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## When Ignoring the News and Going Hiking Can Help You Save the World: Environmental Activist Strategies for Persistence<sup>1</sup>

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*Social movement research has long examined why activists persist. Little attention has been paid, however, to how persistent environmental activists use personalized strategies to cope with challenges. This article draws on data from 30 in-depth interviews with long-term environmental activists to shed light on this understudied phenomenon. The interviewees point to a number of strategies they use to mitigate the challenges they experience in their activism: (1) they have a self-care practice, primarily in the form of spending time in nature; (2) they adopt various personalized orientations, such as bracketing or ignoring structural environmental challenges, focusing on what they can control, deciding that they have no choice but to persist, focusing on long-term outcomes, and being realistic about the possibilities of change; and (3) they integrate work, activism, and life balance by shaping their careers and sense of life purpose around the environment. The article concludes with a discussion of whether these strategies are generalizable beyond the environmental movement.*

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**KEYWORDS:** burnout; environmental activism; persistence; self-care; social movements; strategy.

*I'll meet environmental activists whose animating cause is the doomsday scenario. So there's plenty of people in the [organization] . . . who are like "we're going to go into extinction and things are terrible and they're taking this away from us and they're going to burn up everything and we've got to fight, fight, fight." I think it's a recipe for an ulcer.*

—Nelson, lifelong environmental activist

### INTRODUCTION

Persistent activists are at the core of many forms of social movement success. They show up to meetings and protests (Saunders et al. 2012), use their experience to strategize and be resourceful (Ganz 2000), recruit and mobilize other activists (Viterna 2006), broker coalitions with allies (Haydu 2012), and more. They do all of this despite the setbacks and hardship they may face along the way. The civil rights movement, for instance, might have never achieved important policy changes (e.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1964) without persistent activists who were willing to undergo repeated threats and acts of violence for their cause at the hands of the state and white supremacists. Through the persistence of its activists and leaders, the civil rights movement was able to recruit vast numbers, organize marches and

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boycotts, register voters, build coalitions, spread their message, and much more. Many of these persistent activists were the backbone of the organizational strength that allowed the civil rights movement to grow and gain national influence (McAdam 1982, 1986).

In the study of social movements, there is growing scholarship that seeks to understand and explain activist persistence and commitment. Recognizing that protestors and members of social movements are diverse in their orientations and their persistence, movement scholars differentiate types of commitment and involvement (Corrigan-Brown 2011; Cortese 2015; Cox 2016; Fisher and Jasny 2019; Saunders et al. 2012). In *Patterns of Protest* (2011), Corrigan-Brown, for example, categorizes four broad types of movement behavior: persistence (i.e., staying), disengagement (i.e., leaving), individual abeyance (i.e., episodic involvement), and transfer (i.e., switching groups). This article focuses on how *persistent* environmental activists use personalized strategies to cope with the challenges associated with their activism.

Persistent activism is rarely stress-free. Sustaining activism in movements often means dealing with challenges, ranging from personal ones (e.g., health issues, competing family responsibilities), to organizational ones (e.g., cumbersome bureaucracy, interpersonal conflict), to structural ones (e.g., police violence, stalled political opportunities). One further challenge with persisting that scholars have identified is that movement organizations often do a poor job of retaining members and preventing them from burning out (Cox 2011; Gorski and Chen 2015; Rettig 2006). This leaves a nontrivial responsibility for maintaining persistence to the individual activist. In this article, I examine how long-term environmental activists use personalized strategies to cope with challenges to their sustained activism. I define this type of long-term (i.e., persistent) environmental activism as continued movement-related action for a period of 10 years or more.

The article has five parts. First, I review the relevant literature on why long-term activists drop out or burn out and how they persist, and I offer my contribution to this literature. Second, I outline my methodology and sample. Third, I present my findings, which detail a number of factors that environmental activists point to when discussing burnout. The activists report that (1) they have a self-care practice, primarily in the form of spending time in nature; (2) they adopt various personalized orientations, such as bracketing or ignoring structural environmental challenges, focusing on what they can control, deciding that they have no choice but to persist, focusing on long-term outcomes, and being realistic about the possibilities of change; and (3) they integrate work, activism, and life balance by shaping their careers and sense of life purpose around the environment. I close with a discussion of differences between the mechanisms revealed by this research and those in the literature and make recommendations for future work. Social movements are a central focus of sociological inquiry. This article addresses an understudied topic in this field: how persistent environmental activists use personalized strategies to cope with the challenges associated with their activism.

