**Occupy as a Free Space – Mobilization Processes and Outcomes1 [SRO 2013-125-3]**

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**Abstract**

Although Occupy has received extensive media and scholarly attention, there has not yet been systematic research on its activists’ recruitment pathways and modes of participation. In this article, we focus on the mobilization success (Staggenborg 1995) of Occupy and adopt the concepts of ‘free space’ and ‘modes of association’ (Polletta 1999) to understand how individuals came to participate in Occupy. We consider biographical and structural availability and make distinctions between those more or less involved. By drawing on qualitative and quantitative data gathered in November and December 2011 in London we find that Occupy activists take a range of pathways into differential forms of involvement (more or less visible or time-consuming, offline and on-line). Some participants had previously been involved in social movement and ’indigenous’ organisations, like the church. Yet at the same time Occupy attracted novices lacking prior engagement in indigenous or social movement organisations. But what Occupy activists shared was an interest in creating inclusive prefigurative structures where the ‘path was the destination’. In contrast to the mass media’s scepticism of the success of Occupy, our focus on mobilization processes and outcomes shows Occupy to be successful in this regard.

**Keywords**

Free Spaces, Participation, Prefigurative Politics, Mobilization, Occupy, Recruitment, Social Movements

**Introduction**

The global financial crisis which began with the collapse of Lehman brothers in 2008 resulted in an intensified austerity discourse in Britain, Europe and North America affecting trading partners and aid recipients throughout the world. In the UK, public sector cuts quickly gave rise to union action and protests by new organisations such as UK Uncut ([Mason 2013](#_ENREF_35)).

In the Autumn of 2011, inspired by the protests associated with the Spanish Acampmento movement (Castañeda 2012), the Arab Spring (Kerton 2012) and those in many other places around the world (Flacks 2013), a wave of occupations materialised across the globe calling for social justice and for an end to corporate greed. Tahir Square in Cairo became a reference point for many of these protests. In September 2011, protesters ‘occupied’ Zuccotti Park in Manhattan and set up Occupy Wall Street, a widely documented protest event ([Chomsky 2012](#_ENREF_8); [Gitlin 2012](#_ENREF_22); [Graeber 2013](#_ENREF_25)) which inspired similar protests in more than 700 cities in over 80 countries.2 In this article, we focus on Occupy London, which began in October 2011 with an attempt by about 300 protesters to occupy London Stock Exchange (LSX) in Paternoster Square. Thwarted by police, protesters proceeded to set up a protest camp in the vicinity of St Paul’s cathedral. In mid-October there were over 100 tents present at St Paul’s, in addition to a neighbouring camp at Finsbury Park, and, later, a squatted ex-UBS bank building, renamed the Bank of Ideas. Each protest camp, especially St Paul’s, regularly received visitors. The tents were not only sleeping quarters. Several were important for supporting the temporary community, including a makeshift kitchen, a medical tent, a tranquillity space, a computer laboratory (the ‘Techie Tent’), a library and a teaching space known as ‘Tent City University’.

Using deliberative consensus based decision-making common in autonomous movements (Leach 2013) and alter-globalization movements (Della Porta 2009), Occupy London agreed a set of ten key principles at one of its early general meetings.3 However, most of its ideas and activities emerged and developed day-by-day until the police put an end to the occupation with an eviction in February 2012. Occupy London has a number of continuities with previous protest movements (Leach 2013), particularly with alter-globalisation movements (Juris and Pleyers 2009) and Camps for Climate Action (Saunders and Price 2009). Furthermore, it exemplifies the ‘new, new social movements’ which are characterised by intergenerational coalitions of activists across physical and virtual spaces (Feixa et al. 2009). Moreover, we argue that Occupy should be conceived of as an exemplary ‘free space’: where movement ideas could be explored, protest actions were planned and prefigurative politics played out. By prefigurative politics we mean lived practices that embody the desired society (Breines 1982; Leach 2013; Smucker 2013). But how did individuals come to participate in this free-space? We proceed by introducing the concept of free-space and its usefulness for understanding pathways to, and differential participation in, Occupy London. After introducing our mixed methods approach, we present findings highlighting pathways into recruitment and the importance that activists assign to prefigurative politics.

**Free Spaces as Structures of Association**

‘Free spaces’ is a concept that refers to a host of different ecological settings (Snow and Soule 2010), or ‘places’, considered conducive to generating cultural challenges and/or as a precursor to mobilization. As summed up by Polletta (1999), there are a number of divergences in the way it has been applied: free spaces might be physical, linguistic or cyber; they may be always or only temporarily available for insurgents; sometimes they are intimate, other times they are disparate; they are used by insurgents and by those working within society for social change; sometimes they create insurgency, at other times they are purely cultural.

For Polletta (1999), the variety of applications of the concept of free spaces make it less useful as a tool for interpreting social movements than her more refined concept of ‘structures of association’ (explained below). However, we argue that the concept’s different applications actually make it advantageous for understanding a broad-ranging movement like Occupy.4 Occupy London had and continues to have physical, linguistic and cyber presence simultaneously. It is both temporary and permanent at once. Although the St Paul’s site was evicted at the end of February 2012, nomadic camps and working groups continued to exist, making it both intimate and disparate. Its open nature meant that anti-capitalists and some bankers – insurgents and those working within the system – were working together for social change. And finally its emphasis on democracy as a living practice whilst supporting protest actions – as evident in the key principles agreed by Occupiers (see endnote 3) – means that it can be conceived of both as a cultural and political movement simultaneously. In all, in the context of Occupy London, the concept of free spaces is helpful as it reconciles the analysis of culture and structure, acknowledges cultural practices as political, and is able to bridge tradition or past experiences with radical change.

