

# Sustained versus Eroding Community Engagement

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## Abstract

The potential benefits of sustained community engagement in the political process are diverse: conflicts addressed and issues publicly debated in the short term, and social capital fostered and civic democracy strengthened for the future. One critical issue for sustainable community engagement is whether individuals who become engaged with an issue will maintain commitment over time. Turnover and attrition from community projects and groups reduces efficiency and prevents the development of social capital from long-term relationships. This paper reviews existing theories of sustained commitment from the social sciences and argues that the social psychology of group processes and identity can make a key contribution to the literature. Supporting evidence is drawn from two studies of passive and active war supporters and opponents conducted during and after the invasion of Iraq. High engagement with the political process among war opponents during the war steeply declined subsequently, providing a natural laboratory to test existing theories and models of sustainable community engagement. While political and sociological models of community participation received support in both studies, psychological identification with the process emerged as a key variable in each case. Moreover, a longitudinal study of activists showed, consistent with social psychological models, that engaging in collective action strengthened psychological identification over time, which reduced the rate of drop-outs. Normative conflicts emerged as key causes of burn-outs in the long term. The theoretical and social implications of the results are discussed.

## Keywords

Social identity, engagement, turnover, activism, alienation

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that although there is a burgeoning community of researchers who know that community engagement is important, relatively little attention has been paid to the important question of sustaining commitment over time. This paper will argue that current models of engagement often point to variables that would predict stable or increasing community engagement over time. However, attrition and turnover in community groups is often very high, and this theoretical and empirical problem would benefit from research attention. Group-level variables, and in particular psychological identification

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<sup>1</sup>This paper focuses on general psychological and social processes to define community engagement rather than attempting to limit the analysis to 'positive' forms of engagement. Our perspective is that the difference between positive and negative engagement is often in the eye of the beholder. For example, government programs can be judged positive engagement by some and negative by others if there are differences of opinion about whether the program is assimilationist, perpetuates inequality, or is designed to be ineffectual window-dressing rationalising the status quo. By focusing on the processes involved in sustaining engagement defined as collective mobilisation *intended* to solve social problems we avoid making a global judgement as to whether the outcomes should be evaluated as positive for society.

with groups, are proposed to be essential in modelling and predicting sustained versus eroding community engagement in the long term.

### ***The importance of community engagement***

Disciplinary differences in the understanding of community engagement can arise, but in this paper we adopt a broad process-oriented definition as *collaboration by groups of people defined by geographic proximity, social category membership, political views, and so on to address issues that influence their well-being* (Fawcett et al. 1993). It often involves the formation of alliances to mobilise resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and induce change in policies, programs, and practices (Fawcett et al. 1995). Community engagement can take many forms, from information sharing to partnership in program development, and it can be initiated by non-governmental community groups as well as governments and international non-governmental organisations (Putnam 1995, 2000).

Although community engagement does not inevitably translate into positive outcomes (Zine 2001), it has been identified as a positive force for social wellbeing across many domains. Programs and social systems work better if they engage communities, whether the program is designed to protect and improve health and wellbeing (CDC 1999), to reduce violence (Lutenbacher et al. 2002), or to improve young people's academic achievement (McGee 2004). Moreover, community engagement in one domain often generates spillover benefits in many others (Putnam 1995, 2000). For example, in one case a program to increase community engagement with cancer prevention produced not only successful cancer prevention initiatives but positive social relationships and new political processes described as "in many ways, more beneficial than the implementation of the resulting [cancer prevention] initiative itself" (Baillie et al. 2004, p. 218). The creation and sustaining of new social and political relationships by which resources can be mobilised and policies, programs, and practices affected across multiple domains has been referred to as the development of social capital (Putnam 1995, 2000). Perhaps even more important than community engagement in health and education, we would argue, is community engagement in the democratic political process, which is seen as essential for a healthy political system as well as beneficial to citizens individually and collectively (Kinder 1998). The potential benefits of community engagement in the political process are diverse: conflicts addressed and issues publicly debated in the short term, and social capital fostered and civic democracy strengthened for the future.

### ***Sustaining engagement over time***

One critical issue for sustainable community engagement is whether individuals who become engaged with an issue will maintain commitment over time. Turnover and attrition from community projects and groups reduces efficiency and prevents the development of social capital from long-term relationships (Baillie et al. 2004). Any attempt to review the literature of several fields in a single paper can give rise to oversimplifications. With that epistemological caveat in mind, however, we will progress to a sweeping generalisation: little empirical research, and even less theory, has been devoted to the questions of sustained versus eroding community engagement (for exceptions, see Herman and Usita 1994; Madia and Lutz 2004). But in community organisations turnover is typically very high, and so is attrition in engagement with community programs (see also Cyr and Dowrick 1991). The effects of this attrition can be documented and are often quite negative: impaired relationships, and decreased knowledge that lowered efficiency and

reduce effectiveness. Community groups and programs, like businesses, may fail within months or years of establishment, and the reasons for this attrition are not well established.

This paper will review existing theories of sustained versus eroding commitment from across the social sciences, and argue that the social psychology of group processes and identity can make a key contribution to the literature. Supporting evidence is drawn from two studies of passive and active war supporters and opponents conducted in Australia during and after the invasion of Iraq. To anticipate: high engagement with the political process among war opponents during the war steeply declined subsequently, providing a natural laboratory to test existing theories and models of sustainable community engagement. While political and sociological models of community participation received support in both studies, psychological identification with the process emerged as a key variable in each case. Moreover, a longitudinal study of activists showed, consistent with social psychological models, that engaging in collective action strengthened psychological identification over time, which reduced the rate of drop-outs. Identity conflicts emerged as key causes of burn-outs in the long term. The theoretical and social implications of the results will be discussed.

### ***Theories of sustained, increasing, and eroding engagement***

The purpose of this section is to draw attention to the extent to which current theories of engagement account for stable or increasing political engagement, and without providing a model to account for eroding engagement. Then, three models that could account for eroding community engagement are reviewed, which locate eroding engagement in movement success, in other competitors for engagement energy, and in changing group identities and norms.