## WHY LONG-TERM ACTIVISTS DROP OUT AND BURN OUT

Social movements depend on a core of committed activists; thus, their exit from movements is of concern and interest to scholars of movements. Scholars typically categorize long-term activists who leave movements according to two types of behaviors: dropping out or burning out. Dropping out, more encompassing than burnout as a concept, is simply ending one's activism for a single or any combination of reasons. Burnout, a subset of dropping out, is defined as "a condition in which the accumulative stress associated with activism becomes so debilitating that once-committed activists are forced to scale back on or disengage from their activism" (Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, and Rising 2019:364). While there is overlap, the difference between the two concepts hinges on the fact that burnout is more of an *involuntary* act resulting from a chronic condition (Chen and Gorski 2015; Rettig 2006). That chronic condition can involve emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioral, and motivational symptoms (Chen and Gorski 2015; Schaufeli and Buunk 2002).

Scholars have identified a number of reasons that committed activists drop out of movements or end their activism. Studies point to having weak ties to other members of social movement organizations and feeling isolated as important factors (Manzo and Weinstein 1987; Nepstad 2004, 2013). Some individuals who leave may be juggling too many life responsibilities (e.g., family or health challenges), and their activism is no longer a priority (Nepstad 2004). Many scholars who study movement retention relate this form of dropping out to the activist having low "biographical availability" (McAdam 1986; Saunders et al. 2012). Other activists leave because they lose their sense of solidarity over time and feel they've been involved for too long. In Jo Freeman's (1975) work, *The Politics of Women's Liberation*, she finds that many activists will leave a movement, in her case the feminist movement, after two years. What might they do next? Sometimes they leave political activism altogether; sometimes they join other movements. In *The Search for Political Community*, Lichterman (1996) writes about a more "personalized style" of activism, with activists shifting to different movements or organizations that are more congruent with their personal political goals. This process is concretized in Isserman's (2001) biography of political activist Michael Harrington who dropped out of the Catholic Workers Movement when he discovered that the Young People's Socialist League more closely reflected his personal mission.

There are other reasons activists drop out of movements, however, more closely linked to the concept of "burnout." Paul Gorski (2019) describes three general categories of activist burnout: internal, external, and in-movement. Internal causes of burnout are connected with the individual personalities of activists. An example of an internal cause may be burning out due to a strong affective bond with the movement driving activists to overextend themselves (Chen and Gorski 2015; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2004). Thus, failures such as losing a political battle may take a personal emotional toll on activists, perhaps causing them to feel they failed their life purpose (Gomes 1992; Pines 1994). External causes of burnout can involve personal traumas or stressors from outside sources (Cox 2011). For example, some activists, especially within racial justice movements, are subject to

physical violence and discrimination (Gorski et al. 2019; McAdam 1982, 1986). Finally, in-movement causes of burnout are common. Social movement organizations may impose “cultures of martyrdom” that compel activists to overextend themselves and make too many sacrifices (Chen and Gorski 2015; Gorski and Chen 2015). In-movement conflict is also common, sometimes leading to the marginalization and isolation of certain activists within groups (Cox 2011; Gorski et al. 2019). In a recent study on burnout among racial justice activists, Gorski (2019) found that “structural” factors also contributed to burnout, with activists feeling that white supremacy would never end. More and more, burnout is identified as a significant problem in political activism and movements, so much so that handbooks and guides have been written about mitigating it (Friedmann and McNair 2008; Jones 2007).

## HOW LONG-TERM ACTIVISTS PERSIST

Organizations utilize a number of strategies to support activist persistence. Some factors that aid recruitment into movements, such as strong ties to other participants in the movement (Bunnage 2014; Diani 2013; Oliver 1984) and concern about the problem or issue (Manzo and Weinstein 1987), also aid persistence. In an influential study on persistence in the Catholic peace movement, Nepstad (2004) found that when organizations mediated family responsibilities and strengthened community ties through rituals, they were able to reduce movement exits caused by problems of biographical availability and isolation. Rituals also serve to integrate movements into activists’ lives. Case studies reveal that ideological rituals and practices (e.g., music, discussions, retreats, etc.) strengthen individuals’ movement identity and group ties (Aminzade 2001; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2009; Taylor 1989). In a study of student activists, Hirsch (1990) found that members persisted when the student group faced stressors and challenges. This was largely due to the identity-forming and solidarity-building work and activities that the organization had spearheaded before launching its campaign. At a procedural level, organizations can aid persistence when activists feel more empowered and efficacious (Bunnage 2014; Manzo and Weinstein 1987) and less frustrated with bureaucracy, disorganization, or poor leadership (Cox 2011). Organizations also support persistence when they can work to resolve interpersonal conflicts between activists (Gomes 1992).