Polletta (1999) argues that in order to understand the contribution of free spaces to mobilisation three ‘structures of association’ need to be distinguished: trans-movement, indigenous and pre-figurative structures. Trans-movement structures bring together activists from across movements. These structures are characterised by extensive ties, ‘well-equipped to identify opportunities, not well-equipped to supply leaders or mobilizing frames, or to recruit participants’ (Polletta 1999, p. 9). If Occupy was an extension of the alter-globalisation movement, we would expect to find that activists have a range of organisational affiliations across movements (Saunders 2013).5 Indigenous structures consist of extant community organizations, like the church, which provide a space for communities to develop a protest response. They are characterised by dense ties and ‘well-equipped to supply leaders, local participants, and mobilizing frames; but not to identify extra-local participants’ (Polletta 1999, p. 9).

However, both trans-movement and indigenous structures take for granted a physical presence rooted in existing social movement activism or community organisations, overlooking the increasing importance of online activism. Polletta (1999) mentions cyber-based free spaces, but she does not include them in her discussion of different mobilizing structures. But for contemporary fluid activism, issues and an online presence can sometimes be more important than organisational affiliation (Bennett 2003). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) suggest that digital media has resulted in a paradigm shift from organisationally focused collective action to web-based ‘connective action’, which is characterised by personalised accounts that ‘travel over social networking platforms, email lists and online coordinating platforms’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 742). However, this distinction between collective and connective action overlooks the role of personal connections in collective action (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Robnett 1996; Rose 1999). Thus, while we appreciate the contribution that the internet makes to Occupy as a free space, we consider on-line activism to be only one of many recruitment channels and only part of the action repertoire of most movements (cf. Nielsen 2013). Yet there is more to recruitment in a multifarious free-space like Occupy than organisational ties and internet mobilisation. In addition we highlight prefigurative structures of association, ‘which aim to create and sustain within the lived practice of the movement relationships and political forms that are “prefigured” and embodied the desired society’ (Breines 1982, p. 6) We argue that prefigurative structures is a useful concept for understanding how both those disenchanted with formal social movement organisations and those who are newcomers become participants in movements. This, we argue is an important mobilization outcome.

**Pathways to Recruitment**

This article contributes to an established body of literature on how people get and stay involved in social movements. Current scholarship, however, is inconclusive about the impact of biographical and structural availability on recruitment to and differential participation in protest. In particular, systematic attempts to understand pathways of recruitment to Occupy are thus far absent from the literature.

Biographical availability – that is having time to participate in movements by virtue of having fewer family or job commitments – does not routinely predict participation in social movements for it has differential effects across different movement settings. McAdam (1986) initially developed the concept to explain high risk activism in Freedom Summer. So it is unsurprising that (Saunders et al. 2012) find it to have little effect in predicting the extent to which people participate in low risk street demonstrations. Moreover, Nepstad and Smith (1999) found that family and work responsibilities did not prevent individuals participating in solidarity movements in Central America. This puzzle in the extant literature makes it especially interesting to examine the extent to which biographical availability matters for a multifarious movement setting like Occupy.

Furthermore, the notion of biographical availability needs to be more firmly situated within an understanding of the life-course. Everyday experiences, ties and obligations can be the motivation for getting involved in movements rather than act as constraints. For example, parenting can lead to involvement in women’s movements, and unsatisfactory working conditions can encourage participation in trade unions (Roth 2000; Roth 2013). Thus a biographical approach – as we take in our own qualitative interviews – is needed to address how involvement in contentious politics fits the lifecourse of activists and relates to all private and public spheres of life (Della Porta 1992; Miethe and Roth 2005; Valocchi 2013). Passy and Guigni (2000) found that those who experienced close links between their main life-spheres (family, work) were more likely to sustain their involvement in Third World activism than those who experience disconnection between their involvement in the solidarity movement and other areas of their lives.

Organisational ties – or structural availability – have attracted significant scholarly attention, in particular in the resource mobilization and social networks literature. Trans-movement networks and indigenous organisations have both been shown to help recruit participants to protest. However, as with biographical availability, the role that trans-movement networks play for recruitment depends heavily on the context, including the type of organisation or protest event to which someone is recruited as well as the culture in which the protest event takes place (Diani 2007). While overlapping networks can bolster the diffusion of mobilization efforts, at the same time organisations might compete for the resources that activists have to offer (Cress et al. 1997). Religion plays an important role in oppositional social movements and religious organisations constitute indigenous structures facilitative of protest in a broad range of contexts. Examples include the US civil rights movement (Morris 1984), South African Apartheid opposition (Walshe 1991), dissident movements in Eastern Europe (Kubik 1994; Torpey 1995), liberation theology in Latin America (Smith 1991) and the solidarity movement in Central America (Passy and Giugni 2000; Nepstad 2004). Yet, attempts to consider the relationship between transmovement and indigenous structures, while taking into account less active forms of participation based on prefigurative politics, are rare.

Given that increasing access to the web in the past two decades has offered new opportunities for movement recruitment and participation, scholars have examined the role of the web for social movement mobilisation and the extent to which it might be transformative. New information and communication technologies lower the costs of joining collective action (Eaton 2010), although it is not clear whether purely virtual ties sustain movement participation (Diani 2000). Social networking sites are frequently used to mobilise online as well as offline (Harlow and Harp 2011). Mercea (2012) highlights the opportunities of “digital prefigurative participation” defined as computer-mediated interaction which occurs prior to participation in offline protest events (p. 154). Thus, rather than replacing offline activism, the use of the internet results in new social movement action repertoires (Costanza-Chock 2003; Garrett 2006; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010) including mutually constitutive interaction between offline and online dimensions of protest, especially within the context of social media (Olcese et al. 2012). Computer mediated communication (CMC) is not only relevant for ‘super-activists’ who have connections to different movements and movement organisations (Van Laer 2010), but also for those previously unaffiliated. However, Nielsen (2013) highlights exclusionary aspects of digital and networked technologies and the need for reflexivity.

