Doing ‘enough’ of the ‘right’ thing: the gendered dimension of the ‘ideal activist’ identity and its negative emotional consequences

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ABSTRACT
This article explores how the activist identity is constructed within a local anti-austerity activist culture, how it is implicitly gendered, and the emotional implications of this. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 individuals engaged in local anti-austerity activism, the author argues that although presented as an abstract, genderless, individual, the ‘ideal activist’ is actually male. Despite participants defining activism broadly to include small acts in the everyday, the ‘ideal activist’ identity is narrowly defined by doing ‘enough’ of the ‘right’ type of activism – direct action. It is argued that this identity is easier to achieve for men than women, and that the negative emotional consequences of not achieving the identity are more likely to be experienced by women. The criterion of doing the ‘right’ amount of activism excludes those who cannot commit to constantly doing activism; women tend to face structural availability barriers to political participation, often related to caring responsibilities. The binary construction of direct action as ‘real’ activism versus online ‘slacktivism’ minimizes online activism, which is a form of accessible activism that women can combine with caring responsibilities. While women participants identify and challenge gendered barriers and exclusions to local anti-austerity activism, the implicit gendered nature of the ‘ideal activist’ identity and its damaging gendered consequences are not recognized, resulting in women feeling guilt and blaming themselves for their perceived failure to adequately perform the identity. This article thus reveals the complex ways that spaces of resistance can reinforce dominant gendered power structures, while ostensibly fighting against them. By utilising a feminist approach, the author establishes the importance of paying attention to the gendered differences between activist experiences in counter-hegemonic movements and contributes to understanding the complexities of the activist identity in the context of anti-austerity activism.

Abbreviations: PA: the People’s Assembly Against Austerity; BME: Black Minority Ethnic; LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

Since the 1990s there has been a growing attempt to recognize the central role played by emotions in motivating and sustaining social movement participation (Goodwin,
Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Jasper, 2011; Mouffe, 2005). At the same time, studies have increasingly demonstrated the important role played by collective and individual identities in sustaining social movement participation (Gamson, 1992; Melucci, 1989). Exploring the intersection between emotion and identity, Goodwin et al (2001, p. 9) remarks that ‘the “strength” of an identity, even a cognitively vague one, comes from its emotional side’. Taylor (2000) explores this relationship between emotions and identity in her study of women’s self-help movements, demonstrating how negative emotions can be translated into more positive understandings of self and collective identity that invoke solidarity and a shared understanding.

Contrastingly, studies of the ‘activist’ identity reveal how its typical construction as an extraordinary individual (Bobel, 2007; Cortese, 2015; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Stuart, 2013) often functions as an unreachable standard that results in individuals feeling unworthy of the title (Bobel, 2007; Stuart, 2013). As Brown and Pickerill (2009) identify, this has a negative emotional effect on individuals. Similarly, Jacobsson and Lindblom (2012) recognize that expectations within activist communities result in feelings of guilt when individuals perceive themselves to underperform (though they contend that guilt can function positively as a motivation to do more).

While studies identify the negative emotional effects of the extraordinary activist construct, the majority do not recognize the gendered dimension of this. By utilising a feminist approach to explore how the ‘ideal activist’ identity is constructed within a local anti-austerity activist culture, this article reveals how the construct and its negative emotional effects are implicitly gendered. It is argued that the ‘ideal activist’ is male, given how the identity is narrowly defined by doing ‘enough’ of the ‘right’ type of activism (direct action), which results in women feeling guilt and blaming themselves for their perceived failure to achieve the identity. The next section provides context by discussing the literature about gendered and emotional experiences of political participation and the activist identity, focusing on anti-austerity activism. Following this, an account of the research’s methodology is given, focusing on what feminist research entails, the choice of research methods and participant demographics. Analysis of the research data, which emerged from 30 semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in local anti-austerity activism in Nottingham, England, explores how anti-austerity activism addresses gender, the ways the ‘ideal activist’ identity is constructed and how it and its emotional effects are implicitly gendered. It is argued that the ‘activist’ identity needs to be defined more widely to incorporate other, inclusive, forms of activism and it is hoped that this article will encourage activists to do so.

**Gendered experiences of political participation**

While it has been suggested that there has been an increase in women’s political participation, individuals’ experiences demonstrate the continued influence of wider gender norms and roles (Dodson, 2015). Dodson (2015) draws attention to how the division of labour within social movements is gendered with women often being assigned the mundane organisational tasks, which Thorne (1975, p. 181) terms ‘shitwork’. Despite studying a distinctly male-oriented movement in a U.S historical context, Thorne’s (1975) findings have been reinforced over the years, with men being more visible and given more prestige in social movements than women (Culley, 2003; McAdam, 1992).
Furthermore, women still face significant structural availability barriers related to traditional gendered roles and caring responsibilities that prevent them from participating politically (Craddock, 2016). Bobel’s (2007) key study of ‘doing activism and being activist’ links such gendered barriers to the extraordinary activist character who is defined by protesting around the clock and therefore less likely to be an identity that women have the opportunity to claim. Such barriers are reinforced within the context of austerity where, rather than witnessing a ‘detraditionalisation’ of gender roles and norms, we are in fact witnessing a ‘retraditionalisation’ of gender, with care work regressing to the private sphere and becoming women’s unpaid work in the absence of publically provided care.

