when disagreements happen you have already constructed a connection from which you will be able to address the issues, because we have that in common [...] It was vital to find a common position and focus all your energies there.
To summarize, bonding through personal interaction may have provided a sense of inclusion and connection, where interactions based on emotions and understandings go beyond the discursive function of a debate. This was especially emphasized by the camper group.

The full-time exposure of this group to emotional interaction also influenced their way of approaching new challenges: over time the occupied space attracted external ‘visitors’, and assaults and disturbances started to happen during the night. This problem was resolved by a ‘night-time protocol of action’, in which the way of dealing with those ‘visitors’ consisted of smiling, avoiding confrontation and listening/talking to anybody who reached them from the ‘outside’.4

The practical organization of the camp basically required the full-time devotion of the camper group, which had an important effect on personal involvement and feelings of intensity:

I remember that you used to go to sleep at three in the morning and then you [usually] woke at nine am, and the camp was on the street, [so] there were assaults and insults [...] I do not know if I ever slept for a full single night [...] I wonder if anyone else that started like me, from the outset, camping, [ever] left, because you got hooked on it, I had so much energy [...] it was the time in my life that I slept the least and I didn’t even notice it. (Belén)

This ‘encampment syndrome’ was very common among all the activists, but more intense among the campers as they stayed there all the time. The campers were the interviewees who described the effects of camping in the most positive way in terms of usefulness, having fun and the immediate effect of social interactions. Significantly, some of the group described it as ‘the spirit of the movement’.

Among the group of activists who experienced the movement most intensely by camping in an occupied public space, a form of sociality seems to have been fostered that can be characterized by personal, communication through emotions and senses and feelings of worth and recognition; this was emphasized by practices of task- and knowledge-sharing and empathy with and among strangers. Many campers stressed that they started to see these practices as the means for the movement to create social and societal change on a micro level, instead of by engaging in a political struggle with the political system.

In contrast, the non-campers had quite a different opinion of the occupation and the camp. Pedro, 32, a substitute sports teacher, saw the camp as one part of a two-phase development. According to him, the first necessary step was to contest established understandings, for instance, on the economic crisis and austerity policy, and once this had opened up the public discourse, the political system could be addressed:

Measures are passed by parliament, and the way you have parliament pass the measure you want is by contesting your proposal in the street, looking for social support, winning the cultural battle by making what you want common sense. [...] There are some issues in which politics is not needed and you can put things into practice in your daily life, but you cannot do everything there: if I want a healthcare system, I need to press parliament!
Thus, non-campers thought that the square’s occupation was just another form of protest, a phase that would naturally end at some point instead of being ‘an objective in itself’ (Juan). From this viewpoint, the encampment became counterproductive at a certain point: filthy and disordered, and managed by unstable people, it became a distraction from the movement’s principal purpose. Persistence regarding keeping the encampment until the end of the protest was not shared by all Indignados: many in the non-campers group supported the eviction of the camp at that point.

Pedro summarizes the campers’ view: ‘They thought you could change the world [by sitting] in a tent’. The non-campers perceived that worldview to be limited and inefficient. Lucas, a 39-year-old self-employed architect recalled how the happiness he felt when they succeeded in preventing the eviction of a family was overshadowed by his realization of the magnitude of the problem. The urgency of social problems in the midst of the economic crisis, such as evictions of people from their homes due to the burst housing bubble, was, for some activists, a reason to move on with a more political agenda.

This dichotomy between the activists who were very attached to the encampment and those who saw it as a protest strategy (and increasingly as a burden) may at least partly be related to the activists’ lived experiences during 15-M. Juan highlighted the effect this division had on 15-M in Valladolid:

> We went out onto the streets to call for a real democracy and certain political changes; we didn’t do it exclusively because we wanted to occupy a public space. I think some people stopped seeing this and became camp advocates no matter what. This caused tensions in Valladolid, it was one of the worst moments; it was the beginning of an important rupture.

Thus, it becomes quite clear that the camp as well its dissolution is very important in the memory of the Indignado activists in Valladolid: Here, we can identify eventful experience (Fine 2019) being crucial for the activists. However, we can also see that the different groups of activists also interpret its meaning differently, following – again – the described pattern.