After introducing our methodology, we proceed by analysing the relationship between collective and connective action within Occupy. To what extent had those involved in Occupy had previous experiences with social movement and indigenous organisations? And what role did computer-mediated communication play in recruiting participants?

**Data and Methods**

We analyse data from twenty-four qualitative interviews, one-focus group, participant observation and a survey of 142 participants at Occupy. Data were collected in November and December 2011. We visited the Occupy camps at St Paul’s and Finsbury Park as well as the Bank of Ideas on different days of the week (weekdays and weekends) and times of the day (from late morning to early evening) in order to capture variations in participation. Qualitative interviews were conducted mostly at the camp in cafes and tents close to St. Paul’s cathedral and the Bank of Ideas. We employed a purposive sample. To obtain maximum contrast we sought to include respondents who had joined the camp at different points in time, and those who participated to differential degrees. We were also interested in obtaining a heterogeneous sample with respect to gender, age, nationality, ethnicity and employment status. Respondents were approached at a range of tents within the camp itself. We also recruited respondents through snowballing. In addition, we contacted some of the respondents of the survey, which we describe, below, and carried out some qualitative interviews over the phone. At the camp and in the Bank of Ideas, the interview process was very public, since interviews were often carried out in the presence of others and interrupted by people entering tents and needing to communicate with the interviewees. Given high levels of academic and media interest in Occupy, a number of those approached indicated interviewee fatigue, although others preferred to talk to us rather than to complete the questionnaire. An interview schedule was flexibly employed to capture the life-histories of participants, their educational, social and political background, their routes to and nature of participation in Occupy, and their experiences of the camp. We wrote up detailed interview summaries around these themes, including partial transcriptions.

Quantitative data comes from a survey of those involved in Occupy London (n=142), collected as part of the European collaborative Caught in the Act of Protest: Contexualizing Contestation Project (Klandermans et al. 2009). 852 mail-back surveys were distributed, using a ‘pointer’ – or team leader – to approximately randomly select respondents (Walgrave and Verhulst 2011). Approximately one fifth of these surveys were accompanied by a matched numbered short-structured face-to-face interview, distinct from the qualitative interviews. Since hardly anyone refuses a short face-to-face interview, those who answered the face-to-face interview but failed to respond to the mail-back survey are considered to be an approximately representative sample of non-responders. Given the low response rate of postal surveys (in our study 17%), this procedure makes it possible to gauge the types of people that do not respond to the survey. Of the six variables we test6, we find significant differences between the two sub-samples only on the variable ‘how interested are you in politics?’ (kendall’s tau-b=0.122\*). Those who completed and returned questionnaires were more interested in politics than those who answered only the face-to-face questionnaire. Although the sample size is small for quantitative analysis, our representativity tests suggest that the sample is fairly representative of the broader population of Occupiers. Despite the representativity of our sample, we are aware that we are essentially drawing on an opportunity sample and that the small sample size restricts our ability to conduct quantitative analysis. However, combining our representative data with qualitative data compensates for this weakness.

To distinguish our different types of research participants, we refer to those who completed the survey as *respondents*, and those who participated in a qualitative interview as *interviewees*. Note that a small proportion of individuals were both respondents and interviewees. In addition, around one quarter of the respondents had participated in a structured face-to-face interview used to gauge response rates, as described above. We do not report on the structured interview data except in the context of the representativity tests.

Based on survey responses, we distinguish between individuals who are *more actively involved* in Occupy from those who are *less actively involved* on the basis of the amount of time they spent at the camp and the extent of their contribution to the organisation and decision making processes of Occupy. This distinction matters with respect to how participation in Occupy fits into activists’ life-course. Those classified as more actively involved have engaged in at least one of the following: camped overnight, engaged in logistical activities, contributed to Occupy publications and/or contributed to a Camp general assembly (GA). Those less actively involved have engaged in at least one of the following: visited the Camp, followed it on social media, provided resources and/or attended the GA. 59% (n=82) of respondents were less actively involved in the Camp, and 41% (n=56) were more actively involved. We compare these two groups with respect to demographic characteristics as well as with respect to their involvement in indigenous (church, community/neighbourhood organisation, sports/cultural organisation) and transmovement structures (ten types of organisations commonly associated with social movements).

Occupy is not leaderless, but leaderful (Costanza-Chock 2012; Smith and Glidden 2012); many individuals took on informal leadership roles. Our survey asks whether individuals engaged in a number of roles associated with the Camp. From that list, we single out ‘engaged in logistical activities’, ‘contributed to a Camp general assembly’ and ‘contributed to Occupy publications’ as roles that act as the best leadership proxies.7 To understand individuals’ previous mobilization, we draw on a question which asks whether individuals have participated in marches and rallies in the past (i.e. at any point in their lives) across a range of issues (environment, trade justice, workers’ rights, anti-war etc.).

