OH, THE PLACES [I’LL] GO! IDENTITY, POSSIBLE SELVES, AND ROLE CHANGES IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

JONATHAN HOROWITZ: Oh, the Places [I’ll] Go! Identity, Possible Selves, and Role Changes in Social Movements
(Under the direction of Kenneth T. Andrews)

Preparation for life course transitions begins before the actual event occurs, and individuals use possible selves to map out potential courses of action. Meanwhile, social movements scholars are increasingly using identity as a theoretical construct, but most research in this area uses social psychology ad hoc without building from existing theory. The present study builds from research on the possible self and identities at a life course transition. The study demonstrates the variation in activist identities by background and time horizon and the identity work that graduating student activists use to construct activist identities. The quantitative results demonstrate that the strength of the possible activist identity varies by sex, race/ethnicity, feminist cause affiliation, and time horizon. The qualitative results show that collective memory of past social movement struggles and exposure to feminist ideology produce markedly different types of activist identities, explaining much of the variation identified in the quantitative results.
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Role transitions are moments in the life course where certain previously-held social roles are discarded and new ones are acquired (Macmillan and Copher 2005). The age at which people enter the workforce, marry, and have children is fairly consistent across individuals within societies and historical eras. But while there are regular age-graded role transitions, people usually do not rigidly progress from one stage of life to the next. Rather, people are aware that their lives will change in meaningful ways over time, and envision “possible selves” that help map out future courses of action (Markus and Nurius 1986). In other words, transitions come with subjective understandings of future behavior, which then guide individual action through changing life circumstances. Therefore, possible selves should help answer the all-important question: Which social roles can I keep, and which ones will I leave behind?

The individual decision to persist or disengage in a given social role is also an important area of research in social movements research. Activists find joy, self-efficacy, friendship, a sense of community, social conflict, and burnout in social movements which help guide the decision to persist or disengage in movement activities (Jasper 1997; Klandermans 1997; Nepstad 2004; Polletta 2004). But as activists proceed through life course transitions, new social roles challenge an individual’s connection to a social movement. While most adults eventually cede activist involvement at some point in their lives to handle work and family responsibilities (Corrigall-Brown 2011; Klatch 1999), for
others an introduction to social movement work may lead to a lifetime of participation. For example, the volunteers in McAdam’s (1988) Freedom Summer were college students who spent a summer registering black voters in Mississippi during the civil rights movement, and many of them were still activists twenty years later.

College graduation represents one major life course transition that is laden with particular significance for social movements research. College campuses are hubs for social movement activity (Morris 1981; Zhao 1998): Students are generally much more willing to protest than non-students (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006), and are more likely to be asked to protest than non-students (Schussman and Soule 2005). Yet, all college students eventually become non-students, and we know little about the decision to persist or disengage in a transition that predictably occurs each year. It is possible that activists who anticipate increased family and financial pressures may disengage from social movements at graduation to avoid conflict. For example, the social justice-oriented students in Granfield and Koenig’s (1992) study of Harvard Law School often chose corporate over public interest law to repay future debt obligations. Others, like McAdam’s (1988) Freedom Summer volunteers, may explicitly resist normative life changes to pursue their cause or pursue careers within a social movement to merge professional and political roles. Yet in both cases, because student activists envision possible selves prior to action, persistence or withdrawal actually begins before the transition formally occurs. And because individuals imagine themselves in the future before events actually occur, knowing which activists are likely to persist requires a better understanding of the possible self—and by extension, social psychology.
Life course transitions begin informally prior to their formal occurrence, and therefore a full understanding of life course transitions begins with the possible self and the social expectations of future roles. Thus, the present study is a mixed-methods investigation of the social psychology underlying persistence in social movements at a life course transition. Social movement researchers increasingly depend upon psychological explanations (Gamson 1992), and which are essential for understanding how activists mobilize (e.g., Klandermans 1997; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). Unfortunately, much movements research uses social psychology ad hoc rather than build from existing theory (Snow and McAdam 2000). In contrast, I use insight from social psychology to uncover the racial/ethnic, sex, and organizational bases of possible selves aligned with social movements. Then, I use the concept of “identity work”—a process of reconstructing the self to fit with a social movement (Snow and McAdam 2000)—to illuminate the meaning-making process that activists use when linking the self to persistence and to illustrate how qualitatively different experiences produce qualitatively and quantitatively different activist identities.

**A Sociological Possible Self**

In this paper, I draw on the concept of a possible self, which is a cognitive schema that places an individual in future contexts and provides a template for individual decision-making (Markus and Nurius 1986). Possible selves have not yet been used to examine behavior in social movements; most research on the possible self has been conducted by cultural psychologists, and its most common usage is to identify adolescent choices about careers and delinquent behavior (e.g., Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry 2006; Oyserman and Markus 1990; Stake and Nickens 2005). Possible selves are commonly
measured by identifying an individual’s “hoped for” and “feared for” selves and content-coded. The analytic focus is almost always on “[tying] self-cognition to motivation” (Markus and Nurius 1986: 958) and the actor’s appraisal of social roles (e.g., parent, professional) is only implicitly stated. With only occasional references to roles, research on the possible self is not particularly compatible with an investigation of why some roles are added and others are left behind.

Fortunately, a comparable idea also exists within symbolic interaction: McCall and Simmons (1978: 67) argue that “daydreams” about an imaginary set of roles that “serve as perhaps the primary source of plans for action.” In symbolic interaction and its sibling tradition identity theory, the self is composed of multiple individual identities associated with role expectations and consistent social interaction, which together guide individual choice to either persist or disengage in a given activity (Callero 1985; McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 2008; Stryker and Burke 2000). The strength of an identity—sometimes characterized as “salience” and at other times as “prominence” or “centrality”—therefore predicts choice of behavior (Stryker and Serpe 1994). Thus, we would expect that activist identities are tied to persistence in social movements, and there are already some indications that this true (Corrigall-Brown 2011).

There have been some preliminary attempts to join the self with a robust understanding of time. Social theorists note that conceptions of the self vary as an individual projects them into the future, with shifting role responsibilities alongside alternate futures and potential life changes (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Mische 2009). Shifting role responsibilities is in contrast to the traditional assertion that the strength of an identity should be consistent across social contexts. One example
of the traditional approach is Stryker and Serpe (1994), who ask students to list the identities they perform in different hypothetical situations (e.g., meeting their college roommate for the first time, introducing themselves at a party, etc.). What Stryker and Serpe find is that the strength of an identity remains stable across multiple social situations. But where Stryker and Serpe ask people to imagine scenarios in the present time, asking participants to imagine possible selves over different time frames should yield variations in the strength of an identity. Thus, while identity theory predicts what will occur in routine daily life (Stryker and Burke 2000), a Sociological possible self predicts how an individual will attempt to shape future role acquisition (see also: Hitlin and Elder 2007 for a similar argument).

