

# Human rights activism: factors which influence and motivate young adults in Australia

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## **Human rights activism: factors which influence and motivate young adults in Australia**

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**Abstract:** Human rights activists aim to create social and political change. This article analyses the factors which influence and motivate human rights activists in Australia to want to be a part of this movement. Human rights education is an important part of activism. The pedagogy about, through and for human rights education was used in this study to assess the processes that the activists engaged in prior to and through the experiences of their activism. The findings demonstrated that these human rights activists were motivated to be justice-oriented citizens by altruism, often through the influence of their families rather than their schooling. Some participants also experienced political socialisation through their families when they were children, which enabled them to have knowledge and agency as human rights activists. The study also found that belonging to a non-governmental organisation was an important part of maintaining the motivation of human rights activists.

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### **Introduction**

Human rights activists are individuals who advocate for the protection of their own rights, as well as for the rights of others. This is often done through joining together with other like-minded people as part of a movement to 'make a difference'. This paper discusses findings from a larger study which analysed the factors which influence and motivate human rights activists in Australia.

It is important that research in this field in Australia is conducted, since Australia is a signatory to all the major international human rights documents. Therefore, Australia has an obligation under international law to protect and promote the rights set out in these treaties and conventions. Activists in civil society play a key role in ensuring states such as Australia adhere to these commitments, through publicising human rights abuses and undertaking human rights education in the community.

It is a particularly pertinent time to be researching human rights activism, as questions are being raised about the commitment of countries to uphold and promote international human rights standards. A glance at any news source reveals that human rights abuses occur almost daily all over the world (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Hathaway (2002) argues that this is because human rights law 'stands out as an area of international law in which countries have little incentive to police noncompliance ... [as] human rights treaties impinge on core areas of national sovereignty' (p. 1938). Non-governmental groups (NGOs) have therefore stepped into this space to play a crucial role in promoting international human rights instruments and publicising gross human rights violations.

Human rights education is an important element of human rights activism. Article 2(2) of the Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011) states that the pedagogy of human rights education should include:

- a) Education about human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection
- b) Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners
- c) Education for human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others

Therefore, formal classroom tuition in schools ‘about’ human rights is only one element of a human rights education pedagogy, which also includes learning ‘through’ and ‘for’. Education ‘for’ human rights can occur outside of the formal school curriculum, such as through belonging to a human rights NGO. Indeed, human rights activism is implied in the wording of the third clause of Article 2(2), as it states that a pedagogy of human rights education should include ‘empowering persons’ to ‘respect and uphold the rights of others’.

This paper begins with discussion of how human rights activism is an evolving field of research within the citizenship education literature. This is followed by reference to theoretical frames in broader philosophical and sociological literature, in order to analyse the factors which influence and motivate young adult human rights activists. The paper then examines the influences and motivations of six human rights activists aged between 20 and 26 who belong to two NGOs: an international legal human rights organisation and a Christian development organisation.

Human rights activists are active citizens; they engage with human rights issues locally, nationally and internationally by lobbying politicians, organising petitions and protests and undertaking awareness-raising education campaigns. Human rights activists can therefore be categorised as justice-oriented citizens, as they address injustice through knowledge about social movements and seek to question and change the established political and social structures which cause problems. They can be compared with the personally responsible citizen, who undertakes individual acts of charity (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The extent to which the social, cultural and financial capital of young adults impacts on their capacity to be human rights activists is also considered in this paper, especially in light of Cruikshank’s (1999) claim that active citizens ‘are not born; they are made’ (p. 3).

### **Human rights activists: influences and motivations**

According to Morrell and O’Connor (2002), being an activist involves:

... a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions... a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans... our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; ... and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (p. xvii)

Being an activist involves both an intrinsic desire to create change, as well as extrinsic factors which encourage and enable one to become an activist, such as connecting and communicating with other passionate and like-minded individuals about these issues.

Davies, Evans and Peterson (2014) describe how activists have multiple routes to engagement:

Some may be driven by altruistic tendencies, and/or a desire to develop specific skills and knowledge which may be used for future social and educational advancement. It is possible that a feeling of efficacy and ability to benefit from networks and individuals that make engagement a pleasant, and achievable reality(sic). (p. 6)

Atkeson and Rapoport (2003) argue that activists often possess a strong, intrinsic helping intentionality, that can be fostered through role-modelling in families, which compels them to do the work that they do. Altruism is defined as pro-social behaviour intended to help others and includes 'intentions, goals, and predispositions to work towards the betterment of society such as the alleviation of poverty or suffering' (Saha, 2000, p. 10).