Yet, gendered (and racialized) critiques of austerity are notably absent or inadequate within anti-austerity activism (Craddock, 2016; Emejulu & Bassel, 2015; Maiguashca, Dean, & Keith, 2016). Maiguashca et al.’s (2016) analysis of feminism within the People’s Assembly Against Austerity (PA) (a movement which, along with the local branch of UK Uncut, is one of the biggest anti-austerity groups in Nottingham, the research site this article draws on), demonstrates that where gender is paid attention to (and, notably, it does not feature prominently in the PA’s documented ideological vision), women’s experiences of gendered oppression are conceived of in economic terms only (Maiguashca et al., 2016). Similarly, I have previously explored the local PA’s neglect of the gendered dimension of austerity and barriers to political participation, arguing that the movement prioritizes class politics over gender, partly due to the dominance of white working class men (Craddock, 2016).

Moreover, female participants report many instances of sexism and racism within anti-austerity activist spaces (Maiguashca et al., 2016; Emejulu & Bassel, 2015), demonstrating that such spaces often uphold the dominant structural oppressions that they supposedly aim to bring down. While the increased conversation about such occurrences might signal a heightened awareness of sexism and a strengthened feminist consciousness, the lack of serious attention being paid to structural issues of gender oppression within anti-austerity groups’ ideological visions and documentation, combined with women’s narratives of their experiences in these groups, casts serious doubt on Maiguashca et al.’s (2016) optimistic claims of a ‘feminist turn’ within the overarching anti-austerity movement.

Instead, it appears that women and issues of gender (and racial) oppression have been excluded from this wider movement. Where feminist anti-austerity activism occurs, it tends to be isolated from these main groups and organized by women, for women (Craddock, 2016). Emejulu (2017) demonstrates that minority women activists were often excluded from anti-austerity movements when they attempted to raise gendered and racialized critiques of austerity and attributes this to the incompatibility of difference with a populist movement where ‘There could be no space for analyses and actions that centred race and gender since these supposedly “controversial issues” could potentially fracture the unified “people”’ (p. 64).

Further, the populist nature of anti-austerity activism (with its framing of participants as ‘ordinary’ people and the ’99 percent’), problematizes the role or even existence of an activist identity. Additionally, questions about the role of the activist identity are complicated by the tendency for anti-austerity movements, such as UK Uncut, to be constituted by loose horizontal networks that have no official membership. Yet, as this article will demonstrate, participants have a shared understanding of the ‘ideal activist’ identity which persists despite differences across organisations and an anti-austerity movement constituted of multiple groups, with porous boundaries. Moreover, it is argued that the ‘ideal activist’ identity is
gendered, with its narrow criteria being easier for men to achieve than women, reflecting the androcentric tendencies of anti-austerity activism and the subtle ways that social and political life is gendered. As Maiguashca et al. (2016, p. 39) state ‘it is important to explore how oppression can be produced unwittingly and even unwillingly’.

**The gendered nature of the activist identity**

Coleman and Bassi (2011, p. 205) remark that there is a tendency for research to look at power solely as ‘counter-hegemonic’ or ‘bottom-up’ which ‘obscures the ways in which power may be exercised within practices of resistance’. They draw attention to the subtle ways that spaces of resistance can reproduce and thus reinforce the dominant oppressive gendered structures that they ostensibly reject. They identify the figure of the ‘Anarchist Action Man’, who encompasses a masculine performance of activism where direct action enables men to ‘shape the same ideal male body: fit, able, and hyper-masculine’ (Coleman & Bassi, 2011, p. 217). In this respect, the activist, whilst imagined to be an abstract and universal character, is actually male, reflecting feminist critiques of the universal citizen. Phillips (1991, p. 36) contends that the ‘abstract individual’ is a patriarchal category and that to accept it is ‘silently accepting his masculine shape’ (1991, p. 36). Bourdieu (2001) explains that social life is implicitly gendered and that the effects of this are masked by society’s ‘doxa’ (what is taken for granted) which conceives masculine domination as neutral.

The influence of this masculine doxa is reflected by the ‘very slowness of [gender’s] revelation’ in research studies of activism (Kennelly, 2014, p. 242). Kennelly (2014) admits that gender only emerged once she searched her interview transcripts for the word ‘guilt’. Although Kennelly (2014) does not refer specifically to the activist identity, she draws attention to the gendered dimension of activist guilt by arguing that within the context of gendered neoliberal responsibilisation discourses and the retraditionalisation of gender structures, it is women who ‘bear the burden of that “choice” [to change the world] as an overwhelming and impossible responsibility’ (Kennelly, 2014, p. 250). The failure to fulfil this results in women feeling guilt, which Kennelly (2014, p. 243) interprets as a ‘gendered structure of feeling’, in the vein of Williams (1977). Kennelly thus highlights the gendered emotional effects of activism and specifically the ways in which such gendered experiences are often implicit and linked to the wider political context.

