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## More than an Activist: Identity Competition and Participation in a Revolutionary Socialist Organization

### **Abstract**

How do activists manage life commitments and membership in a radical social movement organization? Starting with the assumption that activists are 'more than activists' who have personal lives that can affect their movement lives, I use identity theory to analyze how competition among identities influences participation in the organization to which they belong. I also assess how the collective identity of a revolutionary socialist organization affects the personal identities of activists. This movement identity is labeled 'socialist identity' which must then compete with other identities that the activist may possess. The methods used were modified life history interviews of former and current members, participant observations, and content analysis of the organization's documents.

### **Keywords**

Social Movements; Identity Theory; Identities; Case Studies; Activists; Socialists.

The causes and consequences of participation in social movements have been central questions for scholars and activists alike (Whalen and Flacks 1989; Flacks 1988; McAdam 1986). Returning to the questions posed by Flacks (1988), I explore how 'making history' and 'making a life' can be understood from the standpoint of identity competition. More specifically, how does competition among multiple identities affect individual participation in a social movement organization? This case study examined identity competition in the context of a revolutionary socialist organization (RSO).<sup>2</sup>

Social movement, scholars' use of identity, expanded beyond a focus on individual identities to include the broader collective identities of social movements and social movement organizations (SMOs). They also focused on the internalization

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<sup>2</sup> Concealing the organization's name was also a requirement for Human Subjects Protocol.

of collective social movement identities by individual members. Therefore, it is necessary to establish the content of this collective identity and how it becomes internalized as an identity for members of the organization. The following examines competition between the socialist identity and other identities that make up the self of the RSO member. To conduct this research, I use empirical data collected through content analysis, modified life history interviews, and participant observation in a local branch of the RSO in Southern California.

I chose this particular SMO because of my own experiences with the RSO and an interest in understanding the dynamics of participation in organizations with radical agendas. I gained access to the group because I had been a participant for nearly eight years. Despite concerns about confidentiality that SMOs often have, my access to the RSO provided candor and trust on the part of the participants in this study.<sup>3</sup>

SMOs often frame organizational commitment within the organization's collective identity and ideology. However, individuals have multiple and divergent identities that may, or may not, be congruent with the collective identity of the organization. This internalized collective identity can form part of his/her personal and social identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Therefore, scholars assumed that if the collective identity of an SMO does not become part of the member's internalized identities, persistent participation is not likely if other identities are held constant. Further, the particular SMO may neither address the political concerns of all activists, nor foster sufficiently salient identities (Stryker 2000).

The RSO requires a high level of commitment from their members and entails identification as a socialist. Membership entails education in Marxist politics and involvement in weekly branch meetings, two weekly paper sales (in which members sell literature in different locations), periodic study groups, conference attendance, and involvement in other local movements.

## **Relevant Literature and Theory**

A social movement organization is "a complex or formal organization which identifies its goals with the social movement or a counter-social movement and attempts to implement those goals" (McCarthy and Zald 1977:1218). According to research on participation, prominent factors that influence sustained participation in social movements are identity (Klandermans 2002; Whittier 1995), and biographical availability (McAdam 1986; Downton and Wehr 1998). I will briefly discuss these factors while concentrating on the impact of identity on participation in SMOs.

I use two approaches to identity: collective identity from new social movement theory (Melucci 1989), and identity theory from structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker 1980). While useful in the understanding of participation in SMOs, new social movement theory suggests collective identities define personal and social identities. Stryker (2000) argues this renders the concept of identity ineffective for understanding differential participation in social movements. What is needed is a perspective that considers multiple identities. Identity theory's symbolic interactionist perspective provides a theory of role-choice behavior that considers extra-movement commitments.

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<sup>3</sup> I base this statement on the RSO's internal documents related to security issues and my own experiences with the RSO. After September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, infiltration by various law enforcement officials became a realistic concern.

## ***Identities***

Social movement scholars use the concept of identity in two ways: collective (Melucci 1989) and personal identities (Hunt and Benford 1994). The concept of social identity is often considered to be a part of one's personal identity (Stryker, Owens and White 2001). Therefore, I pay closer attention to the concept of social identity as it is presented by Stryker and Burke (2000).

Snow and McAdam (2000) argue that the discussion of collective identity is incomplete because there is an underlying assumption by social movement scholars that collective identities are the same as activists' personal identities. Social movement scholars tend to shy away from more nuanced discussions of identity and tend to use the term 'personal identity' in place of social-role identity (White and Fraser 2000). Because membership in an SMO often includes taking on roles, I turn to identity as conceptualized in identity theory.

Social identity refers to "parts of the self composed of the meanings persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary society" (Stryker and Burke 2000:284). Furthermore, Stryker explains that identities are "self-cognitions tied to roles, and through roles, to positions in organized social relationships" (2008:20). Additionally, opportunities to form identities become incentives to join SMOs because the organizations can fulfill the need to identify with a group. Joining SMOs allows one to assume roles within the organization and form an identity linked to the structure of the organization (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

### *Identity and Social Movement Participation*

Identity competition is theoretically a factor in determining the nature of one's participation. Stryker and his colleagues argue that individuals organize social identities into a salience hierarchy in which identity salience plays a role in social movement participation (Stryker, Owens and White 2000). Identity salience consists of "the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations" (Stryker and Burke 2000:286). Salience is linked to behaviors associated with a given identity. As Stryker and Burke point out, "The higher the salience of an identity relative to other identities incorporated into the self, the greater the probability of behavioral choices in accord with the expectations attached to that identity" (2000:286). In other words, the more salient the activist identity, the more likely activist behavior will be sustained. Despite the cogent arguments for using identity salience to understand participation, there is little empirical research that explicitly uses this approach.