Social scientists have identified a strong relationship between young people's sense that they are competent civic actors as individuals and their desire to participate in social activism groups such as NGOs (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The agency of young people can be influenced by the extent to which they are politically socialised as children, and the degree to which they are enabled to feel they have the knowledge and capacity to create change (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010). Hyman (1959) argues that the political understanding of young people is mainly influenced by the modelling they experienced through their families. However, McDevitt and Chaffee (2002) argue that young people who have had civic experiences outside of the home, through school and community-based activities (such as NGO groups), are often able to challenge the political views of their parents, which in turn prompts parents to increase their own civic knowledge.

Human rights activists are also often highly educated, economically advantaged and drawn from the same privileged social class. Tsutsui and Wotipka (2004) state that populations with more resources are more likely to engage in movements such as human rights, because:

... once basic human needs have been met, citizens can turn their attention to other needs. The human rights movement is often considered an example of such post-materialist movements... citizens who are better educated may possess the cultural capital needed to be aware of their rights, to recognise when those rights have not been met, and to possess the tools needed to articulate the demands and to organise for change. (p. 596-7)

Further evidence for this is provided in the 2016 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (Schulz, Ainley, Frallion, Losito & Agrusti, 2016) across 19 countries, which found that socio-economic status, measured by parental occupation and the number of books in the home, was positively associated with student civic knowledge. This study also found that parental and student interest were the strongest background predictors of expected civic engagement. Social capital is developed

through the informal education transmitted through family, political parties and cultural groups which enables individuals to have the attitudes and knowledge required to succeed in society (Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). Social capital also involves features of social organisation such as networks and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1995).

The findings of the 2016 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study also have implications for the conceptualisation of human rights activism as a form of active citizenship, if it is contingent on people's socio-economic status and positive familial experiences. According to DeJaeghere, Josic & McCleary (2016):

Sociological and anthropological studies of education debate how youth agency can be constrained by structures of class, gender, and racial inequalities in society, and they acknowledge that social change is not easily achieved even though education may foster aspirations and individual agency. (p. 2)

Black (2017) also argues that low socio-economic status affects a range of attitudes and capacities for civic participation by young people, and that many such young people are promised the ability to contribute to social justice endeavours despite having little access to it in practice.

Another factor which influences young people to engage with human rights is a desire to belong to a group of like-minded others. Yuval Davis (2011) defines belonging as a physical and emotional experience that has political effects, or a feeling of being 'at home' (p. 10). According to Yuval Davis (2011), belonging has three elements: social and geographical locations, attachment to cultural and symbolic practices of social group, and the value systems that individuals and groups use to make judgments about their own and others' belonging. Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin and Silbereisen (2002) suggest that the social bonds, affiliation and emotional support gained through belonging to a community with shared commitments (such as a human rights activist group) can sustain civic involvement despite intimidating challenges, frustrating experiences and a sense of hopelessness at ever being able to create effective change. Kirshner's (2007) research also found that 'the collaborative, distributive nature of work in an activist group enables participants to accomplish goals they would be hard-pressed to accomplish on their own' (p. 369).

Post-colonial theorists have problematised the seemingly benign and well-intentioned desire of privileged young people in the Global North to 'help others' in the Global South. The concept of the 'humanitarian gaze' questions the motivation of privileged Western human rights activists 'to think that he or she is there to help the rest of the world' (Kapoor, 2004, p. 630). The humanitarian gaze has been defined as contributing to 'recurring geopolitical discourses of North-South relations that naturalize[s] political, economic and social inequality' (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 112). Spivak (2004) argues against the Social Darwinism inherent in the human rights discourse, where 'the fittest must shoulder the burden of righting the wrongs of the unfit' (p. 524); she argues that those most directly affected should be the drivers of these programmes.

However, Article 12 of the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1998) states

that 'everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to participate in peaceful activities against violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms'. Therefore, it can be argued that all people have the right and responsibility to be human rights activists, not just victims of human rights abuses, and indeed many victims may find it too difficult to become engaged because of the trauma they have experienced (Knuckey, Satterthwaite & Brown, 2018).