**Race, Sex, Organizations, and Time: Identity and the Social Structure**

Possible selves are also partially shaped by race and sex (Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry 2006; Stake and Nickens 2005). For example, young adult African-Americans are more likely to believe themselves to be an “adult” than non-Hispanic whites, net of socioeconomic factors (Johnson, Berg, and Sirotzki 2007). Ethnic minority graduate students in math and science programs may also find themselves isolated and stereotyped in the laboratory, which challenges both their identities as scientists and plans to continue in the future (Malone and Barabino 2009). Likewise, one study of adolescent males and females who are gifted in math and science shows that females are more likely than males to identify by gender and less likely to identify as a science student (Lee 1998).

Within the context of social movements, there are two major social forces that are likely to shape racial/ethnic and sex-specific identities. First, the collective memory of the civil rights movement has shaped the identities of many contemporary African-
Americans. African-Americans generally hold the civil rights movement as an important historical force that has shaped who they are today (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998). Furthermore, African-American political leaders also commonly invoke the civil rights movement as an effort to argue for social change, and have a tendency to situate their efforts within the context of hard-fought historical gains (Polletta 1998).

Second, the feminist movement has long made the construction of “feminist” identity a central goal (Whittier 1995). The feminist movement spends much of its ideological efforts on drawing connections between individual oppressions and patriarchy, characterized by the well-known phrase “the personal is political” (Hanisch 1970: 76). Furthermore, feminist organizations place great intentional effort on teaching women to use this analysis via consciousness raising, resulting in new personal identities as feminists (Chesebro, Cragan, and McCullough 1973; Sowards and Renegar 2004). Like mentions of the civil rights movement, the implicit and explicit time horizon employed by feminist ideology is often quite expansive, situating the self in a patriarchal society that stretches back to the dawn of human civilization (e.g., Brownmiller 1975). But in contrast to the omnipresent collective memory of the civil rights movement, feminist consciousness-raising is a premeditated meso-level process, with intent to shape activist identities.

Thus, in a sociological model of the possible self, activists imagine a set of role responsibilities and corresponding identities emerging or receding over time within a given possible self, eventually leading towards disengagement or persistence. Furthermore, the variation in an identity across activists should be clearly predicted by race/ethnicity, gender, and contextually-specific experiences. A Sociological conception
of the possible self stands in contrast to psychological studies, which asks participants for their feared and hoped for possible selves without any explicit reference to social roles. The present study operationalizes and tests the possible self in a new way that builds from insights in symbolic interaction and identity theory by asking:

*Research Question 1:* How are race, gender, and cause affiliation associated with variation in present and possible activist identities?

Although there are likely racial/ethnic, sex, and organizational bases of the possible self, the link between social structure and self is not automatic and relies on a mediating meaning-making process. The subjective construction of identities in social movements is explored in the following section.

**Identity Work and Social Movements**

Social movement scholars have labeled the meaning-making link between experiences and self as “identity work”: The process of reconstructing your own identity to fit within that of a social movement, aligning personal and collective identities (Snow and McAdam 2000). The process of identity work is performed via storytelling, which Hunt and Benford (1994) call “identity talk” and Polletta (1998) calls “narrative.” It is in the process of storytelling that the relationship between identities is defined, which then helps to determine future behavior. For example, women involved in the gay-ally group PFLAG often reinterpret their identity as a “mother,” and their stories about supporting their children connect them to gay rights activism (Broad 2002). Other activists transform their identity completely, shunning prior social roles while casting themselves as adherents of a new ideology. Environmentalists sometimes perform narratives of transformation, explaining their turn to activism as becoming a new person who has
changed their ways (Ruiz-Junco 2011). A third example of identity work is the
development of a new “master identity,” which organizes and defines all other social
identities (Charmaz 1994). For example, Freedom Summer volunteers often placed
“activist” as a new master identity and devoted their entire lives to political work, and the
story of their time in Mississippi is the basis for a substantial re-organization of the self
and life goals (McAdam 1988).

However, the identity talk reported by most social movements researchers (e.g.,
Hunt and Benford 1994; Snow and McAdam 2000) emphasize a cognitive interpretation
of a past or current identity. Envisioning a future as an activist prepares persistence or
termination to a future identity instead. As a result, envisioning the possible self is a
distinct type of identity work that provides a template for making important life choices
(e.g., accepting a promotion) rather than situational decisions (e.g., whether to attend a
local meeting). This is analogous to how a Sociological possible self links the self to life-
course choices rather than a choice of specific activity.

Narratives, as verbal representations of identity work, are crucial to understanding
how activists sustain their work. While identifying variation in identities over possible
selves is an important first step, the meaning-making process that ties experiences to
identity is also necessary to explaining how social movement participants either elect to
disengage or persist through life course transitions. Thus, the second research question in
this paper is:

*Research Question 2:* What are the narratives associated with subgroups of
activists that inform their possible selves?
In summary, persistence is a major issue in social movement research that takes on added significance for populations about to experience a major life-course transition. Individuals navigate upcoming life course transitions by mapping out possible selves, which are constellations of identities that are linked to race/ethnicity, sex, and group participation. The self is constructed through a narrative process that may either elevate or subsume activist identity. A mixed-methods design is therefore needed to 1) quantify the impact of social race/ethnicity, sex, and organizational involvement on activist identity and to identify whose activist identities increase or recede over possible selves, and also 2) understand the process where activists construct possible selves that lead towards persistence or disengagement.

**Methods**

The present study utilizes questionnaire and interview data from the Class of 2012 research project, and uses mixed-methods data analysis to explain the impact of sex, race/ethnicity, and cause affiliation on variation of identities across possible selves. The Class of 2012 research project investigates student social justice activism at fifteen elite colleges and universities in the United States, varied by region (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and West) and by school structure (Large State School, Elite Private University, and Small Liberal Arts College). In addition, most of the students at one school (“Southern State University”) completed a semi-structured interview, focusing in-depth on how they envision their identification with certain social roles and their future plans for social justice activity.

**Sampling and Data**
First, I identified activists at 16 universities, and asked them to participate in a study on graduating social justice leaders. To identify social justice activists, I used a multi-stage strategy. First, I selected universities within each region of the country, and then I identified all organizations at those universities. Next, I contacted organization leaders to secure lists of all currently active seniors. All nominated students were contacted to participate in the survey.

I selected one large state school, one elite private university, and two small liberal arts colleges per region, based on the following criteria:

1) The school had detailed information about their registered student organizations online. Additionally, to ensure a comparable degree of social justice activity at campuses of each type, each of the Large State Schools and Elite Private Universities had between 15 and 30 social justice organizations (SJOs) listed online, while the Small Liberal Arts Colleges had at least 5 SJOs.

2) Within each institutional type (Large State School, Elite Private University, Liberal Arts College), each campus was be comparable in terms of undergraduate academic prestige and narrative descriptions of the student body. Initial comparisons were drawn from the most recent US News and World Report rankings (U.S. News and World Report. 2011), and checked against the most recent Princeton Review college guide (Franek, Meltzer, Maier, and Olson 2010).
3) Finally, while a few of the schools in the sample were officially religiously affiliated, all of those schools had chaplains and a substantial number of students on campus affiliated with other religious traditions.

