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The Solidary Relationship’s Consequences for the Ebb and Flow of Activism: Collaborative Evidence from Life-History Interviews and Social Media Event Analysis

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Abstract

Acting in solidarity with disadvantaged others has become a central topic in social movement research. The explanations of solidarity activism are few, but social movement researchers have claimed that solidarity with out-of-group others is a by-product of in-group interaction. Based on studies of the Danish refugee solidarity movement, we argue that interaction with the deprived other and the formation of a solidary relationship is central to the ebb and flow of solidarity activism. The meeting with the deprived other 1) brings about an interaction order which makes an ethical demand on the activists to care for the other both within the bounds of the situations and in the future and 2) enacts and amplifies activists’ values and beliefs because the deprived other becomes an exemplar of the injustice and the need to help the wider group of people in the same fragile situation. We develop and test this theory drawing on both 42 life-history interviews and a social media dataset containing a panel of 87,455 activists participating in refugee solidarity groups.

Keywords: Activist persistence; life-history interviews; solidarity; social movements; social media event analysis; symbolic interactionism

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Introduction: The solidary relationship

Solidarity movements and altruistic activism are central to social movements and civic action (Passy 2013; Olesen 2012; Giugni and Passy 2001; Russo 2018). Many of the activists in historically important movements such as the abolitionist movement (Joas 2013), civil rights movement (McAdam 1986, 1988a), immigrant and refugee rights movement (Lahusen and Grasso 2018; Della Porta 2018; Lippert and Rehaag 2013; Passy and Giugni 2001b), transnational solidarity movements (Olesen 2008; Soule 2001), and many more participated in solidarity with deprived others and not to the benefit of their own interest. Indeed, in many instances, the cost and risk involved by far exceeded the possible benefits of acting in solidarity with the disadvantaged (McAdam 1986; Wiltfang and McAdam 1991; S. Nepstad and Smith 1999). The feature of solidarity activism that distinguishes it from other forms of activism is the centrality of the relation between activist and the deprived or disadvantaged other—what we call the solidary relationship. In this study, we investigate what role this solidary relationship plays for the ebb and flow of participation.

Although classical studies of differential participation in social movements investigate solidarity activism (McAdam 1986; Wiltfang and McAdam 1991; S. Nepstad and Smith 1999), the solidary relationship’s possible bearing upon participation has not been the object of systematic empirical study or theoretical conceptualization. Concepts such as frames (Snow et al. 1986; Gamson 1992; Ketelaars 2017; Aslanidis 2018), values (Gundelach 1998; Gundelach & Toubol 2019), expressive activism (Parkin 1968), conscience constituents (McCarthy and Zald 1977), identity (Melucci 1989, 1995; Tilly 2001, 2005; Cerulo 1997), and the focus on normative commitments (Klandermans 1997) have been central to the study of differential participation. Typically, they are seen as normative and cognitive resources for activists to formulate injustice frames around their experienced grievances (Snow et al. 1986; Gamson 1992). When these concepts are applied to solidarity activism, the deprivation of the other becomes proof of the mismatch between the actual state of affairs and activists’ normative expectations, an injustice symbol (Olesen 2017) that may provoke moral shocks (Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Olesen 2018). The result is a generalized solidarity stipulating that the betterment of the situation of the category of deprived others is good and right. However, here the specific other is merely a representative of the general category of, for instance, refugees whom the movement’s collective identity defines as unjustly deprived according to the shared ideals and, therefore, the object of the movement’s solidarity. Thus, the identities acting in solidarity are constituted through in-group interaction, and the acts of solidarity toward specific deprived others are carried out as a result of in-group interactive processes, not the out-group interaction and
relationship with the deprived other. In Charles Tilly’s formulation (2001), they are the result of in-group mechanisms producing by-product commitment.

This perspective, which we by no means intend to dismiss, does not, however, capture what we consider as essential, namely the meeting and relationship between activist and the specific deprived other as an independent cause of solidarity activism and political altruism. We suggest that such personal relations inform and drive solidarity activism and thereby movement participation by creating personal obligations to participate due to particularized solidarity with the specific deprived other and, in turn, also generalized solidarity with the category of the deprived other. For all the many network studies in the social movement literature, none, to our knowledge, study the relationship between activists and deprived others. Hence, we need studies that can address, as both Florence Passy (2013) and Robert D. Benford (2013) argue, how solidarity is formed in out-group relationships between the activist and deprived other and influences participation. This study contributes to filling this gap.

In this article, we show that meeting the other, in our case the refugee, influences the ebb and flow of participation. Drawing on interactionist theory (Rawls 1987; Goffman 1983; Løgstrup 1997) and life-history interviews, we formulate a tentative theory of how the meeting with the refugee works both to intensify short-term participation and enhance activists’ chances of longer-term survival. The personal meeting with the deprived other 1) creates sympathy and 2) an ethical obligation to care for the other and 3) generalized solidarity with the category of the deprived others. While these three aspects of the meeting with the deprived other are typically connected, they also work independently. Our case is the Danish refugee solidarity movement in which many Danish residents reacted to the so-called “European refugee crisis” in 2015 and mobilized to help and fight for the wellbeing of refugees (e.g., Agustín and Bak Jørgensen 2018; Carlsen 2019; Toubøl 2015, 2017a; Siim and Meret 2019). We conduct a mixed methods study of the solidary relationship’s influence on participation in which we combine analyses of 42 life-history interviews and a large-panel social media interaction dataset on about 86,000 refugee solidarity activists.

Our combination of qualitative life-history interviews and interactional event analysis enables us to focus on how specific sequences of events involving certain kinds of interaction lead to altered patterns of participation. Thereby, the methodological approach presents an answer to recent calls for a process-based explanation of social movement dynamics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) that pays more careful attention to the interactions underpinning social ties (Passy 2003; Passy and Monsch 2014, forthcoming; McAdam 2003). Our life history interviews provides an in depth
understanding of the experiences, motivation and consequences of meeting with a refugee, while social media events data allows us to test if the same pattern is found at scale using a different, behavioral, data source. Standing alone, the findings from the life-history interviews would be hard to generalize and the social media interaction data hard to interpret - Blumer pointed to this problem with pure behavioral data long ago (Blumer 1986). Hence, we combine life-history analysis and social media event analysis in a mixed methods research design that allows for the analysis of both behavior and meaning involved in the phenomena of solidary relationship and participation. This approach, we believe, is fruitful for the research on participation which traditionally has relied mainly on cross-sectional account data.

The article’s second section will review some of the literature on participation and argue for the need to focus on participation as sequences of events among which some are more important than others for future participation. The third section conceptualizes the meeting with the refugee building upon theories of the self and social interaction, clarifying how situational ethical obligations spill over into future trajectories. Sections four and five introduce our data and methods, clarifying why life-history interviews and social media activity data supplement one another well in the study of participation. Section six presents the results and analysis before the article ends with a discussion and conclusion in section seven.