**Participation in Occupy London - Biographical availability**

To date there is little representative data on Occupy participants who have been characterized as white, young, male and highly educated (Gledhill 2012; Juris 2012; Milkman et al. 2013). Perhaps the best attempt to survey Occupiers was coordinated by Sasha Costanza-Chock (cited in Castells ([2012, 166f](#_ENREF_7)).8 However, this was an online survey which has no systematic measures for assessing representativity and response bias. Nonetheless, the Costanza-Chock data largely concurs with ours: there is a gender bias in favour of women, and ethnic minorities are present as well as middle-aged union members and unemployed working class people. Quite a number of qualitative interviewees belonged to ethnic minorities, came from overseas (including Europe, Africa and North America) or had lived overseas for some time. Over two-thirds of survey respondents were born in England or the UK, and the rest were evenly spread from across continental Europe, Australia and Africa. Only 25% of survey respondents were 25 years or younger, 25% were between 46 and 55 and 9% over 66, suggesting involvement of different political generations. More men (n=82) than women (n=53) participated in our survey, but women were slightly more likely to be more involved in Occupy (42%) than men (39%).

Although respondents were diverse with respect to age and gender, the vast majority were highly educated. More than three-quarters (78%) had or were studying for auniversity qualification (including 28% who had or were studying for a Master’s degree and 11% who had or were studying for a PhD). The largest group of the respondents worked full-time (28%), followed by full-time students (19%) and free-lancers/self-employed (18%).9 Those who were unemployed were more likely to be more involved in Occupy (67% of the unemployed) and those who were retired were more likely to be less involved (79% of the retired) (Table 1).

**Table 1 Demographic Information**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | More involved in Occupy (n=56)% | Less involved in Occupy (n=82)% | Total% (n=138) |
| *Education* |  |  |  |
| UG degree | 40 | 38 | 39 |
|  | 38 | 62 | 100 |
| Masters degree | 27 | 30 | 29 |
|  | 35 | 65 | 100 |
| ***Employment status*** |  |  |  |
| **In full-time work** | 23 | 32 | 28 |
|  | 33 | 67 | 100 |
| Full-time student | 20 | 20 | 20 |
|  | 41 | 59 | 100 |
| **Unemployed** | 18 | 6 | 11 |
|  | 67 | 33 | 100 |
| Retired | 5 | 13 | 10 |
|  | 21 | 79 | 100 |
| **Total**  | 41 | 59 | 100 |

Note: column percentages are at the top, row percentages below

The qualitative interviews provide more in-depth information about a sample of those more actively involved in Occupy. While several were not in paid employment at the time of the interview, they varied with respect to their occupational background. Some had never worked for pay and had instead raised children or cared for other family members. Others had recently finished education, were in casual jobs or doing internships, while a few had worked for international corporations and the banking system. Some had savings or were receiving benefits. Others were homeless before participating in Occupy. Interviewees described continuity as well as discontinuity. On the one hand, they described that their decision to join Occupy was related to a change in their lives – for example being in the transition between education and employment, in-between jobs, moving from one country to another or having separated from a partner. On the other hand, they provided detailed accounts of pathways that led them to Occupy and thus emphasised a degree of biographical continuity.

**Structural availability – Personal Ties and Involvement in Transmovement and Indigenous Structures**

Almost half of those who were more active in the camp had come to Occupy on their own (48%). However, an equal proportion of survey respondents stated that they had attended Occupy with fellow organisation members. A much smaller proportion attended Occupy with partners, children, friends, relatives, acquaintances, colleagues and fellow students. The high level of involvement of those who attended alone highlights the potential for more individualised and web-based connective action; while the high proportion of those who came with others attests to the continuing importance of collective action. We will now address involvement in transmovement and indigenous structures, summarised in Table 2.

#### ****Table 2 Involvement in Indigenous and Transmovement Structures****

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | More Involved in Occupy (N=56)% | Less Involved in Occupy (N=82)% |
| Type of involvement in various organisations | Not involved  | Passive member/Financial support | Active member  | Not involved | Passive member/ financial support | Active member |
| Charity | 55 | 27 | 18 | 68 | 18 | 15 |
| *Transmovement Structures* |
| Environment | 62 | 20 | 18 | 67 | 18 | 15 |
| Human/civil r. | 66 | 23 | 13 | 82 | 15 | 4 |
| Third world | 68 | 20 | 13 | 71 | 21 | 9 |
| Trade union | 70 | 18 | 13 | 71 | 18 | 11 |
| Anti-racist | 77 | 7 | 16 | 90 | 5 | 5 |
| Women’s org | 84 | 11 | 5 | 94 | 2 | 4 |
| LGBT | 84 | 9 | 7 | 88 | 6 | 6 |
| Peace | 93 | 2 | 5 | 88 | 2 | 15 |
| *Indigenous Structures* |
| Community | 78 | 11 | 11 | 80 | 7 | 12 |
| Church | 80 | 11 | 9 | 82 | 6 | 12 |
| Sport&Culture | 89 | 4 | 7 | 82 | 22 | 7 |
| *Other* |
| Political party | 73 | 13 | 14 | 84 | 10 | 6 |

Occupy attracted a diverse group of previously unaffiliated individuals and those with experience in social movement and indigenous organisations. Some interviewees who had been politically active in environmental groups, the youth faction of the Labour Party or feminist groups whilst studying described their discomfort in those organisations, either because their class or ethnic background distinguished them or because they considered their organisational structures, practices and ideologies to be constraining.

Additionally, many participants stated that they had attended protests of the Stop the War Coalition or against climate change. With respect to participation in rallies and marches (Table 3), we find a similar pattern among those who were more and those who were less involved in Occupy. In both groups, we find the highest participation in protest events organised by trade unions, anti-war/pro-peace and/or anti-cuts organisations. Frequency of participation in protest in the past 12 months appears to be related to the intensity of participation in Occupy, those who were more involved in Occupy also had participated in more rallies and marches.