#### *Stable factors*

Many models of community engagement direct attention to factors that are reasonably stable, such as class. People who are more educated, wealthier, earning a higher income, and in more prestigious occupations are more likely to be engaged in community service and with community programs and organisations (see Kinder 1998, for one review in the political domain). Demographic characteristics have also been studied, such as gender (Verba et al. 1997). According to Kinder (1998) and others, age has been linked to engagement in many studies, but the direction varies depending on the age range being considered: retirement is a strong predictor of community engagement, while parenting often inhibits this form of engagement. Controlling for these socio-economic variables, differences in engagement have also been noted among ethnic and cultural groups. For example, in the United States, Hispanics have been observed to be disproportionately disengaged from politics (Verba et al. 1995). At the community or societal level, a history of democratic politics can facilitate or inhibit community engagement (Mariani 1998).

These demographic variables influence engagement in two ways, via individuals' associated resources and motives, and by the environment created by (or reflected in) the demographic differences (Kinder 1998). Wealthier individuals (in skills, time, and money) have the resources that enable them to afford the costs of engagement. Personal interests, group interests, emotions such as sympathy and resentment, and perceived principles and duties motivate political engagement, and these motivations can be shaped by demographic and social group memberships (Louis and Taylor 2005). For our purposes, the implication of this research is that some individuals, groups and communities are more likely to volunteer than others.

However, there is no reason for instability and rapid turnover to arise within a group of engaged community members.

#### *Factors that result in spiralling engagement*

Other research draws attention to factors that should, all other things being equal, result in monotonically increasing community engagement. For example, past research has demonstrated that more knowledge translates into more interest in issues, and increases the likelihood of engaging in the issues by increasing individual's awareness of how they can make a contribution (Galston 2001; Kinder 1998). However, since knowledge about a community concern cannot decrease, why would committed individuals drop out of the groups they engage with? Similarly, theorists such as Putnam (1995, 2000) have drawn attention to the virtuous circles of engagement by which ties to one community organisation can facilitate engagement in other domains. Engagement can facilitate further engagement by many paths, in this model. For example, engagement increases future recruitment opportunities and mobilisation potential. Church members can be tapped for a political campaign, sports teams can organise charity fund-raisers, and so on. Similarly, engagement in one organisation can increase skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy about the repertoire of political behaviours of the day, and these resources can be drawn on by other organisations. With networks of activists involved in multiple community organisations, important knowledge, of successful tactics for example, can pass rapidly from group to group. Putnam's proposal that engagement in one domain can facilitate engagement in another has been supported by empirical research (Boeckman and Tyler 2002; Tossutti 2003). However, as with political knowledge, the spiral model of mutual facilitation doesn't seem to account for the frequent turnover and issue of institutional attrition that can be observed in community engagement.

#### *Eroding engagement?*

Three models of eroding community engagement can be reviewed, which locate eroding engagement in movement success, in other competitors for engagement energy, and in changing group identities and norms.

First, some research draws attention to the possibility that community organisations can be mutually competitive rather than facilitating, so that engagement in one domain inhibits engagement in others (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Two versions of this model can be derived. In one version, individuals fluidly move to groups that deal with the issues of the day, taking their skills with them, and then move on once the issue has been resolved to the betterment of society. This version sees interest in engagement motivated by societal needs, and engagement often leading to productive social change. In this vision, community groups could arise to address a problem, solve the problem, and then dissolve, releasing their members for other positive projects.

As a more general version of this model, which does not necessarily imply constant social betterment, commitment is proposed to be a function of two processes: satisfaction in the current role/relationship, and perception of the available alternatives. For example, research on close relationships suggests that the perception of available new partners combines with dissatisfaction in the current relationship to motivate breaking up (Lydon et al. 2003). A similar approach has been adopted in political science and sociology by

resource mobilisation theorists (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977), who have envisaged community leaders as entrepreneurs vying for market share. This model emphasises the extent to which people choose from multiple spheres of engagement competitively, seeing resources for engagement as often zero-sum (rather than expanding, as in the spiral models above). The competitive models explicitly address one possible cause of eroding community engagement, namely the rise of other movements that better serve individual or groups' motives and resources. The pessimistic version of resource mobilisation theory can emphasise the trade-off of individual and societal needs, so that worthy causes and effective tactics suffer disengagement when they are superseded by fashionable causes that offer social or material rewards to hedonistic participants. A less pessimistic version emphasises the replacement of failing social movements by more effective ones, so groups who neglect member interests or inflexibly pursue ineffective tactics are abandoned in favour of more functional community organisations.

More broadly, models of social movement success and competition both frame sustained, increasing or decreasing community engagement as a rational process, drawing attention to satisfaction with the community group relative to alternatives as the critical variable. Engagement depends on the successes of the community organisation in attaining goals and satisfying needs, and accordingly, we should be able to predict community engagement with psychological models of rational decision-making. In our research program, we employ two rational decision-making models: the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991) and the selective incentives model of social movement participation (Klandermans 1984, 1997).

The theory of planned behaviour is the most successful general model of decision-making (Armitage and Conner 2001), and proposes that behaviour is proximally predicted by intentions to act. Intentions in turn arise from consideration of the costs and benefits associated with the behaviour; perceived social expectations and motivations to comply with those expectations; and perceptions of ability to perform the behaviour. Consideration of these individual-level variables has succeeded in accounting for a large amount of variance in individual decision-making (Armitage and Conner 2001). However, application in collective contexts has generally required consideration of group-level variables as well. Within the rational choice tradition, Klandermans (1984, 1997) advances a model of decision-making in which individuals' perceptions of individual-level material and social costs and benefits independently predict participation in social movements, alongside a third group-level predictor, namely perceived effectiveness of the movement in attaining collective goals. Perceived effectiveness at the group level has been observed to predict social movement participation independent individual costs and benefits (Klandermans 1997). Sometimes, however, people have called into question the utility of cost-benefit approaches at both the group and individual level in accounting for collective behaviour.