The ebb and flow of solidarity activism

In this chapter, we discuss three challenges in the literature on differential participation and solidarity activism. First, we outline the internal critique that points to the need for more studies of activism over time, motivating our focus on the ebb and flow of activism from a sequential perspective. Second, we address the also widely shared critique of the lack of accounts of the processes and mechanisms in social networks that lead to participation in activism and the lack of studies of the actual content of the social relationships, that is, the interaction that constitutes the social network ties. Finally, in relation to solidarity activism, we identify a need for theorizing and studying not only processes and interactions internally in activist networks but also the interaction between the activists in the network and the deprived others outside the network. The second and third points together imply an interactionist critique of regarding only the impact of interaction on participation as mediated through relational identity formation and not considering the interaction order itself a source of action in line with classical insights from the interactionist traditions (Goffman 1983; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014).
In the context of solidarity activism, to study the impact on participation of the meeting and establishment of a solidary relationship between activists and deprived others in the most direct way, we need to study the sequence of situations, events, and actions around the meeting. The lack of focus on activism over time in the literature on differential participation has been a recurring self-critique (Klandermans 1997; McAdam 1989). Florence Passy and Marco Giugni (2000) argue that most studies on differential participation assume that the dynamics that account for recruitments are the same as those that account for persistence in participation. Doug McAdam phrases the gap in the literature differently, namely calling for more research into “how movement participation ebbs and flows over time” (McAdam 1989, 744). While there has been a steadily growing literature on participation past the point of recruitment (e.g., Barkan, Cohn, and Whitaker 1995; Passy 2001b; Passy and Giugni 2001b; Gorski 2018; Gundelach & Toubøl 2019; S. E. Nepstad 2004), few studies focus on the ebb and flow of activist participation. Ebb and flow denotes the process of moving in and out of an active state along an ongoing trajectory. Although related, this is different from differentiating between dropouts and persisters (e.g., Corrigall-Brown 2011; Downton and Wehr 1997). Ebb and flow for one implies a move toward the microsociological analysis of sequences of events and their consequence for participation, which demands a different conception of interaction than is traditionally found in social network analysis. That is, it implies a focus on the sequence of participation surrounding concrete episodes of interaction rather than their aggregate structure (e.g., Saunders et al. 2012).

The lack of knowledge regarding the processes and interactions underpinning the social ties in activist networks has been the object of a growing critique of social network explanations of participation both from outsiders (e.g., Jasper 1997) and insiders (e.g., Passy and Monsch 2014; McAdam 2003). McAdam has argued that network explanations fail to specify the process through which network relations lead to the formation of activists identities that, in turn, lead to participation (McAdam 2003). Lim (2008) argues that it is the content of the tie rather than the mere tie that is decisive for participation. Passy & Giugni (2001b) argue that human agency and interpretation are lost for network explanations of participation. Therefore, they cannot account for why people do not just leave activist networks and activists’ “subjective perceptions, which after all are what affects
behavior” (Passy and Giugni 2000, 120). Drawing on symbolic interactionism, Florence Passy and Marco Giugni argue that social networks are not important just for facilitating recruitment (e.g., Walker 2008) but also because they “create structure of meanings about commitment that helps them remain committed over time”—meanings which are the result of both interaction with others and self-interaction (Passy and Giugni 2000, 121). Inspired by Herbert Blumer, the central critique of social network explanations is that they do not account for what goes on in interaction and how actors make sense of it and, furthermore, how interaction with others comes to have implications for activists’ self-understanding and their projections of future lines of actions (Blumer 1986, 62).

Recent work by Florence Passy & Gian-Andrea Monsch (Passy and Monsch 2014, forthcoming; Monsch and Passy 2018) is close to our focus on the concrete interactions even though the methodology is different. Passy & Monsch show that conversational interactions among activists are important for participation because they “nourish, enlarge, strengthen, or modify individuals’ toolkit of cognitive components that enable actors to act. Our findings stress that conversational interactions are important in sensitizing to a protest issue: to develop moral indignation regarding a specific political problem, and mentally construct that the contentious repertoire is a valuable means for acting politically” (Passy & Monsch 2014: 42).

Such findings encourage more studies of interaction, but in relation to solidarity activism, such inter-activist conversational interaction helps explain only the development of what we have termed generalized solidarity, that is, commitment to the ideology and goals of the social network of activists. Thus, the other component of solidarity activism, namely the particular solidarity relationship constituted in the interaction between activists and the deprived other, remains in the dark. At the same time, Florence Passy & Gian-Andrea Monsch focus on the link between interaction and identity and commitment that in turn may motivate activism. Not being dismissive of the importance of such processes, this still leaves open the possibility of interaction causing activism by other avenues. Thus, without dismissing the importance of conversational interaction and development of cognitive tool-kits (Passy and Monsch 2014, forthcoming), life sphere coherence (Passy and Giugni 2000), structural factors (Corrigall-Brown 2011), identity-trust ties (Tilly 2001), socialization (McAdam 1986, 1988b; Della Porta 1988), commitment (Klandermans 1997), in this study, we are concerned with the immediate responses to the situations where activist meet the deprived other: what obligations for present and future action are created in that meeting? This implies studying participation as a sequence of situations and interactions to show how certain situations with specific kinds of interactions impact the flow and ebb of movement participation. As
we shall see, the situational obligation in the meeting with the deprived other and the resulting solidary relationship alter the actors’ action path and in many cases undermines other projects the activists are caught up in.

_Beyond network processes and identity_

In this final section reviewing the literature, we will expand and clarify our critique of 1) the current lack of studies of interaction as a source of activism by other avenues that mediated through identity, and 2) the need for paying attention to the relationship and interaction between the activist in a network and the deprived other outside the network. We do this in dialogue with Charles Tilly who perhaps most clearly spells out the dominant relational identity-based explanation of altruistic politics including solidarity activism (Tilly 2001, 2005).

According to Tilly, altruistic action and solidarity activism to the benefit of another is not due to the relationship between the activist and the deprived other but to the identity constituted in the relationship between the activist and the activist group. Thus, the act of solidarity is a by-product of the commitment of the activist to the cause, ideology, and contentious struggle the activist network is part of, that is, the collective identity (Melucci 1989, 1995; Tilly 2005). This implies that when actors make claims, they take action in the name of the given identity which, however, is nothing but a representation of a relationship to certain others. Thus, “their actions actually consist of interaction with those others” (Tilly 2001, 43, emphasis in original). So it is, also, in the case of altruism and solidarity activism:

> Cases of apparent self-sacrifice for others unlike themselves—trees, the environment, endangered species, and unknown foreigners—will ordinarily turn out to depend on mechanisms operating within groups of activists. [...] In the final analysis, they will not involve isolated individual decisions to take substantial net losses for the benefit of others. Instead they will result from by-product commitment and interactive processes. (Tilly 2001, 45)

Thereby, solidarity activism and altruism are no different from all other kinds of activism and can be explained from the same relation and interactionist theoretical assumptions. We are not the least dismissive of this explanation and could not agree more when Tilly stresses “social interaction as the
locus and basis for contention” (Tilly 2001, 41) and that action is interaction, thereby rejecting rational and culturalist explanations (Passy 2001a).