Some scholars argue that in general, organizations do a poor job of mitigating burnout (Cox 2011; Gorski 2015; Gorski and Chen 2015; Rettig 2006). This leaves much of the labor of persistence to the individual activist. What do scholars find that activists do individually to support persistence? Downton and Wehr’s study on 30 peace activists is especially illuminating. In addition to organization-level mechanisms, they found that in order to persist, activists were “clever in shaping their lives for prolonged peace work” (Downton and Wehr 1998:542). The activists organized their multiple life responsibilities or adapted their careers around peace activism; they found ways to let go of disappointments or to take small breaks; and they were creative with the ways in which they dealt with setbacks and challenges. Other

scholars find similar patterns of creativity. Sometimes that creativity takes the form of incorporating activism into different spheres of an activist's life (Passy and Giugni 2000; Roth 2016). Roth (2016) finds that engaging in activism between life spheres allows activists a work-life balance that protects against burnout. Linking activism to personal consumerism (Neilson 2010), lifestyle movements (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012), or even career and work environment (Newman 2012) can aid persistence. This creativity can also take on the form of self-care. Movements "often disregard the importance of self-care, seeing it as self-indulgence, putting activists at even higher risks of burnout" (Gorski 2015:697). Despite this, in a study on burnout, Gorski (2015) found that activists effectively used mindfulness practices such as yoga, meditation, or tai chi to cope with challenges and strengthen their activism.

Activists can reframe their motivation around activism to mitigate frustrations as well. In her study on animal rights activists, Einwohner (2002) finds that despite the fact that the activists feel the prospects of real change were bleak (a potential cause of burnout), they still utilize "fortifying strategies" in order to avoid burnout: they focus on the bright side of any outcome; they see their goals as extending over a long period of time, thus incremental progress is acceptable; they enjoy wins at any level; and they take credit for positive outcomes. In an autoethnography on environmental activism, one scholar called it a "cautious optimism" that one must maintain to persist (Lowan-Trudeau 2017). Also, in multiple studies scholars find that making activism central to one's life mission and source of meaning helps activists persist (Andrews 1991; Gomes 1992; Pines 1994; Valocchi 2013). Despite maintaining occupations that are separate from their activism, activists can frame their work as a "career, calling, and way of life" (Valocchi 2013:169), rendering competing responsibilities less important. In sum, there is a plethora of ways in which organizations and activists both work to alleviate difficulties and aid persistence, and they vary in efficacy and by movement. Still, the literature on personal strategies of persistence lacks a significant presence in studies of environmental activism. Examining persistence in the environmental movement can support undertheorized strategies in this literature and also offer new strategies and theory on activist strategies for persistence.

The contribution of this study lies within personalized strategies that long-term environmental activists state that they utilize to persist and thereby mediate challenges associated with both dropout and burnout—some of them not represented in the existing literature. Little is known about environmental activist persistence beyond a few studies (Lowan-Trudeau 2017; Manzo and Weinstein 1987; Saunders 2008), and not one specifies how long-term environmental activists manage movement-related challenges at an individual level.<sup>2</sup> However, this article does not address the factors that may influence those personalized strategies (e.g., socialization, biographies, social position, etc.; for that, see Driscoll 2018), who does or doesn't abandon activism, or whether these personalized strategies promote

<sup>2</sup> This article utilizes a sample of environmental activists also used in Driscoll (2018). However, the previous paper focused on the roots of commitment in environmental activists' biographies and experiences, not the personalized strategies they use to cope with the challenges of activism and actively manage their persistence.

persistence. My intention is to shed light on environmental activists' individual strategies for maintaining persistence and also offer findings that scholars who study other forms of persistence, even beyond movements, can replicate or compare.

## DATA AND METHODS

Environmental activists were selected through chain-referral or snowball sampling as well as online archival searches for accomplished activists published in news sources (Charmaz 2014; Lofland et al. 2006; Weiss 1995). Due to my focus on understanding how long-term environmental activists manage challenges, I sought to recruit subjects who had surely faced the issue—long-term and committed environmental activists. My selection criteria were that activists had to be active (organizational involvements, protest, political consumerism, career involvements, etc.) in the environmental movement for at least 10 years.

The sample population consists of 30 environmental activists (16 men and 14 women) living in San Diego, Orange, and Los Angeles counties. Environmentalism encompasses multiple movements and diverse paths to activism. It is no surprise that my sample was composed of activists from many occupations. For example, participants held such professions as CEO of an organic food company, yoga teacher, poet-philosopher, Hollywood actress, musician, mountaineer, woodworker, university professor, life coach, radio host, and politician. I also interviewed career activists whose primary income and occupation are explicitly connected to environmental causes. They include small biodynamic/organic farmers, an ecovillage founder, a green architect, environmental nonprofit employees, ecologists and environmental scientists, environmental lawyers, and a business owner who turns waste into fertilizer. While all the activists whom I interviewed had been involved with environmental causes for at least a decade, several had been active for 30 or 40 years. By focusing on a diverse array of environmental activists with long histories of involvement, the study is well suited to address questions of personalized strategies for managing challenges. As the interviews were open-ended and qualitative, intended to reveal mechanisms about persistence, I didn't ask participants about their socioeconomic status if it didn't come up naturally (some were clearly wealthy, while most seemed roughly middle class).