The social identity approach draws attention to changing group identities and norms as powerful causes of increasing or decreasing community engagement (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987). Social norms, defined as group-based standards or rules for engagement, are held to facilitate or inhibit engagement (see also Kinder, 1998). Social identity theorists point out that individuals are members of many social categories and groups. Since norms vary across social groups, membership in multiple groups means that individuals may have multiple norms for the same behavioural context (Louis and Taylor 2005). There are multiple ways that people can define themselves at any given time (as an academic, a woman, a White person, and so on),

and these identities are attached to conflicting or reinforcing norms for behaviour. Individuals define themselves in different contexts with reference to different psychologically salient groups, and in doing so conform to group norms (Terry and Hogg 1996, 2001; Turner et al. 1987, 1989). The psychological importance of particular identities changes as a function of perceptions of the context, and so do the norms for group behaviour in conflict (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987). Speaking broadly, identities are proposed to become salient in a context which are historically associated with an identity, or where differences are perceived between groups and similarities are perceived within groups. For example, in examining a salary report, a woman could become conscious of her gender if she perceives that men and women are paid differently; if she identifies herself as a woman, gender norms for action come into play, and the woman may be likely to engage with gender issues. A great deal of social psychological research shows that psychological identification with a group and perceptions of the social context, rather than group membership alone, motivates conformity (Terry and Hogg 1996, 2001), as well as engagement with problems of discrimination (Louis and Taylor 1999), or tolerance of discriminatory behaviour (Johnson et al 2005).

The social identity approach suggests that group norms can shape individual-level rationality, both by creating a link between consequences for the individual and group (Louis et al. 2005) and by normatively driving cost-benefit analyses (Louis et al. 2005). However, for our purposes, the more important point is that some theorists have argued, and some empirical research has shown, that identity can influence decision-making independently of rational choice concerns to sustain engagement in collective groups and motivate intentions to participate in future behaviour (Kelly 1993; Simon and Klandermans 2001; Simon et al. 1998; van Zomeren et al. 2004). This identity can foster engagement 'irrationally' (independent of cost-benefit analyses) by cueing routine or habitual behaviour in long-term activists (Simon and Klandermans 2001) or triggering emotions (van Zomeren et al. 2004), or cognitive processes of self-stereotyping (Terry and Hogg 1996, 2001).

### ***Summary and overview of current research***

In this paper, two studies are described which integrate the above theoretical models in analysing community engagement during the Iraq war. The first study illustrates Australian peace activists' plummeting engagement over April – May 2003, showing the initially high levels of engagement dissipating over a short (four week) period. While individual-level factors are linked to intentions to engage, group-level factors play a more important role in sustaining engagement. Structural group factors (formal group membership), group-level rational outcomes, and psychological identification each contribute independently to intentions to engage. Moreover, it is primarily group-level factors that buffer against attrition, under-engagement, and disengagement over time. A second study is described that follows up key findings in Study 1 with passive and engaged war opponents. Finally, implications for motivating engagement are discussed.

### **Study 1: Engagement with the peace movement**

We summarise here the results of a study (discussed in more detail in Louis and Terry 2005a) which assessed community activism in April and May 2003. We recruited 155 participants at Time 1 (April 2003) who were engaged as peace activists, having performed at least one pro-peace action in the last month. We employed a snowball sample recruited by speaking at activist groups, sending invitations to complete the

survey to e-lists for Australian peace groups, and spreading news of the survey via word of mouth. The survey was posted online, but print versions were also created and mailed to respondents who requested offline access. The sample for Study 1 was diverse but unrepresentative, ranging in age from 16 to 75 (with a median of 35), 62% women, disproportionately politically affiliated with the minor parties, Green (63%) or Democrat (19%), highly educated (93% having some form of tertiary education). Sixty-two percent were members of formal groups of which 45 were represented in the sample. Although respondents were all residents of Australia, the group contained a high proportion of non-citizens (62% citizens, 20% dual citizens, and 18% non-citizens).

At Time 1, respondents rated their intentions to engage in collective action in the next month, and then a month later at Time 2 we recruited 71 of them to report on their action in the last month. We can thus ask, how stable was community engagement over the time period of the study; what predicted intentions to act at Time 1; attrition at Time 2; and under-engagement (i.e., less community engagement than intended) at Time 2; and what lowered intentions (motivated disengagement) at Time 2. To answer these questions, we focussed on comparing models which accounted for engagement erosion and decline. Models that predicted sustained engagement in terms of satisfactory individual outcomes (material and social costs and benefits and control beliefs: Ajzen 1991) were compared with models that included group outcomes such as effectiveness in attaining group goals (Klandermans 1984, 1997). These rational choice variables were compared to non-rational models which included other group variables: formal group membership (which we took to stand as a proxy for mobilisation potential, and thus hypothesised to be a positive predictor of engagement; Putnam 1995, 2001) and psychological identities. Three types of identities were measured, namely proximal identification as an activist, which was expected to predict sustained engagement independent of rational outcomes (Kelly 1993; Simon et al. 1998; Simon and Klandermans 2001), and to be reinforced by collective action over time. In addition, we assessed identification with the more distal social categories of political parties and nationality typically considered in social identity research (e.g. Turner et al. 1987, 1989; Louis and Taylor 2002). It was hypothesised that these would impact on community engagement by motivating conformity to perceived group norms for war support and opposition, which were also measured (Terry and Hogg 1996, 2001; Turner et al. 1987). Table 1 summarises the results of Study 1.

### ***How stable was community engagement?***

A marked decline was observed in engagement over the six weeks of the study, with the number of active respondents recruited dropping from 155 to 71, and the average number of actions reported by participants dropping from 4.2 each to 2.2 each. Despite the high intentions to engage in collective action reported at Time 1 (with 70% of the sample scoring above the midpoint of the scale on intentions to act), attrition was over 50% and participation among respondents at Time 2 had also declined steeply by 50%. In short, community engagement was not sustained even over the short four week period of the study but rather eroded steeply over time. This level of attrition and disengagement arguably contributed to the difficulties of the peace movement in the months following the outbreak of the war.