Likewise, while I had paid attention to explicit gendered barriers and exclusions to activism, as well as discovering the presence of anxiety and guilt about the amount and type of activism individuals did, it was not until I returned to my interview transcripts with gender in mind regarding guilt, that I discovered that it was a distinctly gendered phenomenon. It is therefore important to pay close attention to gendered differences in experiences of activism in order to uncover and challenge the power relations between activists, which are often neglected when focusing on movements that seek to resist elite power.

In summary, both explicit and implicit gendered differences in activist experiences exist, which often result in spaces of resistance reinforcing dominant oppressive structures. Despite austerity being a feminist issue given its disproportionate impact on women, anti-austerity activism has neglected to adequately consider gendered critiques of austerity and the role gender plays as a power relation in activist spaces. Further, while several studies have identified the negative emotional effects of the extraordinary activist construct, the majority do not recognize their gendered nature. As an exception, Bobel (2007) identifies the explicit gendered
dimension of the activist identity but does not explore the implicit gendered aspects of the identity and its emotional effects. Kennelly (2014) draws attention to the implicit gendered effects of doing activism but does not explore the role played by the activist identity in this.

This article therefore aims to build on Bobel (2007) and Kennelly (2014) to explore the implicit ways the activist identity is gendered within the context of anti-austerity activism and the damaging, hidden, gendered consequences of this. It does this by utilising a feminist approach that focuses on the gendered subjective experiences of women participants of anti-austerity activism. Focusing on anti-austerity activism widens the focus of such an enquiry from research on feminist movements to a movement which is not explicitly concerned with gender, though it has a clear underlying gendered element given the disproportionate impact of austerity on women. It is hoped that making visible the previously invisible gendered dimension of the activist identity and its consequences will not only contribute to our theoretical understanding of the role of gender in subjective experiences of doing activism and being activist but will also enable activists to challenge such gendered barriers and exclusions.

**Methodology**

This section will outline a feminist approach to research, followed by a description of the local context and explanation of the research methods and data analysis utilized, in order to provide transparency and context for the following analysis. Finally, it will present participant demographic information.

**A feminist approach**

While no single feminist methodology exists, the combination of certain features demarcates ‘feminist research practice’ (Hesse-Biber, 2007), which underpinned this project. These include an understanding that gender inequality exists, a commitment to political change through research, a concern with the subjective, lived experiences of participants, an emphasis on knowledge building as a relational process which requires researcher reflexivity, and an acknowledgement of the power dynamics between researcher and researched, which influence the knowledge produced.

We must be cautious about speaking of ‘women’ as an homogenous, unified group; however, the need to recognize difference does not negate the possibility of looking at shared, common experiences (Tanesini, 1999). Although there is no universal experience of ‘woman’, it is possible to speak of women as a category that corresponds to the social structure of gender, which has real and material effects (such as the gender pay-gap) on those who are perceived and identify as women (Nixon, 2013).

**The local context**

It was necessary to clearly define the field and provide a boundary to the research in order to enable an in-depth exploration of a particular activist culture. The research therefore focused on Nottingham as an active location in the resistance to austerity. At the height of anti-austerity activism in Nottingham in 2010–2013, there were several campaigns against
government spending cuts that protested on a weekly basis, forming a vibrant and dynamic local activist scene. These included groups that campaigned against specific cuts such as Notts Save Our Services, feminist activism and groups operating from the Women’s Centre such as Nottingham Women Campaign for Change, and local branches of wider national movements such as UK Uncut and the People’s Assembly Against Austerity. It is important to remember, as Beth (participant) states, ‘austerity is a thread that runs through many campaigns’. Therefore, participants were involved in a combination of groups and campaigns that resist austerity, including those above, with anti-austerity activism being a broad area and groups having porous boundaries.

**Qualitative research methods**

I utilized a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews to produce rich, in-depth data about individuals’ experiences and meanings of anti-austerity activism. I attended anti-austerity groups’ organising meetings, events, and protests between 2011 and 2013, including UK Uncut events, the People’s Assembly, feminist anti-austerity groups, and smaller local campaigns. My extended immersion within the setting enabled me to gain trust among participants and subsequent access to interview participants. While I originally asked for ‘activists’ to participate, I quickly discovered that the term had ambiguous and complex meanings for individuals. I therefore dropped the word ‘activist’ from online posts and emails requesting participation and instead recruited individuals who self-identified as having been involved in local anti-austerity activism. The construction of the ‘activist’ identity became a central theme of the research which emerged from these initial experiences and conversations with individuals involved in local activism. Participant observation therefore helped me to refine my research questions and the topics that I asked about in the interviews. Data gathered from participant observations also contributed to analysing and understanding participants’ narratives as it provided a wider context to draw on. For example, many women participants spoke about the dominance of white men in the organising meetings, which was reinforced by personally witnessing this during my fieldwork.