After identifying schools, I identified all social justice organizations (SJOs) at each school. For the purposes of this study, I drew upon Paul Kivel’s (2007) distinction between “social service work” and “social change work” to define a social justice organization as an undergraduate student group that seeks to change the social, structural, and/or institutional relationships that perpetuate inequality and injustice. The organizations are fairly heterogeneous in scope. Many focused on issues that are considered left-wing by most commentators—feminism, environmental justice, and labor rights are exemplars of this type of organization. However, many traditional left-wing movement organizations, such as those advocating for more stringent gun laws, did not qualify under this definition. Other organizations insist that they are apolitical to attract support across partisan lines—groups that campaign to end sexual assault often fit this definition. There were also a surprisingly large number of Evangelical Christian groups that combat human trafficking. Scholars suggest that Evangelical Christians are often concerned with conservative “status issues” (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1989); while this does not describe an involvement in human trafficking organizations, there is also no reason to assume that they hold stereotypically left-wing beliefs on other issues (e.g., on feminism, labor rights).

I then contacted every student leader of every SJO at each school and asked them to nominate all social justice leaders (SJLs) graduating in the Spring of 2012, specifically those individuals who have organized meetings or events for the SJOs in the past. A total
of 161 out of 222 student groups responded with a full list of SJLs. A comparison of the
groups that responded to the ones that were sampled indicates that large state universities
had marginally lower response rates than others. However, those schools also tended to
list groups that were no longer active and had student contacts that had graduated several
years prior, and so it is likely that many of the non-responding groups no longer existed.
There is also a slight tendency for response bias by issue; anti-war and immigrant rights
groups were slightly less likely to respond, and Muslim-rights groups uniformly opted
out of the study. Informants from all three movements indicated that recent police
repression such as the “Irvine 11” legal proceedings (Majeed 2012) had made them more
cautious about collaboration with outside groups. In contrast, all other groups were
friendly and excited about participation.

I then contacted all SJLs directly and informed them about the study and the
email-based questionnaire. A total of 192 of 341 (56.3%) SJLs completed the online
questionnaire, via the online program Qualtrics. There appear to be no response biases by
school or issue. The median campus had 9 SJOs, 21 nominated SJLs, and 11 SJLs who
agreed to participate in the project. The only compensation provided was to receive
ongoing information about the project; at this time, 73 SJLs have elected to receive
periodic updates and results.

A major strength of this research design is that I am collecting data on identities
prospectively instead of retrospectively. McAdam’s (1988) Freedom Summer is one
prominent example of a study that asks people to recount prior identities, but there is
evidence that individuals constantly revise their biography to emphasize coherence with
their current self-conception (Cohler and Hostetler 2003). An excellent example of
historical revisionism based on present identities is Tom Hayden’s insistence that
Students for Democratic Society (SDS) used consensus decision-making from the
beginning. Much of SDS’s later activist identity is bound by the notion of participatory
democracy, and so Hayden maintains his position even when Polletta (2004)
demonstrates that the earlier meeting minutes show that SDS used Robert’s Rules of
Order. McAdam (1988) also addresses narrative revisionism by supplementing life
history interviews with additional historical evidence, but a more direct solution is to
collect data on identities prospectively.

**Questionnaire**

The online questionnaire was designed to take between twenty and thirty minutes,
and asked participants about influential people (i.e., “alters”) in their social network,
participation in social justice organizations, how they imagine their future life roles, and
demographic information. Most students elected to participate in the study: 192 out of
341 (56.3%) SJLs completed the questionnaire. The present study used strength of the
social justice identity at future times as the dependent variable. Independent variables in
this study asked about sex, ethnic/racial category, and feminist SJO affiliation;
descriptive statistics for each variable is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female (Male=0)</td>
<td>.6822917</td>
<td>.4668026</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White (White, Non-Hisp.=0)</td>
<td>.3817204</td>
<td>.4871198</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist (Non-Feminist Group =0)</td>
<td>.109375</td>
<td>.3129251</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13
Strength of social justice identity was measured over several versions of the question “To what extent do the following roles define you?” This question stem is repeated several times for the present (“To what extent do the following roles define you at this time?”) and in the future at one, five, and ten years (e.g., “How much do you think the following roles will define you one year from today? Please take your best guess”). The prompt “social justice participant” was then given, and the participant selected from the ordinal categories “Not at all,” “A little,” “Somewhat,” and “Very Much.” The response measured projected strength of the identity “social justice participant”, varied by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>1 year</th>
<th>5 years</th>
<th>10 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice Role</td>
<td>3.151042</td>
<td>.839533</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Present)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice Role</td>
<td>3.338624</td>
<td>.806648</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 year)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice Role</td>
<td>3.303665</td>
<td>.8284019</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5 years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice Role</td>
<td>3.267016</td>
<td>.856499</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10 years)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Education</td>
<td>.1614583</td>
<td>.3689151</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(less than 4 year degree)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Education</td>
<td>.2708333</td>
<td>.445552</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 year degree)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Education</td>
<td>.5677083</td>
<td>.4966895</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>(graduate degree)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expected Student Debt</td>
<td>.5287958</td>
<td>.500482</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(none)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Expected Student Debt</td>
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<td>.4587714</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>(less than $20,000)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected Student Debt</td>
<td>.1727749</td>
<td>.3790461</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>($20,000 or more)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Services</td>
<td>.2670157</td>
<td>.4435633</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(never attends)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
time horizon. This is in contrast to psychological measures of the possible self, which tend to ask an individual to generate their “hoped for” and “feared” possible selves across different life domains (e.g., Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry 2006). In these psychological measures, only some life domains are explicitly connected to social roles (e.g., parent, professional) and therefore the relationship between social categories and specific identities is ambiguous. Strength of social justice identity represents the dependent variable in this analysis. To determine whether the strength of the identity projected was in the present time, at 1 year, 5 years, or 10 years, dummy variables were constructed to identify the possible self that the participant is envisioning.

The variable “sex” was prompted by the question “What is your sex?” Females are listed as 1, with males as 0. The variable “non-white” was a constructed dummy variable, and a value of 1 includes individuals who identify as Black, Asian, American-Indian/Native American, Hispanic, or Other. The cause affiliation of each SJO was coded by mission statements and websites provided as part of the questionnaire into several different categories including “feminist,” “immigrant rights,” and “environmental justice.” Organizations that did not fit the definition of an SJO were removed. The variable “feminist” was constructed by identifying all individuals who are involved with a feminist SJO, with all other individuals assigned to the reference category.

In addition to the variables used in this analysis, the study collected background information on a number of other characteristics. The participants in this study generally had at least one highly-educated parent; only 16.06% of the sample had a parent whose highest degree of education did not involve a 4-year college degree, while 56.47% of the sample had at least one parent with a graduate degree. Furthermore, over half the sample
is expecting to graduate with no student debt, while less than 1/5th expects to graduate with more than $20,000 in student loans. Religious attendance is fairly low, as 26.5% of the sample had not attended any religious service in the prior year, and only 25.52% of the sample had attended on at least a monthly basis. Finally, there were more participants at small liberal arts schools (44.56%) than at large state and private universities (approximately 27% for each). These background characteristics are also listed in Table 1.