I am a young white male with a middle-class background. This positionality overlapped with some interviewees and contrasted with others. In an effort to make all interviewees comfortable with me, my rapport was supported by two factors. First, the histories of many activists were documented in media and public records. Whenever data on activists were available, I educated myself in advance of our meetings. Second, my six years of experience in environmental movements and the outdoor industry provided a common language and frame of reference that placed me in a position to establish rapport. My position supported conversations where activists were generally comfortable talking about their lives and their challenges with activism.

Qualitative interviews are an appropriate methodological instrument for extracting individual meanings and processes related to persistence and personal



challenges. Several studies cited in the literature review conducted qualitative interviews for such a purpose (Downton and Wehr 1998; Einwohner 2002; Gorski 2015; Manzo and Weinstein 1987; Nepstad 2004; Valocchi 2013; Viterna 2006). In the interviews themselves, I first asked activists about their life history related to the environmental cause. I would begin with: *Looking back, when did you first become interested in environmental issues?* From then on, with some prompting on my part, we would move forward through their history of environmental involvements to the present day. Their sharing this trajectory allowed me to become informed about their activist life history before directing their attention to challenges. With regard to that, I asked, *You've faced a number of challenges related to your environmental work [insert list of challenges activist mentioned previously]; what keeps you going?* Their answers are discussed in the following section. Interviews were complete once activists felt like they had shared their trajectory and their strategies that kept them from burning out during certain time periods. The average interview was 80 minutes long.

While activists' memory and perceptions are not always accurate, this study is not concerned with ontological realism. In this research, I take a critical realist stance (Maxwell 2012; Riessman 1993; Willis 2007). The ways in which activists frame, construct, and recall how they manage hardship in their activism is important to study not just for the sake of meaning alone. Meanings and constructions themselves can motivate action. They can motivate activists to stay the course despite the many challenges they might face.

Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Utilizing Atlas.ti, I not only studied activist biographies, but I mainly focused on identifying strategies that activists mentioned directly or indirectly about mediating challenges. I coded each interview, categorizing strategies. After coding, I systematized the categories to reveal common strategies from all of the interviews.

## FINDINGS

In interviews, activists echoed the literature in many ways, describing many different kinds of challenges and frustrations that caused them to question their continued involvement. For some, interoffice politics and burdensome pressures from leaders stressed them to the point of wanting to quit. For others, it was legislative setbacks or losses and even victories that were subsequently overturned. Some had to switch careers or move, which made it difficult for them to stay involved. For all, the current growth-oriented societal structure, political climate, and stagnated environmental progress was extremely frustrating. Ellen<sup>3</sup> said, "I'm getting tired. . . . I never stop thinking about what I see right in front of me and how it could be made better or how to stop it from getting worse." When discussing American climate action, Travis said that Americans were "sticking our fucking heads in the sand. . . . We have a society that's insane." Carol said, "The impacts and the signs [of climate change] are just becoming more overwhelming."

<sup>3</sup> All interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms.

These assertions were often said with emotion, and it was clear that their frustrations were the very same as those who leave movements. However, they often found ways to counter their own negativity, even in interviews. Ellen discussed going into nature to rejuvenate. Travis said witnessing problems motivated him. Carol discussed how viewing the negative impacts of climate change, while overwhelming, will *eventually* cause people and politicians to act. One activist, Roman, describes wanting to abandon the cause, but then reverses course:

There were many times where I thought about dropping out and getting on my boat and sailing for a long time or just living off the land. And those are still compelling ideas, but I guess for me, I kind of like staying where the challenges are. Like I feel like it's defeatist in some way to retreat. And so I feel I'm still in the fight.

This sample of long-term environmental activists found ways to fight the feelings and struggles that may lead to burnout for most.

The results section details their strategies in three parts, in increasing generalizability beyond the environmental movement. The first section outlines activists' relationship with and time in nature as a form of self-care. Throughout their lives they return to nature to recharge. They find exhilaration, fun, peace, and solace in it. Positive experiences in nature motivate their environmental work and are a respite from the associated challenges. The second section outlines personalized orientations that activists utilize to stay positive and continue working for the environmental cause. They bracket or ignore structural environmental challenges, focus on what they can control, decide that they have no choice but to persist, focus on long-term outcomes, and are realistic about the possibilities of change. The final section outlines how activists integrate work, activism, and life balance by shaping their careers and sense of life purpose around the environment.