I interviewed 30 local individuals using semi-structured interviews that lasted for approximately 90 minutes, to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ perspectives. I used a loose interview guide of topics that had emerged from observations and conversations and allowed the interview to be guided by the participant. Data analysis occurred simultaneously alongside data generation. This was enabled by transcribing the interviews soon after recording, making notes during transcription and comparing these to the previous interviews by using mind-mapping software and thematic analysis to generate themes (Fetterman, 1998). This meant that some themes did not emerge until later in the research process; notably, I began asking participants explicitly about feminism after the first eight interviews as this became a key theme.

Nevertheless, there were several topics that I covered in all of the interviews including: what political activities the participant was currently involved in and why, what they had previously been involved in and why, the types of actions and meetings they had been to and their opinions of these, the local context of Nottingham and anti-austerity activism, the role played by social media in activism, what they think the most important issues are to people, and whether they consider themselves to be a political activist – how they understand this term, what role activism plays in their life and how it makes them feel.
Sampling and participant demographics

While I began the search for participants by using Facebook and websites of local anti-austerity groups to post calls for participants and to contact gatekeepers of local groups, the most successful method of participant recruitment was snowball sampling, as participants spread the word that I could be trusted and encouraged others to come forwards (for which I am very grateful). While this could have resulted in a limited sample, because of the broad participant base of anti-austerity activism (one participant explained that unlike other Left groups and movements, participants were not solely the ‘usual suspects’), I managed to access participants both at the core and periphery of the movement who participated in multiple groups, reflecting the complexity and ambiguous boundaries of local anti-austerity groups. Nevertheless, there are limitations with the diversity of the sample, as the following characteristics demonstrate. However, from my participant observations, which involved many conversations with individuals and attending various events, meetings and protests, the sample does appear to reflect the general make-up of local anti-austerity activism – white male dominated, with more participants under 45 than over, a noticeable student and public/third sector worker presence.

The sample included seventeen males and thirteen females, six of whom were mothers, including three single mothers. Seventeen participants were in their twenties, ten in their thirties, two in their forties and one in her fifties. Twenty-five were university educated with three having PhDs, reflecting Fuchs’ (2005) contention that participants in contemporary movements tend to possess cultural capital. Eleven participants were in full-time employment including four males and seven females. Four of these females had children, three were with a partner and one was a single mother. The majority of full-time employed participants worked in the public or third sector. Five participants were in part-time employment in the private sector including three males and two females who were both single mothers. There was one self-employed male, and four unemployed participants, including three males and one female who was unemployed due to disabilities. Eight participants were currently full-time university students, though the majority of them also had part-time or zero hours contract employment.

The majority of participants were white with one British Pakistani, one Black British, one Chinese and one white first-generation Eastern European migrant. Participants noted the visible absence of non-white, black minority ethnic (BME) anti-austerity activists and had tried, unsuccessfully, to address this by reaching out to ethnic-minority communities. Further, several participants identified as having a disability and as LGBT. Half identified as working class, a quarter as middle class, and the remaining quarter had an ambivalent relationship with class. Notably, the majority of women emphasized gender over class in their narratives about their identities, influenced by their negative associations of working class politics and men. This perhaps reflects an effort to address the traditional dynamic of class being emphasized over gender by placing gender visibly at the centre of anti-austerity activism, an approach this article also takes.

While attempts were made to collect as much demographic information as possible, I did not request participants to fill out a questionnaire about their demographic information as I felt that this would compromise my ability to gain participants and valuable data, given that individuals were keen to be as anonymous as possible. Therefore, it is highly probable that
more participants identify as disabled and LGBT than I identified but I have only provided information that was self-disclosed.

Individuals’ participation involved organising and attending protests and meetings as well as participating in online petitions, awareness raising, and group organisation. There were ten core organisers of UK Uncut and People’s Assembly events and actions who are included in my sample. The sample also includes individuals who only attended meetings and/or protests and those who mainly participated online. For reasons of preserving anonymity, I have not identified what role individuals fulfilled and use pseudonyms. While a distinction was drawn between the People’s Assembly and UK Uncut (which is explored in Craddock, 2017), most had participated in both as well as other local groups, and it emerged that the ‘ideal activist’ identity was consistent across groups. Therefore, despite organisational differences, these different groups and campaigns formed part of a wider local anti-austerity activist culture.