While we agree that altruism is not a “phenomenon *sui generis* which requires specific theoretical tools to be analyzed” (Passy and Giugni 2001a, 87) and also applaud starting from interaction as the locus of action, we identify a crucial limitation, namely that, despite interaction being the ontology, interaction’s bearing upon action (altruistic or not) is limited to the formation of identities. To be clear, we do not deny the relevance of commitment, mutual in group coercion, and trust-identity ties to political altruism (e.g., Carlsen 2019; Gundelach and Toubøl 2019; Carlsen, Toubøl and Ralund forthcoming), but we argue that we need to consider interaction itself as a source of individual-level activism. In the case of solidarity activism, we hold that the situation creates an ethical obligation to take care of the particular other and sometimes also the general other due to the relative autonomy of the interaction order (Goffman 1983). The central point is that the reaction to the situation involving interaction with the other is not merely an expression of an identity constituted in the relationship between an activist and a third party but has its own capacity to intensify activists’ participation: The situation makes demands on the activist. Thus, we argue that relations with the deprived others outside the activist network are an independent factor that needs to be taken into account if we are to explain participation in solidarity activism in full.

In light of the combination of the stress put on interaction by Tilly and other scholars adhering to the relational theoretical framework and the centrality of the relationship between activist and the deprived other in solidarity activism, to consider this relationship and the interaction constituting it as the locus of solidarity activism appears a necessary next step. Thus, unpacking the content of the tie or relationship between activist and the deprived other will, on the one hand, advance our knowledge of what generates political altruism, and, on the other hand, differential participation in solidarity activism.

**The solidary relationship as cause of activism**

This leads to our conceptualizing of the solidary relationship as a cause of solidarity activism and political altruism that in a sequential perspective help explain the ebb and flow of movement participation. To be clear, we do not aim to replace but rather to expand the relational framework outlined above. In doing this, we draw heavily on insights from the interactionist tradition.

Interactionists view the self as partly situationally adjusted, performed, and produced. In Blumer’s reformulation of Mead, the idea of the self is that a “human being is an object to himself” (Blumer
Through interaction with other actors and objects, actors evaluate their own actions and project lines of action into the future. This process of self-interaction is the “mechanism that [by the actor] is used in forming and guiding his conduct” (Blumer 1986, 62). Situations which leave a strong and lasting impression on the actor, and where interaction calls for the planning of future action, can create consistent lines of activity. Thus situations also point toward the more long-term futures, toward trajectories of action or, as Iddo Tavory and Nina Eliasoph argue, “a trajectory is not an extraneous add-on to everyday interaction but helps constitute it, unless people do something active to prevent each other from entering one” (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013, 923). That is, whenever actors interact, they point toward some implied future trajectory unless actors work at keeping this future undetermined. The situation, through its production of selves, has the power to create trajectories of action which were not there before. When this is the case, the situation has the potential to become a turning point, initiating a change of actors’ future trajectory and lines of action.

In relation to solidarity activism and the solidary relationship as a turning point, an important aspect of the situation is the interaction order’s (Goffman 1983) ability to place ethical obligations on the participants to care for each other as has been argued by, for instance, Ann Rawls (Rawls 1987, 1990; see also Løgstrup 1997; Toubøl 2017b). As Rawls argues, the ritual self is a moral constraint on the organization of action (Rawls 1987, 139). While being important for the possibility of successful interaction in general, such ethical demands take center stage in the solidarity relationship. This is because the interaction composed of a deprived other and a benefactor does not just constraint interaction within the bounds of the situations but points toward future obligations. This is because their transaction, the benefactor helping the deprived other, cannot typically be sufficiently solved within the present situation. In other words, to be the benefactor and to respect the suffering of the refugee, the activist feels an obligation to sustain her relationship beyond the situation—the activist commits to a relationship of particularized solidarity. Furthermore, the demand to take care of the other can result in a flow of sustained activism where activists are entirely caught up in a line of action without considering others—what Goffman called engrossment (Goffman 1974, 346). Importantly, while engrossed in the flow, the actions do not feel like decisions to be made or in need of justification. Rather, they feel natural and undeniable. Only after the fact can one come to recognize the sacrifices involved. This point will be developed further in the analysis of the life-history interviews.

The meeting with the concrete other, hearing their stories and witnessing their pain, can also become an exemplar of a wider group of people and a demonstration of the need to help them
(Boltanski 1999, 12). It translates concrete and particular sympathy into generalized solidarity with a group of people and their situation. The meeting creates a situation in which the refugees’ situation is in focus and their implicit or explicit stories amplify humanistic values around a common humanity and the political obligation to help those who suffer. Furthermore, the meeting and the role-taking it produces can amplify the belief about both the antagonists and the proper route of action. Through these processes of what David Snow and associates (1986) call frame amplification and also processes of emotional (Flam 2015) and cognitive liberation (McAdam 1999, 2013), activists reenact and support their ideological commitment to the refugee solidarity movement and come to share its collective identity.

The solidarity relationship and the frame amplification and identity formation that follows from meeting the deprived other creates an optimal circumstance for the flow of participation. On the one hand, the concrete relationship pulls the activists to do concrete tasks to better the particular refugee’s situation and, on the other hand, it creates a powerful justification of action (and a critique of inaction) relevant for both the activists’ self-interaction and interaction with others around them.

Furthermore, the actions and events following a meeting with a refugee may contribute to the survival chances simply through investment. As Bert Klandermans has argued, actors who have invested time and resources in a movement tend to stay longer than those who have not (Klandermans 1997). Another explanation is that the meeting with a refugee develops into a relationship that sustains itself and leads to other refugee and activists relations, thus providing the social embedding that supports sustained engagement (McAdam 1986; Downton and Wehr 1997).

However, the meeting with the deprived other may also cause outcomes other than an increase of the flow of participation. For instance, confronted with the unanticipated ethical demand to take care of another human being with all the potential risks and costs implied, the situation may overwhelm the activist who realizes that she does not have the resources and energy to take this task upon herself. It may also be that the meeting with the deprived other was completely different from what the activist had imagined or maybe simply that the chemistry between activist and the other is bad. Such scenarios may result in the activist sticking to her previous line of activism implying no change in the level of participation. It may even result in the activist dropping out of the movement due to the realization of her inability to take care of the deprived other or disappointed by the meeting not being as anticipated. Thus, the meeting with the refugee may also cause an ebb of activism.
However, in the case of the Danish refugee solidarity movement, which we have researched extensively (Carlsen 2019; Toubøl 2017a; Carlsen, Doerr and Toubøl, Forthcoming), this appears not to be a common occurrence, and such observations are also rare in the data analyzed in this study. Thus, while maintaining that the negative outcome generally is relevant to consider and very well may be more frequently observed in other movements, in this study, we limit our focus to the positive outcome, that is, when meeting the refugee causes an increased flow of activism.