While social ties are important because of the support one may receive, some scholars have criticized the importance of social networks in recruitment and sustained activism. Nevertheless, as McAdam and Paulson (1993) conclude, these prior ties increase the likelihood of participation in social movements when they strengthen the activist's identity as an activist and strengthen linkages between identity and the movement. When identity is removed from the process, social ties lose their predictive power as they relate to social movement participation.

### *Collective Identities*

Social movement scholars link collective identity to social movement participation and activism (Gamson 1991; McVeigh and Smith 1999; Klandermans 2002). Collective identity is the shared definition of a group that derives from

members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity (Melucci 1989); others emphasize the sense of 'we-ness' that is given meaning by actors (Gamson 1991).

Several scholars contend that activist identification amplifies the likelihood of participation (Downton and Wehr 1998; Simon, Sturmer and Loewry 1998). This activist identity represents the internalized meaning attached to one's role in a social movement or SMO. Taking on a role in the social structure may reflect a person's sense of self with differing levels of importance or salience, depending on what this identity means to a person. Additionally, (Simon et al. 1998), scholars have not studied how the activist identity competes with other identities that make up the self.

Studies of social movement participation have practical significance to activists. As Downton and Wehr point out, "knowledge of what leads to persistence could increase the movement's effectiveness and expansion" (1998:548). Understanding the effects multiple identities have on sustained participation in SMOs will help social movement and identity theorists gain a fuller understanding of identity processes in these organizations.

## Methods

Due to the fluid nature of SMO collective identities, I collected data in an empirical case study of a regional chapter of the RSO. One benefit of the case study method in researching SMOs is the ability to use multiple methods to collect extensive and diverse data (Lofland 1996). Additionally, the collective identity of an SMO, even in the same national organization, would vary from region to region. For example, respondents from this chapter often discussed issues surrounding the border and immigration. This would be expected given the close proximity of the US-Mexico border.

I start by establishing and identifying the RSO's collective identity. In order to do this I conducted a content analysis of RSO documents. Movement documents are an important part of the discourse within SMO that defines who they are or the movement's collective identity (Johnston 2002; Lofland 1996). The documents that I derived data from include a *New Member's Handbook*,<sup>4</sup> the RSO's weekly newspaper, and internal bulletins distributed between December 1<sup>st</sup> 2006 and April 2007.

In addition to content analysis, I also conducted modified life histories. The modified life history interview subjects consisted of ten adults, both male and female. I chose to interview five current and five former members in order to gain a more diverse perspective on involvement in the RSO. I gave all subjects pseudonyms to protect their identity. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the subjects that I interviewed. I chose as broad a sample as possible in terms of gender, age, race, and sexual orientation in order to capture diverse identities that may affect participation in this social movement organization.

For the five former members, I used respondent driven sampling to contact former members through my remaining contacts with current members. Along with demographic representativeness, I also attempted to recruit former members who had varying degrees of ideological agreement with the RSO because many still identified as socialists. Table 1 below lists the interview respondents.

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<sup>4</sup> Citation withheld to maintain the RSO's anonymity.

**Table 1:**  
**Demographics of Interview Subjects** (all names are pseudonyms)

<b>Interview Subjects</b>	<b>Notable Information</b>
Kathleen	Current Member White, female, late 60's Married to another current member Active in other SMOs in the 1960s and 70's
Bruce	Current Member Non-white, male, early 20's College student (Social Work) Active for 3 years
Greg	Current Member Chicano, male, early 30's Part of national RSO leadership Member for nearly 10 years
Jeremy	Current Member White, male, mid 30's Married Social Worker Member for over 10 years Most seniority in local branch
Patrice	Current Member African-American, female, late 20's Artist
JoAnne	Former Member White, female, mid 20's Deeply concerned with sexual oppression
Abby	Former Member White, female, mid 20's Active for 5 years before leaving
James	Former Member Biracial (Indian nationality), male, late 20's Married a week after his interview High school teacher Nine years of membership
Jane	Former Member White, female, early 20's College student 3 years of membership

I entered the field as an insider, and therefore conducted full-membership field work (Adler and Adler 1987). As Adler and Adler explain, full membership requires a sort of strategic reflexivity: "They must look at the setting through a fresh perspective, to develop relationships with people they did not associate with previously, to change the nature of their pre-existing relationships, and to become involved with the setting more broadly" (1987:69-70). Moreover, there is a need to be somewhat more assertive in interviews regarding social movements. Researchers often encounter problems with probing for data relevant to the research question because committed activists often will only divulge information that they see as relevant. As an insider, I had to be mindful of the potential bias in the subject's responses, as well my subjective interpretation of them. As Blee and Taylor (2002) point out, this requires the researcher to take a more active approach when conducting the modified life history. This includes asking for clarifications when relevant events are given and pegging the recollections of respondents to historical events and life transitions.