### *Self-Care Practice: Time in Nature*

Time in nature served as a respite from many stresses related to activism. Activists went in nature to stoke motivation, find peace, and avoid burnout. Ellen said, "Go to the places you love and refresh yourselves and enjoy them. That's how people don't burn out."<sup>4</sup> For some, getting outside is a deliberate strategy to recharge, and for all, it was for enjoyment. All interviewees describe spending significant amounts of time in nature, and many of them since childhood. They describe how routine, everyday experiences in nature have impacted their environmentalism and allowed them to recharge. They also speak of the impact of peak experiences in nature—shocking, exhilarating moments that impacted them on an emotional and psychological level. They spoke of expansive panoramic views, surprise encounters with wildlife, exhilarating outdoor activities and sports, and finding peace. One activist describes taking a road trip out west for the first time:

I remember the first day, we were in Joshua Tree, you exit at Wonderland of Rocks and you come down and you come around the view and the whole desert opens up in front of you. I remember feeling a surge of excitement because the landscape was just enormous. There was something amazing about that. It was just a pervasive sense of freedom and being in a wide-

<sup>4</sup> Ellen was not prompted with a question on avoiding burnout.



open space instead of being in a confined asphalt-bound area. It's a large sense of exhilaration and liberation . . . that feeling of being awestruck is a very addictive feeling because everything else just kind of melts away.

Awe, including awe of the natural world, changes one's perspective. It connects individuals to something vaster, greater than their lives as individuals, and spurs them to incorporate that experience into their psyche (Keltner and Haidt 2003). Scholars have long agreed that experiences of awe and peak experiences have life-altering impacts (Maslow 1964). For instance, peak experiences, or even mystical ones, can spur conversion and commitment to new religions (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). Many activists describe peak experiences as shaping their activism, offering breaks and fun, and renewed inspiration.

Many other activists connect their time in nature to their morals and activism. Travis, a small business owner, enjoys the outdoors. He finds momentary peace outdoors and links it to his involvement: "There is absolute peace, tranquility, and attachment to nature. That's why I do the shit that I do is because those moments like that and I feel like they are threatened constantly." In his activism, Travis says he seeks to protect the peace and quiet that nature offers. One reason these environmentalists fight for the environment is because nature itself has offered them so much. It's something of value to them that they feel must be protected.

In addition to peak experiences for many of the activists, nature offers something existential, even spiritual. Nelson said, "The serious way to get to the heart of the universe is to walk in the wilderness." Indeed, many activists find it healing. Molly said nature is

peaceful, rejuvenating, purifying. It's calming. It snaps me out of a bad mood. It makes me feel connected to the earth. It brings me back to these experiences I had early on as a kid that highlight the path that I've taken. We are a product of the evolution of nature. I don't consider ourselves separate from it, but we do a lot to separate ourselves from it. So for me, it feels like, sort of like coming home. The responsibilities and problems that we face day to day go away. I think that's why I find it to be just relaxing, comforting, all of those things.

There are two of ideas to unpack from Molly's account. The first is that time in nature aids psychological well-being and is a form of self-care. There are many studies confirming this connection (Bratman, Hamilton, and Daily 2012). The second is that Molly describes how time in nature is a confirming factor for her activism and life path. It brings her back to the warm memories of her childhood; it brings her home. She feels more connected to the earth. It is likely that the nostalgic ties to nature formed in childhood (if present) are sustained by continued time in nature throughout activists' lives.

Activists, as they repeatedly return to nature, report that time in nature impacts them in a number of ways. First, it inspires awe through positive, peak experiences. Second, it offers peace, promotes psychological well-being, and a respite from the demands of activism. Third, those experiences lead activists to place a higher value on nature, to form a morality around it, supporting their commitments. Fourth, time in nature also connects activists to their personal history with the natural world and confirms activism. All these benefits can stave off the stresses and challenges associated with environmental activism that lead to abandoning activism.

### *Personalized Orientations*

Years of commitment to a cause comes with challenges. How do these activists explain their dealing with setbacks, bad news, political inaction, or disenchantment with the cause? Activists commonly point to a few personalized orientations and mind-sets. They stay positive by bracketing the global challenges associated with the environmental cause and focusing on what they can control with their own behavior. They also emphasize that they have no choice other than to continue working to support the environmental cause. And finally, they think long-term, which helps them avoid short-term setbacks and needing instant rewards. They see their role in a movement as greater than their work as individuals.

Although interviewees had their complaints about environmental issues, many spoke out against the negativity within the environmental movement. They viewed pessimism as unproductive:

I'll meet environmental activists whose animating cause is the doomsday scenario. So there's plenty of people in the [organization] and other environmental organizations who are like "we're going to go into extinction and things are terrible and they're taking this away from us and they're going to burn up everything and we've got to fight, fight, fight." I think it's a recipe for an ulcer. I got into this movement because I was inspired by the places that I've been to, and I was inspired by the stories of the people who saved the places that I went to. . . . You're not going to grow your movement if you go around saying, "Everything is awful and everything is terrible."

Instead of focusing on depressing scenarios or developments, they avoid them. They construct boundaries to protect their motivation from the many challenges facing the environmental movement. One male activist said, "I try not to let the day-to-day news affect me," thus avoiding interaction with both short- and long-term movement setbacks. A female activist said, "There's just a lot of things you have to ignore. . . . I will tend to write off whole groups of people like climate change deniers." In other words, they avoid opposition or news that could be interpreted as signs of movement failure or obstacles. Many activists reported that if they didn't avoid these things, they found themselves suffering from depression and frustration.