**Table 1. Summary of findings**

Study 1						Study 2		
Problems of unstained engagement: Number of participants declines by 50% over four weeks. Declining engagement intensity also observed (i.e., 50% fewer actions engaged in at Time 2, despite high intentions at Time 1).						Problems of unstained engagement: Majority of those who support issue have not acted. Large minority (28%) are actively trying to avoid further information about the distressing issue.		
Unique predictive role observed for:	Time 1 Good Intentions	Attrition at Time 2 (Dropping out)	Under-engaging (Less action than	Disengaging (Lower intentions at Time 2)	Unique predictive role observed for:	Good intentions	News avoidance	
<b>Individual-level</b>	<b>Yes:</b>	<b>No:</b>	<b>No:</b>	<b>No:</b>	<b>Group Identities:</b>	<b>Yes:</b>	<b>Yes:</b>	
Personal benefits > personal costs	+ effect on intentions	--	--	--	Political identity	+ effect on intentions	- effect on avoidance	
Control beliefs	+ effect	--	--	--	National identity	- effect	+ effect	
<b>Group-level:</b>	<b>Yes:</b>	<b>Yes:</b>	<b>Yes:</b>	<b>Yes:</b>	<b>Mediators:</b>	<b>Partial:</b>	<b>No:</b>	
Formal group membership	+ effect	--	- effect on under-engaging	- effect on disengaging	Group benefits > group costs	+ effect (no mediation)	--	
Perceived group effectiveness	+ effect	--	--	--	Negative emotions to politicians	+ effect (partial med. of political id)	--	
Activist Identity	+ effect	- effect on drop outs	--	--	Negative emotions to ordinary Australians	--	--	
National Identity	--	--	+ effect	--				
Political identity	--	+ effect	--	+ effect				

**What participated intentions to engage?**

Individuals' personal material and social costs and benefits were linked to intentions to engage at Time 1, along with control beliefs. These results provide support for the general theory of decision-making called the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991), which like other rational choice models locates individuals' decisions to engage in pro-social acts in perceived individual benefits. The results suggest we can help

support community engagement by service functions that benefit members of organisations and by social functions that foster mutual expectations of engagement and control.

However, controlling for these individual level variables, variables at the group level independently predicted intentions to engage. As predicted by the selective incentives model (Klandermans 1984, 1997), perceptions of the effectiveness of the social movement in meeting collective goals motivated engagement, demonstrating that group-level variables can play an important role in rational decision-making (see also Louis et al. 2005). In addition, identification as an activist independently predicted intentions, consistent with the social identity approach (Kelly 1993; Simon et al. 1998; Simon and Klandermans 2001). Independent of rational decision-making, those who identified more strongly as activists had stronger intentions to act. Finally, independent of these psychological variables, membership of a formal organisation was linked to stronger intentions to engage. These results are consistent with a mobilisation potential approach (Putnam 1995, 2000) in which formal group membership facilitates further community engagement. In the analyses of Time 1 intentions, effects of broad social category variables (i.e. nationality and political party affiliation) were mediated through other variables, so that the broad category variables did not directly predict unique variance. It was identification as an activist, rather than identification with party or nationality, that influenced intentions to engage.

### ***What predicted attrition at Time 2?***

Strikingly, individuals' costs and benefits were not linked to attrition, nor were control beliefs. However, at the zero-order level, people who were not members of formal organisations and who identified less strongly as activists were more likely to drop out of the study, while marginal trends were apparent for higher attrition in those who perceived the movement as less effective in reaching its collective goals, or who perceived their political party as supporting the war more. Considered jointly in logistic regression, only identification as an activist and higher identification with a political party predicted attrition. Those who identified more strongly as activists tended to be less likely to drop out, while those who identified more strongly with a political party were less likely to sustain engagement in the peace movement

The findings point to the unexpectedly strong importance of psychological variables (identification as an activist versus with a political party) in shaping engagement. Rational outcomes, whether at the group or the individual level, had no unique impact on attrition, contrary to models such as selective incentives (Klandermans 1984, 1997) and planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991). Moreover, formal group membership did not buffer against attrition, despite the mobilisation potential that group membership confers (Putnam 1995, 2000). These results paint a relatively benign picture of attrition in community engagement, in suggesting that those more engaged with the formal party process of democratic activism were the ones who drifted away from informal community activism. In this regard, the unexpected pattern of results could suggest a functional fluidity of engagement between formal and informal democratic systems.

### ***What predicted under-engagement relative to intentions?***

In addition, however, we analysed the likelihood of under-engaging among those who completed a second questionnaire in May 2003.<sup>2</sup> Again, individual's costs and benefits were not linked to under-engagement, nor were control beliefs, nor perceptions of the effectiveness of the movement in attaining group goals. Thus, contrary to rational decision-making models (Ajzen 1991; Klandermans 1984, 1997), perceptions of group- and individual-level outcomes could not account for sustained community engagement. However, it was observed that people who were not members of formal organisations were more likely to under-engage, supporting a mobilisation potential approach (e.g. Putnam 1995, 2000). Unexpectedly, identification as an activist was not linked uniquely to under-engagement: we had expected that those who identify more strongly as activists would be less likely to under-engage. Instead, an effect for national identification emerged: those who identified more strongly as Australian were more likely to under-engage than those who were less nationalist. This result is discussed in more detail below.

We also asked participants to evaluate a number of reasons why they might have engaged less than they had planned. The reasons that participants considered most important were family commitments, time/financial pressure, and lack of organised opportunities for activism. In this sense, participants' perceptions of the barriers to sustained commitment appear to line up with rational choice models and mobilisation potential models. However, endorsing these reasons was *not* correlationally associated with individuals' actual under-engagement, interestingly. The only reason whose endorsement was significantly linked to under-engagement was the perception that the fighting was over quickly and thus there was a reduced need for peace activism. There was a marginal *negative* correlation for family commitments and under-engagement too, so that people who reported their family commitments were getting in the way of their activism tended to be *less* likely to under-engage. Considered jointly, participants' evaluation of reasons for sustained engagements did not add to the prediction of under-engagement, however.