Because much of the information gathered in modified life histories is given after the fact, gathering data from other sources is critical to maintaining validity (Blee and Taylor 2002). The second procedure that I used was participant observation in which I participated in the day-to-day activities of the RSO over the course of four months. Because I was already on the periphery of RSO, insider status had already been attained. This included attending meetings, distributing literature on public sidewalks, participating in study groups, attending informal gatherings and observing protest activities. Therefore, the most significant change in my behavior was the moving into the role of researcher. I gave a brief presentation to the RSO to disclose my role as a researcher.

Embarking on this project represented a significant increase in the intensity of activity on my part. Prior to starting my research, my activity was limited to attending public meetings. Therefore, several members were still 'strangers' to me who had experiences that were unknown prior to my observations and interviews. Thirdly, despite the length of time I have been a member, I was not considered a 'cadre' member.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when I took on the research role I was forced to take on a duality of consciousness of my role as both researcher and insider (Thorne 1975).

This dual consciousness came out over the course of the interviews when, from my perspective, subjects would make points that I disagreed with or what I thought were misunderstandings of certain aspects of the RSO. I had to remind myself that I was not playing out the role of an RSO member but that of a researcher and therefore did not make any attempt to correct or elaborate on comments by interviewees. As a researcher, I was always conscious of being a member and while acting as a member I was conscious of being a researcher.

## Results

The central research question was: how does competition among multiple identities affect participation in an SMO? Individuals identify as 'more than activists' at the time of their membership in that they also identified ties to their relationships, occupations and families. If these identities are salient and compete with their socialist identity, they must consolidate these identities or subordinate them to their socialist identity in order to sustain involvement.

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<sup>5</sup> Cadre is a term used to describe experienced members that can train new members.

## ***RSO Collective Identity***

The RSO claims to be the largest revolutionary socialist organization in the United States. Nationally, the membership of the RSO is predominantly composed of college students. In the local branch, membership was composed of primarily working students and a few professionals such as teachers and social workers. The RSO sees itself as part of an effort to make the initial steps toward building a revolutionary party in the United States. Because of the emphasis on 'party building,' the RSO involves itself in most of the major movements of the day with the hope that they can find potential recruits, as well as push local movements to the left politically. Despite these ambitious goals, RSO members are cognizant of their marginal status in American politics.

I coded field notes, the RSO's newspaper, internal documents, and interview transcripts for three types of framing repertoires that shape the collective identity of the organization and describe its overarching ideology or master frame (Hunt, Benford and Snow 1994). The rooting of problems, issues, and concerns within a social system such as capitalism, patriarchy, or racial stratification usually characterizes an SMO as radical. The RSO identified the capitalist system as the root cause of misery and oppression in the world.

As one would expect, a socialist organization that makes the diagnostic claim that capitalism is the root of the various issues they mobilize around would also make a prognostic claim that socialism is the cure. Further, the RSO frames the vanguard party as a tool to achieve this goal. Yet, the RSO does not see themselves as an actual vanguard party but as a preparatory formation that is laying the foundations for a vanguard party.

### *Making the Socialist Identity Salient*

RSO members are encouraged to identify themselves as socialists. This happens as part of the democratic centralist structure of the organization. I recorded the following excerpt during a political discussion before an anti-war fraction meeting in which democratic centralism was the topic. Harold opened the discussion by asking what we thought democratic centralism was. I responded first:

Me: It basically means that we all democratically decide what we are going to do, and then we all do what we decided to do.

Jill: Yeah it's true. We need to decide where to put our resources, but does that mean I can't go to a forum or something on my own if I want?

Harold: Whatever it is you do [political work on your own time] you are acting as a representative of the [organization].

Harold acknowledged the flexibility of the group's interpretation, but stressed the need to be aware that one is always part of the organization. This reveals that the RSO imposed the salience of one's socialist identity, from above, through democratic centralism.

Participation in an organization such as this can be challenging as well as time consuming. A large part of becoming committed to the RSO involved becoming a part of the structure of the organization. During my fieldwork, the branch committee (elected local leadership) suggested that I take on the role of membership

coordinator. A member of the branch committee told me to make sure that new members had a 'job' within the organization because it is important to train them to be good activists. One branch committee member argued that people are more likely to stay in the organization if they feel that they play a part in its overall functioning. Jane also described this process in an interview:

They do a good job of bringing you in and making you feel like you are contributing an important part. Probably because they give you some kind of vital function, even if you don't know what you are doing. I really sort-of liked the dynamic of that and how they treat you as an equal right away. (Jane, former member)

Taking on roles in the organization pulled members into different responsibilities that are difficult to refuse. The pull towards responsibilities was constant. Jane voiced extreme frustration with the pressure to take on an active role in the organization.

The responsibilities associated with taking on a role in the RSO can be overwhelming. Because the RSO is involved in several movements at a given time, an individual's involvement in the RSO, along with another movement, often results in double the workload related to activism. At the time of my observations, the RSO's local branch had 15 members who regularly came to meetings. The RSO was also involved in the anti-war, immigrant rights, and gay marriage movements during my time in the field. At demonstrations, RSO members were often the first to arrive and the last to leave. On top of this, RSO members involved in these coalitions usually have labor intensive roles and are often on the steering committees of major coalitions. RSO members often find themselves in these positions because of the movement related skills they learn moving from upsurge to upsurge during the course of their RSO careers. As a result, the RSO is always shorthanded and needs its members to take on as many responsibilities as possible.