**Table 3 Participation in rallies / marches in the past 12 months**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | More Involved in Occupy (N=56)% | Less Involved in Occupy (N=82)% |
| Type of rally: | Never | 1-5 | 5+ | Never | 1-5 | 5+ |
| Anti-cuts | 15 | 61 | 24 | 48 | 48 |  4 |
| Anti-war | 29 | 56 | 29 | 32 | 46 | 22 |
| Trade union  | 32 | 45 | 23 | 61 | 24 | 15 |
| Anti-global | 46 | 33 | 16 | 90 |  5 |  5 |
| Climate change | 46 | 38 | 16 | 60 | 38 |  1 |
| Other environment | 47 | 37 | 16 | 73 | 22 |  5 |
| Creative protest | 48 | 32 | 20 | 83 | 15 |  1 |
| Development/Pov. | 51 | 39 | 10 | 64 | 35 |  1 |
| Anti-racist | 56 | 30 |  9 | 67 | 31 |  3 |
| LGBT | 57 | 31 | 12 | 77 | 21 |  3 |
| Trade justice  | 58 | 29 | 13 | 74 | 25 |  1 |
| Women | 63 | 22 | 16 | 77 | 17 |  5 |

Reflecting survey data, qualitative interviewees had previously stayed at Climate Camps, lived in eco-villages or squatted. In addition, some had attended the anarchist book fair, participated in the ‘Occupy Trafalgar Square’ and ‘Occupy Westminster’ Bridge anti-cuts protests, UK Uncut and/or student protests.10 At some of these protests, interviewees received leaflets informing them about the plan to form Occupy London Stock Exchange. Involvement in unions was also mentioned. Whether they had previously participated in various forms of protest or not, a number of interviewees had learned about Occupy Wall Street via the (mainly social) media and were following it on Facebook (literature on this topic includes Gaby and Caren 2012; Gamson and Sifry 2013; Nielsen 2013) or through newspapers. Since September 2011 some had been expecting that Occupy would spread to London and several participated in the planned occupation of Paternoster Square on 15 October. Older participants had previously participated in ‘the Hippie movement’, CND or Greenham Common. Furthermore, the camp included anarchists, socialists and communists, but it was important to interviewees that ideological and other differences were downplayed to come together.

Alex11, a white man in his late twenties, grew up in South Africa and moved to England when he was twenty where he worked in various jobs. In South Africa, he had been involved in the Church which raised his consciousness concerning racism and inequality. In England he got involved in the student protests and UK Uncut. He never attended university, but obtained a teaching qualification. He was planning to teach English overseas when Occupy started, but after attending an anarchist event in London, he joined the camp at Finsbury Square. Alex described the convergence of movements in the following way:

… I don’t think it is about agreeing on an end goal, but agreeing on the next step. That’s when we fight power, when unions can put aside their own goal, when socialists can put aside their own goal, anarchists can set aside their own goal, and say what next step can we take together? And that’s happening as we speak.

Ben, an African immigrant in his forties who had lived in various European countries before settling in England where he worked as lawyer and musician similarly emphasized the importance of downplaying ideological differences and emphasizing common goals:

There are many people from different backgrounds, there are anarchists, there are socialists, there are communists, there are all the different political parties, but what we try, we ask all these people to leave behind these denominations, to concentrate on the common issue which is the economic situation.

In these quotes, different strands of the alter-globalisation movement are mentioned and the need to define short term goals, which allow the formation of coalitions and solidarity, is emphasised (Piven 2013). Overall, political allegiance was down-played: the emphasis was on building a broad coalition, challenging corrupt political structures and creating alternative, inclusive spaces giving voice to the marginalised.

In addition to trans-movement structures, indigenous structures such as the church also played a central role in Occupy London in two respects: political socialisation and legitimation. First, some interviewees explained that their religious education and socialisation in a religious household was resonant with their interpretation of Occupy. The church provided them with a framework to question apartheid. Second, the endorsement of Occupy by the Archbishop of Canterbury had a legitimizing function. It validated the protest and a church group close to the St Paul’s camp mobilised new participants by providing a space in which people could learn about Occupy.

Involvement in transmovement or indigenous structures, however, does not necessarily translate into identification with such organisations, as illustrated by a quote from Elisabeth, who regularly visited the St. Paul’s camp and was involved in a working group, but had not stayed at the camp overnight. Elisabeth was a white English woman in her early twenties, who had recently finished a Masters’ degree, and was unemployed at the time of the interview. She had a long standing interest in activism, but was also highly ambivalent about political groups.

I haven’t been part of a formal group, I haven’t been part of the church, I’ve been involved, I guess I go to events, but I am not part of anything as such. I don’t know how to class myself. I would not say that I am a socialist, I haven’t joined the socialist movement. I am interest in anarchism,[…] but I would not call myself an anarchist, I am interested in radical politics. But I think in this country, the groups on the left have all been fighting each other and that has been off-putting. And I haven’t joined a formal group as such.

Rosa, an Italian woman in her twenties, had finished her Masters’ degree in the UK and was working in part-time jobs when she joined Occupy. She was involved in various working groups and had stayed overnight at Occupy. Reflecting her experiences of involvement in different political groups prior to joining Occupy she explained that she found group identification constraining:

… people will identify themselves with the socialist party or with a church group or religious group. I personally feel that takes away from the creative individualism that everybody can have, being identified with a certain group you admit that you have certain ideas that are shared, there is nothing wrong with that, but, in my personal view I would feel that there is some group that is dictating certain views that you have and that it creates more of an inflexible, relationship or perspective on a lot of things.