**Independents: skills and empowerment**

The many rich possibilities to contribute, the open discussions at the assemblies and the generally open atmosphere were the characteristics of the movement that attracted the independents. One was Filo, 45, who had participated in neighbourhood associations in her youth; later, family and work responsibilities had prevented her from further engagement, but she had always wanted to become involved in activism again. Previously employed in her husband’s business, she found herself without a job at the time of 15-M due to business cutbacks. In this situation 15-M presented an interesting possibility to become an activist again. Although she only occasionally participated during the encampment phase, she felt the individual possibilities for participation were highly inclusive:
I met so many people there! It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life! Because you felt you were useful, it was very individual, no one would tell you what to do, you just used to come along and volunteer.

The openness of the assemblies and encampment enabled the independents to feel integrated even though they were not constantly involved in the movement’s activities.

I used to go there every day and you could meet people who were already into stuff. I used to go there and if someone was needed to make a banner or to buy something, I did. You went there and it was like, ‘Do you know how to do something?’ I can sew, so if there was the need to sew some fabrics to make a large banner I did it. As a person, you provided what you knew and also you learnt something else, because by being together, you always learn. Everything flowed naturally, nobody controlled who was doing what or what was being done. (Raquel)

The non-hierarchical, self-organized structure, characterized by friend-like relationships and open or personalized participation, constituted a feature that provided the respondents with feelings of empowerment and self-esteem. Raquel, for instance, noticed that despite her previous experience, participation in an open and public space had a vital impact on how she viewed herself:

Just to speak in public […] Maybe you are used to talking and did project presentations at college […] and maybe I have done some of it at work for specific issues, but that […] – it seems so silly! – being able to voice your opinion […] Your opinion matters as much as others’, you know? There were professors, doctors, architects […] Your opinion was respected like anyone else’s, and that is important: when you have self-respect you start placing importance on what you are thinking and you want to know more […], that did me good, I felt good, I felt comfortable.

Thus, for the independents group, involvement was often seen as gainful for personal reasons such as empowerment and some (but fewer) quality relationships. In this type of sociality, self-development was highlighted, and emotional connections seemed to be less in focus. Independents described participants as coalescing in groups: for example ‘the youngsters’ as opposed to older people, or the ‘new people’, rather than the ‘long-term activists’, and they tried to keep their personal position or perspective out of these dynamics when narrating their 15-M experience. Empowerment and social relations were stressed and little or no negative emotion was expressed. The encampment conflict described above was viewed from a distance.

There were several motivations for keeping a distance from the conflict. In our analysis, Paco, 52, an adult educator with a long history of involvement in social movements and activist engagement (mainly in Latin American solidarity movements), appeared to be positioned between the non-campers and the independents – this was mainly because while his action orientation was somewhat political, the sociality form of his engagement put him squarely in the independents category. He gave the following explanation for that pattern:
I wanted to participate to a higher degree, but I thought it was not my moment, mine had been during the ‘80s [...] I wanted these ‘new people’ [...] You know, coming from the Transition, you have feelings of superiority [...] I think they taught us a good lesson even though they didn’t have the [historical] political training we had had.

Other ‘independents’ kept their distance because of their focus on the personal benefits of 15-M: social connections, self-expression and empowerment. They saw the ‘magic’ (Miriam) of the encampment but did not get involved in the internal conflicts.

When looking at the characteristics – eg age or employment status of the three types the question arises, if that might mean that it was the individuals’ specific context that predetermined which group and type of sociality to join and in the end, action orientation to develop. This might be right for some of the independents’ activism-returnees but cannot generally be seen – as described before several of the non-campers started out camping and the other way around, and thus actively chose a certain sociality. Besides that, many of the activists in the non-camper group were unemployed at the time, thus potentially having enough time to join full-time camps.

**Activism and engagement after the hype**

As stated above, the discussions about the possible voluntary removal of the camp led to a major conflict within the activist group, and after the camp was finally evicted by the police the movement somewhat dissolved. In the interviews, we included questions about the interviewees’ subsequent political and social engagement and participation. Concerning this topic, we found an interesting continuation of the group patterns. Table 3 provides an overview of the activists’ participation patterns over time.