### **Methodology**

My study uses the interpretative lens of critical theory, which involves researchers acknowledging their own power, engaging in dialogues and using theory to interpret or illuminate social action (Habermas, 1979). This perspective has been chosen because my study conceptualises human rights activists as justice-oriented social actors (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), and critical theory is concerned with the 'desire to comprehend ... the underlying orders of social life - those social and systemic relations that constitute society' (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 211).

The use of case studies is appropriate for this qualitative research, which is explanatory and strives to answer how- and why-type questions about contemporary events (Yin, 2009). A case study methodology involves the collection of exploratory and descriptive qualitative data from one or more cases within a bounded system (Yin, 2009). The qualitative data collected in a case study involves perceiving what is happening in key episodes or testimonies, and then representing these events with direct interpretations and narratives which are, in turn, used to optimise understanding of particular cases (Stake, 1995).

The two particular cases were chosen because they each provided the opportunity for an interesting in-depth analysis and comparison of the factors which motivate and influence human rights activists. This purposeful sampling strategy allows for the representation of diverse cases on the topic and allowed me as the researcher to choose case studies that were illuminating (Creswell, 2007). The interviews with three participants from each NGO were semi-structured, and the volunteer participants were interviewed individually for about 1 ½ hours. I chose to interview young adults who were very committed to this cause (they volunteered at least one day a week) in order to understand how their childhood and educational experiences impacted on their decision to be human rights activists. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to enable a rich and dense thematic analysis. Documentation from each organisation, specifically their mission statements, were also analysed as part of this research.

The first case study is an international legal human rights NGO that campaigns to protect human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The organisation does not accept financial contributions from governments, in order to maintain its independence. This allows it to take action to defend human rights when they are breached, both in Australia and internationally. It campaigns for the rights of indigenous peoples, refugees and women. The activities organised by this NGO as part of their human rights activist work includes rallies, letters to news organisations, petitions to parliaments, direct lobbying of politicians, digital activism campaigns and awareness-raising education programmes about human rights issues. Three participants (two male and one female) from this organisation volunteered to be interviewed after I approached the organisation and gained their permission to conduct the research.

The second case study is a Christian development NGO which advocates on behalf of people who live in extreme poverty. The organisation opposes proselytising and coercion of any kind and is therefore dependent on gaining the consent of the communities involved. The aim of the organisation is to work towards eliminating poverty and its causes, using the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (2015) as a framework. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'human rights principles and standards are now strongly reflected in... [the] ambitious new global development framework, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 2015). A major focus of this organisation is a campaign to ban child labour, which involves consumer activism, lobbying politicians and awareness-raising education programmes. Another important campaign supported by this organisation is lobbying the Australian government to raise the foreign aid budget to fund programmes for those living in extreme poverty in developing countries. Three female participants agreed to be interviewed as part of this analysis after I approached the organisation and asked for volunteers. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants and the organisations were de-identified. The participants were not observed as part of this study to see if their responses in the interviews correlated with their actions; this could form a second phase of this research to help triangulate the findings from the interviews (Yin, 2009).

### **Case study 1: a legal human rights NGO**

Three human rights activists were interviewed as part of the first case study: Aryan, Sophia and Robert.

Aryan is 24 years old and is the volunteer leader of a local branch of this NGO. He is an Indian citizen who has been studying for a Community Development degree as an international student in Australia for the past three years. In his role as community organiser he recruits and supports the members of his local group through providing training, resources and support, planning future events and liaising between the local group and the branch office. Aryan spends one day a week in this role and has been involved in the organisation for one year.

In describing his motivation to be a human rights activist, Aryan said:

I was looking for some voluntary work to help with my résumé to build up some work experience which I thought would help me to find a job in the future.

It is interesting that this participant admitted that part of his initial motivation for being a human rights activist with this group was to contribute to his résumé. This supports Davies, Evans and Peterson's (2014) findings that some activists 'may be driven by ... a desire to develop specific skills and knowledge which may be used for future social and educational advancement' (p. 6). He further explained how his family and background had also influenced his interest in human rights:

I'm from India and I've grown up seeing a lot of stuff that is not right. Twenty years of seeing human rights violations every day, especially domestic violence.

His views were influenced by other experiences in his family, as he explained:

My grandmother experienced human rights violations herself. Her family had to flee Bangladesh for India because of their religion, and many of them were left behind and disappeared. A lot of the people from her village also fled to India, and she really helped to look after them as they had nothing. This story is always told in my family.