One example of how busy the RSO can get, as well as what life is like as an RSO member, occurred in December 2006 and January 2007. In the anti-war fraction, composed of myself and four other members, we decided to push the [Local Peace Coalition] to call for a protest against the Iraq war. At the next [Coalition] meeting, Harold argued for a protest on January 17<sup>th</sup>. The [coalition] agreed, but said they lacked the resources to build the protest. The [coalition] explained that attendance at the meetings was down to about a dozen and simply did not have the manpower necessary for such a task. The following week at the RSO meeting, Harold argued that the RSO should make building this protest a priority of the entire branch. The branch agreed.

During the next two weeks, RSO members were involved in building this protest as well as fulfilling their routine RSO commitments. From making leaflets and protest signs, to securing a stage and permit for the protest, RSO members were involved in most aspects of this protest. My own role was to set up the stage, sell literature, and keep an eye on the Protest Warriors (right-wing counter-movement organization). The protest ended up being a success with 500 protesters in attendance, and gained newspaper coverage in which the article on the protest mentioned the RSO by name.

Membership in the RSO not only entails a high level of commitment to the RSO, but also to the movements in which they are involved. This level of involvement provides RSO members with experience, as activists. As a result, they often take on leadership roles. Greg, a member of the branch committee, explained that he appreciated that the organization develops people as individuals and as leaders:



It's a group that functions in a way that reflects a way to develop the individual as a leader, but also the importance of a collective approach to addressing the political questions of the day. (Greg, current member)

Greg appreciated the movement related skills that RSO members learn as a result of their emphasis on developing leaders.

Much of what can make life in this organization so stressful is the amount of time and resources one is asked to contribute.

They pile stuff on you, I mean it's unrelenting ... it's really difficult and that's one of the things that contributed to my disillusionment with the group over time. (Jane, former member)

For several members, the work for the organization was not overwhelming in itself. It was overwhelming because they had other responsibilities, and identities linked to them, that they also had to manage. The only way the work for the organization can be prioritized is if the identity associated with the organization is more salient than other identities these individuals possess.

Joanne also allowed other aspects of her life to be consumed by the needs of the organization. After I asked her how much time she spent doing work for the organization she responded with an amazing fifty hours per week at her high point. However, she points out that her intense level of involvement was the result of the absence of other identities that could challenge her socialist identity for salience. At her high point, she was not in school, and working off and on in part-time jobs. While at one point, life in the organization consumed most of her personal life, other commitments later emerged that challenged the centrality of the RSO in her life. More specifically, the emergence of work commitments forced her to reduce her involvement in the organization.

Additionally, a discrepancy existed between how the organization viewed a member and the member's sense of self. Abby felt that although she gave as much time as she could she was labeled as a 'slacker' by members of the group despite her achievements in college and maintaining multiple jobs that she felt were important:

When I was Abby of the [RSO], I was Abby the slacker of the [RSO]. And that was the role, that was the label for me. It's not something that I really was, I think people just expected it of me, it was like a self fulfilling prophesy.

I was so angry, and I had no way to tell people what I really thought about them because they could all throw me down in an instant. In the pecking order, I was the bottom. (Abby, current member)

Mary shared Abby's feeling of a lack of efficacy and perceived hierarchy. Because of those feelings, Mary felt that she did not have any efficacy in the organization and the more experienced members did not listen to her concerns. Jane explained that while she was a member she often made fundraising suggestions regarding fundraising and the style of the meeting flyers. As she put it:

Every idea I had got shut down. ... It's like, I'm not going to be in your group anymore because you don't listen to me. (Mary, former member)

This undermined her ability to carry out her role in the organization. It is important that the social groups and structures in which identities are rooted verify these identities. If one's socialist identity is not verified, it is not likely to be salient.

### *The Identity Competition of RSO Members*

As stated above, RSO members possess multiple identities that are organized into a salience hierarchy. The key assumption of this research is the socialist identity is placed in an individual's salient hierarchy along with other identities. Competition exists among these identities for salience. I found that the multiple identities of current and former members of the RSO either undermine or compliment identities related to RSO involvement.

For many members, the socialist identity was the most salient so long as there were no other identities with which to compete. The process of joining the organization in order to find an identity and build relationships only affects staying power so long as the organization is essential to identity maintenance. An especially telling case is Jane, a former member. She joined after seeing an advertisement for a local meeting in a newspaper, at a point in her life where she was trying to rebuild her life after moving to the region. She did not have "much on the outside of school and work." This implies that neither aspect of her life was particularly rewarding or salient, and that she was looking for something that could be.

Personally, I was looking for something, something to do. I was trying to figure out what I believed in; I wanted to get involved in contributing to the community and going to protests and doing things that I felt strongly about.  
(Jane, former member)

According to identity theory, an activist role identity can only be constructed if one is given roles in the group. Jane was able to take on roles and feel like part of the group, even though she did not fully understand what she was doing. She expressed that she felt as though she was learning to swim by being thrown into the water. The RSO encouraged her to do certain tasks, such as paper-sales, without her knowing what they were or why they do them.

Although constructing an identity related to activism pre-empted Jane's membership in the organization, the need for community and social bonds helped maintain her involvement while it lasted. She constructed new identities linked with new relationships while in the organization. Once the organization was no longer necessary as a place for support, the other identities eventually became more salient.

My other obligations [working 30 hours per week and fulltime college student] sort of swelled, and I let the [organization] sort of die off and wither away. (Jane, former member)

These obligations were difficult to manage while maintaining other areas of her life.