**Interview**

I contacted each participant at Southern State University (SSU), and invited all of them to a 60 to 90 minute semi-structured interview. In total, 27 of 31 participants at SSU accepted the invitation to discuss their questionnaire responses. The interview consisted of three primary sections. The first section was a discussion about their experiences in each of their listed organizations. The second section asked the participant to speak about their social network alters, and the nature of their relationship with each. The final section asked specifically about how the participant sees their future, and whether each identity is likely to rise or fall in importance. I analyzed the entire interview, but the final section was the one most likely to contain information about an individual’s identity and conceptions of the future. Therefore, most transcripts had the highest density of codes near the end of the interview, and most of the quotes presented in this paper are also located near the end of the interview.

**Quantitative Analysis**

To answer the research question “How are race, gender, and cause affiliation associated with variation in present and possible activist identities?” I analyzed the
variation that is associated with each sub-group. Regression analysis is well-suited to identifying variation in activist identities associated with various subgroups, and both regression analysis and confidence intervals are ideal for determining whether the strength of an identity increases or decreases by subgroup.

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire consisted of confidence intervals, graphs, and a multi-level ordered probit. First, I estimated 95% confidence intervals for strength of a social justice identity at the present time, one year in the future, five years in the future, and ten years in the future. The confidence interval for one subgroup (e.g., men) was compared to the confidence interval for a complementary subgroup (e.g., women); this process was repeated for the subgroups of race/ethnicity (white vs. nonwhite), sex (male vs. female), and cause affiliation (feminist vs. non-feminist). If there was no overlap in 95% confidence intervals at a given time point, I graphed each confidence interval to identify whether the gap widens or lessens over time. If the gap widens or lessens over time for any particular subgroup, then I tested for a possible time by subgroup interaction in the full regression analysis.

The confidence intervals are useful tools for demonstrating the gaps between groups, but suffer from two major flaws. The first flaw is that confidence intervals are designed for use with interval-level data, and thus it may not be appropriate to use confidence intervals to infer differences in ordinal data. The second flaw is that each independent variable (race, sex, cause affiliation) is assumed to be the only cause of variation. To account for multiple independent variables and the ordinal nature of the data, I estimated a multi-level ordered probit model to provide an inferential multivariate statistical test of activist identity, nesting projected time periods within individuals.
Multi-level models are specialized regression equations that address variation within clusters (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008). One common multi-level model is a growth curve model, which is used to predict individual growth over time. By treating time periods as varying within the context of individuals, growth curve models separate variance specific to an individual from variance associated with time and other independent variables. Each individual is therefore treated as multiple observations (one for each time point), but also accounts for the non-independence of the observations by assigning each subject their own error term.

The multi-level model in this study drew inspiration from growth curve modeling, but is different in one key regard. Most growth curve analysis uses an independent variable representing time to address the rate of change, while also using a polynomial to show how the rate of change shifts as an individual ages. However, time is not an interval or ratio measurement in the current study because each time point reflects an imagined scenario rather than the continuous passage of time. Therefore, each time point in this study was represented by a dummy variable, with the present time as the reference category.

Strength of identification was regressed on sex, race, involvement in a feminist organization, and imagined point in time with the present time as a reference group. Feminist groups were selected as the organizational contrast because feminism explicitly ties the personal to the political, which could shape activist identities in a unique way. I also specified an additional interaction term (race by time) because the confidence interval graph showed that the gap between white and non-white individuals is not
significant at the present time, but diverges considerably at each future time point. The last model is therefore specified by the level-1 equation:

$$\Gamma_{it} = \beta_{0i} + \beta_{1i}(t1) + \beta_{2i}(t2) + \beta_{3i}(t3) + v_{it}$$

And the level two equations:

$$\begin{align*}
\beta_{0i} &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(sex) + \gamma_{02}(race) + \gamma_{03}(fem) + u_{0i} \\
\beta_{1i} &= \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{12}(race) + u_{1i} \\
\beta_{2i} &= \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{22}(race) + u_{2i} \\
\beta_{3i} &= \gamma_{30} + \gamma_{32}(race) + u_{3i}
\end{align*}$$

Where \( \beta_{0i} \) represents the intercept, and \( \beta_{1i}, \beta_{2i}, \beta_{3i} \) are dummy variables indicating whether the identity rating in question is one year, five years, or ten years in the future. In the second level equations, \( \gamma_{01} \) represents sex, \( \gamma_{02} \) represents race, and \( \gamma_{03} \) represents participation in a feminist organization. The interaction term for race and time period was specified by the additional second-level equations for each time period. The regression models enable measurement of individual predictors of activist identity (time point, sex, race, and feminist affiliation) net of the other independent variables, and also permits examination of whether race is a salient structural factor at some possible activist identities but not others. All regression models were estimated in Stata 12 using the GLLAMM program, and were estimated with robust standard errors unless otherwise specified (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008).

**Qualitative Analysis**

To answer the research question “What are the narratives associated with subgroups of activists that inform their possible selves?” I analyzed the results from the semi-
structured interviews. After each interview, I wrote an analytic memo outlining the initial impressions of the interview. The analytic memo focused primarily on parts of the interview that may illuminate the reasons for social justice persistence in the projected strength of the identity, and secondarily upon the similarities to interviews already conducted. I then coded each interview transcript line-by-line for any mention of the self, time, or persistence. After coding and classifying the participants’ descriptions, I merged similar codes into common themes, each of which represents a distinct identity tale. I also made note of themes expressed primarily by ethnic minorities, females, or specific cause affiliations to determine if identity talk is associated with specific subgroups. Finally, I performed member checks by sending the initial findings to all participants who had elected to receive publications from the Class of 2012 research project. Participants did not object to any of the core findings in the paper, although their responses helped clarify language that they thought did not capture their experiences.

Answering quantitative inquiries—such as whether certain subgroups of individuals have “stronger” or “weaker” identities over time—is complicated when analyzing in-depth interviews. Regression analysis is better suited to answer quantitative questions, but not as well suited to explaining social processes. In this study, the analysis of the interviews complemented and extended the questionnaire results by suggesting appropriate interpretations for the variation by subgroup in the quantitative analysis (Small 2011).

Quantitative Findings

The sub-group specific means and standard errors for activist identity over time are presented in Table 2, and the confidence intervals constructed from this table show
some substantial differences between sub-groups. While white/non-Hispanic and non-white participants have similar levels in social justice identification in the present time, non-white participants expect that they will become substantially more invested over time. Figure 1 shows that there is no racial/ethnic gap in the present time, but at one year in the future racial/ethnic minority confidence interval barely overlaps with white non-Hispanic participants. The gap increases even further at 5 years and 10 years into the future, showing divergent future expectations.