Aryan's comments are interesting because he situates his intrinsic desire to be a human rights activist within a narrative of witnessing and hearing about injustices in his family and community (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003).

Sophia is 25 years old and is the volunteer leader of an inner suburban local group of this NGO. She is from an Italian-Australian family and is studying full time for a degree in International Development at a university in Melbourne. Her unpaid role with this NGO involves similar tasks to those performed by Aryan. Sophia spends one day a week in this role and has been involved in this organisation for 18 months. Sophia was asked about her motivation to be involved with this organisation. She said:

When I was a child I was very sick for a long time, and when I got better I thought, right, I'm going to change the world! At first it wasn't really human rights, I was more interested in charity work like helping orphans in Africa. My family has always been interested in social issues, so I've always grown up with the idea of helping other people. My grandmother always tried to help people in other countries through donating money and goods, and I think that got me interested too.

The narrative that Sophia presents is one in which her personal experiences of illness and her family traditions of altruism influenced her decision to be a human rights activist (Saha, 2000). She also situates her initial motivation within a helping intentionality paradigm where she in the Global North 'helps' those in the Global South (Kapoor, 2004).

Robert is 26 years old and holds a voluntary leadership position with this NGO. Robert is studying full time for a degree in Human Rights Law. He spends about two days a week in this unpaid role, and has been involved in the organisation for a number of years.

When asked about his motivation for being a human rights activist, Robert said:

My family had strong political views, so I had that influence from early on. I have this need to do something. I would be very bothered if I wasn't involved in this cause in some way.

Robert's comments provide support for Hyman's (1959) argument that the political understanding of young people is often influenced by the modelling they experience through their families.

The human rights activists in this case study are all tertiary-educated. This supports Tsutsui and Wotipka's (2004) argument that citizens who are better educated may be better equipped to organise for change. However, it is significant to note that despite their educated status, these participants did not mention that learning about human rights at school was a motivating factor in them becoming a

human rights activist. Rather, they stated that the formative influences provided by their families while they were growing up was the major influence (Schulz et al, 2016). For educators, these findings raise questions about the lack of impact that education 'about' human rights at school had on the motivation of these human rights activists, and this is an area for further research. If confirmed by other studies, this finding is significant because schooling can play a crucial role in equitably enabling all young people to be involved in the protection of their own and other people's human rights.

I asked Sophia about the impact that belonging to this human rights NGO had on her motivation to continue to be a human rights activist, despite the challenges involved in trying to improve human rights (Youniss et al, 2002). Interestingly, the three elements of Yuval Davis' (2011) theory of belonging were evident in her answer. She said:

I like being involved in the local community [social location]. It is not just being involved in the big international issues, it is having a connection with people who care about the same things [value systems] that you do who live close by [geographical location]. Belonging is a huge part of the experience - all the community organisers meet together once a year and last time we met we talked about how we had all been bitten by the [human rights] bug [cultural and symbolic practices]. I really like that idea - that you are in, you are part of the team supporting each other, we are one big family [value systems, social location]. I know it is not by chance that I feel this way, the organisation has been set up that way so that people feel a strong sense of connection.

Aryan also described the significance to him of belonging to a group in maintaining his motivation. He said:

You need the support of the group to do this work together as a team. This work can be pretty depressing otherwise.

Similarly, Robert also talked about the importance of belonging to a group. He commented that:

Being involved in a community of people who think alike and who are trying to solve the same problems is an important part of the experience, and it definitely makes it more enjoyable. You need the support of other people, engage with other people who have different skills than you do, so you can all work together to achieve something you couldn't do on your own.

In terms of belonging, Sophia also commented:

Through my involvement with this group I've really learned that the most important thing about being an activist is to engage with the community you are trying to help and ask them what they think would work to make things better. So we have Aboriginal elders who advise us about the juvenile justice campaign, they run all the training and write the materials. You have to

consult with the local community about their needs, rather than saying 'we know what's best for you'.