Instead, they focus on actions that lie within their control. Lance, an environmental scientist, describes narrowing his attention to his own life:

I try not to think about depressive aspects of it too much and get bogged down by them. I just try to do what I can personally, within myself and my household: to live according to our values. . . . I think I'll drive myself crazy if I got too emotionally involved in what's going wrong. I think I just try to do what I think is good in my own small world.

Many other activists described this individualized type of action and thinking. Martha, an activist and philanthropist, said, "It's just little things that keep me encouraged." Another activist spoke of "the small victories" making a difference. Joel, a contractor, said, "For me, it's all about the impact that you can have, it's what you deal with at home, what's right under your nose." Candice, an investor, said, "You just have to try where you can." Most activists purposefully avoid the frustrations and bad news that comes with being an environmentalist. They reorient their focus toward their own lives, where they witness impacts and solve environmental problems, however minor and personal.

Many activists explained that they don't have a choice about their involvement in the environmental movement. Action is required, rather than optional. Hillary describes this:

I don't have a choice. . . . There is nothing else to do other than to fight with everything I have, to put things on the right course. Knowing that it's a fight that's longer than my lifetime and there are many players in it. . . . There's too much at stake. So I don't see how being on the sidelines, or just watching the world implode, is an option.

This perspective eliminates "dropping out" as an option. Their only choice is to persist. To some, not acting is not only immoral; it is foolish. Carol said, "To me, not doing anything is just stupid." They believe that persistence and passion are necessary to make a difference in the environmental movement:

This is one field where if you're going to do this work, if you don't have the conviction, you not only won't last, but you won't be successful. Every one of us who does this kind of work has a strong, strong passion for the work we do and a belief, and it's part of our belief system.

Finally, these activists have a long-term view about the environmental movement and their involvements. Rosey, a nonprofit founder and activist, said, "You have to keep the long-term view. These are not short-term wins." They even seemed to draw motivation from thinking long-term. Jack said, "There are so many things that need to be addressed. That's part of what keeps you motivated is the work will never be done." The cause contains many issues that aren't going away soon. For some like Jack, that fact helps keep motivation constant. For others like Sam, an environmental lawyer, this fact about the cause makes him redefine success:

You learn to redefine success as you're not completely saving the earth every time you're doing that action. It's more that this is an action that is part of a chain of events or it is leading to better. It's one step at a time. . . . The fulfillment thing is sometimes just in the work itself, not the outcome, because you don't know when or if that outcome is going to be realized. I think if I was rewards-based like that, I would be screwed. There are cases that I worked on that go on three years, five years, seven years, or ten years. It's more of a process than an outcome thing, I think. . . . It's realizing the successes in this won't be done in my lifetime, and it won't be done just by me.

Focusing on "one step at a time," while "thinking long-term," is useful for many activists. An ecologist and activist explained how it helped him avoid leaving:

When I was focusing on the results, like I have to get *x* results, it's really depressing because you have so many setbacks and there is so much. I worked more on my brain going "Okay, maybe it's not the destination as much as it is the journey, and let's work on the journey." That seemed to help. I wasn't as depressed. You just got to keep walking the walk and doing what you can do. That's the motivation.

Both activists were able to shift and redefine their motivations. This allowed them to feel good about their work, despite many setbacks. Redefining helped them persist.

Finally, thinking long-term gives some activists hope. Knowing the movement is beyond their lifetime and their work as individuals helps them stay positive. One said, "I see myself as part of a much bigger picture." Also knowing that nature can recover in the long-term helps them stay positive. Rex said,

I would say the things that give me the most hope are the things that I find in the concept of resilience of natural systems. The ability to bounce back, the ability to restore itself, the ability to create in the wounds of an overdeveloped society . . . where things restore, new forests grow, and how weeds are poking through the recently recovered road. I mean, I think those are all signs of hope in a way for me because they suggest that as bad as the human practices are for the environment in general, there's enormous resilience there.

In sum, personalized mind-sets and orientations help activists persist. By focusing attention on their own small actions or behaviors, ignoring setbacks, and seeing the long-term trajectory of the environmental movement, they are able to stave off depression and burnout. Activists are also, in a theoretical sense, strategically shifting their “temporal horizons” to avoid leaving—thinking short-term, to highlight small victories, but also long-term, to discount setbacks and frustrations. It can't hurt that many also believe that they have no choice but to stay involved.