Table 2. Means and Standard Errors for Sub-Group Activist Identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Group</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>One Year</th>
<th>Five Years</th>
<th>Ten Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>.0786</td>
<td>.0793</td>
<td>.0827</td>
<td>.0837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial/Ethnic Minority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>.1009</td>
<td>.0840</td>
<td>.0781</td>
<td>.0856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>.1261</td>
<td>.1199</td>
<td>.1255</td>
<td>.1332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>.0642</td>
<td>.0623</td>
<td>.0607</td>
<td>.0631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Feminist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Projected Social Justice Identity Gaps, by Race and Time Horizon

There is also a substantial social justice identification gap between females and males at each projected time point. Figure 2 shows that the confidence interval for females is higher at all time periods, and does not appear to increase or decrease. Feminist and non-feminist affiliated confidence intervals overlapped at multiple time points, but this is possibly because there were only 21 individuals who were involved in feminist organizations.
Figure 2: Projected Social Justice Identity Gaps, by Sex and Time Horizon

The results of the multi-level probit covariates are listed in Table 3. Model 1 shows that participants tend to believe that they will increase their identification with social justice participation over time. Projected strength of the social justice participant identity is statistically significant at one year (p<0.001), five years (p<0.01), and ten years (p<0.05).

Table 3. Projected Social Justice Identification by Chronological Distance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>0.530***</td>
<td>0.548***</td>
<td>0.548***</td>
<td>0.553***</td>
<td>0.431*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.140)</td>
<td>(0.140)</td>
<td>(0.138)</td>
<td>(0.140)</td>
<td>(0.185)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>0.439**</td>
<td>0.482***</td>
<td>0.482**</td>
<td>0.486**</td>
<td>0.259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.153)</td>
<td>(0.139)</td>
<td>(0.151)</td>
<td>(0.152)</td>
<td>(0.184)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>0.323</td>
<td>0.348*</td>
<td>0.348*</td>
<td>0.351*</td>
<td>0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.168)</td>
<td>(0.137)</td>
<td>(0.167)</td>
<td>(0.167)</td>
<td>(0.207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.124*</td>
<td>1.124</td>
<td>1.348**</td>
<td>1.374**</td>
<td>1.374**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.466)</td>
<td>-1.379</td>
<td>(0.498)</td>
<td>(0.459)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>0.739**</td>
<td>0.739</td>
<td>0.848*</td>
<td>0.459</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.277)</td>
<td>(0.638)</td>
<td>(0.345)</td>
<td>(0.368)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td>1.166***</td>
<td>1.222***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.312)</td>
<td>(0.287)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both sex and ethnic/racial minority status are statistically significant in Model 2 (p<0.05), which is the only model not to use robust standard errors. However, after using robust standard errors in Model 3, only ethnic/racial minority status is statistically significant (p<0.05). Sex is not statistically significant in Model 3 because some females have extremely high levels of social justice identification—those involved with feminist groups—while the rest do not. Feminist-affiliated activists show higher social justice identities at all time points, which is confirmed in Model 4, where feminist status is statistically significant (p<0.01). Being female is also statistically significant in Model 4, as adding feminist affiliation to the model substantially reduces the standard errors associated with being female.

Finally, Model 5 introduces an interaction of ethnic/racial minority status with projected time. The interaction term was introduced because the gap between white and non-white individuals widens over time in the confidence interval analysis, suggesting that the relationship between race and social justice identity does not remain constant over successive possible selves. The series of race by time interaction terms eliminates the relationship between most projected time periods and social justice identity, with only one year statistically significant (p<0.05). Model 5 also shows that non-white / Hispanic
individuals are the primary contributors to the projected increase in social justice identification at five and ten years (p<0.05), although it is not statistically significant at the present time or at one year in the future. Being involved in a feminist group also boosts social justice identities in Model 5, both at the present and into the future (p<0.001).

This regression analysis shows that there is a strong connection between feminist affiliation and activist identity, between being female and activist identity, and that there is a rise in activist identity driven primarily by ethnic/racial minorities. These are the structural factors associated with variation in present and possible activist identities, and the regression analysis is extremely useful for identifying whose activist identities become more important and whose recede over successive possible selves. However, the regression analysis does not explain how activists align the self with a social movement. In the following section, I explore the narratives that comprise this meaning-making process.

**Qualitative Findings**

Model 1 indicates that activists see their social justice identity increasing over time, indicating that student activists see social justice participation as even more central to their lives in the future. However, interviews reveal that there is strong normative pressure to abandon movement work, and as a result a few participants expect social justice identity to decrease. Participants in this study show high levels of anxiety about their future life course, and participants counter the pressure to abandon activism with five distinct types of identity talk that link themselves to a social justice identity (“Community,” “Meaning,” “Importance,” “Ethnic or Family Legacy,” and “Self-
Interest”). I will first give a brief overview of each narrative, and explore the themes more fully in subsequent sections.

The most frequent rationale is that there is “Community” in Social Justice Groups with 23 of the 27 interviewees mentioning it as a key reason for their persistence in social justice groups. Community allows activists to interact socially with like-minded others, provides validation for beliefs that may not necessarily be mainstream, and provides a social space where activists do not have to hide their beliefs. The second major theme is “Meaning”—the sense that activism gives them a sense of purpose and guiding framework for how to interpret other social roles (e.g., parent, professional, etc.). The third major reason for persistence (“Importance”) is a deep belief that the issue is too important to ignore and that action is necessary. Participants who reference an “Importance” theme usually hold relationships with individuals who are affected by unjust policies, and the issue is rooted in their relationships with those people.

The first three themes (“Community,” “Meaning,” and “Importance”) do not specifically reference race/ethnic groups, male or female status, or cause affiliation; it was therefore accessible to all participants. Each one represents a narrative that explains why most activists resist normative pressure to drop causes they care about. “Community” and “Importance” both reinforce commitment by tying the self to other individuals. Meanwhile, “Meaning” positions the role of social justice participants as a master identity, which organizes and defines other social roles (Charmaz 1994). But while “Community” and “Meaning” were used with equal frequency across subgroups, “Importance” was rarely deployed in interviews with racial/ethnic minority or feminist participants.
Model 5 suggests that racial/ethnic minorities and feminists are more likely to have high social justice identity, and each has a distinctive narrative theme that appears throughout the interviews and appears to supersede “Importance” as a primary narrative. The fourth major theme is an “Ethnic or Family Legacy” of activism, which is only espoused by racial/ethnic minorities. Unlike the previous types of three identity talk, an Ethnic or Family Legacy of activism is a story about the inevitability of struggle against oppressive forces. The participants who utilize this tale see themselves as guardians of a legacy of social justice that has been given to them by virtue of their race or ethnicity. Like some other identity talk, “Ethnic or Family Legacies” link the self to family members and others they trust, but also a) show an extended time horizon into the past and future and b) link the self to social structure via their racial or ethnic status.

The last major theme is “Self-Interest,” where activists state they continue to participate in a social movement because they will directly benefit from the movement’s success. This theme is only mentioned by participants with experience in feminist groups, suggesting that a feminist analysis of social relations taps self-interest more directly than other ideologies. Participants use this theme to link the self to a gendered social structure, explaining how personal oppressions are the result of a patriarchal world. There were no themes used specifically by women in this sample.