As an adult, Sophia has developed a more sophisticated motivation for her human rights activism, compared with the 'white saviour' mentality she had as a child of wanting to 'help orphans in Africa' (Mostafanezhad, 2014). The mission statement of the organisation indicates that human rights activists should work in collaboration with those who are most directly affected by the issues (Spivak, 2004). This approach lessens the 'humanitarian gaze' dynamic that human rights activists can develop (Mostafanezhad, 2014). In this way, the participants in this case study could be described as justice-oriented citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), as they are seeking to improve society by critically analysing and addressing social issues and structural injustices rather than emphasising individual acts of charity.

In conclusion, the participants in this case study were influenced by their families to become human rights activists and the social connections, education and infrastructure provided to the participants by the NGO enabled them to maintain their motivation.

### **Case study 2: a Christian development NGO**

Three human rights activists were interviewed as part of the second case study: Anita, Carol and Rebecca.

Anita is 23 years old and has a leadership position with this NGO. She moved to Australia from England as a child. She is studying for a degree in International Relations, specifically focused on gender inequality and development. In her leadership role, Anita organises a group of thirty other young adults, and has been in this position for two years. Her role involves organising the campaigns, activities, training, resources, recruitment and administration of the group.

In describing her motivation to be a human rights activist, Anita said:

Since I was a child I have been involved in issues of poverty and injustice. When I was 11 years old my parents took us to South Africa and we went to Soweto, and this was my first experience of seeing poverty. That was the moment that I realised that the world wasn't fair. So I thought, cool, I've got the power to do something about this, and that's what I want to spend the rest of my life doing.

These comments are instructive because they demonstrate that this participant has been influenced to become engaged in this work by the experiences her family have given her, which led to a 'shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently' altered her way of being in the world (Morrell & O'Connor, 2002, p. xvii). Through this experience of witnessing poverty in the Global South, Anita developed a mindset that although 'the world isn't fair', she has the knowledge, capacity and agency to do something about it (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010). However, Mostafanezhad (2014) discusses how such 'voluntourism' experiences do not necessarily recognise the limits that one individual or group can have on the real amelioration of human rights abuses and poverty. In this way, it can be argued that such comments are not reflective of a justice-oriented citizen who wants to change the system that reproduces inequalities by working in collaboration with the communities affected,

but are instead focused on individual acts of charity as a personally responsible citizen (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Carol is 20 years old and is the leader of the school education team with this NGO. She moved to Australia from China as a child, and lives with her parents. In addition to volunteering one day a week with this organisation, she is studying for a Commerce degree. In her role with this organisation, Carol provides support to school students who are involved in the NGO through a newsletter and training materials.

Carol was asked to reflect upon her motivations for being a human rights activist. She said:

You have to be passionate about these issues. That's what keeps you going at the end of the day. You have to have that special twinkle in your eye. I don't think it can be taught, you either have it or you don't. It is very much part of who I am.

These comments support Atkeson and Rapoport's (2003) argument that activists often possess a strong, intrinsic helping intentionality which compels them to do the work that they do.

Carol also reflected on the influence of her family:

I've had some amazing people in my life who have really helped me. I know I am very lucky and that has given me a very strong sense of giving back. I think that has really nurtured my sense of giving. Whatever I end up doing in my life I know it will be about serving other people in a meaningful way. My grandmother has always encouraged my sister and I to think about those who are less fortunate. She has this awesome saying: 'you can't do everything, but everyone can do something'. I think that really influenced me from a young age.

In this way, Carol's formative experiences with her family nurtured her altruistic desire to help or 'serve' others (Saha, 2000).

Rebecca is 20 years old. She is from an Anglo-Australian family and lives with her mother. She is studying an International Business degree full-time at university. Rebecca spends about one day a week in her voluntary role with this NGO as leader of a university group, which she has done for one year. In this role, she is involved in recruiting and maintaining group members and giving them roles, organising campaigns and planning events. In particular, Rebecca has campaigned for the service providers within the university to purchase fair trade goods that do not use child labour in their production.

Rebecca was also asked about the influence that her family had on motivating her to be a human rights activist. She said:

I'm an only child and my parents got divorced and then my mum was diagnosed with breast cancer, so my home life was crazy. I think I really threw myself into this group as a way of coping.