To sum it up, limiting our focus to the positive relationship between the solidary relationship and participation, the meeting between the activists and the deprived other has 1) the ability to make claims on the activist’s future actions resulting in increased flow of short-term participation. Also, 2) the activist’s commitment to the concrete solidary relationship creates a trans-situational obligation resulting in increased flow of long-term participation, which in turn 3) will be formative of an identity involving generalized solidarity that motivates participation in solidarity activism unrelated to the particular deprived other.

In the following empirical analysis, we shall analyze both the meaning and behavior of the sequence of events surrounding meeting a refugee. The central aim is to demonstrate that the meeting with the refugee and the solidary relationship are important factors that in a manner independent of within-group mechanisms as well as individual pre-dispositions impact the ebb and flow of participation. However, we do not posit that such individual- and group-level factors and processes do not matter. Rather, we aim to add a piece to the puzzle and thereby contribute to the incomplete account of why and how interaction and social ties matter to movement participation.

**Studying the solidary relationship in an interactionist framework**

To capture both the trajectory and turning points within an activist’s career, we combine life-history interviews with longitudinal behavioral data on movement activity. We focus on the consequences of meeting a refugee for the ebb and flow of participation. Life-history methods have been one of the favored methods for interactionists because they focus on how actors derive meaning from and act in the light of the events they experience (Denzin 1978). We focus more on a specific event than is typical in life-history analysis, which normally has the full trajectory as its object of study. Still, many of the methodological considerations around life history become relevant if we want to get closer to how the sequence of events explains differential participation. Life-history analysis works from the premise that human conduct should be studied from the point of view of the actors
involved, meaning that the actors’ “definition of the situation” has epistemological privilege over other sources of data in line with the interactional axiom that actors act on objects in accordance with the meaning they have for them.

This does not imply that life-history methods naively adopt the actor’s explanation, rather they seek collaborative evidence from independent testimonies (Denzin 1978, 246). However, it does imply that the actor's own story should be what research should seek evidence for by other means. Social media data on activist participation provides an individual-level historical record which can be used both to support and generalize the findings of the life-history interviews.

From 42 interviews with refugee solidarity activists, we have derived patterns of what the central events were for the activist careers: what events made activists change from being non-active to active, to very active and sometimes burnout, from engaging in one sort of activism to another, and so on. The life-history interviews focused on the activist careers but also systematically considered how upbringing, youth and professional career, family, and so forth related to the engagement in the refugee solidarity movement. As a rule, the interviewees were given time to talk and reflect upon their action and experiences, but the interviewer (one of the authors) also validated his interpretation of the accounts continuously. The interviews were carried out with an abductive approach in which multiple theoretical perspectives were central in the first interviews, but as theoretically interesting and puzzling features turned up, these became the center of attention for future interviews and theory production (Tavory and Timmerman 2014).

In an attempt to generalize the analysis from the interviews to the larger Danish refugee solidarity movement, we use a Facebook dataset of around 87,455 activists’ participation over time. We exploit the fact that the movement mobilized mainly through Facebook (Toubøl 2015, 2017a; Carlsen 2019), thus leaving a rich digital record of its activity. The refugee solidarity movement used Facebook groups as their intranet and for membership registration. They coordinated events, everything from demonstrations to dinners. They shared stories of activism, and helped refugees with employment, language, asylum applications, and more. We collected the total activity of 119 groups, resulting in 87,455 activists and >640,000 statements (posts and comments). In total, this makes up a dataset of both internal interaction within the groups and the overall mobilization patterns over time as well as individual activity data from 2008-2016. We will concentrate on late 2014 to 2016 during which time the movement experienced a revitalization in relation to the so-called European refugee crisis. In particular, during the summer and fall of 2015, the movement experienced a massive mobilization (Toubøl 2015, 2019). It was also in relation to these events that
the movement went online, so to speak, implying that in this period the bulk of activity was coordinated in the Facebook groups which qualifies the Facebook data as a very comprehensive data source on participation.

We can conceptualize this data as what network scholars have called relational event data. All activity points are relational in the sense that actors direct their communication toward either the Facebook groups when posting or to other activists’ communication when answering/reacting (liking and/or commenting).

We use a name-based method for inferring ethnicity (Ambekar et al. 2009) to generate an indicator of whether the Facebook user is a refugee. Thus, users with North African and Arabic names who are active in the Facebook groups affiliated with the movement comprise our proxy for refugees. This has the obvious problem of also counting non-refugees with Arabic or North African heritage as refugees. However, Denmark, as one of the most ethnically homogenous societies in the world (at the peak of the refugee crisis in the fall of 2015, 7.8% of the population’s ancestry was other than Danish or Western3), is also reflected in the refugee solidarity movement. Results from a survey (Toubøl 2017a, 2019) sampled from the same Facebook population we study here show that only 32 (1.4%) out of 2,209 responses indicate that they primarily or secondarily identify with a North African or Arabic nationality and were not themselves refugees. Thus, despite the proxy not being perfect, the margin of error, (identifying activists of North African or Arabic heritage as refugees) is deemed acceptable.

This indicator enables us to investigate what communicating with a refugee does for the ebb and flow of participation over time. In this context, it is important to consider the status of the interaction we study. The meeting with the refugee does not have to be face to face to constitute a turning point for the activists. Other media of interaction such as documents and social media messages may also do the trick. Many interactionists have argued that face-to-face has a privileged status in creating interpersonal ethical obligations (Goffman 1983, 2) due to the lack of paralinguistic signs and co-presence in mediated interaction. Instead of merely seeing the mediated situation as second-rate face-to-face situations, Knorr Cetina proposes that the proliferation of screen-based interaction has brought about a new type of situation that she calls a synthetic situation. In synthetic situations, response presence takes over for physical co-presences (Knorr Cetina 2009, 63).

However, in a sense, being responsive and accountable to others is precisely the major ethical obligation actors have, also within face-to-face interaction.

In Facebook group fora where many activists coordinate their activities, actors can both call on a specific other to respond but also monitor one another’s responses and lack of response. What is most important for us is that the interaction between activists and the refugee still can imply a certain future path of action. The refugee’s story and prospects are explicitly or implicitly communicated to the activist, and the activist presence is likewise communicated to the refugee. The Facebook interaction can thereby tie the trajectory of the refugee together with that of the activists, due to the moral obligation to act in the wake of an unfortunate other.