### *Integrating Activism With Life Purpose and Careers*

Many activists maintain their trajectories of involvement by integrating their activism with their life purpose and careers. They shape their life purpose around the environment and choose to focus on the environmental issues that they personally connect with the most. Carol chose climate change as her primary environmental issue because she saw it as the most encompassing of environmental issues. Sarah chose population growth as her primary issue because for her, it had quantifiable, direct impacts on the natural world. In his young adulthood, Roman chose his career as an architect for similar reasons:

I was already focused on environmentalism and I was looking at some form of environmental activism. Again, I love to build and I love to design. And I thought, well, buildings are a big part of the problem. In fact, in the U.S., buildings consume over 40% of our annual resources. It's the number one greenhouse emitter and has tremendous consumption.

Creatively and strategically, they utilize their personal histories, judgment, and knowledge to best navigate their trajectories and involvements. They purposefully decide how to spend their energy and time so that they will maximize benefits to the environmental cause, feel the most fulfilled, and maintain a viable career. They avoid dropping or burning out with these strategies in two key ways: (1) it resolves the tensions between making a living and their activism, and (2) it also allows them to navigate competing life responsibilities and save time.

Every activist discussed the environmental cause as being a part of their life purpose and moral imperative. Carly said, “So I guess it's a psychological sense of purpose. It satisfies my psychological sense of purpose.” However, it isn't as simple as purpose for the activists. It's not just about doing something that makes them feel good, a “worthy” contribution. It's an imperative. Carly continued:

I guess I can't not support environmental causes. It's a part of my DNA literally. From the smallest backyard experiences just watching the degradation of the river I grew up on, to the very bizarre climate change that's going on today.

Similarly, Travis said commitment to environmental activism was not only a part of who he was; it was a relationship.

Something like that that you're so passionate about, that affects you on such a visceral physical and emotional level, you don't walk away from that. It's like getting married. It's who I am.

They say being an environmentalist is truly who they are. Victor adds that he couldn't do anything else. He could be a part of different organizations or have a different job, but it would always have something to do with the environment.

I'm here because I wanted to help and I wanted to leave the world better than I found it. It's always been about that. Since I was a kid, it's been about that. . . . This isn't a job. This is my life. I can't do anything else. I could do it in different ways. Sure, I could stop what I'm doing here and doing it in a different form, but I can't not do this. Even when I taught school, I taught life sciences, I taught about being global citizens, I taught about love and appreciation for nature. It was just a different form of the same thing. Now I do it for adults, politicians, and company CEOs. It's the same thing, just a different form.

These activists connect their activism to their life histories and careers. It's always been who they were. If they weren't working on environmental issues, they would be someone else. They avoided burnout or short-term setbacks in part by making choices and constructing narratives of their lives that highlighted the connections to larger, more long-term activist goals.

When they did switch careers or activist trajectories, they understood those changes as persisting with the movement, even though they were involved with other activities. They often said that other avenues of action better complemented their life purpose and allowed them to better support the environmental cause. Some left organizations, groups, careers, or life paths as they learned more and as current circumstances didn't fit their ideals. Bradley's career history is a useful example. He decided to become an engineer and study alternative energy because he felt it would be most useful.

I think it probably came to a point where I realized what I want to do. I needed to do something to help protect the earth somehow. And I started doing it very strategically. When I went to undergrad, I said, "Well, what could I do? Well, you know, I'll do something with alternative energy." It was one of the things destroying the land as well as contaminating the atmosphere and contributing to climate change. And so, yeah, that pushed me to pursue that, and I worked for an energy company for a few years because of that.

He went into a career path in alternative energy to develop and spread viable energy alternatives. His mission, however, morphed when he had a realization.

I didn't want to be the engineer that couldn't talk to public health people. Because it's like you come from the environment side, ultimately, everything you're doing is related to health. You're talking about coastal water quality. Nobody cares about coastal water quality unless it's going to maybe close the beach because it's going to get people sick. They don't do it for the dolphins' sake. They do it for people's sake, so that's why it's paid for. It made sense for me to get a public health degree as well, so I can speak both languages.

He gained more knowledge and shifted his strategy to better "help protect the earth." To do so, he left his career working in alternative energy to pursue a master's degree in public health. He felt he had a purpose to aid the environment and shaped his career and livelihood around it. This revelation helped him feel he was doing more for the environmental cause, and as a result, he avoided the disillusionment or lack of efficacy that often precedes burnout.

In sum, activists often used their careers to complement or facilitate their life purpose of helping the environment. They are less likely to leave activist work if their livelihood sometimes depends on sustaining activism. They are also less likely to burn out because they frame their activism as a life purpose, which means it can offer meaning.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, I explored the individualized strategies that environmental activists connect with their persistence. Consistent with scholars who study burnout, the participants in my study did not mention organizations when discussing what protected them from leaving the environmental movement. Instead, they mentioned forms of self-care and creative strategies utilized at an individual level, a form of individual action and identity distinct from collective, more organizational forms (Polletta and Jasper 2001). As many scholars of burnout and persistence assert, this represents a failure of organizations (Cox 2011; Gorski and Chen 2015; Rettig 2006). Still, the ways in which activists are creative (Downton and Wehr 1998) and find individual ways to persist are illuminating.