Finally, it is worth noting that among those who completed the Time 2 questionnaire, people who were low in identification as an activist at Time 1 and who engaged in more group actions in the intervening period reported higher levels of identification as an activist at Time 2. (Highly identified activists at Time 1 in general sustained high activism at Time 2, regardless of action in the intervening months.) These results are consistent with the social identity approach (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987, 1989). They also provide indirect evidence in favour of a "spiral hypothesis", in that engagement in community activism helped build identification as an activist, which in turn bolsters and sustains activism in the longer term.

### ***What predicted disengagement at Time 2?***

Finally, we looked at the factors that predicted disengagement at Time 2, which we conceptualised as disproportionately low Time 2 intentions for engagement after controlling for Time 1 intentions. Again,

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we regressed the self-reports at Time 2 of what people said they actually did on their intentions at Time 1. Consistent with the planned behaviour model (Ajzen 1991), intentions at Time 1 did predict self-reported engagement at Time 2. However, what we were interested in the present analyses was the extent to which deviations from intentions could be accounted for. We took the reverse-scored unstandardised residual as a measure of how much less people actually engaged in the peace movement than they planned to. Higher scores meant people engaged a lot less than they intended to, whereas lower scores meant that people engaged as much as they planned to or even more than intended.

individual-level cost-benefit analyses and control beliefs at Time 1 had no impact on disengagement. Those who perceived high social expectations for peace activism at Time 1 were more likely to disengage at Time 2, controlling for Time 1 intentions, although the zero-order relationship of social expectations and Time 2 intentions was not significant. This suppressed effect suggests that although social expectations could motivate people to engage in the short term (Time 1 intentions), social pressure at the individual level was also linked to eroding engagement in the longer term (Time 2 intentions). However, the stability of the finding remains to be replicated in future research. Perceived effectiveness in attaining group-level outcomes was also negatively associated with Time 2 disengagement at the zero-order level, but did not account for any variance uniquely. Taken as a whole, then, the results point to the global ineffectiveness of perceived individual or group benefits in providing a buffer against disengagement the long term.

By contrast, formal group members were less likely to disengage, controlling for individual- and group-level outcomes, supporting a mobilisation potential approach (Putnam 1995, 2000). Moreover, strongly party-identified respondents were more likely to disengage from community activism, reinforcing the hypothesis proposed above that in part the decline of community engagement in this study was a function of competing psychological identification with formal party politics. However, when the reasons rated at Time 2 for under-engagement were also considered as a predictor of lower Time 2 intentions, it was observed that people who perceived more time/financial pressure at Time 2 did disengage more. These results support resource-based approaches (Jenkins 1983; Klandermans 1984, 1997; McCarthy and Zald 1977) by demonstrating the difficulty of sustaining engagement in the long term among people whose resources are strained. Beliefs that the fighting was over, or that once the troops were committed peace activism was not appropriate, were linked to more disengagement at the zero order level but did not contribute uniquely.

### ***Study 1: Summary and conclusions***

The results of this study illustrate important and understudied phenomena: the problem of sustainable engagement; the relatively small role of individual-level rational factors in sustaining engagement; the importance of group-level factors; and the independent roles of group membership and psychological group identities.

Firstly, steep declines in engagement were observed over the one month period of the study. While 50% attrition in one month may be a function of the particular context studied (i.e. the peace movement in April–May 2003), very high turnover and burn out rates are commonly reported in community organisations, as noted above. Thus the questions of what erodes engagement and how it may be sustained in the long term deserve research attention.

#### *The limited role of rationality*

As would be expected by decision-makers in many fields, individual-level variables, as measured by perceived social and material costs and benefits and control beliefs (i.e. Ajzen's [1991] planned behaviour model) were related to intentions to engage, which in turn predicted self-reported engagement one month later. What might be surprising to some researchers is the extent to which individual-level variables were unsuccessful in accounting for attrition, failure to follow through on intentions with behaviour (under-engagement), and dropping intentions to engage at Time 2 (disengagement). The only significant link of

individual-level factors to sustained engagement was a suppressed negative association between social pressure for engagement and Time 2 intentions (controlling for Time 1), which could be interpreted as suggesting that although social expectations motivate people to engage in the short term, social pressure at the individual level is also linked to quickly eroding engagement in the longer term. Independent of the planned behaviour model (Ajzen 1991), it was observed that self-reported time/financial pressure at Time 2 was linked to decreased intentions to engage, which may show a role of individual-level resource strain in eroding community engagement (see Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Taken as a whole, however, the effect of these series of analyses is to call into question the utility of individual-level rational choice models in accounting for sustained versus eroding engagement.

By contrast, the critical role of group-level variables in sustained engagement is demonstrated in the present data. Perceptions of the effectiveness of the movement in attaining its goals were independently associated with intentions to engage in community activism (Klandermans 1984, 1997). Interestingly, lower effectiveness perceptions were correlated with attrition, under-engagement, and disengagement, but perceived effectiveness in attaining group goals did not contribute uniquely to any of these dependent variables in a regression analysis. These results suggest that although group-level outcomes may be associated with decision-making, they may play a secondary role in comparison to variables such as formal group membership and identification (see Louis et al. 2005).

Indeed, formal group membership independently predicted Time 1 intentions to engage, as well as providing a buffer against under-engagement and disengagement among those who completed the Time 2 questionnaire. That is, respondents who were members of formal groups formed higher intentions to engage, were more likely to carry out their intentions, and were more likely to sustain high intentions to engage at Time 2. The strong role for this structural factor, even when psychological group identification and rational outcome perceptions at the individual- and group-level are controlled, is consistent with a mobilisation potential effect (e.g. Putnam 1995, 2000).