Given the heterogeneity of the research setting and the lack of an over-arching clearly defined ‘movement’, I refer to ‘anti-austerity activism’ throughout. Of course, there are issues concerning how ‘activism’ is defined and understood, and this is explored in the wider research (Craddock, 2017). For now, I am using a wide definition of activism that incorporates participation in protests, direct action, online petitions and campaigns, and community groups that are focused on resisting austerity. However, it is noted that the term is fluid and that this definition is open to revision. The focus of this article is on how the ‘ideal activist’ identity is defined by participants and its gendered impact. Therefore, I have deliberately not provided my own definition of ‘activist’ as the focus is on the complex ways that participants negotiate this term, and, as this article will demonstrate, it is not an easy task to provide a clear all-encompassing definition of the title. Although I place participants’ voices at the centre of the project, it is important to remember that the researcher always maintains power as the one who decides what is recorded and omitted, as well as how data is interpreted and presented. Therefore, it is acknowledged that the product of research is always ‘our story of their story’ (Oakley, 2015, p. 14).

Having established the need to explore the implicit gendered differences between activist experiences, and outlined the particular research context, I now present analysis of the data. I begin by establishing austerity as a feminist issue and highlighting gendered barriers and exclusions to local anti-austerity activism before detailing the ways in which the activist identity is constructed by the local anti-austerity activist culture, focusing on what I have called the ‘ideal activist’ identity. The implicit gendered dimension of this identity and its negative implications, which is the main focus of this article, will then be demonstrated and explained.

**Gender and anti-austerity activism**

Both female and male participants recognize the gendered dimension of austerity and its effects. Dermot remarks ‘the people who are getting hit hardest are women. That’s just the statistical truth […] so austerity is a women’s issue which means it is a feminist issue’. Specifically, participants speak about cuts to women’s services and public sector jobs, which tend to be occupied by women (Fawcett Society, 2012). Alison, a mother who had left her job in a women’s service because of austerity, reinforces this: ‘it is the double thing, isn’t it, of the public sector, which is mostly women that work in the
public sector, and the welfare cuts that massively affect women [...] women are the victims, the first victims, because gender specific services are the first ones that go’.

Despite this, gendered barriers and exclusions to local anti-austerity activism persist (Craddock, 2016). As Hazel asserts ‘ultimately they exclude women, because they have the meetings in the evening when you’ve got to put your kids to bed’. Participants suggest that this is a symptom of the dominance of white men in anti-austerity activism and their concern with class politics, to the neglect of gender. Beth says:

There is not really any sphere of public life that isn’t gendered. So even when you have well-meaning people maybe meeting under a Marxist banner to oppose cuts to the NHS or whatever it might be, they are usually still typically run by men and you need to have people involved that go ‘hang on, if we have this meeting at this time on a Sunday evening, then these women won’t be able to come’.

Participants also consider the subtler ways gendered power relations restrict women’s access to participating fully in activism. They highlight a general atmosphere of ‘aggressive machismo’ in activist circles which makes spaces feel unsafe for women to participate. Anna notes how in mixed gender groups ‘very often the men have [a] very aggressive argumentative style of arguing and they haven’t got rid of all their patriarchal tendencies to speak over you and to shout you down and patronize you’. Jared demonstrates awareness of ‘informal impediments’ (Fraser, 1992, p. 126) that prevent individuals from participating: ‘people need to feel safe enough to have their voice and safe enough to attend there. ’Cause if there’s not then you’re preventing a lot of people really taking an active role if they wish to in the movement’. Therefore, even when initial access barriers are overcome, further barriers remain that can prevent people from fully participating.

While participants address such gendered barriers and exclusions to local anti-austerity activism, as well as the gendered dimension of austerity (see Craddock, 2016 for a full exploration of how women seek to address this), they do not recognize a further gendered barrier to being an activist – how the ‘ideal activist’ identity is defined and its negative gendered consequences.

The ‘ideal activist’ identity

Two main constructions of the ‘activist’ identity emerged from participants’ narratives; the ‘authentic’ activist who has the required lived experiences to possess the authority to speak about certain topics, and the ‘ideal activist’ who does the ‘right’ type (direct action) and level of activism, protesting constantly. Therefore, while participants emphasize caring in their narratives about activism (speaking about caring and empathy for others as motivations for activism [see Craddock, 2017]), it emerges that the ‘ideal activist’ identity is defined not by caring but by doing (as suggested by the often repeated question ‘am I doing enough?’). Participants construct this as the ‘gold standard’ of activist, which is not often achievable.

While the focus of this article is on the ‘ideal activist’ identity and its underlying gendered dimension and consequences, it is important to keep in mind that the two constructions of activist are often combined to produce an overarching activist identity. This implies that individuals need to have relevant lived experiences, be motivated by
the ‘right’ things, and do ‘enough’ of the ‘right’ type of activism in order to achieve the ‘activist’ label. Clearly, the bar is set high, which has repercussions that will be explored. I will now outline how the ‘ideal activist’ identity is constructed before revealing how the identity is implicitly gendered, and discussing the negative gendered consequences of the construct.