Descriptions of the five types of identity talk, and which talk is common within certain subgroups, may be found in Table 4. All sub-groups have access to three types of identity talk, and provide some integration of the self into movement activity. However, access to additional feminist and racial/ethnic minority narratives allow further integration of the self into a social movement, boosting social justice identity.
Table 4. Rationales for Persistence in Social Justice Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>White, Non Feminist</th>
<th>Ethnic Minority</th>
<th>Feminist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>They enjoy participating in a community with like-minded individuals.</td>
<td>13/16</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic/Family</td>
<td>Membership in a minority or family group inspires them</td>
<td>0/16</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>The issue is too important to ignore, and they are morally obliged to address it.</td>
<td>12/16</td>
<td>2/7</td>
<td>2/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Participation in social justice efforts gives them a purpose and focus in life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Interest</td>
<td>While they work to build a socially just world for everyone, they acknowledge their benefit in a more socially just world</td>
<td>4/16</td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td>2/5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Anticipating the Future**

Although most participants believe that their social justice identities will remain strong in the future, almost all student activists are also uncertain and anxious about the future. Even those participants who do not expect their social justice identities to decrease acknowledge some normative pressure to make money and act like an “adult” in the “real world.” The anxiety over the future provides all graduating student activists a uniform backdrop for life-course decision making. Linda, an advocate for local and fair food systems, summarizes normative pressure to act like an “adult” by stating:

I think there’s a perception to be successful after you graduate, and maybe this is—maybe I’m getting this wrong—but I’ve, I feel like there’s a perception from society (or this could be from my mom), but that you need find a career that pays well so you can support yourself. And then you need to go and seek a partner who can help you support yourself…and then you need to have a family. That kind of, you know, continual…get a pay raise, get a promotion.

28
Cindy, an activist involved with a religious social justice group, recalls a conversation that she had with a former employer. She says that she believes that as people get older, they are expected to spend more time supporting themselves and less time taking risks on behalf of causes.

I’ll give you a quote that one of my bosses said to me when I was in high school. He said as far as…doing social justice work and stuff like that, he said, “If you’re young and you’re not a liberal you don’t have a heart. But if you’re an older person and you’re not a conservative, you don’t have a brain.” So I think his, the meaning behind that is just that he thinks—and a lot of people think—that as you grow up and as you mature, different things become important to you and you see the value of finances and the value of financial stability. And you stop putting as much value in other people’s welfare and put more value in your own. And a lot of times that’s just because you had to provide for yourself, but it’s not necessarily that you’ve become a bad person. Just that when you get older you have to provide for yourself, so you have to spend more time on your career and your job and stuff like that to support yourself. But I also think that he was thinking that whenever you’re younger, you’re a little bit more naïve and you think that you can do more. And as you get older, you realize how limited your role actually is.

A few participants are already responding to the normative pressure to abandon social justice efforts. Rachel, another advocate for local and fair agriculture, is psychologically preparing herself to withdraw from social movement activity:

I’m not sure to what extent my role [in activism] is going to change. I definitely think [it will]…I’m not sure to what extent my personal needs are going to have to pre-empt that…Paying for my own food/rent wherever I am finding that job that I am, to occupy my time when I’m not in school.

Some participants have already committed to career choices that they believe will limit their ability to participate in social justice issues, such as attending graduate or law school. Future graduate and law students hold the belief that their discretionary time will be severely curtailed. Laura, who is planning to attend a PhD program, says:
I was sort of thinking of it in terms of the priority is, you know, participate…when I have time. But again, the major priority is going to be I need to do well in school.

The normative pressure that participants describe involves an assumption that their time and resources will be limited after graduation, so they will need to cease participating in social justice efforts. While neither Rachel nor Laura explicitly plan to stop working for causes that they care about, they are clearly preparing for a future where participation in causes is no longer central to their self-conception. Thus, whether they actually have limited time or resources in the future may not actually matter because they are have already realigned the self to become less dependent on the social justice identity.

In the most extreme case, activists respond to the anticipated need to make money and behave maturely by taking a job that systematically reduces their opportunities for involvement. Diane, an environmental justice activist, has already accepted a job teaching English in a country with strong environmental protections with several months of school left to go. She explains her decision by saying:

I, like many of my classmates, am very—am feeling very pessimistic because right as we’re in school...[we have the] financial crisis. And you know my parents have been telling me... “do you know how hard it is to get a job out there?” And I’m like, “Nooooo!” and... “gosh, what’s going to happen?”

Diane’s anxiety over her ability to get a job leads her to take a job fairly early in the job-seeking process. However, this job removes her from the immediate issues and contexts that she has worked on in the past, making future involvement less likely.

**White Non-Feminist Activists**

Participants across ethnicities, cause affiliation, and sexes see a similar future with increased responsibilities and decreased ability to take action. Although white non-
feminist activists show the lowest projected social justice identities in this study, even they foresee an increase in their social justice identification. The identity talk that white non-feminist activists use to explain general persistence in social movement activities provide interpretations of why they plan to maintain a social justice identity. These identity talk are “Community,” the desire to interact with like-minded individuals; “Meaning,” the use of social justice participant as a master identity that guides other life choices; and “Importance,” where an issue is too important to ignore and they have a moral obligation to continue.

Tom, a white male activist in a multi-issue social justice group, claims that the sense of community is his favorite part of activism.

It’s sort of a reinforcement that that’s okay, and that there are people who share those ideas… and [are] able to better organize and sort of make what can be more jumbled notions, or I guess, desires or pictures of justice that you might have into a reality…it can be, like make you feel a little less crazy or something. It can make you feel… It makes you feel that there is support… being with people who are not deterred by [anything], or they won’t put their beliefs in a box and be deterred by, upon acting on them.

Tom’s quote combines two topics mentioned by other participants. First, participating in a social justice organization allows you to meet others that share your beliefs. Second, participation in a group gives a sense of social support, and reminds him that he is right in standing up for his beliefs. Later, Tom also mentions a third major topic—that he feels “safe” inside the group—that he can express his own beliefs without fear of social retribution.

The second common reason for persistence is that it gives an activist a purpose and meaning for life. Some participants say that they feel that participation in their fight
for equality organizes other aspects of their identity as well. Nancy, a white woman involved in a multi-issue social justice group, notes:

But like I said social justice, whether it’s volunteering or career, what it is will always be a part of whom/what I’m focusing on and even with raising my children I want to be sure that they are tolerant people and have a lot of those accepting viewpoints. So it’ll affect every aspect of who I am, as a friend, as a parent, a professional—everywhere I go, that’s important to who I am.

Nancy argues that she has internalized the values of her causes so deeply that separating them would be impossible. She argues that if she stops being a social justice participant, she would have to re-interpret all of the other roles in her life. In other words, “activist” has become a master identity that organizes and shapes other decisions.

The third common reason for persistence is that an activist believes the issue is too important to ignore, and care deeply about the issue or the people who are involved. While racial/ethnic minority and feminist participants did occasionally reference this theme, it is a more prominent and frequent theme among white non-feminists. Jane is a white female involved with homeless advocacy and environmental justice issues, and she claims that her activism is morally correct and driven by her relationship with homeless individuals and communities of color facing environmental racism. She says:

I want to help try and break that system [of oppression]. So I think that’s why I stay involved, is just because, you know, I love, I love the people and I see how, what I do and what the system does—how it directly affects people and I can’t sit by and just let it happen while knowing that it does happen.