#### *Psychological identification with social groups*

Finally, psychological identification as an activist was independently linked to higher engagement intentions at Time 1, and reduced the likelihood of attrition at Time 2. The role of the activist identity in predicting engagement and sustained commitment, independent of rational choice deliberations, is consistent with the social identity approach (Kelly 1993; Simon et al. 1998; Simon and Klandermans 2001). Moreover, the results demonstrated strong roles of distal variables of social category identification (with a political party and with Australia as a nation) in sustaining engagement over the long term. Specifically, higher identification with a political party predicted attrition at Time 2 as well as disengagement (decreased intentions to engage at Time 2, controlling for Time 1 intentions) among those who did not drop out. In some circumstances, those who are more psychologically committed to formal party politics may be less likely to sustain engagement with informal community groups. Of course, this competition may be reasonable if individuals committed to formal politics can work effectively within parties to effect change and mobilise resources. However, at a theoretical level, the results provide empirical evidence against the “spiral models” of community engagement. In these data, engagement in one area (formal party politics) inhibited engagement in other areas (community activism) in the longer term.

In addition, higher identification as an Australian was associated with reported under-engagement at Time 2, relative to Time 1 intentions for engagement. Importantly, nationalism at Time 1 was not linked to engagement, ruling out the idea that nationalists in the peace movement were less engaged across the board. Two alternative interpretations for the later effect of nationalism can be advanced. First, highly identified Australians may have responded to the labelling of peace protestors as un-Australian and conformed to an emerging norm of national disengagement: a disturbing possibility! A second interpretation, however, is linked to the seeming end of the military phase of the war in April 2003 (i.e. Bagdad occupied 9 April). Since it had been announced that Australian troops would withdraw once the occupation was complete, Australians who were motivated primarily by nationalist concerns might have perceived that the issue of the Iraq war was less relevant to them in May than they had initially expected, having envisaged a longer war. Future data is needed to disentangle these explanations, particularly given the absence of effects in Study 1 for national or political norms for war opposition (either alone or in interaction with identification). A great deal of research in the social identity approach suggests that group norms associated with particular social categories should influence the link between identities and action.

At a broader level, however, the effects of political and national psychological identities on engagement with peace activism even when individual-level variables and proximal group variables (group membership, activist identity, and social movement effectiveness) are controlled demonstrate the extent to which social category identities can constrain as well as facilitate community engagement (see also Louis and Taylor 2002). Broad social category memberships can inhibit engagement, either via norms of disengagement with particular issues or by motivating group-focussed interests that direct attention away from broader community concerns. In this sense, the present effects also demonstrate the limits of the “spiral engagement” models. The findings that informal community engagement in politics, for example, can be eroded by engagement with formal party affiliations, while engagement with national concerns can be at the expense of international issues, work against the hypothesis that engagement in one sphere facilitates and sustains engagement in others.

### **Study 2: Following up the role of social category identification on engagement**

The results of study 1 provide support for the theory that rational concerns, such as the presence of rewards and the resources to afford costs, can affect community engagement (Klandermans 1984, 1997) and that in social contexts the perception of rational outcomes is often linked to group identities (Louis et al. 2005). However, in other contexts, it has been argued that identities (particularly identification as an activist: Kelly 1993; Simon et al. 1998; Simon and Klandermans 2001) can motivate decision-making even in the absence of instrumental benefits for self or group, and the results of Study 1 also bear this out. Although we did find a role for rationality (individual- and group-level outcomes influenced intentions), independent identification effects were also observed and these proved more important in sustaining commitment over the longer term. The mechanism by which identification sustains engagement is unclear, however: as noted above some have suggested routinisation and habit (Simon and Klandermans 2001), others self-stereotyping (Terry and Hogg 1996, 2001), or “irrational” emotionality (van Zomeren et al. 2004).

We summarise here the results of a study (discussed in more detail in Louis and Terry 2005b) that assessed intentions to engage in activism in April 2003. We recruited 276 participants who were students in sociology, religious studies, social science, or economics at the University of Queensland. The sample was again diverse but unrepresentative, ranging in age from 17 to 57 (with a median of 19), 66% women, and predominantly Australian (76%). Only 80% affiliated with a party, and of these 46% supported the Liberal/National coalition, and 52% one of the opposition parties (26% Greens, 21% ALP, 5% Democrats).

For the purposes of this paper, our goal was to assess the prevalence of under-engagement, and the extent to which psychological group identities were linked to intentions to engage in the next month among the respondents who opposed the war. We were also interested in measuring the extent to which the link between group identities and action could be accounted for by rational choice models, such as perceptions that the war was benefiting the group (Australians) (Klandermans 1984, 1997; Louis et al. 2005), versus emotions (van Zomeren et al. 2004). Participants reported their peace activism in the last month, and this measure was used to code whether respondents were activists (having committed at least one action). In addition, measures were obtained of participants' national and political identification, perceptions of the benefits of the war for Australia, emotions towards politicians and ordinary Australians, and intentions to engage over the next month. To provide a more active index of alienation among war opponents, we also measured and attempted to predict trying to avoid news of the war using social category identification, group-level outcomes, and emotions. Table 1 summarises the results of Study 2.

#### ***How prevalent was under-engagement?***

Among the 55% ( $n = 150$ ) of respondents who indicated they were opposed to the war in April 2003, a majority (51%) had taken no action in the past month. In fact, only 61% were even following news of the war; a large minority (28%) indicated that they were actively trying to avoid news of the war. Thus, a large portion of this student community was disengaged from the Iraq war, even at a time when controversy raged politically and nationally.