Jane's case also illustrates her differences with the RSO may have been political. She explained she felt forced into the activity without fully believing in or advocating for a socialist revolution. The need for a highly salient socialist identity may be an inherent part of belonging to an SMO. The revolutionary politics did matter

to Jane, implying that the internalization of the collective identity into one's personal identity can be difficult and intense in organizations such as this:

It is sort of a big deal to believe that revolution is possible. But, are you going to let your life get swallowed by it or are you going to let it become a part of it and I think it might be the political part for me that says, "Well I'm not sure if I necessarily agree with [aspects of RSO's politics]." (Jane, former member)

I, consistently, found identities that competed with one's socialist identity. These included occupational identities that included work, school, and identities tied to relationships such as families and friendships. How do identities rooted in the structure of the family and occupations affect participation in SMOs? The effect of these identities varied for different individuals depending on the salience individuals attach to these identities.

### **Family and Relationship Identities**

A pattern emerged in the data related to how one acquired identities throughout the life course. For example, many individuals wait a certain amount of time before they decide to start families, which influences social movement participation (Van Dyke, McAdam and Wilhelm 2000). When RSO members do start a family, another identity may emerge to compete with their socialist identities. Extra-movement identities affect participation in both positive and negative ways.

### ***Consolidating Family and Socialist Identities***

Sometimes being active in an SMO is part of one's family identity. Several members were raised in households in which progressive or even radical values were instilled in them. For oppressed groups, a legacy and collective memory of resistance is often passed on from generation to generation.

My dad was pretty class-conscious, I guess you could say. I knew that he had been an activist in the 60's, I still don't know to what extent. My mom said he got involved in that "black power stuff." And that's why he didn't finish college on time. He would give us lectures on, you know, the meaning of my name, what it means to be Black in America, you know, historical things. So, I had some sense of injustice that was in the world and that my family had done something about it... (Patrice, current member)

The role family played in the construction and support of an activist identity also emerged in Kathleen's case. Kathleen was a current member and former member of other radical SMOs in the 1960s with her husband Harold. She shared that her involvement was facilitated by the support of her husband and family. Joining the organization made home life more pleasant and gave them a common interest and topic of frequent discussion. Her spouse also became active in the organization a little over a year before the interview. Before he became active, Kathleen's RSO commitments and time away from home were a source of stress. However, he understood the importance of Kathleen's work with the organization.

[Harold] understood what I was doing. He used to say, "You are doing this for both of us." (Kathleen, current member)

Harold expressed his own desire to be active vicariously through Kathleen before he eventually joined the RSO.

Despite the support she and others received, problems came up that led individuals to choose between family responsibilities and movement responsibilities. The deteriorating health of Kathleen's mother and sister influenced her to reduce her activity in the RSO. I asked her what the most difficult aspect of becoming active again had been:

I mean, I'm barely hanging on in the organization, and it's not because I have any disagreements. I have to do everybody's [needs]. (Kathleen, current member)

In Kathleen's case, the gendered nature of social movement participation came to the forefront. Gender structures all aspects of life and participation in an SMO is no exception (McAdam 1992; Van Dyke et al. 2000; Hasso 2001). She then pointed out that her return to activity became possible in the first place because of her 'empty nester' status. There was a space between the point when her children left for college and the increase in family responsibilities where she became more active. Now that she has to help her mother and sister, the time for the RSO is difficult to find. The salience of her identity as a daughter and as a mother changed with the necessity of acting out these roles.

It's really hard, because I want to do more stuff [for the RSO]. But, I have to be completely strict and not do it because I have to deal with the pile of [household] stuff on my desk. I mean, I'm still a member and [cutting back on RSO activity] stinks, but before that is my mother. (Kathleen, current member)

Competition between family identities and political identities are more complex and segmented than other identities. For example, Kathleen's children restricted involvement when they were young and facilitated her involvement when they left home. At some point in their lives, all members of her household were members of the RSO. In fact, she first came to RSO meetings because her children (then around 18 years old) were members. The dialectical interconnectedness of family identities and political identities underscores the feminist adage that the personal is political. Also evident in the case of Kathleen was the gendered aspect of family roles that often require a large amount of caring labor, which women are often burdened with by the broader social structure (Hochschild 2003). Caring labor, which accompanies many family roles, can consume much of the time available to participate in an SMO.

Nancy Naples' (1992) concept of 'activist mothering' provides a template for how activists consolidate gender and family identities. While Kathleen's commitments at the time of the interview seem antagonistic to her involvement and the goals of the organization, much of the caring labor she did while she was not involved in the organization was not only familial reproduction, but also reproduction of another generation of socialists. By raising 'red diaper babies,' Kathleen and Harold facilitated the continuity of the RSO.

Another instance of the impact of family identities is Steve's attempt to maintain his level of involvement after the birth of a child. In sum, Steve cut back on his activity in other movements, dropped out of RSO study groups, and only attended the weekly

branch meetings and paper-sales. Even then, he attempted to consolidate the responsibilities associated with parenting and the RSO. One afternoon, Steve brought his 10-month-old daughter with him to a paper-sale on a college campus. The division between his personal life and his movement life broke down; he had to attempt to combine the two where he could.