**Table 3: Activists’ participation over time**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Participation before 15-M</th>
<th>Participation immediately after 15-M</th>
<th>Participation 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campers</td>
<td>Marta</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tino</td>
<td>None ~ high</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luna</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rocio</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belen</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ramiro</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-campers</td>
<td>Lorena</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The campers appear to have been rather disillusioned after the eviction of the camp. They did not express motivation to continue with political/social activism, although they still expressed political commitment and interest. Some of them stated that they now mistrusted collective action; others claimed that they wanted to pursue change through personal or professional activities instead. The latter corresponds to the idea of pursuing change on the individual micro-level as experienced in camp sociality. This was the case both directly after 15-M and also during the interviews. Here we might see a commonality with Accornero (2019)’s activists: Albeit under very different circumstance the campers, like the activists in her study did experience a big disillusion, namely the dissolution of the camp and all that was connected to it, and became politically inactive afterwards. This does not only seem to stress the importance of the memory of eventful protest experience, but even more precisely the relevance of how this experience is memorized.

Both non-campers and independents participated much more directly after 15-M. However, the engagement of the two groups took different forms: many non-campers thought that working in the groups that emerged after the occupation fitted much better into their lives, with fewer emotionally loaded conflicts and a clearer political agenda. They had the fewest issues with joining the newly established parties or party-like lists (eg Podemos, or the Ganemos or Toma la Palabra municipal coalition platforms/lists), where they could best follow their political agendas.

The independents, on the other hand, became very involved in direct impact organizations (ie local platforms, eg in the field of anti-eviction) or they collaborated with political groups/lists, which were often those initiated by their 15-M...
M friendship networks. However, they steered clear of formal party membership and only became involved on the local level.

After the general elections in 2016, only five of the interviewees remained actively engaged in socio-political activism, and of these, three were involved in organizations that had originated from 15-M. This, however, might not be unusual concerning party activism after an important election. Moreover, the fact that the independents appear to be the most involved activists six years later fits very well with their orientation towards long-standing personal commitment. Some newer articles on Occupy London (Matthews, 2018; Reinicke, 2018) also focus on the disintegration-of-the-camp stage and report the emergence of somewhat similar groups or factions as we have found in our study. Thus, there might be a broader pattern to be found. However, very little is known about the biographical consequences of this so far, and here our findings contribute to the field.

Conclusions

In the retrospective interview material, we have found a pattern concerning movement sociality and action orientation among 15-M activists in Valladolid that appears to be reflected in their long-term engagement after the hype. This seems to be relevant, especially in the context of the newer waves of activism or movements, which have a tendency to be rather short-lived (Castells, 2012; Della Porta et al., 2016). A shortage of longer-term committed activists is, as for example Bunnage (2014) has pointed out, a major factor in the decay of a movement. Hence, our analysis contributes insights about the interrelation of social contexts (forms of sociality) and individual aspects (action orientations) and their potential influence on long-term engagement within contemporary social movements. Our analysis suggests that the (different) lived experiences of joint activism can lead to different understandings of its meaning and subsequently have an impact on long-term engagement. Here the relevance of how eventful experience is memorized became visible, as well as the role of disillusion.

Another interesting aspect is the question of age and the potential meaning of activism in the life course. It is striking, for instance, that all the interviewees in the campers’ group were very young, and it might not be surprising that it was this group that was very much into emotional bonding with others. However, this might also be a reason for concern: If some the youngest activists, for almost all of whom 15M was the first political engagement do memorize the ending of the Indignados encampment as a disappointing event that leads them to give up on politics and collective action entirely then this might not be a positive biographical outcome of movement activism. More generally and taking findings of other studies (e.g. Matthews, 2018; Reinecke, 2018) about the endings of camps into account, there might be a specific group of former ‘movements of the squares’ activists, at the time very young and ‘enchanted’ by camper sociality, who possibly remember the decline and eviction of the camp as particularly disappointing event. If Fine (2019) is right and positively remembered movement participation can be a resource for later mobilization, the opposite might also be true. Where (more) of these activists are now, remains thus a relevant research task in order to understand dynamics and outcomes of contemporary social movements.
References

Accornero, G. (2019). I wanted to carry out the revolution’: activists’ trajectories in Portugal from dictatorship to democracy. Social Movement Studies. 18(3): 305-323


Endnotes

1 Public denunciation of relevant figures (politicians, bankers, etc.) in private spaces (outsides their homes, workplaces, restaurants, etc.).
2 All names are pseudonyms.
3 Paco, whom we have placed in both non-campers and independents, but who probably mainly belongs to the latter (see section on independents).
4 This protocol had been decided on at the assembly.
5 Transition from the dictatorship to the current democratic system in Spain (1975-1979)