One distinct variation on “Importance” is expressed by individuals who consult their faith for guidance. Only a small number of individuals said that the issue is important because their religious faith commands them to “being justice to the oppressed,” but the theme is pervasive throughout those interviews and represents a
Evangeline, a white female who works with a Christian social justice group, provides one example:

I don’t really see it as an option to love Jesus and not to do what He has commanded us to do as believers. And there’s all through the Bible, there’s commands to seek justice and to bring justice to the oppressed and to free people from slavery and I, I can’t really get away from that. Because I don’t think I can look at one part of the Bible that says “Love your neighbor” and not do the rest of it. Like I can’t really pick and choose, what I can do. And it excites me because I think that that’s, I think that Christians in the world are God’s tools to show His love to the world. And I think that that’s how, we’re God’s plan for freedom in the world. And so I mean, it’s a very clear statement to me.

Evangeline draws on her faith to construct a moral analysis, placing herself as one of “God’s tools” who is commanded to “bring justice to the oppressed.” Although her motivation comes from religious faith rather than social relationships, neither Jane nor Evangeline believes that a moral individual could ignore their issue.

Racial/Ethnic Minority Activists

Although most participants expect to continue social justice activism, the increase in social justice identification at five and ten years in the future is primarily driven by non-white and Hispanic participants. Racial/ethnic minorities draw upon the three common themes (“Community,” “Important,” and “Meaning”) to explain their continued persistence, although they draw upon “Importance” less frequently than white non-feminist participants. In addition, they also recall family and community histories, a story that places a second aspect of their identity (ethnic identity) and the people that they care about (parents and grandparents) within the activist role. The “Family or Ethnic Legacy” identity tale therefore explicitly connects the self to social structure, and also emphasizes that the struggle for social justice is inevitable but a worthy cause in any era.
African-American activists in this study claim to represent the legacy of the civil rights movement. They explicitly cast themselves as the stewards of a decades-long tradition of protest and change, and proudly recount the work their organization performed in the past while deeming themselves ready to confront oppression in the future. This unique time horizon is expressed by Maya, who explains her role as a “representative of 103 years of awesome activism” by stating:

…[O]ur state president, has a metaphor that he uses that it’s not Jim Crow anymore, it’s James Crow, Esquire…Jim Crow has changed and morphed itself into all these different things to meet different barriers to freedom that we’re seeing now, and different categories of oppression.

Additionally, ethnic minority activists often specifically cite a family legacy of activism that they wish to uphold within the same narrative. Angela, who is involved with labor and feminist organizations, describes how she represents her family and others in the black community when she attends a protest:

…[M]y dad, he went to segregated schools and things. So he grew up during the Civil Rights era. He and his family protested a lot…So the stories I would hear of them growing up was like well, that much hasn’t changed so I still need to be speaking up for what I feel is wrong. My mom, she grew up after him but she talked about remembering the protests…I just grew up in a family that always talked about how you have to be an activist…I just think back to, I always go back to the civil rights movement. If they weren’t driven every day to go out there and march and protest, or to fight for equal rights then they wouldn’t be—or we wouldn’t be where we are now, where we wouldn’t still be achieving great milestones.

Angela starts by talking about the past, but ends by discussing “milestones” that impact the future. In this account, she joins the past and future together to discuss the need to act at all times. But Angela also places people that she cares about (her parents) as central actors in the story, tying her actions to people that she cares about. Angela’s account bears a superficial resemblance to Jane’s interpretation of why she is involved
with social justice activism—that she has a tie to particular individuals who inspire her to take action. But Angela’s story is trans-situational and could refer to any possible self, as it applies wherever there is oppression and injustice; Jane’s account is more contextually dependent on knowing community members, and thus refers more specifically to work that is being done in the present.

Stories of family and ethnic legacies appear in the story of a Jewish participant as well, even though he self-identifies as white and is not a racial minority. Al, an activist in multiple social justice organizations, argues that his Jewish ancestry motivates him to take action, just as it has motivated his parents and grandparents before him. Discrimination and genocide against Jewish people makes oppression seem personal to him. Citing this legacy, he says that “we, as Jews, we have to [set] an example for everybody else.”

Maya, Angela, Al, and other racial/ethnic minority activists place their ethnic/racial and sometimes family traditions in the center of their stories of persistence and show a longer time horizon than other participants. They have access to an additional form of identity work that emphasizes their personal relationship to an inequitable society and the indefinite nature of their cause, which also explains why non-white and Hispanic participants show a greater social justice identity over time than white non-Hispanic activists.

**Feminist Activists**

Although women show higher projected social justice identification at each time point in Figure 2, this is primarily due to the fact that feminists have high social justice identification and all of the feminists in this sample are female. Like racial/ethnic
minorities, activists with past experience in feminist groups access common identity talk where participation in “Community,” the ability for activism to provide “Meaning” and guide social behavior, and occasionally cite the “Importance” of the issue are reasons for continued persistence. However, feminists utilize a distinct identity tale that explains the relationship between self and patriarchal society, claiming that their persistence builds a world where they will be accepted as equals. While the racial or ethnic minority activists in this study may imply that their activism will eventually improve their lives, only feminist-affiliated activists tie self-interest directly to action. The additional identity tale therefore provides feminists with further capacity to strengthen the social justice participant identity.

Amy, a white woman involved in a feminist group on campus and who mentioned reproductive rights throughout the interview, stated that she works on reproductive justice issues because she is a feminist. She responded to the question “And why are you a feminist?” by stating:

Big question. I mean, obviously, I am a woman so I have a stake in it. Even though, not necessarily all women are feminists. That’s definitely not the case… you have like all these experiences. And then once, I guess the example of taking sex and gender, you like realize like that there’s a reason [for injustice], some of those experiences start to make sense and sort of like this system of how things work. And then you like realize—Oh, it doesn’t have to be like that. I can change that.

Amy acknowledges that she has a stake in making the world a more equitable place for women. But while many people have self-interest in social action, not everyone explicitly recognizes it. By noting how her actions affect herself, she reinforces her own commitment to feminist action. She then ties her awareness of self-interest directly to her ideology, and a specific analysis of how the world should change for the better.
Another student, Margaret, describes her initial steps into activism by working to end sexual violence, but after becoming involved with feminist issues she started to believe that “the penalties of not conforming to patriarchal standards” personally affect each woman even if they had not been assaulted. She notes:

I think the biggest difference [between now and then] is that I didn’t have a vocabulary to express really what I was trying to talk about. Like I knew all kinds of terms that express explicitly about what sexual violence—how it manifested itself and how it could be prevented, but I didn’t have generally—I didn’t have any idea of what oppression systems were, you know?

Feminist analysis explicitly links the personal and the political, and thus links the self to a specific role. However, feminist analysis also stays with an activist even after formally exiting the feminist movement. Emma is an activist who began her college career working with a feminist organization on campus, but later stopped participating as she became more involved with the struggles for labor and racial equality. At the time of the study, she no longer had formal ties to any feminist organization. However, when asked about her experiences as a college student organizing blue-collar workers, she says:

I work at a job where I can’t collectively bargain, where I can be fired at any moment, and I understand that the people I work with such as [occupation] on campus are also working under those conditions. So, when I work with them to fight certain [injustices]—especially, when it comes to [State] law and policy around labor—I also understand how this is also part of my own personal struggle and making my life as a worker more fulfilling.