Some members placed RSO membership on the top of their salient hierarchy, despite the presence of other competing identities. For example, balancing RSO involvement with married life proved difficult:

Well it's always been a challenge [balancing married life and the RSO], the main thing that's been hard was that formerly my wife resisted me being involved beyond a certain point, or just didn't support my involvement and that ... she didn't forbid it or really resist it ... still I felt bad about it. (Jeremy, current member)

Later in the interview, I attempted to assess Jeremy's most salient identity. I asked him what his priority in life was and the politics of the RSO came to the forefront. Although there may be some bias in his response due to my own membership, this excerpt reveals the salience of the RSO in his life:

[The RSO] is it. I mean my priority is building socialism. (Jeremy, current member)

From what we can tell from this interview, his membership in the RSO may be the most salient. My field observations of Jeremy and other leading members were consistent with these findings. He easily put in more hours per week than every other member I observed, on top of the usual commitments. Jeremy attended union meetings, immigrant rights coalition meetings, cadre study groups, and trained new members on a weekly basis, all while operating as an RSO member.

Conversely, socialist identities extend into other social identities. Membership in an RSO affects relationships with others, whose political views differ. Furthermore, RSO membership can lead to conflicts with individuals that were in the life of an RSO member prior to his/her joining the organization.

I lost some friends. That was the big one. It sounds kind of weird and I still think some of them are good people, but they have really bad ideas [racism and homophobia] that they are not willing to confront them with me and talk about. (JoAnne, former member)

Similarly, Bruce stated:

Oh yeah. I've shifted things around and I've had to make sacrifices just in personal relationships, you know. It takes time. I know last semester was a big problem cause my girlfriend had Thursday nights off and I didn't have class and I would spend all day reading and go to meetings and stuff. ... My girlfriend didn't like that at all. (Bruce, current member)

Additionally, Abby expressed how her involvement prevented relationships from emerging:

I was single pretty much the whole time I was in the RSO because I could never go out and meet anyone. My only friends were people from work or the RSO. (Abby, former member)

At times, the separation between personal life and activism was extremely difficult for members; they lived with other members of the organization. Abby and Patrice both had separate, but similar experiences when they lived with RSO members at different points in their lives. In both cases, they felt as if they had no time for a social life and that the organization was all-consuming. For Abby, consolidating her personal life with her life in the organization was not seen as beneficial because she could not step back from the RSO. On the other hand, Patrice pointed out that this arrangement helped her maintain participation:

I mean my roommate and my next-door neighbor [being members] makes it really hard to just completely disavow myself from the [organization]. I mean there were days when I would say, "I'm not going to go to the meeting," and try to tell [my neighbor], and, not in a judgmental way, she made enough good arguments that I was like, "OK, I'll go to the meeting." (Patrice, current member)

### ***Occupational Identities***

Occupations and careers also form identities that can compete for salience with one's socialist identity. Identities such as 'grad student,' 'teacher,' and 'nurse' all are occupational identities rooted in the structure of the economic system. Career identities are also linked to stages of the life-course. Most RSO members are college students, which reflects the RSO's strategic decision to recruit on college campuses. These identities often shift from 'student' to 'professional' or other career linked identities. These shifts can lead to changes in the competition of these identities within one's salient hierarchy. Occupational identities do not always crowd out the socialist identity. Individuals can sometimes consolidate these identities.

Mary, a former member, found it difficult to maintain her involvement in the organization while simultaneously working and attending college full-time. Her job primarily got in the way of her activism due to the fact that she could not get the night of the weekly meeting off from work. Changes in Mary's responsibilities at work also played a role in her decision to leave the organization. She became a supervisor at the furniture store and further lost flexibility in her schedule and felt increased pressure to be a responsible employee. This revealed the salience that work had in her life because she was not concerned with being responsible to the RSO, but to her occupation.

It's a horrible thing, but, I mean, everything else comes [before the RSO] and all of those things juggle with each other. (Mary, former member)

Ultimately, her socialist identity was not sufficiently salient to sustain participation.

Many working students view their occupations as a means to gain an education, revealing a high salience of identities linked to education.

School is the first priority and then, unfortunately, it has to be work because I need to live and maintain going to school. So, unfortunately, work is first and everything else is pretty much third. (Mary, former member)

You know [school] has to be a priority because it has a set time. It's going to end. I think that if you are really committed to the politics it's an open-ended relationship. You can be committed at any point in your life. (Abby, former member)

Conversely, some activists put the socialist identity above their commitments to school.

Some RSO members organize their schedules around activism:

The day was set up around political activity, going to coalition meetings, doing paper sales, putting up flyers and ... and when those things were going on, I spent all my time doing [activism]. I would go to class when I had to go to class. (James, former member)

James' most salient identity, at this point in time, was that of a socialist. He attended a university known for its activism; so he could continue activism after high school. While at university, he joined the RSO. This amplified the activist identity that he was trying to construct. His response to what his life was like in the organization is an example of how both school and the organization assisted his activist identity construction:

It was interesting, I really enjoyed it. I liked being an activist and I went there less to be a student and more to be an activist. (James, former member)

James' label and satisfaction with the activist identity was supported by his RSO membership.

This illustrates the formation of a salient activist identity can override the pressures of school and become the most salient. His student status and flexible schedule facilitated his activist identity. Once James graduated, he no longer had this power and began to feel some of the stress when he took on a full-time job. Although full-time work made activism more difficult for James to maintain his level of activity, some members managed to steer themselves into careers that allow the necessary time for activism.