Thus on the one hand occupying activists distanced themselves from organisations in which they had previously participated, while on the other hand, prior experience played a significant role for taking on leadership positions in the camp, as Table 4 below indicates.

**Table 4 Proxies for Leadership Roles**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Neither% | Indigenous only% | Trans-movement only % | Both% |
| Engaged in Camp Logistics (n=22) | 14 | 0 | 50 | 36 |
| Contributed to General assembly (n=30) | 17 | 3 | 53 | 27 |
| Contributed to Camp Literature (n=19) | 32 | 5 | 16 | 47 |

The vast majority of respondents who took on leadership roles in Occupy had previous experiences in either indigenous or transmovement structures or both. Over 80% of those involved in camp logistics or contributing to the GA had previous organisational experience. In contrast, nearly a third of those who contributed to Occupy publications had not been involved in indigenous or transmovement organisations. We argue that prefigurative structures are of particular relevance for those who have no prior organisational affiliations or who were disillusioned by previous organisational involvement.

**Prefigurative Structures**

Interviewees who experienced existing political structures and organisations as stifling and exclusionary were attracted to Occupy because it was a space to create a community that could potentially address the shortcomings of the life they had – at least temporarily – left behind. Whether they had previously worked in highly paid professions or were used to living a very simple life, they challenged the rationality of capitalism and criticised materialism. They emphasised that living in the camp did not require much money, since resources provided by participants and supporters were shared.

Our findings resonate with Halvorson’s (2012) understanding of Occupy as a ‘*process* [emphasis in original] of grass roots activism’ (p. 428) in which Occupiers were experimenting with new forms of collective living and decision making (Leach 2013; Smucker 2013). Most interviewees described a fluid and harmonious division of labour. When they noticed something requiring action, they became proactive. They appreciated possibilities to participate, both in terms of assessing situations and promoting initiatives without prior expertise (Milkman et al. 2013). This emerging division of labour allowed development of new skills and minimised distinctions between leaders and followers. Interviewees felt that their efforts to maintain the camp constituted meaningful work. Those out of employment thus rejected the notion that they were “unemployed” or “not working” because they did not pursue paid employment.



Photo: Cristiana Olcese

Chris, a young Englishman on incapacity benefits, answered the question whether he was “working” in the following way:

No, I am not, the thing is, I have got a problem with the question because there is this framework “Are you working?” But really, what it means is, what it actually means is that I am not working for the authority which claims to be the state and just because I don’t serve the state, does not mean that I am not working, not doing anything, because the immediate implication is “no you are doing nothing”. But I am here, I am working in the welfare tent, giving my time to try and make people pay attention to this and make them see things that are going on and possible solutions. So, I would say, I am working.

Similarly, Debbie, who has never been paid for work, but had raised her children and helped a friend to care for an elderly relative before she got involved in Occupy explained:

“so I have more time [after the elderly relative moved into a nursing home], now I work more here, but it is not paid work, but I am working for the occupation”.

The activities in the camp were multi-fold. Tea tent, kitchen, first aid and welfare tents provided for the basic needs of those staying and visiting the tent. The tranquillity group and night-watch guaranteed the well-being and safety of those staying and visiting the camp. Rosa (introduced earlier), was who was for a while involved in the tranquillity group before taking on other tasks explained:

Tranquillity being a version of security which does not look as if it is security, but just wants to keep the atmosphere tranquil and calm. So it has something to do with being able to talk to people, calming them down and understand their issues as opposed to kicking them out with brute force.

Interviewees pointed out that one crucial aspect of Occupy was to create a safe space for those suffering from depression and alienation caused by a system that prioritises consumerism and mass media communication over genuine interpersonal communication and community. Decision-making processes took place in the GA and working groups. Occupy Times, the university tent, the info tent, techie tents and livestream and the church-liaison group provided infrastructure for internal and external communication. Online media were experienced as empowering (Castells 2009) by some interviewees who were part of the livestream working group and who enjoyed being able to film and report outreach activities, especially those without prior media production experience. As Schein (2012) notes, service provision is ‘more than a means to movement building, […], but an enactment of the movement’s end’ (p. 4). This is expressed by Alex (quoted earlier)

… we are a community and we realise that our strength is in our numbers. And if we would not be in the community, we could not sleep outside, we would all be, we are forced to rely each other. And now that we are forced to rely on each other, we realise how much better relying on each other is than just relying on ourselves.[…] I might have known this in theory, but in practice it is much more exciting to see how possible it is to live in a community […], because it is a liberating experience of ideas to be in communities together and how we interact with each other, how do we deal with junkies, do we just kick them out? Or do we try and help them? Do we have the facilities to help them?

One very important aspect of the prefigurative structures of Occupy was inclusivity and diversity. Interviewees emphasized the effort and challenges to include everyone whether camp residents, regular or occasional visitors or more distant supporters (e.g. donors). Thus, it was highlighted that the frequency of visits and/ or type of involvement did not differentiate between those who were and were not considered a part of the movement. Some reconciled full- or part-time employment with their participation in Occupy and visited the camp in lunch breaks, the evening or on weekends. However, other interviewees who visited the camp during the day mentioned that they were not sure whether they were as much part of the movement as those who stayed there over night. Furthermore, the survey suggests that the participation in Occupy was to some extent gendered. Women were more likely to follow Occupy on social media, whereas a higher proportion of men contributed to publications and attended the GA. This suggests that, on the one hand, women were more likely to take on a supportive role, using connective action, while men were more likely to shape the discourse through publications. However, men and women almost equally contributed to the GA. Interviewees highlighted the importance of providing everyone with the opportunity to get involved in the debates and participate in the decision-making processes which was achieved through the practice of the “progressive stack” (Maharawal 2013), prioritizing marginalised groups. Diana, a South African woman in her late thirties who was employed by a bank participated in Occupy in her spare time by providing legal advice explained

If you are a movement that tries to be open and non-judgemental and try to allow a broad range of people to be able to have a voice, […], you have to allow everybody to talk. The process might take longer but that is a sacrifice you will have to make so people can actually fully express themselves. And I think this is a platform that people probably never have had before.