The social media data functions as what Norman K. Denzin calls *between methods triangulation* (Denzin 1978, 246, 302–3), which uses another method and data source, ideally independent from the other, to assess the same empirical claim. The problems with using only interviews to map sequences of action are well known both within life-history analysis and action-oriented inquiry more generally (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Activists’ verbal accounts of their trajectory can be disturbed by the limits of human memory, the interview situation, and their ideological commitments as well as the drive toward constructing consistent life-narratives recasting relational events as the result of individually conceived action (Tilly 2001). Here, a non-verbal and behavioral indicator of the sequence of events can work to support or challenge analysis derived by verbal accounts. Our approach, therefore, has a huge advantage over other approaches that combine survey and interviews as means of getting both an extensive and intensive analysis of how events affect participation.

Following the considerations above, we give epistemological primacy to the life-history interviews and see the social media data as supportive and generalizing. Without the interviews or other intensive data source, we would have little evidence or knowledge of what it means for activists to meet a refugee and how it relates to future activism. The events in social media data are, in themselves, weak in both their semantics—what they are taken to indicate, and in their syntax—the social process relations variables assume to capture. This epistemological primacy of the interviews has consequences for how we integrated the two forms of analysis in the research design. Here, the findings in the interviews informed the hypothesis tested in using the social media data.

An important weakness of our study is that we do not integrate our interview data and social media data on the level of individuals. The interviews were conducted early in 2014, before the mass mobilization on Facebook from late 2014 and through 2015, and hence we had no chance of asking
the interviewees for permission to couple them to the Facebook data. Although many of them are active and in principle identifiable, we have for ethical and privacy reasons chosen not to do so. Therefore, we cannot match their description directly and learn from the relations between action and talk, nor between Facebook engagement and other arenas of engagement.

**Quantitative design: Activity patterns of refugee solidarity activists**

To investigate further the importance to the solidarity activists of contact and relationship with a refugee, we look at activists’ careers in the social media dataset. We follow each activist week for week and ask, “How does the probability of continuing in the movement change in relation to meeting a refugee?” and furthermore, “does it impact the rate of commitments in the movement?” The activist’s career is constructed as weekly aggregates of activities, interactions, and social responses in the form of likes and comments.

We construct our independent variable “contact with a refugee” simply by counting interactions (replying or getting a reply, or giving or receiving a like) with a refugee in a given week. The two dependent variables are defined as time to next activity (lag time) and a Boolean stating whether this is the last week of activity, that is, the “death” of the activist in survival analytic terms.

Multivariate regression analysis is used to estimate the effect on the activist’s career of meeting a refugee, controlling for a range of possible confounding factors. Critically, as the independent variable “contact with a refugee” is constructed from the online activities it also encodes other behavioral signals including:

1) Popularity in the movement (in the sense of receiving a refugee’s reply to a post),

2) The current level of activity (being very active in a week heightens the chance of either receiving a reply or giving a reply to a refugee).

3) Overall signs of commitment and centrality in the movement. Central coordinators with a long history of activities and interactions might be the main responsible for greeting and answering requests from refugees in the groups.

To discern the specific significance of meeting a refugee from other equally valid interpretations of the independent variable, we construct a broad set of control variables designed to more directly extract signals of both current and prior commitment, activity, popularity, and group-level activity and potential signs of turnover (see appendix for a more detailed description).

As the motivation and dynamics of commitment change as the activist career progress, we do not treat all observations in the same analysis. Instead, we estimate the changing importance of the
refugee meeting as the activist’s career is progressing by running the regression analysis week for week only on the remaining activists. We define the career stage by the number of previous weeks one has been active, i.e. not counting passive weeks. This means that at each stage we compare activists with the same prior history in terms of activity points and not real time. This allows us to ask: What explains the motivation and commitment of the activists going from e.g. week 4 to 5, as they decide to continue or not?

We report our analysis as plots of regression coefficients and 0.05 confidence intervals at different career stages. Furthermore, we report t-values when comparing coefficients across dependent values (see appendix).

**Meeting the refugee as a turning point in refugee solidarity activism**

The central observation across the bulk of the interviews is the fundamental difference between having generalized solidarity with the category of refugees and the solidarity of a relationship with one or more refugees in person. Engagement driven by generalized solidarity is more easily displaced into others non-refugee solidarity activities and interests in life; it can be set on hold if family or work demands attention, and in general, the activist is more in control with regard to when the actual activity is going to take place and how many resources the activist will invest (Passy & Giugni 2000). Things are quite the opposite when it comes to the personal relationship with a refugee which places demands on the activists that often make them prioritize the refugee at the cost of other aspects of the activists’ life, a priority that is experienced as almost forced upon the activist. This is so because the activist perceives herself as the central determinant of the refugee’s well-being (Toubøl 2017b).

Below, we will present cases which are far from unique in the interview data material. They are chosen to exemplify the variety of patterns of how meeting a refugee relates to the ebb and flow of participation found across the entire material of the 42 interviews. They also show how the solitary relation may be an initiator of an activist career altogether and how it might be a periodic intensifier of activity. Thus, we argue that the interviews suggest that the relationships with refugees are crucial for both the more short-term ebb and flow of activity and the more extended long-term trajectory of the activist career.

Line, an experienced refugee solidarity activist, who at the time of the interview is 27 years old, is a case of how meeting a refugee creates intense periods of activism. Her relationship with the refugees
becomes the driver of participation in a way that also strains her resources. She is active in an NGO that supports refugees and makes activities driven by asylum seekers and Danes together, aiming at providing a space that circumvents the role of the asylum seeker as a passive receiver of help while awaiting the decision about asylum or deportation. Thus, this case exemplifies how solidary relationships and interaction with refugees can be said to regulate the ebb and flow of activism within a persistent activist trajectory. In this quote, Line explains how the involvement with refugees takes priority over almost all other aspects of her life in this way:

Line: If you really open yourself to another person who is in such a fucked-up situation, so different from you own, then, yes, I cannot just walk away. And I got to the point where, for a long time, I did not attend classes and studies, and where you burn out and that sort. I experienced very much that it took over, that suddenly it was all I did. I got my study grant and I just managed to pass my exams; university was OK, interesting; it was also something I wanted, but suddenly it just did not matter.

Interviewer: And that was when you met refugees and asylum seekers?

Line: Yes, and we organized demonstrations, paper work, and made, yes, suddenly you went to a camp [ed. asylum center] because this person [ed. asylum seeker] has to go to a meeting with a lawyer the next day and needs to rehearse the right things to say, right, or some Afghan women who ask for your help making a statement because they await deportation back to violence and jail, where they will be killed or raped or—I mean, how do you say no to that? How do you say, “No, I have to go to school?” That is, it becomes, whose life, or where to draw the line, because when should I say, “No, I actually need to go to school?” Because, in a way, that is also to respect these people who cannot go to school or university. I mean, then you have, I can actually do that, so I have some kind of duty to do that. So, I have been very worked up in this; everything else must be shelved.