**Doing the ‘right’ amount and type of activism**

It might be assumed that individuals reject the activist identity because of negative connotations, however, it is often because ‘activist’ is held in such high regard, and defined by distinctive criteria, that individuals do not accept the label. Participants’ narratives reinforce Stuart’s (2013, p. 170) suggestion that ‘the more positive stereotypical high level committed activist could function as a high-bar perceived requirement where some individuals may feel they fall short’. In response to being questioned about what ‘activist’ means to her and whether she identifies as an activist, Beth says ‘I don’t do enough [activism]’ and others suggest that they cannot claim the activist title because they ‘only do little bits’ (Anna). Yet both Anna and Beth had been involved in various forms of activism over at least four years including anti-austerity, feminist, and human rights activism which involved taking on organising roles, attending events and protests, and managing online groups. Both therefore had a long-term history of activism yet still felt unsure about whether they fulfilled the criteria for being an ‘activist’. This was a repeated occurrence in narratives of individuals who had varied and long-term involvement with activism, with women particularly never feeling they did ‘enough’ to be considered an activist, no matter how much they did. The only female participant who did not feel uncertainty about the activist identity was someone who was involved more peripherally, perhaps because she was not as embedded within and influenced by the local activist culture’s values and expectations.

At one point Charlotte directly asked me ‘am I doing enough?’ suggesting that ‘activist’ is a label to be granted by somebody else. In this respect, the activist identity works via the Althussian (1971) concept of ‘interpellation’ where a subject comes into being when hailed by someone who has authority. Charlotte implies that I have the authority or expertise to decide what ‘counts’ as activism given my role as researcher, indicating that what counts as ‘enough’ is relative to others’ activities and is not openly discussed in activist communities. Indeed, participants appeared to use the interview situation as an opportunity to freely discuss their anxieties about the activist identity and role. There is a sense, then, that participants are seeking not only guidance but also reassurance from someone qualified to give it, that what they are doing is ‘enough’ to be deemed an activist.

Dana reinforces the idea that rather than being a self-identification, ‘activist’ is a title to be earned and awarded by somebody else:

> I remember somebody when, just before I got involved properly with *No More Page 3* and I’d done a couple of the demos that was all and somebody tweeted me or included me in a tweet saying ‘oh looking for local feminist activists’ and they included me! And I thought, is that me?! I thought God, I suppose it is! Blimey, I’m a feminist activist, who knew!
Dana’s comment shows that the ‘activist’ label is regarded as a badge of honour, reinforcing Bobel’s (2007, p. 154) suggestion that: ‘hoping that she [participant] is an activist suggests that the designation activist is bestowed upon an individual, like an award given for exceptional service’. It became clear that the ‘activist’ title is held in high regard by participants and functions within the local activist community as a form of symbolic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Those who are awarded it are granted status and a good reputation as well as possessing links to others with authority in activist circles.

Moreover, participants’ narratives suggest that being an activist is a moral and worthy identity, with activism being interpreted as a moral and social responsibility. Joe speaks of activism as ‘serving society’. Similarly, Hazel quotes Alice Walker, saying: ‘activism is the rent I pay for living on the planet’. The idea that activism is a duty reflects a moral and normative stance held by many participants that activism is something that everybody should do. Charlotte asks me ‘whether you think to just do a little bit is enough or whether you think people should do more, I don’t know, because that’s the thing that I think about’. Here, Charlotte widens the criteria of ‘enough’ from the activist identity to considering how much activism people ‘should’ do as an ethical duty. Notably, when speaking of ‘doing enough’ participants are nearly always referring to ‘enough’ to be considered an activist, rather than to create social change. In fact, participants suggest that small acts are ‘enough’ to make a difference:

Let’s really make a difference, let’s have everybody make tiny small differences and have a bigger society that really works... It takes a village to raise a child; it takes a huge number of people doing many small things to make a revolution. (Mel)

This comment reflects a key way participants define activism – as a form of care. Other participant definitions of activism include challenging discourses in everyday life (which suggests that talking can be a form of activism) and helping individuals on an everyday level. Charlotte speaks of her ex-partner’s work as a Mental Health Nurse as a form of activism: ‘he helps people, like individual people, and he does things for people, very quietly, so I think that is a way of being active, you know, changing things’. However, a clear distinction is made between doing activism and being an activist, with the latter being more narrowly defined, as this article reveals.

What’s more, it appears that there is a discrepancy between what participants perceive the social definition of activist to be and what it actually is. While there is no clear definition of what is ‘enough’ activism to be deemed worthy of the activist title, participants’ response to others’ perceptions of them reveals a probable gap between what others actually think and what they perceive others to think. Dana demonstrates this; despite being pleased to receive the ‘activist’ title, Dana implies that she had perhaps not yet done enough to earn it, stating ‘I’d done a couple of demos, that was all’. Likewise, Stuart (2013, p. 104) notes that ‘one pattern of occurrences was where the ideal person [activist] was described as quite extraordinary – highly capable, knowledgeable and skilled, but their [participants’] own self-description did not match this ideal’. This self-judgement according to imagined standards of others results in individuals making harsher judgements of themselves than others perhaps would. However, as Stuart (2013, p. 98) contends, ‘what others really think is not directly relevant, but rather the assumption made by the individual is’.
It emerges that the ‘ideal activist’s’ criterion of doing the ‘right’ level of activism is tied to the criterion of doing the ‘right’ type of activism, as demonstrated by Charlotte:

I think I’m a lot more active than most people but I don’t think I’m active enough, I don’t in terms of, you know, I haven’t gone and handcuffed myself to a power station or anything like that.