#### ***What predicted disengagement?***

We conducted a series of analyses focusing on the respondents who indicated they were opposed to the war in April 2003, examining the extent to which intentions to engage in future could be accounted for by group psychological identification, group outcomes, and emotions. The results suggested that political identification was positively associated with intentions to engage, while national identification was independently negatively associated with intentions. That is, people who were less committed to their political party, and more nationalist, were less likely to engage with the war. Perceived costs of the war to Australia emerged as an independent predictor of engagement. However, the group-level outcomes operated in parallel to group identities rather than mediating the identity effects. Finally, considered independently, negative feelings to politicians and to ordinary Australians were both positively associated with intentions to engage, suggesting that in general participants were motivated by negativity to engage from problems rather than withdraw. Considered jointly with the other factors, it was anger at politicians that emerged as an independent predictor of engagement. Most interesting for our purposes, hostility to politicians partially mediated the positive impact of party identification on future engagement. That is, among war opponents, those who were more committed to their party were also more angry at politicians, and this anger motivated highly identified party

affiliates to intend to engage in future community activism. However, emotions did not play a significant mediating role for Australian identification (although those who were more nationalist expressed more positive feelings towards ordinary Australians).

### ***What predicted avoiding news of the war?***

We conducted a parallel series of analyses of war opponents examining their reported intentions to actively avoid news. In a mirror of the results for disengagement, political identification was negatively associated with intentions to avoid news, while national identification was an independent positive predictor. Individuals who were less committed to their political party, and more nationalist, were more likely to avoid news of the war. However, perceived costs of the war to Australia were unrelated to news avoidance, and so were negative feelings to both politicians and ordinary Australians when considered jointly with the other predictors. At the zero-order level, negative feelings with ordinary Australians were linked to less news avoidance, but this effect was not significant when national identification was controlled.

### ***Study 2: Summary and conclusions***

The results provide an interesting partial replication and extension of Study 1. As in Study 1, under-engagement and disengagement were commonly observed, confirming the importance of studying community engagement in the context of widespread alienation from the formal and informal political systems. Moreover, as in Study 1, the results confirm the importance of group variables in the study of community engagement. Group factors accounted for significant portions of variance in intentions to engage in community activism and engagement with news of the war (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987, 1989; Terry and Hogg 1996, 2001). In addition, consistent with the results of Study 1, psychological identification emerged as a predictor of engagement and alienation that could operate independently of perceptions of rational group outcomes (Kelly 1993; Simon et al. 1998; c.f. Klandermans 1984; Louis et al. 2005). Again, the results highlight the limits of spiral models of engagement. Opponents of the war who were more nationalist in their orientation were less likely to engage in community activism — and this held true even when the effects of perceived costs of the war to Australia, political identification, and emotional responses were independently controlled. Thus, as in Study 1, the results demonstrate the breadth of the problem of disengagement as well as testing and demonstrating the utility of psychological models, and specifically the social identity approach, in accounting for community engagement during the time of the Iraq war.

One difference between the two studies discussed in this paper is that in Study 2, engagement in formal party politics was positively associated with engagement in informal community activism and news of the war. These findings are consistent with spiral models (Putnam 1995, 2000), but different from the first study in which those who were more strongly engaged in the formal political arena showed more attrition and disengagement from community activism. What was particularly interesting is that among these student war opponents, people who identified more strongly with their political party showed more anger at politicians, and this anger motivated them to intend to engage in community peace activism. The results are partially consistent with recent research by van Zomeren and colleagues in which group-based emotions are thought to drive identity-based engagement in collective action (van Zomeren et al. 2004). However, two caveats must be noted. First, the spirit of the dual path model advanced by van Zomeren and colleagues (2004) is

that is negative emotions motivate group-based action when they are felt on behalf of the group towards other groups. It is not clear whether the motivating anger in the present results consists of anger towards politicians of other parties, or of respondents towards their own party leaders' ineffectual opposition to the war. The latter framing would explain the willingness of highly identified party affiliates to throw their energy into community activism. However, it is noticeable that political identification maintained an independent link to engagement even after emotions were controlled, and emotions were not involved in the direct link between political identification and (lower) avoidance of news of the war. Moreover, strongly identified Australians showed more positive feelings to ordinary Australians as well as less anger to politicians without that bearing on the independent positive link between identification as an Australian and disengagement, or nationalist identification and alienation. The results thus do not provide a resolution to the question of the process by which psychological identification with groups affects engagement and alienation. It appears that the link between identity and engagement can be positive or negative, and can operate independently of perceived group norms (as seen in Study 1), and of group-based outcomes and emotions (as in Study 2). Although some effects of identification via these processes can be observed, processes of routinisation (Simon and Klandermans 2001) or self-stereotyping (Terry and Hogg, 1996, 2001) may be more consistent.

### **General discussion**

In the present paper, we focus on one form of engagement: community activism in Australia in response to the Iraq war. It should be noted that factors specific to particular contexts and issues could also influence commitment in the long term. For example, religious values and identity could be more important in some community engagement contexts, such as peace activism, than in others, such as anti-smoking campaigns. Moreover, political activism is only one form of engagement, and work on sustaining engagement in this context should certainly be complemented by empirical study in other domains and types of work. For example among environmental activists, those working with a government-supported campaign to change individuals' environmental behaviour may perceive they share common goals with the government, whereas others attempting to change governmental policy on the environment perceive they are working in a conflict. In both cases however we argue that the work to change a social system is a form of community engagement. Both government-initiated and activist-initiated environmental programs will suffer from problems of sustainability. Thus we propose that the theoretical models described will generalise across contexts to other forms of formal and informal community participation (similarly, see Klandermans 1984, 1997; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987). The present analyses demonstrate, we would argue, the importance of the problem of sustaining community engagement across time, the critical role of group variables in understanding that problem, and the key role of psychological identification in particular. The paper leaves a great many research questions open concerning the paths by which group identities operate, and these questions will soon (we hope) be receiving the attention of researchers in community engagement and social movement participation.

### **Implications of Studies 1 and 2 for programs designed to foster community engagement**

We would like to close this paper by presenting three recommendations for programs designed to foster (or take advantage of) community engagement. These involve the importance of studying psychological variables, the importance of the group level, and the key role of group identification in building and sustaining community engagement.