In this discussion of her own engagement, Line reaches the conclusion that in her secure and relatively comfortable and privileged social position, when asked for help by a refugee in the almost exact opposite social, political, and legal position, stripped of almost all resources, rights, and agency,
the right thing is to help even though it strains her resources to the limit and sometimes pushes her over the brink when she burns out. In such a situation, confronted with a request for help from a person whose faith she experiences she might have the power to influence and whose continued wellbeing and, in some instances, even existence is perceived to depend on her, Line cannot say no. She does not know how to, as she puts it, and even though she is aware that such a high level of activity renders her overall life-situation unsustainable, the flow of activity further intensifies.

The experience of the forcing or obligating power of the situation of encountering the deprived other that we above theorized as an ethical obligation (Rawls 1987; Løgstrup 1997, 2007; Toubol 2017b) is a typical feature of the accounts of meetings with a refugee. Another woman in her late 60s put it this way after having met a refugee in an asylum center for the first time: “I just couldn't say goodbye—this was interesting. I could only get out of the door by saying “I'll be back”.

Interaction with the refugee creates this demand on part of the activists to take more transsituational responsibility for the other. Drawing on Rawls (1987) reading of Goffman, this can be seen as a consequence of the situational production of selves that comes to demand more than can be accomplished within the situation. The ethical obligation to take care of the other present in the current situation drives the interviewees to plan more long term commitments that were not there prior to the meeting. In the situation of the quote above the activist’s response to the situations demand to care for the other-apparently without knowing exactly how—is simply to promise that she will be back, thereby confirming the just initiated obligating solidary relationship between her as benefactor and the refugee as unfortunate.

It is important that the meeting with the refugee and the following intensification of activism is not something which finds its explanation solely in a decision to be active taken before meeting the refugee. In some cases, meeting with the refugee was only meant to be small act of kindness but turned into an intense period of activism. One interviewee, who had no prior experience with refugee solidarity activism and a very limited history of activism in general, was asked by an old friend if she was willing to talk to a young refugee who, like the interviewee, was a LGBT-person and due to her sexual orientation was isolated and stigmatized in the asylum center. This meeting was meant to be just “a talk,” but it had a huge impact on the interviewee who in the wake of this meeting became highly active in the movement:

She [ed. the refugee] called me, I remember it quite clearly, and spoke with a very deep voice, in a very calm manner and spoke good English—it could have been me. Sitting
there completely alone and not knowing her rights, she does not know where her case is in the system, the name of his lawyer; she knows nothing, she is sitting there with some letters in Danish, could be a rejection from the agency.

This interviewee goes on saying that it was a “fundamental experience of injustice,” but also a process of empathizing and sympathizing with the refugee’s situation, implying an urge to care for this person. The phone conversation developed into subsequent meetings and continuously supporting the refugee. This involved reaching out to other persons in her extended network who could help, and the network around this refugee soon developed into a fast-growing activist NGO working for the rights of LGBT refugees and asylum seekers. An important feature of this activist’s life history is that no prior socialization in activist networks had occurred, implying that the subsequent solidarity activism cannot be explained as a by-product commitment to collective activist identity as suggested by Tilly (2001). In fact, up to meeting the refugee and the subsequent event, the interviewee described herself as a political centrist and in general not very sensitized to the politics of gender and sexuality or the refugee issue and immigration. However, a network, in form of the old friend who facilitated establishing the connection between the soon-to-become activist and the refugee, plays an important role. However, at the same time, the interaction between refugee and interviewee nonetheless presents itself as an independent cause of the subsequent intense flow of participation.

FIGURE 1

Turning to the behavioral social media data, Figure 1 shows the average lag time to the next activity as the career progresses. Overall as we look at more and more committed activists (with longer prior history), the lag time is unsurprisingly decreased. However, if we split the population on having just interacted with a refugee on Facebook (blue line) or not (red) at each career stage, we see that those that have interacted with a refugee has a much shorter lag time. E.g. looking at activists surviving through week 5, interaction with a refugee relates to an average decrease of 8 days until the next activity. This is true throughout the activists’ trajectories.

FIGURE 2
Figure 2 shows the estimated effect of meeting a refugee on the lag time until next activity when controlling for various activity variables (see appendix for full list of controls included) including the current and prior commitment, activity, popularity, and group-level activity. The figure shows that meeting a refugee still has a rather large and significant effect until 10 active weeks into the activist career, where meeting a refugee reduces an activist’s time until the next activity by 5 days. Thus, these findings support what the interview data suggests, namely that meeting a refugee and establishing a solidary relationship causes an increase in the flow of activity.

As the variables measuring the accumulated level of activity grow across the trajectory they, as one should expect, take away the effect of meeting a refugee. A substantive interpretation of this is that the activists become less and less dependent on meeting a refugee to sustain the flow of participation. This is due both to the encoding of habits of action of past activism and the likely enrollment into dense activist networks where any one type of event does not make a difference. An alternative explanation is that the Facebook data captures relations to refugees in the initial phase of the activist career. Later in the career, non-Facebook arenas of interaction take over as the activists become enrolled in the activist groups.

**FIGURE 3**

Turning to longer-term effects, Figure 3 shows the probability of dropping out given the prior number of weeks active, split on having met a refugee and not having met a refugee. As the figure reveals, meeting a refugee is important for sustained participation throughout the activist trajectory.

In Figure 4, we control for various activity variables (see appendix for a full list of controls included), hereunder the accumulation of past activity. The results show that meeting a refugee still has a relatively large and significant effect, the relatively low baseline chance of dropout taken into account (see appendix Figure 6). The relative effect of having met a refugee drops the further into the activist career we look and ceases to be significant after week 10.

**FIGURE 4**

Summing up, the findings from the interviews show that activists experience meeting refugees as obligating them to take care of them by engaging in solidarity activism which results in an intensification of the flow of participation. Furthermore, the interview findings indicate that this
solidarity is not due solely to commitment to the cause of refugee solidarity and thus to identity-constituting processes internally in activist networks. Rather, the ethical obligation of the interaction order of the situation of meeting the refugee works as an independent cause of activism that regulates the ebb and flow of participation. These findings are supported by the quantitative social media data on interaction with refugees and subsequent sequences of activity showing that meeting a refugee has behavioral consequences in the form of a higher flow of participation.

Discussion and conclusion: Beyond the solidary relationship?

Analyzing qualitative as well as quantitative data, this paper has theoretically and empirically explored the connection between the solidary relationship and the flow and ebb of participation in solidarity activism. The argument takes its departure in the relational theoretical framework that takes interaction as the locus of the formation of relationships and identity in an activist network that motivate activism including solidarity activism and altruism. We add to this perspective a focus on interaction between activists and deprived others and demonstrate that this meeting is a vital motivation to participate in refugee activism. The meeting, with its distributions of selves and its interaction order, demands that the activists, as the benefactors, take care of the deprived other, thus forging a solidarity relationship. As the analysis of the qualitative interview finds, the activists experience a powerful, almost compelling, obligation to aid the refugees with whom they have interacted. From this follows situational as well as trans-situational projection of future (altruistic) actions by the activist to the benefit of the deprived other, resulting in an intensified flow of action. The quantitative evidence supports that the meaning ascribed to the meeting with refugees found in the interview data also has behavioral consequences as a substantial and significant positive effect on both the level of activity in the weeks that follow interaction with a refugee as well as the longer-term survival rate.