While participants attempt to widen the definition of activism, individuals are often criticized by other activists (and internalize these criticisms to police their own actions) for ‘not doing enough’ or for not doing the ‘right’ type of activism, with direct action being privileged over other forms of activism. Participants draw a sharp distinction between online ‘slacktivism’ and offline ‘direct action’, suggesting that offline action is a more valid and legitimate form of activism. Reinforcing the notion that direct activism is tougher and because of this more noble, Beth suggests that online activism is often perceived to be ‘cowardly’ as it is not directly confronting the problems and people who are causing them. Henry suggests that online activism is a ‘sub-category of activism’ and others refer to it as ‘soft’, ‘armchair activism’ and ‘passive’ compared to active, hard direct action. Activists’ symbolic capital thus appears to be defined by direct action which defines the ‘ideal activist’. Here, direct action is defined as ‘[a]n action where you actually go out and do something, where you go out and let say shut down a shop, close a street’ (Will). Jacobsson and Lindblom (2012, p. 51) observe that ‘the moral hierarchies within social movements are action-oriented: the status that the members are assigned depends on what they have done rather than thought or said’. Indeed, Owain asserts: ‘actions speak a lot louder than words’.

**How the ‘ideal activist’ identity is implicitly gendered**

Although portrayed as an abstract, genderless individual, I argue that the ‘ideal activist’ is male, given its criteria of doing ‘enough’ of the ‘right’ type of activism, which excludes women. For the purposes of this article I will be focussing on the gendered aspects of the identity but it is worth keeping in mind that these gendered barriers and exclusions often apply to people with disabilities too (and thus it is likely that the ‘ideal activist’ is not only male but also able-bodied). The criterion of doing the ‘right’ level of activism (protesting tirelessly) excludes those who do not have the time or ability to commit to doing activism around the clock. As I have discussed, women tend to face structural availability barriers to political participation that are related to caring responsibilities. Beth summarizes: ‘women are busy, they’re so busy […] women’s time is precious, more so than men’s, because they still have to take on this burden of like, housework, or childcare, other care’. Mary explains that ‘there is still an expectation that women are the people who look after the kids […] caring for elderly parents. They are seen as the people that do that caring role and are at home’. Mary highlights the gendered nature of care-work and how this affects not only mothers but women who have other caring responsibilities, which was reinforced by Helen’s (a single woman in her thirties without children) experience as a carer for her terminally ill mother. Additionally, in the context of austerity, women are subject to the ‘triple jeopardy’ of losing public services, their paid jobs providing these services, and being expected to pick up the remaining care work, unpaid (Fawcett Society, 2012; Craddock, 2016).
The criterion of doing the ‘right’ type of activism – direct action – adds a further implicitly gendered exclusion. The binary construction of direct action as ‘real’ activism versus online ‘slacktivism’ is problematic because it minimizes online activism (an umbrella term that includes many different activities such as signing online petitions, organising events, sharing information, among others), which women’s narratives reveal as being a central form of activism that they can combine with caring roles. Beth speaks about her friend setting up a now large Facebook group for local feminists:

So it’s like, techno-grassroots in that sense (laughs), it was just like she made it probably like feeding Mika in one hand and like, at 5 o clock in the morning or something, he was new-born so, (laughs).

The accessibility of online activism contrasts the barriers women face to doing direct action. Dermot acknowledges that direct action often involves the danger of ‘putting yourself on the line’ and Harry remarks ‘if you stand up like a nail, you’ll be knocked down’. Though men spoke about the risks involved in doing direct action, women with children seemed especially worried about these: ‘so in that sense I think it is harder for women […] I think you don’t take as many risks with kids probably’. Additionally, several participants felt constrained by the risk of losing their jobs through participating in direct action, with those who work in the public sector (more often women than men) being particularly aware of this risk.

While direct action is often associated with traditionally masculine traits such as physical confrontation, toughness, and aggression (Coleman & Bassi, 2011; Sullivan, 2005), it should be noted that it is not inherently masculine; indeed, the women Suffragettes were renowned for their direct actions. However, because of the way participants construct direct action in opposition to online activism, thus denigrating a central form of women’s activism, the gendered barriers women face to participating in direct action, and how this combines with the criteria of constantly protesting, it is argued that this results in the ‘ideal activist’ identity being implicitly gendered, which has negative gendered consequences.