In contrast to the first two participants who emphasised the importance of the altruism encouraged by their families, Rebecca described how her motivation to

become a human rights activist stemmed from escaping a personal crisis she was experiencing and her desire to belong to a group of other like-minded people. When asked further about her family's influence in sparking her interest in human rights, Rebecca said:

It's a bit weird but they aren't interested in this stuff at all. In fact, it is more that I have influenced them! They just see it as a distraction from studying. But I showed my mum, who normally isn't interested in politics or issues, a video about the negative effect that Australian foreign aid cuts are having on the poorest people in the world, and she said, 'I finally get it now, I get what you do and why you do it'. It really hit home for her that when you round the foreign aid budget in Australia to the nearest whole number it is zero. And that is really wrong.

In terms of political socialisation, Rebecca's comments reflect McDevitt and Chaffee's (2002) findings that young people who have had civic experiences outside of the home, through school and community-based activities, are often able to challenge the political views of their parents which in turn prompts parents to increase their own civic knowledge.

All of the participants in this case study attended private, religious secondary schools, and were engaged in tertiary studies as young adults. Carol also discussed whether her experiences at school influenced her to become a human rights activist:

In Year 9 I moved from a co-educational public school in the outer suburbs to an all-girls private inner-city school. I got the opportunity there to volunteer with an NGO advocacy group where I really learned about international issues such as human rights by listening to guest speakers, going to conferences and being involved in campaigning.

These comments support the literature that human rights activists are often highly educated, economically advantaged and drawn from the same privileged social class (Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). Rebecca was also asked about the influence that her schooling had on her becoming a human rights activist. She explained:

I went to a private school for 13 years. One of the great things I was exposed to at school was the lunchtime social justice program they had, where we learned about human rights. We even got to go to Canberra [the capital of Australia] to lobby politicians about human rights issues. Everyone wanted to be involved.

It is significant to note that these participants reference the positive influence that voluntary extracurricular activities had on their motivation to be human rights activists. Like the participants in the first case study, these participants did not identify that learning 'about' human rights in the formal school curriculum influenced them; it was rather the opportunities they gained through extracurricular activities which exposed them to human rights education (Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, 2011). The private, religious schooling provided to these participants by their families also allowed them to access experiences such as conferences and travel in order to lobby politicians, opportunities that may not be

available to other interested students in Australia because of the costs involved (Black, 2017). This is an example of how ‘agency is embedded in social relations with deep inequalities’ (DeJaeghere et al, 2016, p. 7).

As this NGO is a Christian organisation, it could be assumed that religion would have played a role in motivating these participants to become human rights activists, and a philosophy of helping others who are ‘less fortunate’ is apparent in the mission statement of the organisation. However, it is interesting that none of the participants identified themselves as currently having strong religious beliefs. When asked whether religion influenced her to become a human rights activist, Anita said:

I’m not religious at all now, although I was raised as a Catholic and went to a Catholic school. I wanted to be a human rights activist with this group because it was welcoming and friendly and the people were so passionate and had such great energy that I thought I want to be a part of what they are part of!

Similarly, when asked why she chose to be a human rights activist with this organisation, Carol said:

It wasn’t the religious thing. But I do like being a part of something that is bigger than myself. Hmm, now I hear myself saying that, it does sound very religious, and I’m trying to work out if that bothers me or not? Maybe belonging to this group is something that I need because I don’t have religion in my life?

When asked about the role of religion in deciding to become a human rights activist, Rebecca explained that:

Originally, I didn’t want to join this group at university because I saw it as too Christian. But then I realised that there were lots of non-Christians involved in it, so it was fine. I like that it is a values-based organisation, it’s about being ethical. We do start and end each meeting with a prayer but that doesn’t bother me.

Therefore, although none of the participants professed to being motivated by religion, it was evident that they had internalised the values of altruism which religion emphasises (Saha, 2000). In addition, Carol’s comments raise the possibility that belonging to this organisation as a human rights activist may have acted as a religion substitute for her, as it involves belonging to a group of like-minded people who have similar values and a common cause and who undertake shared rituals (Yuval Davis, 2011).

Anita spoke about how important the sense of belonging to a group was in order to maintain her motivation. She said:

Whenever I’m feeling overwhelmed, I just go to a meeting and instantly I feel inspired again. You could never do this work on your own, being in a group is essential.

Carol expressed a similar sentiment when I asked her how important it was to her do this work as part of a group. She explained:

I came for the cause, but I'm staying in it for the group. The benefits to me personally of belonging to this organisation have been huge. I'm a bit of an introverted person so I really feed off the energy of other people and need that to stay inspired and develop my confidence.