Several members described conditions where their work responsibilities and their RSO responsibilities were consolidated. For example, it was common practice too for RSO members to make copies of fliers while they were at work. Other members with flexible work schedules, such as the ability to telecommute, more easily managed commitments to the RSO.

Identity consolidation of work and activist identities does not work for everybody. For some, exposure as a radical activist at work can have negative consequences. One member, Patrice, was exposed by local television news coverage of a protest. Conflict emerged after a co-worker with incompatible political views saw the segment. This jeopardized their pre-existing relationships:

I didn't want to have to get into it with that one person at work who [held views hostile to the RSO] because, you know, I kind of needed [her], she was the only person that I was kind of friends with. (Patrice, current member)

In this case, her socialist identity extended into her work life involuntarily. This identity extension made her socialist identity function as a master status that was carried out across situations.

The RSO encouraged identifying oneself as a socialist at work. The organization also encourages the use of identity markers, such as buttons and stickers, to reveal oneself as a socialist. When one's most salient personal identity corresponds with the organization's collective identity, it should not be surprising that this identity becomes extended into their occupation.

Extending one's socialist identity into other aspects of life requires one to be cognizant of the context and consequences of revealing this identity. Accordingly, Greg pointed out that he has to be strategic about when to reveal himself as a socialist:

[Revealing oneself] requires that people be strategic about identifying themselves because, you know, in a society where there has been such hatred and violence directed at people with radical viewpoints there can be a situation where you need to be careful about identifying yourself. There can be situations where it can be problematic and therefore, I just chose not to or I chose to just avoid it if I can. (Greg, current member)

Despite the need to be careful, Greg did see possible benefits to an open socialist identity in that it can empower others:

[Being open] does allow me to communicate that it's OK to have these political views in our society and that they aren't marginal views, but they are views that reflect the experience of people and that people can kind of overcome that shadow, that cloud that's been cast on socialist ideas, merely because they've been ideas that have been under attack for so long in this country. (Greg, current member)

Greg acknowledged that revealing his socialist identity can empower individuals that are fearful of doing so in a hostile environment.

Although there are perceived consequences to being an open socialist at work, they do not seem to be perceived in academic settings. Several members majored in, or even received an advanced degree in a social science, and members that were in the humanities specialized in areas such as Marxist literary criticism that were complimentary to RSO involvement. Bruce described his experience as a Social Work major:

Every semester I get in front of class and announce a meeting, or a protest, or something going on. Sometimes I try to tie it in to something we are talking about in class, like if we're talking about Hurricane Katrina or something like that, or when we'd have a meeting... (Bruce, current member)

He then expressed his frustration that students in his classes were not receptive to his socialist ideas. Bruce initially majored in Social Work because he felt that it was supportive of his commitment to social change. In other words, Bruce attempted to consolidate these identities. Nevertheless, Bruce's socialist identity undermined his identity as a 'Social Work major.' In Bruce's interview, he provided a radical critique of the discipline of social work that was informed by his membership in an RSO. Although Bruce's socialist identity undermined his occupational identity of 'Social Work major,' other members found ways to consolidate their identities in complimentary ways.



Patrice, a current member, first described her commitment to a career in art. After she mentioned that she had a degree in art and was pursuing a career in it, I asked her how her membership in the organization affects other areas of her life including her art:

They compliment each other nicely actually. I'm making the fliers now for the meetings and I've made T-shirts, I do silk screening, so they are really compatible. The only thing that sucks is that in order to get a job I can't show any of this stuff. (Patrice, current member)

This consolidation of her artist and socialist identities was not perfect in that she could not use the artwork created for the organization in her portfolio. Despite this, her ability to bring another salient identity into her work with the organization reduces her alienation from those tasks.

The interview and field work data indicate that identity salience is a fluid and ever-changing phenomenon. Other areas of the personal lives of members were also affected, but were not as easy to categorize in terms of competing identities. In order to address this, I present a generalized discussion on balancing 'personal life' and activism.