**Women’s guilt?**

While all participants were asked about how they understood the ‘activist’ identity and whether they personally identified as an activist, it was only women’s narratives that revealed anxiety and guilt about whether they were ‘doing enough’ to be considered an activist. Male activists spoke about activist shaming practices, referring to activists’ judgment and criticisms for not doing enough direct action, for example, Jack spoke of being called a ‘chicken’ for not wanting to take part in a sit-in. However, they did not speak about being personally affected by these attitudes or question whether their activities meet the criteria of the ‘ideal activist’ identity construct. Only one male participant referred to feeling guilty about how much he did, and this was at the end of the interview as an after-thought. Likewise, Kennelly (2014, p. 249) found that while both men and women comment on the intense expectations of activist cultures, ‘it was women who appeared to take these expectations in and transform them into self-debasing emotions such as guilt or feeling selfish’.

It could be argued that men are less likely to speak openly about their emotions (and thus do feel the same as women but do not express it in the same way), however this does not seem to be the case as they spoke openly about other emotions such as empathy and caring.
It could also be argued, then, that men are more likely to speak about positive emotions rather than negative ones that could be perceived as ‘weakness’. However, this does not appear to be the case either as men were forthcoming in speaking about other emotions that could be perceived to be ‘weak’ such as being upset and being ‘in really shit disempowered kind of positions’. Moreover, whilst empathy is portrayed as a positive emotion, participants closely link it to ‘caring about others’, which has often been considered a feminine activity. Yet both men and women spoke about activism as a form of caring for others. Finally, given the time I spent as a participant attending groups’ meetings, events, and protests, I built a good relationship with many of my interview participants and so they spoke openly and honestly with me about personal topics. Therefore, I believe that the absence of guilt within male participants’ narratives reflects the gendered nature of the ‘ideal activist’ identity and its effects.

Although participants recognize the gendered dimension of austerity and highlight gendered exclusions and barriers to doing anti-austerity activism (as I have demonstrated above), they do not recognize the gendered dimension of the ‘ideal activist’ identity. Thus, despite being male, the ‘ideal activist’ is accepted as a universal abstract body. In this respect, activist cultures reflect the wider societal doxa of ‘masculine domination’, highlighted by Bourdieu (2001), where masculine behaviour and forms of thinking are afforded a higher status but taken for granted as ‘natural’ because of how embedded and inscribed in our daily activities and discourses they are. The obscuring and naturalisation of the gendered nature of the ‘ideal activist’ identity masks the structural causes of women’s perceived ‘failure’ to achieve the identity and instead places full responsibility on the individual, leading women to blame themselves for their perceived personal failure to live up to the identity’s criteria. This results in ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1984) where ‘the internalized experience of pain or suffering that results from social conditions […] is misrecognized by the subject as somehow of their own making’ (Kennelly, 2014, p. 250).

**Conclusion**

Despite the gendered impact of austerity and individuals recognising this, gendered barriers and exclusions to doing anti-austerity activism persist which ironically reinforce dominant gendered structures. However, while individuals challenge explicit gendered barriers and exclusions to local anti-austerity activism, they do not recognize the implicit gendered nature of the ‘ideal activist’ identity. This article has demonstrated that despite participants defining activism broadly to include small acts in the everyday, the ‘ideal activist’ identity is narrowly defined by doing ‘enough’ of the ‘right’ type of activism – direct action. It has been argued that the ‘ideal activist’ identity is easier for men to achieve than women, which results in women feeling guilty about not doing ‘enough’ activism to merit the ‘activist’ title. Therefore, women are more likely to experience not only barriers and exclusions to doing activism and being an activist in the first place, but negative emotional impacts from not fulfilling the criteria to be deemed an ‘ideal activist’ and from perceiving this failure as personal and individual rather than structural, gendered, and beyond their control. Thus, the activist field is not an equal playing field, despite its presentation as such; the ability to achieve the activist identity and its associated rewards is weighted in favour of men, while the negative emotional consequences of not achieving the identity are more likely to be experienced by women.
In order to develop rich data and an in-depth understanding of these processes, the research focused on a specific context. There are obviously limitations to this and it would be fruitful for future research to explore the gendered dynamics of the activist identity and its impact in other contexts. Sandhu and Stephenson (2013) identify the disproportionate impact of austerity on BME women, yet the local anti-austerity activist scene in this research had a notable absence of BME activists and had unsuccessfully attempted to address this. Like other forms of supposedly abstract and universal individuals, it is highly possible that the ‘ideal activist’ is not only male but a white able-bodied male. However, further research is needed to substantiate this and as this research did not focus on race, I have avoided making claims that are not grounded in the research data. Future research that considers how gender intersects with race, class, and disability would further enrich and deepen our understanding of the complex and multifaceted identities and experiences of activism in diverse real-world contexts.

Overall, this article demonstrates the importance of paying close attention to the gendered differences in experiences within counter-hegemonic groups in order to identify how dominant power relations might be reinforced by the spaces that seek to resist them. It also highlights the subtle, implicit ways that gendered structures affect women’s experiences of political participation. It is hoped that this article will contribute to our understanding of the complexities of identity within anti-austerity activist cultures and encourage individuals who do activism to widen their understanding and definitions of activist to incorporate other, inclusive, forms of activism, thus minimising the exclusive and damaging gendered effects of the ‘ideal activist’ identity.

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**Notes on contributor**

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