Rebecca emphasized the importance of the group to her as a way of coping with the difficulties of really alleviating extreme poverty:

You just couldn't do this stuff by yourself, it's too depressing. It is really important to have other like-minded people around you who care about the same issues and you can feel like you are in it together, otherwise you would just give up as it is too hard. Some of the issues we campaign about are pretty terrible, so it's important to have a laugh together sometimes.

These comments reflect Kirshner's (2007) research which found that 'the collaborative, distributive nature of work in an activist group enables participants to accomplish goals they would be hard-pressed to accomplish on their own' (p. 369). The participants clearly valued the support of having other like-minded people around them to help them stay motivated. Understandably, such a committed group of similar people formed strong friendships as a result of belonging to this group. Anita said:

We're a real community. The people in the group are some of my best friends. We all have a strong sense of compassion and we really look after each other.

Similarly, Rebecca commented that:

I've made some amazing friends, everyone is so friendly and welcoming. Being part of a group is so motivating.

These comments reflect Youniss et al's (2002) research which suggests that the social bonds, affiliation and emotional support gained through belonging to a community with shared commitments can sustain civic involvement despite intimidating challenges, frustrating experiences and a sense of hopelessness at ever being able to create effective change. Carol's comment 'I came for the cause, but I'm staying in it for the group' is particularly illuminating, as her site of belonging became the group rather than the broader human rights movement.

## **Conclusions**

This research investigated the factors which influenced and motivated young adult human rights activists in Australia.

The findings support the literature which identifies the factors involved when people become activists. There is both an intrinsic, deeply personal desire to create change, as well as extrinsic factors that encourage and enable future activists (Morrell & O'Connor, 2002). A major factor which influenced the participants across the case studies was their family's interest in human rights issues, and their intrinsic

helping intentionality was also fostered and encouraged by their families (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003). Some of the participants also experienced political socialisation through their family life when they were children, which enabled them to have the knowledge and agency to be human rights activists (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010).

All of the participants in the two case studies worked at least one day a week in their unpaid roles with the organisations. Committing a significant portion of their week to this pursuit meant that these participants had significant social and financial assistance which allowed them to spend this significant amount of time in unpaid work, as there was an opportunity cost in volunteering to this extent. This indicates that these participants not only had the intrinsic motivation to do this work, which was fostered by the attitudes of their families, but also the time, money and support to commit to this degree of activism (Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). This is not the case for all young Australians (Black, 2017).

It is instructive to compare the findings from my study with that of Black's (2017) work, as she examines the activism practices of young people in low socio-economic communities in Australia. As opposed to the mainly positive experiences of my participants, who were encouraged and commended for their activism by their families, schools, communities and elected representatives, Black (2017) found that young people in low socio-economic communities often lack a sense of belonging and recognition, finding themselves instead to be subjects of distrust by their communities. That is, while young people who have a high socio-economic status can be conceptualised as desirable activists, those of a lower socio-economic status who participate in the same types of activities can be perceived as trouble-makers who threaten the status-quo (DeJaeghere et al, 2016).

Unlike in the first case study, the participants in the second case study did not emphasise the importance of collaborative partnerships being developed between human rights activists and those who they advocate for (Spivak, 2004). Emphasising collaboration can be a way to counter the potentially disempowering dichotomy of 'helpers' and 'victims' which can develop in the human rights activist space (Mostafanezhad, 2014).

The human rights activists across the case studies recognised the importance of belonging to a group, as it gave them common social and geographical locations, attachment to cultural and symbolic practices and similar value systems (Yuval Davis, 2011). We see that belonging to a group makes it easier for activists to successfully engage with issues such as human rights than if they were acting alone (Kirshner, 2007). However, another powerful motivation for some activists' engagement is the sense of belonging to a group of like-minded people who have a common cause.

In conclusion, my study indicates that education about, through or for human rights at school was not a factor which influenced these participants to be human rights activists; rather, it was primarily the influence their families provided to them in terms of altruism and political socialisation. If confirmed by further studies, these findings could have implications for human rights educators, at this crucial time when questions are being raised about the commitment of countries such as Australia to uphold and promote international human rights standards. Giving students exposure to a pedagogy 'for' human rights in the formal classroom curriculum can potentially foster the knowledge, dispositions and competencies required for all young people to be active citizens, not just those who happen to have been born into a family which fosters an interest in human rights issues.

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