Before closing, we shall briefly discuss these results in relation to four issues: First, is “meeting the other” primarily an important effect on participation in the initial phase of activism? In relation to formation of generalized solidarity, that appears to be the case, but our interview material suggests that meeting the refugee is also more important in later stages of the activist career, as do the descriptive statistics. Indeed, the interviews suggest that even for the persistent refugee solidarity activist, encountering a refugee is a meeting that has the potential to set off a period of an intensified flow of participation. However, more research is needed on this matter, especially since our data allows only for quantitative analysis of a limited period.
Second, can this generalize to other movements ties? Regarding solidarity movements, it appears very likely and, as was noticed initially and has been pointed out by other authors (Passy 2013; Olesen 2012), solidarity movements and activism are widespread and common. In particular, if we accept that relationships to animals and maybe even plants or non-living things share the ability to constitute ethical demands on the activists (Næss 1989), the relevance of the solidarity relationship as a driver for activism has wide implications, but this remains to be investigated further. Beyond solidarity movements, paying attention to the consequences of the interaction order in general (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014) and its ethically obligating effects in particular (Rawls 1987; Løgstrup 1997, 2007) may be very relevant to studies of movement solidarity and altruistic action internally in movements, including the willingness to sacrifice for one’s group. Also, in many movements which are not solidarity movement the distribution of social ills is unequal. Therefore, it appears relevant to study more classical interest based movement and see if interacting with a person who is worse off than oneself increase commitment to activism and the cause.

Third, mediated interaction seems to be important as suggested by the analysis of interaction on social media. This is not to suggest that face-to-face interaction does not stand out, but it does suggest that it is worthwhile considering if the common view that other forms of mediated interaction are secondary to face-to-face interaction is correct. In contrast, some authors hold that we are dealing with different forms of aesthetically mediated interaction of which face-to-face is just one very common form (Løgstrup 1997; Liebst 2009). From this standpoint, the task is to investigate the consequences of different kinds of mediation rather than seeing face-to-face interaction as more “real” or “true” than other forms of interaction. In particular, in a time when social media and digital communication play an indispensable role in social movements, civil society mobilization, and activism, this seems to be an appropriate direction to take for future research and conceptualizations of interaction.

Fourth, as discussed in section two, this paper contributes to and identifies itself as part of a larger effort in the network strand of social movement studies that attempt to complete the account of networks effects on mobilization, participation, and movement internal processes (e.g., McAdam 2003; Passy and Monsch 2014, forthcoming). Here, it might be advisable to exploit the new sources of behavioral data that social media and online activism and mobilization unearth, which in combination with qualitative data, which are often also obtainable from the same digital data.
sources, enable us to realize the much-celebrated but rarely realized social interactionist ambition of simultaneously studying behavior and the symbolically ascribed meaning.

Finally, we shall point to four limitations of this study. First, we consider only one outcome of the solidary relationship, namely the intensified flow of participation, which is mainly due to the other outcomes being rare in our data. This, however, may be very different in other movements, and consequently, studies are needed that investigate the possibility of the ebb of activism being the outcome. Second, in this study, we limit ourselves to the short- and intermediate-term consequences. However, the solidary relationship may also have consequences for the entire activist career and the question of persistent activists. As can be interpreted from the interviews presented in this piece, but has also been argued in other studies of the same (Toubol 2017b) and other cases (e.g., McAdam 1988a), the meeting and subsequent solidarity relationship with deprived others may constitute turning points that have lasting biographical consequences for the activists involved. Third, as also suggested by the interviews, a consequence of the ethical obligation of the solidary relationship may be a straining period of too intense participation resulting in activist burnout. This aspect is beyond the scope of this paper but appears highly relevant as there is ample indication of such consequences in the interview material. The fourth and final limitation has been touched upon in the above discussion, namely that solidary relationships need not only be between activists in the network and deprived others outside the network but may also be relevant to within network relations. For instance, when workers act collectively in a labor market conflict—a paradigmatic case of interest-based collective action—a common scenario is the conflict involving both the workers whose rights or benefits are attacked and other workers supporting the affected in solidarity. Both groups of workers will participate alongside each other in demonstrations, blockades, and protest events and informally, but they often also do so formally through their trade union as part of the same activist network and SMO. To such a classical form of interest-based collective action, the theoretical as well as methodological perspectives of this paper may prove highly valuable to better grasp the internal dynamics of solidarity that shape, sustain, and mobilize protest.
References


Carlsen, Hjalmar Bang, Nicole Doerr and Jonas Toubøl. Forthcoming. “Inequality in interaction: Equalising the helper-recipient relationship in the refugee solidarity movement”


Figure 1. Difference in lag time (time to next activity) through the activist career grouped by whether they met a refugee in the previous week.
Figure 2. The regression coefficient of the estimated effect of having met a refugee on the lag time through the activist career.

Notes: Effects are estimated using multivariate regression analysis controlling for a wide range of alternative signals which our proxy (interacting with a refugee) might also capture including current and prior level of activity, popularity/response, and group-level activity (see appendix for a more detailed description of the control variables).
Figure 3. Percentage of the activists who meet refugee (blue) and drop out the next week compared to those who did not (red).
Figure 4. The estimated effect of having met a refugee on the probability of dropping out throughout the activist career. It shows the decreasing significance (being essentially insignificant after week 10) of the meeting the refugee as the career progresses.
Appendix

Variable descriptions and quantitative design

Central to the quantitative design is that we compare activists only on the same career stage and see how the effect of meeting a refugee changes as the career progresses. We choose to define the career stage as how many weeks one has actively taken part in the movement, as opposed to a real-time measure of weeks from first activity. As activists begin their career at different times and have different rhythms and levels of engagement, we choose not to count passive weeks. This means that we are not comparing activists who have been in the movement for the same amount of time, but who had previously been active the same number of weeks. We do, however, measure the span of engagement in absolute time as a control variable (see section below).

Weeks survived: Counted relative to the individual activist, not counting passive weeks. We use this to define whom we compare to whom.

Independent:
- Contact with refugee: Boolean encoding if the activist has interaction with a refugee this week.
- Has met refugee: Boolean encoding if the activist has interacted with a refugee in prior engagement. Designed to compare recency effects with longer-term effects and differentiate between three states: recent interaction, prior interaction, and no interaction with a refugee.
- Activity span without refugee: Length of span in real time without interacting with a refugee, gets reset with each interaction with a refugee. Designed to see the decreasing effect of the meeting on the longer term.