Yet, as noted by Smith and Glidden (2012), attending the GA made it difficult to pursue other activist work. Also, interviewees noted the risk that the less well-educated might have felt excluded from GA debates.

Many participants reported that they had made the protest camp their ‘home’, both in the sense of having a place to stay or a place where they were accepted for what they are. As in many other Occupy camps homeless people and squatters, used to occupying public space, became part of Occupy London (Schein 2012; Smith et al. 2012; Wengronowitz 2013). Of course participants, differed in social, cultural and economic capital ([Bourdieu 1984](#_ENREF_3)). While university graduates are often themselves confronted with student loan debts, unemployment and high housing costs, there are significant differences between homeless people with mental illnesses and those who are well-educated and temporarily unemployed. Even though encounters could be tense, most interviewees emphasized solidarity between different groups and pointed out that drawing a strict distinction between homeless and other occupiers would undermine inclusivity. George, an American in his thirties, who had squatted and occupied urban and rural spaces before he joined Occupy exemplifies the blurring boundaries between homelessness and other forms of occupying public or private spaces. He stated

That’s right, I am used to living ‘rough’ as they call it, but I felt very good about it because going to work especially in a place where I grew up, well I feel the culture itself, in my experience, is abusive, the work environments are abusive.

Similarly Chris, who was introduced earlier, stated

If I would have to choose, I probably would be homeless or squatting or travelling than to go on with that life which partially made me depressed. […] so if I get a good five years of doing this kind of stuff and then spend the rest of my life homeless, I don’t really care, I see that better than working for 40 years.

 As Schein argues, “The realities of homelessness weave together many of the political and economic grievances that have converged around OWS and which underpin the right to the city: the primacy of property rights over human needs; the increasing privatisation of public goods and services and the bankruptcy of democratic political citizenship in the absence of basic material security” (Schein 2012, p. 338).

The tent city at St Paul’s Cathedral also resonated with childhood memories of interviewees who had grown up in a Brazilian favela or in refugee camps in Africa and the Middle East. Obviously, there are significant differences between well-educated, middle-class protesters who chose to stay at Occupy but have the opportunity to return to their homes at any time and refugees who are highly constrained in their movements. However, even though some Occupiers were in a privileged position compared to others, not every Occupier had a home or felt at home. Some interviewees from overseas as well as from the UK who stated that they did not feel at home in the UK said that they cherished the international atmosphere in the camp. Teenagers and other interviewees who lived with their parents came to stay at Occupy when they experienced family conflicts.

Emphasising inclusion, interviewees not only addressed the range of political currents within the camp but also the variety of social backgrounds of those involved in the movement (“from hackers to 79 year old nuns” as Alex put it). Furthermore, interviewees frequently pointed out that only by promoting dialogue, for example with bankers or police, could social divisions be overcome. This capacity of inclusion and diversity was considered a strength, as Alex, who was introduced earlier, explains:

The power of Occupy has been in the ability to have all these, because Occupy is just a name, there are many, many groups here. All these different groups are doing [things] together. And the strength is, that even if it ended today, there are all these many, many different groups with different ideas. It is really hard to stamp down the whole movement, if you stamp down one, another one comes up, so it is very difficult to group them all in one area, that makes us really in one sense disorganised, but very powerful, because it is so widespread in so many places, which gives me a lot of hope.

Yet maintaining the prefigurative space did not occur without tensions. It is important to acknowledge that Occupy faced a number of challenges in its internal dynamics ([No-Author 2012](#_ENREF_45); [Gitlin 2013](#_ENREF_23)). Although interviewees clearly enjoyed staying at the camp, they experienced dystopian moments including sexual violence ([Walker 2013](#_ENREF_69)), disruption at meetings, theft, and paranoia of police infiltration. Some interviewees reported that they left the camp when they found it too straining and returned a couple of days later. However, they also felt that they did not want to miss out by staying away. Those who stayed from the beginning felt that they had made close bonds with those staying as long. In addition, those who at the time of the interview had not yet stayed overnight at the camp, but had visited it and followed it on social media, did not feel as connected.



Photo: Cristiana Olcese

Maintaining and defending the internet - experienced as a free space - was of high importance. Some participants, including members of Anonymous12 drew parallels between their presence in the protest camp and their on-going contribution to digitalised free spaces, emphasising freedom of expression and transparency, while downplaying ideologies and identities. Similarly, George, who was introduced earlier, explained that online interaction was his first experience of a free space and led him to squatting:

On the internet, I would consider this the first experience with a free space, because that is a space where you have a lot of freedom to create a space that you want to do, you can participate with others in that process and that is also creating a community. Yes, I wanted to apply that to my entire way of life because I, well I enjoy that, and I got more fulfilment from that so I wanted to apply that to all of my life.