Rather than cast herself as a “conscience” constituent by working alongside those who suffer greater oppression, she finds the commonalities in their stories and casts herself as an indirect “beneficiary” constituent (McCarthy and Zald 1977). By tying the personal and the political together, activists involved with feminist organizations heighten their own self-interest in social justice movements with an additional identity
tale, explaining why so many feminists show greater social justice identities at all projected time points.

**Discussion**

This study shows that most graduating social justice activists expect to persist or even increase their role identification with causes that they care about, even though most of them are also anxious about the tangible and social expectations of being in the “real world.” Future social justice identification is particularly strong for ethnic/racial minority students and feminist students. Ethnic/racial minorities project higher levels of social justice identification at five and ten years, while feminists and women project higher levels at all future and present time points. All students have narratives that they use to explain why they persist in social justice efforts, but ethnic/racial minorities and feminists have access to two additional narratives that allow them to reinforce social justice identities located within possible selves. Ethnic and racial minorities often speak about the need to uphold family and/or ethnic standards for activism, and feminists utilize an ideology that explicitly ties personal oppression to political action. These specialized narratives often replace “Importance” as a theme; they also provide an additional cultural tool linking the self to a social movement, and also between the activist identity and socially conditioned oppressions.

This study has two major limitations. The first is that the participants in this study all attend schools that are considered “elite” by a well-known college guide. The dynamics may be different at less prestigious schools, which may offer a less challenging curriculum, provide fewer resources, or select students with different backgrounds and interests. Second, this study’s importance derives from empirical work on the relationship
between identities and commitment. But despite each limitation, this study has implications for both the social psychological, social movements, and life course literature. These areas include the operationalization of the possible self, the role of identity work in social movements, the constraints of new roles in activist persistence, and how persistence and disengagement can be used to understand life course transitions.

Prominent social theorists propose that anticipation of the future may drive future behavior (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007), but this is rarely operationalized in Sociology research. This study offers an alternative to the psychological approach to possible selves, using identity as a unifying concept. Additionally, this paper addresses variation by time horizon, race/ethnicity, sex, and feminist cause affiliation. Consistent with existing theory about the self, future selves do vary by ethnic/racial experience. Furthermore, participation in feminist SJOs shape both future and present selves. Narratives tie the self to social movements, and qualitative analysis suggests that structured experiences within both ethnic and ideological communities influence the present and possible activist identities.

Furthermore, this paper contributes to the discussion on shaping of identity in social movements. Corrigall-Brown (2011) argues that a leftist ideology shapes an activist identity and this study finds that one particular left-leaning cause affiliation with a unique ideological focus—feminism—plays a particularly strong role in identity across possible selves. In addition, there are particular narratives available to certain ethnic and racial minorities that sustain participation. However, the intriguing implication of this finding is that there are some activist identities shaped by legacies of oppression (racial and ethnic groups), while others require consciousness-raising within social movement
organizations (feminism). The axiom of structural symbolic interaction “Society shapes self shapes social interaction” (Stryker 2008: 19) holds true, with one clarification: Different parts of society shape qualitatively different activist identities.

This study is also relevant to the question of persistence in social movements. Most accounts of social movement disengagement center upon immediate, situational imperatives that raise the cost of participation (e.g., Klandermans 1997). This study shows that like the law students in Granfield and Koenig’s (1992) study, activists also react to future events long before they are directly faced with them. At least a few activists react to the premonition of more responsibility by preparing to disengage with their current role as a social justice participant. The rest use narratives to explain persistence, some of which are specific to ethnic/racial groups or feminism. Activists may plan to terminate participation due to the threat of new social roles, or stop later because they do not have access to specific narratives that fortify persistence when the new social roles demand attention and resources. The first reason is a threat that applies to all activists, but the second reason suggests certain types of activists—ethnic minorities and feminists—are more likely to continue than others.

However, perhaps the most important implication of this study is for the understanding of life course transitions. Preparing to disengage or persist in a certain behavior is highly relevant to life course transitions, which are moments when some roles are discarded and other roles are attained. But life course transitions actually consist of two stages—a recognition that one’s life is about to change, and then the actual social demands presented by the new role. In the first stage, a graduating student may acknowledge that the work role will increase in importance; likewise, a soon-to-be parent
may foresee that family will demand more attention. In the second stage, the recent graduate finds it difficult to maintain prior activism because the expectations surrounding work are greater than for school; similarly, the new parent realizes that certain social relationships require more effort to maintain. What this study shows is that disengagement or persistence actually begins before the formal start of the transition, and people make plans that either aid or hinder their future role configurations. The first stage—a recognition of life changes—is not evidence that an individual will or will not disengage per se, but those who foresee disengagement select life circumstances that makes persistence less likely. Very few people actually live entirely in the moment and ignore the expectations associated with new roles; reactions to these expectations may form a larger part of which roles are discarded and obtained than the extant life course research suggests.

There is still one major unresolved question from this study—why do women hold greater activist identity at each imagined time point in the quantitative analysis, yet there are no distinctive themes associated with women in the qualitative analysis? There are at least two possible answers. The first is that the semi-structured interview protocol did not contain enough probes to identify non-organizational gendered experiences. The second is that many women who are involved with social justice organizations have internalized some feminist ideology as a result of spending time with other left-leaning women, even though they do not explicitly use it as a reason for persistence. Both answers are plausible, but future research is needed to further explore gendered influences on activist identities.
The implications of this study suggest two new directions in the social movements literature, and a third for research on life course transitions. First, because this paper does not account for behavior after the life-course transition, the question of how the possible self influences roles is still unresolved. A follow-up study, which looks at activists across a life course transition, would help determine how the possible self affects social movement persistence. Additionally, because certain ideologies lead to activist identities, it is likely that organizations that explicitly connect ideology to identity do a better job of retaining volunteers. While some social movements research uses a cross-movement organizational design (e.g., Corrigall-Brown 2011), additional samples with structural characteristics of organizations may help clarify the relationship between issue, ideology, and persistence.

Finally, life course scholars clarifying the mechanism by which certain roles are obtained or discarded should take expectations seriously. An individual who appears to be reacting to the immediate demands of a social role may have planned his or her behavior in advance. Thus, future scholarship should consider looking at situations in which individual expectations of the future do not match actual structural circumstances. One particular scenario for this line of research would be a student who graduates from college. The student expects that he or she will have far less time to pursue volunteering activity because they will be working full-time, but then discovers that the job takes far less time than originally thought. Does the student continue with the original plan of not volunteering, or does the student look at the situation and determine that it is time to return to issues that he or she cares about? Understanding choice where culturally-defined
expectations of the future diverge from actual events would provide remarkable analytic leverage into the study of human behavior.
References


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1 The variable “feminist” should not be construed as capturing all participants who hold viewpoints congruent with feminism, nor all of those who self-identify as feminists. The variable refers explicitly to membership in a feminist SJO.

2 I also constructed confidence intervals for parental education, expected student debt, religious service attendance, and type of education institution; these overlapped considerably and are therefore not included here or in the regression analyses.

3 One participant is involved with feminist organizations and is also identifies as being an ethnic/racial minority.