### **1. Consider the psychology of engagement**

We described, in the introduction, a vast research domain which demonstrates that wealthier and more privileged people and groups are more likely to engage as communities (see Kinder 1998). However, applied researchers will need no telling that we must go beyond this truism in designing programs for community engagement. It is helpful, on one level, to know that efforts to invite community engagement are more likely to succeed if richer, more educated, professionally skilled, less time-pressured groups are targeted. For example, health workers could reach out to time-rich retired elders in a community to get volunteers to distribute information or help run a community program, or target neighbourhood professional organisations in order to recruit local members for a committee on community environmentalism. However, program designers are often concerned not only to exploit resource-based differences in engagement, but to change them. The problem then becomes, how can less well resourced groups and individuals be mobilised? Decision-making models that consider individuals' perceptions of personal costs and benefits, social expectations, and control beliefs for community engagement (Ajzen 1991), provide a list of possible tactics to implement. Lowering the costs of engagement (e.g. childcare for parents for meetings/rallies) and increasing the benefits of engagement (e.g. skill-building and social recognition) would be expected to increase engagement. Recruiting heavily within established groups, instead of piecemeal across a community, would also increase engagement where mutual social expectations of engagement can be established. Finally, targeting individuals' control beliefs — or beliefs that if they attempt to engage with community issues, they will be successful — is likely to increase engagement. Where individuals lack the confidence to volunteer for particular community projects, clear communication about the tasks for which they are needed and the additional training (if necessary) that they will receive will increase community members' engagement.

### **2. Consider the Group Level Variables**

In addition, the present data speak clearly to the need to consider group-level variables, including outcomes, formal group membership, and psychological group identification. Group-level outcomes were associated with intentions to engage in both Studies 1 and 2. Moreover, a host of previous theory and research exists to suggest that contrary to strong individualist approaches, group-level outcomes can impact on individuals' rational decision-making (Klandermans 1984, 1997; Louis et al. 2005). It is probably clear to most program designers and implementers that successful community programs must be perceived to achieve community goals. Careful consideration to the framing of the organisation's goals is essential, then, in that unrealistically high community group goals could paradoxically deter individuals from participating. Even if they agree with a particular noble goal (e.g. stopping global warming), they may not perceive the community as having a realistic chance of achieving the outcome. However, expectations of success in achieving group goals were linked to two other variables that may be even more important targets for program designers and implementers: formal group membership, and psychological group identification.

Formal group membership, in Study 1, was linked to intentions to engage in community activism, and it provided a buffer against under-engagement and disengagement. This was true even though group-level outcomes, individual outcomes, and psychological group identification were independently controlled. The reasons for this strong positive effect are not explored in the present research, but previous research on resource mobilisation draw attention to benefits such as forming relationships, facilitating future recruiting, and skills training (Kinder 1998; Putnam 1995, 2000). Although it may not always be possible to establish

new formal groups linked to particular community projects, the present research draws attention to the benefits of using existing organisations to recruit for community causes and projects.

### **3. Consider the key role of group identification**

Both studies in the present paper, as well as a great deal of prior research and theory in the social identity approach, put social group identities at the heart of collective projects and mobilisation for engagement (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Terry and Hogg 1996, 2001; Turner et al. 1987, 1989). The present research draws attention to the essential role of psychological identities in sustaining commitment in the long term as well. Although rational outcomes were linked to intentions to engage, in Studies 1 and 2, psychological identities played independent predictive roles for intentions in both studies. Moreover, psychological identification was a stronger and sometimes exclusive predictor of disengagement and alienation. Identity as an activist reinforced engagement, in Study 1, and helped sustain engagement over time, while rational outcomes had few if any effects. But while this pattern explains stability and increasing commitment, what is the cause of eroding community engagement? Both in Study 1 and Study 2 *conflicting* national identification had negative effects on commitment. In addition, in Study 1, political identification *conflicted* with sustaining community engagement in the peace movement. These results speak to the limits of spiral engagement models (Putnam 1995, 2000). While identification and engagement in two arenas may be mutually beneficial (as was apparently the case for political engagement and engagement with the peace movement in Study 2), in many cases identities and engagement may mutually conflict.

We would argue that group identification patterns are the critical issue in building and sustaining community engagement. Unsuccessful community engagement programs are perceived as affiliated with outsiders, or with a subgroup or faction of the community, so that people who strongly identify locally or with rival factions are put off from joining or cannot sustain engagement. Literacy, gun control, or environmental programs derailed by perceived rural-urban divides, White-Black divides, or native-immigrant divides are tragic examples of failed group identification management. Successful programs for community engagement tap into or create meaningful group identities, and navigate the challenge of competing affiliation sources. Other sources who are working on parallel goals may be framed as complementary allies within a superordinate movement whose values are exemplified by the current community program. In addition, other sources who are working on different goals, or primarily backing opponents in the current engagement project, must be defused. Role model group members may be presented for groups under-represented in the community program to demonstrate program inclusiveness. Leaders of under-represented groups may be targeted for appeals for the community program, again with an eye to demonstrating inclusive concerns. Effort may be taken to frame the goals and values of the program in terms of the goals and values of the under-represented groups. To the extent that this attempt to portray the community program as including community members and representing community value succeeds, alternative identity sources in the community will reinforce, rather than compete with, engagement with the programs.

The mostly highly successful programs will be those that succeed in developing a sense in program participants of identification as an activist. Identification as an activist is fostered over time by the positive experience of community engagement, as demonstrated in Study 1. The processes by which activist identification works may include routinisation and habit (Simon and Klandermans 2001), emotions (van

Zomeran et al. 2004), self-stereotyping (Terry and Hogg 1996, 2001), or internalised norms that impact on deliberative decisions (Louis et al. 2005). However it works, it is clear both from the present data and from previous research that once fostered, activist identification can sustain engagement in the face of rational disincentives, such as individual costs and perceived inability to attain group goals (Simon et al. 1998; Simon and Klandermans 2001). By recruiting experienced activists, and more importantly by working to foster activist identification in existing program members, community groups and organisations can exert a profound positive impact on the sustainability of their members' community engagement.

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