Dependent:
- Next lag time: Time until the next activity point. To investigate what affects the rate of commitment.
- Dropout: Boolean encoding of whether this is the last activity point. Given the artificial ending of our dataset, we count it as a dropout only if the time until the last data point (in our dataset) exceeds the individual activist’s longest lag and is a minimum of 3 weeks. Used to investigate how meeting a refugee changes the chance of staying in the movement.
- **Active next week**: As each career stage is measured in active weeks, it is relevant to ask whether the next career stage follows in the week immediately after. Similar to the next lag time variable, it is designed to investigate the short-term flow; however, it is a little less informative and, therefore, the results are reported only in the appendix.

- **Next stage count**: Expresses the activity level at the next career stage as a simple count of activities (likes, comments, and posts) in the next active week. Designed to see if meeting a refugee heightens the activity level. Results are reported only in the appendix.

*Controls:*

**Signals of prior commitment and potential burnout**

- **Time in movement**: Length of career in real time. Designed to control for a prior commitment and/or heightened risk of burnout.

*Autocorrelated features*

- **Lagtime**: Time since last activity. Trying to control for other signs of fatigue that might predict turnover and essentially autocorrelation in the next lag time variable.
- **Number of activities**: Aggregating likes, comments, and posts.
- **Weighted number of activities**: Weighted aggregate of likes, comments, and posts. Weights are designed to express the relative effort of liking, commenting, and posting, and related to the relative frequency of activity types. A like is 3 times as common as a comment, and comments are 5 times as common as posts. The weighing scheme was defined as: like: 1, comment: 3, post: 5.

*Social Response features*

As contact with a refugee is related to how much response one gets, these variables are designed to measure more directly the level of response. Theoretically, these could capture a sign of status in the movement and potential motivation (or fatigue) from the response received.

- **Likes received**: Sum of all likes received in a week.
- **Comments received**: Sum of all comments to a post received in a week.
- **Comment to comments received**: Sum of all comment to a comment received in a week.
Cumulative features
To control for signals of historical engagement and response in the movement, we also transform all activity-based features and response features into cumulative features.

Group-based features:
All group-based measures are designed to discern a general activity level in the movement (and might heighten the probability of interacting with a refugee), which might be event-specific and create other motivational factors, from the individual motivation and commitment gained from meeting a refugee. All measures are relative to the group which the individual activist is a member of.

- *Group likes*: Aggregate of all likes in the group for a current week.
- *Group comments*: Aggregate of all comments in the group for a current week.
- *Group comments*: Aggregate of all comments to comments in the group for a current week.

Background variables

- *Namebased gender*: Inferred by matching the first name to government lists of accepted male and female names.

Survival rates in the movement
Each regression model is estimated on the surviving activists as we look week for week through their career stages. As activists drop out, our population becomes smaller and smaller, and the number of activists who have not met a refugee drops quickly to near zero. When having met a refugee is no longer a differentiating factor, we stop our analysis; this is after week 46 when there remain 792 activists all having interacted with a refugee. The number of surviving activists and the survival rate is shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6. The number of activists shows that our analysis has strong statistical power throughout the career trajectory, and the survival rate gives the reader an intuition about the effect sizes reported in Figure 4. As the survival rate after week 10 is above 90%, we see that most activists are already very dedicated, and interacting with a refugee (again for the most part) at this point is not as important as in the beginning.
Figure 5. Logged number of surviving activists in the movement as the career progresses.
Figure 6. Survival rates from week to week. Survival rate quickly stabilize above 90% and then stagnates slowly. Note that the number of activists left after week 80 is below 100 and close to 10 when survival rate start to fluctuate.

Reporting the regression models

In the main paper we only report the coefficients of the main explanatory variable, interacting with a refugee, in this section we lay out more details about the models, including 2 alternative outcomes not reported in the main paper.

In Figure 7, we report the R^2 across models (as career progresses) and across the four outcomes. This elicits to what degree our regression models succeed in describing the factors important to understanding the flow and survival of activists throughout their careers, and how it varies across outcomes. It is evident from Figure 7 that the problem of predicting dynamic behavior in relation to social movement activity on a micro-level is far from solved with this simple model, and indeed, it becomes worse as the career progresses. Especially the r2 of dropout is low, and dives as the career progresses, even with the auto-correlated and historical variables encoding more informative. It is expected that the rhythms of everyday life and dynamic decisions on movement
engagement, cannot be modeled with past engagement on social media alone, and it does not necessarily challenge our design. It is, however, interesting that one of the alternative variables (activity level in the next stage—the absolute count of activity in the next activity week) exhibits high autocorrelation and that it increases as the career progresses. This suggests that auto-correlated features matter more when understanding the level of engagement than dropout and breaks in engagement. However, this apparent stabilization of one’s engagement needs further studies to be conclusive.

Figure 7. The R2 performance of the models as the career progresses. Shows a general downward trend of the dropout, lagtime, and active next week; only the next stage count exhibits an upward trend suggesting that there are indeed autocorrelated features but that these matter much more for the level of engagement than understanding breaks and dropout.

As there are 15 (1 independent + 14 controls) variables, 4 outcomes, and 46 career stages, we represent the t-values both in a heatmap and as line plots. The former provides a good overview over when parameters become and seize being significant, and the time series plot is more efficient for comparing magnitudes. Each of the 4 outcomes is reported in figures 8a-d.

In the heatmap, each row is a variable, and each column is a career stage, and only the >0.05 significant values of a two-tailed t-test, are shown. In the line plots each line represents one variable (t-values for comparison) as career progress. The independent variable is attenuated with a higher alpha and a thicker.
From the figures 8a-8d we can see that the control variables are indeed informative, especially in figure 8.c reporting the models for the outcome “Next stage count”, i.e. the level of activity at the next career stage. The auto-correlated features, describing activity in the last stage, are informative and with meaningful directions. E.g. looking at figure 8.b, being more active at the last stage (i.e. captured in the “count” variable), decrease the average lag time. In the same way, the last lag time has a strong a positive relationship with the next lagtime throughout the career.

Looking at the group level variables designed to control for local rhythms in the movement we also find informative features that we can interpret. E.g. high level of likes (“group_activiy_likes”) at the group level increase the lagtime and high levels of comment activity decrease it, suggesting that this variable capture signals from periods of more or less commitment in the local groups. The cumulative features designed to encode historical commitment, also show significance especially the variable activity, denoted “cum_count”, which counts all previous activity. Again with a meaningful direction, in the sense of having an independent negative impact on lag time. As the specific coefficients are not the object of the current study, but reported for documentation, we shall not go further into the them here.
Regression coefficients: Lag time
Regression coefficients: Next stage count

Contact with refugee
weight
likes
comments
c_comments
count
lagtime
group_activity_comments
group_activity_likes
cum_count
cum_weight
cum_likes
cum_comments
cum_c_comments

$42$
Regression coefficients: Active Next Week

Figure 8a-d. Regression coefficients as t-values of the all models estimated as career progresses on the dependent variables a) “dropout” b) “lagtime” c) “Active next week” d) “Next stage count”. In the heatmap only significant values are reported and two stippled lines marks the value ±1.96 for judging statistical significance in a two-tailed t-test.