When faced with any struggle, frustration, or setback, the activists used time in nature as a resource to rejuvenate and get reactivated. When activists felt hopeless or disenchanted with the cause, they bracketed or even ignored environmental problems. When activists felt powerless and needed to feel efficacious, they focused on what they could control in their life related to their activism. When activists were frustrated with losses or immediate problems, they focused on long-term, more realistic movement outcomes and goals. When activists faced issues associated with employment and competing life challenges, they reshaped their careers and framed their life purpose around the environment. All in all, these strategies allowed activists to manage the emotions, experiences, and situations that often lead to abandoning movements. They also provide activists a sense of efficacy and hope, often essential to movement success (McAdam 1982, 2017).

Some of the strategies I uncovered during in-depth interviews with environmental activists were consistent with other movements in the literature review. Thinking long-term, staying positive, managing life responsibilities, adapting careers were present in the literature review of scholarship on peace activism, animal activism, and progressive activism (Andrews 1991; Downton and Wehr 1998; Gomes 1992; Einwohner 2002; Lowan-Trudeau 2017; Newman 2012; Valocchi 2013). One strategy and form of self-care, in particular, that I discussed is seemingly less translatable to other movements: time in nature. In one study on burnout, Gorski (2015) shows that social justice activists effectively use mindfulness practices such as yoga, meditation, or tai chi to cope with challenges and strengthen their activism. Based on the interview data, it seems that many environmental activists utilize “time in nature” as a quasi-mindfulness practice as well. While access to natural spaces often reflects structures of inequality and is not available to all (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009; Park and Pellow 2011), the positive psychological effects of time in nature can aid some activists in avoiding burnout. Furthermore, “time in



nature” seemed to offer even more than “psychological benefits” to the environmental activists interviewed. Time in nature allowed them to reconnect with the natural environment and often their reasons for activism in the first place and with their identity as an environmentalist. It is also key that they mention “time in nature” with regard to avoiding burnout. It seems unlikely that activists in other movements would make the same connection. That discursive connection alone may render “time in nature” as a more powerful protective factor against burnout for environmental activists than for other activists.

Furthermore, environmental activists can interpret their leisure time in nature as part of their activism. It gives them a sense of sustained connection and also makes their “activism” itself more enjoyable. Perhaps it is also seen as a less “self-indulgent” (Gorski 2015) form of self-care in the environmental movement community because it’s so closely related to movement spaces of contention—nature. Other movements lack this “common outlet space” that is closely linked to the form of activism itself. Shared activities or recreation, common in other forms of activism, such as drinking or socializing, may be great for releasing stress and tension but relate less to the space of contention. In contrast, many of the other strategies such as staying hopeful and thinking long-term are more translatable to other movements or any challenging endeavor. Reframing activism and its challenges in creative ways can help any activist persist. Shaping one’s career around activism can do the same.

Although perhaps less unique to environmentalism, two other strategies the activists utilized were also distinct from the literature. Scholars mentioned structural challenges, such as white supremacy (Gorski 2019), as a potential cause of burnout. The long-term environmental activists mentioned structural challenges in interviews as well, but their responses to those challenges were unlike any in the literature. They avoid the news, “write-off” climate deniers, and focus on what they can control in their own lives. Lucky for them, pro-environmental behavior is approachable and ubiquitous. This type of behavior represents the overlap between life spheres of activists that scholars discuss (Passy and Giugni 2000), particularly when it involves incorporating political consumerism and lifestyle movements into broader activism (Haenfler et al. 2012; Neilson 2010). If an activist is facing existential or structural challenges to the movement, he or she can feel like he or she is doing something by biking to work, buying organic, or even hiking. In other movements, dealing with structural challenges through personalized politics and lifestyle activism is likely to be more difficult. An activist facing a structural issue such as white supremacy or social inequality cannot connect biking to work with making a difference (albeit very small). Perhaps this type of strategy and form of self-care is not unique to environmental movements, but to movements that can offer more possibilities for personalized avenues of expression (e.g., food, consumer, LGBTQIA+, etc.). Although these particular lifestyle behaviors are negligible in impact, the behaviors still have potential to take on an existential significance for activists and help them feel more in control. Handling the structural challenge of living in a world with incremental environmental progress (at best) is something environmental activists must manage.

Social movements are a core topic of sociological inquiry. This article addresses an understudied topic in this field: how persistent environmental activists use personalized strategies to cope with the challenges associated with their activism. Interviews with long-term environmental activists revealed some strategies and forms of self-care that overlap with literatures on persistence and burnout but also new ones that long-term environmental activists use to persist. Sociologists can use these findings to connect with their own studies of persistence in other arenas of social life. Environmental activists and movements can use these findings to support activist persistence. Environmental social movement organizations should take heed that the long-term activists I interviewed never mention that organizations aid their persistence. They connect their persistence to personal strategies instead.

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