Thus while participants had learned about Occupy through social media (Gaby and Caren 2012) and appreciated that the livestream allowed them to interact with Occupy camps around the world, the face-to-face interaction at the camp was positively contrasted with isolation at the computer screen. Even though online interaction can be highly stimulating, emotionally and cognitively, it is different from being able to see, feel, hear, touch and smell the person one is sitting next to. Several interviewees described their pleasure of meeting other people in person. They felt lonely before they came to Occupy despite being very active online. Co-presence gave the camp emotional energy which was enhanced by following and interacting with other people on the livestream.

**Conclusions**

Our findings suggest that while the opportunities offered by digital media cannot be overestimated, face-to-face interaction remains a crucial aspect of both the challenges and pleasures participating in protest events (Jasper 1997; Nielsen 2013; Rushkoff 2013). Our study of Occupy also highlights how collective and connective action and the creation of online and offline free spaces intersect. While it is still useful to analytically distinguish between transmovement, indigenous and prefigurative structures (Polletta 1999), these structures often overlap. Moreover, the combination of online and offline repertoires of action enhances the strengths and compensates for the weaknesses of each of the three mobilisation structures: Computer mediated communication provides indigenous structures with a further reach, allows super-activists active in transmovement structures to use web-based platforms for personal accounts and it can provide the more elusive prefigurative structures with a long-lasting digital presence. As other studies across a variety of different movements (Harlow and Harp 2011; Mercea 2012; Nielsen 2013) have concluded, computer mediated communication has the potential to enhance physical free-spaces, but is no replacement for face-to-face interaction.

In this article, we focus on success only in terms of recruitment and participation. An assessment of the political and social impact of Occupy would be premature. With respect to mobilization processes Occupy was highly successful. It recruited individuals not previously active in social movements and became an intergenerational and heterogeneous movement. Our analysis of Occupy indicates that participants, although generally well-educated, were diverse in terms of age and (political) generations, incorporating seasoned protestors and novices in collective action. Occupy London attracted veterans of trade unions and environmental movements as well as those who had previously engaged in various forms of on-line and offline activism but felt alienated by social movement organisations. Participation in Occupy varied to some extent with respect to age and gender. The youngest and middle-aged participants were more active, while men and women took on different roles within the camp. Digital communication as well as organisational affiliation played a role for the recruitment into Occupy as well as the division of labour within the camp. While Occupy’s online presence on Facebook and its own website provided digital prefigurative structures (Mercea 2012), the face-to-face interaction and community building in the camp was experienced as exhilarating and exhausting. Theoretical analysis and criticism of existing structures of exclusion, inequality and exploitation was put into practice by sharing resources, trusting and relying on each other, seeking to integrate a diverse group of people, providing for their well-being and dealing with conflicts – living the mantra of prefigurative politics – ‘be the change you want to see in the world’ (Mahatma Ghandi).

Our findings are important for future studies of protests as free-spaces. Whilst Polletta (1999) conceived the three types of structures of association as relatively independent from one another, we have shown how a multi-farious movement like Occupy was able to create multiple avenues for recruitment and participation by combining cyber and physical indigenous, transmovement and prefigurative structures of association. Whether this is unique to Occupy is something worthy of future scholarly attention. An interesting question to ask, for example, might be whether recent student protests in the UK have been able to use structures of association quite so effectively to recruit newcomers and sustain the participation of already committed activists. We suspect that Occupy may be quite unique in this respect. The durability of Occupy’s effects remain to be seen but the avalanche of popular and scholarly publications on Occupy make it appear to be a movement that journalists and the community of social movement scholars have eagerly awaited.

**Footnotes**

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A database collated by the *Guardian* newspaper lists 747 Occupy camps across the globe, active in 2011 (last accessed 17 May 2013).

1) the current economic system is unsustainable and Occupy is the place to begin to redress it; 2) Occupy London represents a diverse range of people across class, race, gender and sexuality; 3) the public should not have to pay for the banking crisis; 4) cuts to public sector spending are not inevitable but justice is needed, instead; 5) independent regulators are needed to check the financial sector; 6) Occupy London supports strikes and other actions to defend welfare, education, health services and employment; 7) structural change is required to make it possible to care for people and the planet; 8) the current system is jeopardising the environment; 9) Occupy London stands in solidarity with oppressed people across the globe and; 10) Occupy is democracy in action and everyone is welcome to join (paraphrased from the Occupy London web pages. Available at <http://occupylondon.org.uk/about/about-occupy-london-2>, last accessed 03/05/12.

It might seem contradictory to apply the concept of ‘free spaces’ to Occupy, given the fact that occupations are associated with military action and colonial or imperialist invasion of territories (‘occupied territories’). However, leftist movements which traditionally have emphasised liberation and de-colonialisation, have employed the occupation of private or public spaces in a wide range of social movements.

Of course multi-movement affiliation of activists is not unique to alter-globalisations movements (Roth 2003).

1. We used t-tests to compare the age of protesters in two sub-samples, and kendall’s tau-b to compare most of the other variables that were common across the face-to-face and mail-back surveys, which were ordinal. The distribution of the nominal variable ‘gender’ was compared using Chi2. The first sub-sample consists only of those who answered the face-to-face questionnaire. The second sub-sample consists of those who responded to both the face-to-face and mail-back questionnaires.

Other categories are: visited the Camps; camped overnight; followed the Camp on Facebook; Followed the Camp on Twitter; provided occupiers with any resources; and contributed to a Camp general assembly.

http://occupyresearch.net

Multiple answers possible.

Even Occupy Wall Street was mentioned.

All the names are pseudonyms; we have removed any identifying information in order to guarantee anonymity.

Anonymous is a collective of cyber activists or “hacktivists” that supported Wikileaks and Occupy Wall Street. Anonymous wear plastic Guy Fawkes masks symbolizing popular resistance.

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