## Conclusions

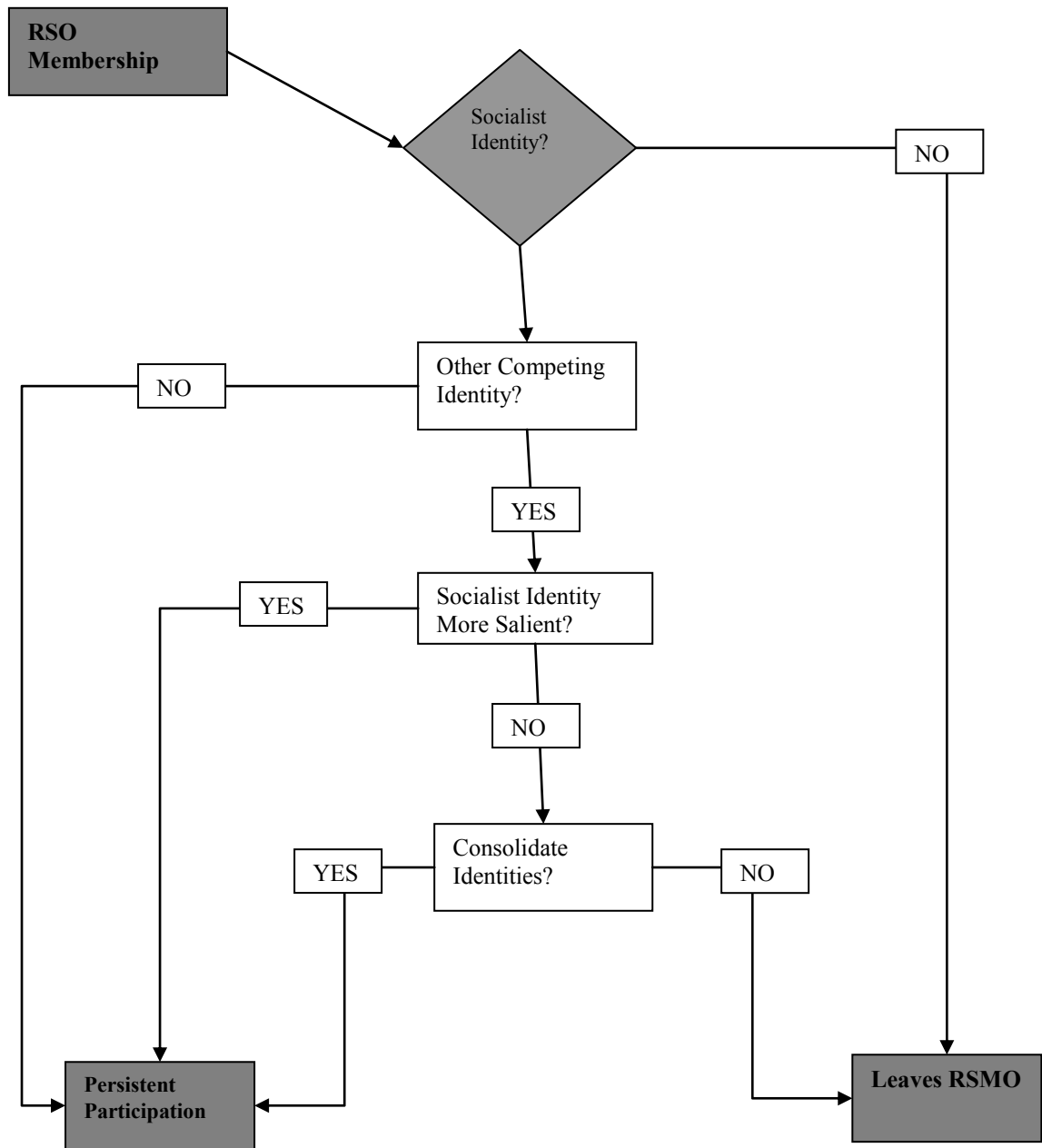
The RSO's radical agenda, workload, and high level of activity present unique challenges for its members. Moreover, members of the organization internalize aspects of this collective identity into what I call a socialist identity. Although the development of this socialist identity is important, this identity is one among many that comprise the 'self.'

The default explanation within the RSO for why members leave after devoting so much time and energy have been political differences (e.g., no longer holding the RSO's political views) or questions that are unanswered (e.g., the 'hows' and 'whys' of socialist revolution), which contribute to their decision to leave the group. This research shows that aspects of the lives outside of the RSO affect participation. Finally, I found that the socialist identity of an individual must then compete with other identities. Most importantly, when RSO members possess an identity that rivals the socialist identity, the result is not always discontinued participation. Several members have consolidated their socialist identity into other identities they possess in order to prolong participation.

The most surprising and perhaps most important finding was that the long term involvement of an individual can occur even if significant parts of the RSO's collective identity have not been internalized into a socialist identity. This occurs because the socialist identity will find itself on the top of one's salient hierarchy if no other identities stand to challenge it. Likewise, a highly salient socialist identity can be challenged by the increased salience of other identities. Increased identity competition that individuals experience manifested itself in increased responsibilities and time commitments to extra-movement identities. If members manage to consolidate their identities participation can be prolonged.

As shown in the flow chart in Figure 1, identity salience is often a mediator for participation. Participation is likely to persist if members are able to consolidate other competing identities with their socialist identity. In other words, truly making the personal political facilitates participation. For example, several people attempted to

combine aspects of their family life and their involvement in the RSO. Others combined career identities to minimize the competition between occupational and socialist identities.



**Figure 1.** The impact of Socialist Identity, Saliency, and Competition of Participation

I believe that my analysis has taken a first step towards further understanding of the role of identity competition and identity-salient hierarchies in participation in SMOs. This research also adds insight into understanding social movement participation throughout the life-course. A primary shortcoming of these results is that there is a tautological explanation for participation. In order to solve this tautology, it may be necessary to couple the analysis of identity with an analysis of the political opportunity structures over time, and how these political opportunities affect the saliency of existing identities. Another possibility is that researchers could attempt to find the mechanisms that allow members to construct a salient socialist identity.

Despite this shortcoming, this analysis broadens the focus of social movement research from the political back to the personal, thereby reducing the myopia inherent in approaches that exclusively view activists as activists.

In addition, comparative and quantitative research on SMOs would add significantly to the body of literature on these types of organizations. This would require the creation of original data and possibly the need for a census of these SMOs. More research using the concepts of identity theory and SMOs as the units of analysis is necessary and will add to this important area of social movement studies. Most importantly, it is hoped that this research will lead to further social movement research that takes into account multiple identities and the impact they have on participation. Further research is needed to understand how identity influences social movement participation from non-actor to actor.

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