The Experience of First-Time Activism

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Two and a half years ago, I never guessed I would be up here telling you this story—which is also your story. One day something happened that changed your life forever. There came a moment when something deep and powerful inside you, something vital and undeniable, connected to the very core of your existence, stood up and said, “No, you can’t do this.” Someone or something crossed a line, and the rest is history.

(Opening address, grassroots anti-toxics activist, environmental leadership conference, 2004).

This study explores the experience of first-time anti-toxics activists in the metro Boston area. I examine whether and how first-time activism alters everyday routines, draws core assumptions into question, introduces new social relationships, and as a result, has a profound effect on personal self-concept. Looking at activism as a particular kind of disrupting event challenges researchers and professionals to understand how first-time activists navigate disrupted lives, and how to facilitate—both socially and organizationally—activists as they travel unfamiliar ground. Finally, by considering the disruption recounted by activists, and how activists negotiate and/or embrace them, this study also explores how activists’ experiences may lead to personal change, and in particular, influences activists’ decisions to remain active in environmental issues in their community or state.

This project was guided by the following questions:

1. How do activists become involved in grassroots anti-toxics organizing?

2. What is the lived experience of first-time grassroots anti-toxics activists? And, how does activism affect their lives at home and in the community?

3. How do activists manage disruptions to worldview, routines, and norms?

4. How do first-time activists make the decision to continue, or not to continue, in civic, political or activist roles after their campaign has ended?

Sociologists who study grassroots activism and social movements only recently have examined activists’ experiences and the relevance experience has to subsequent worldview, life choices, and future activism. This gap is curious, given the conclusions of several studies that followed activists’ life course after intense social movement participation. These studies found that activism transformed personal lives (McAdam 1989; McAdam 1999; Sherkat and Blocker 1997), and that activism, like attending college or parenthood, is a life experience that often fundamentally alter a person’s identity and trajectory (McAdam 1999). However, studies about the consequences of activism often concentrate on the effects of activism and identity changes on career choice, or what age a person first marries or has a child. Instead, many activists, and in particular, grassroots environmental activists, balance the rigors of activism with work and family roles. Researchers need to investigate how activism bears on subsequent life decisions, particularly when first-time activists are already committed to careers,
partners, and/or children. Illuminating how activism fits within the already bustling personal, work, and familial lives of first-time activists is one of the main aims of this paper.

A second goal is to consider what factors activists’ report as essential to their long-term commitment to grassroots organizing, even when experiencing stress and role strain. Sociologists often look to the availability of economic and emotional resources when trying to explain why some activists remain active, when others eventually retreat. This includes having time to do movement work, as well as the ability to manage both criticism and burnout associated with activism. To cope with these issues, sociologists observe that some activists reorganize their lives around activism (Klandermans 1998), or find ways to creatively integrate activism into everyday life (Downton & Wehr 1998). By doing so, activism becomes self-perpetuating (McAdam 1989). But, making drastic life changes to accommodate activism is not an option for most people. Nor does ‘resource management’ fully explain why activists preserve. We must look to other factors as well.

Social connections and relationships—or, what sociologists term “social networks”—also matter to activists’ commitments. Relationships with other activists introduce new ideas, new connections, and new experiences, which can counter burnout and reinforce commitments (Passy and Giugni 2000; 2001). Peers and mentors also provide connections to organizations that offer support networks and organizing assistance (Lichterman 1995). In addition to linking people to ideas and contacts, social networks bring meaning to activism (Passy and Giugni 2000; Shemtov 2003). People share stories, history, cartoons, books, jokes, music, and other cultural artifacts, and by doing so, they build a shared understanding of environmental problems and the grassroots struggle to address them (Passy and Giugni 2000; Shemtov 2003). Finally, activists’ degree of involvement in social networks—their embeddedness, or the number of personal ties they have with other activists—also influences subsequent activism. The more involved an activist is in broad networks and relationships with others facing similar experiences, the more likely activists will continue in an activist or civic capacity (Passy & Giugni 2001).

Finally, sociologists suggest that activists, as they become involved in grassroots campaigns and politics, undergo significant identity changes (Downton and Wehr 1998; Kiecolt 2000; Klandermans 1997; Passy and Giugni 2001). For example, activists often develop a political consciousness (Passy & Giugni 2001), especially as they form new opinions about the legitimacy and efficacy of how governments handle environment problems (Shemtov 2003). Likewise, activists may adopt a radicalized worldview that veers from mainstream or traditional notions of citizenship through engaging in social movement work (Shemtov 2003; Krauss 1998). Similarly, activism can alter activists’ self-concept. For example, activists’ perceptions of their own self-efficacy, personal responsibility (Passy and Giugni 2001; Shemtov 2003), or perceptions of personal consequences posed by activism (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001) may shift as a result of their experiences, which in turn, may encourage subsequent involvement.
In this report, I explore the complexities behind how first-time activism can be transformative, paying particular attention to how the social experience of activists influences future participation in organizing and politics. To do this, I draw on sociological research on the experience of ‘critical junctures,’ or key life events. Sociologists have long studied the meaning of critical junctures in people’s lives. Research suggests that major life changes become a relative time-point against which other life events become referenced. According to Bury (1982), a disrupting event (or series of events) jolts a person into realizing a different future from the one he/she envisioned. Further, a disrupting event demands new ways of thinking and new routines as a result of changed circumstances, altered access to social and economic resources, or new social relationships. The experience also unseats taken-for-granted assumptions or explanations about how society works. The experience of this changed perceptual, social, and physical environment can be infused with emotion: fear, grief, intimidation, or anger. In this report, I explore how the experience of activism, whether disruptive or not, matters to how activists sustain their activist role over time.

To orient my reporting of activists’ experiences, I draw on the work of Bury (1982), who suggests there are three dimensions to the experience of critical life junctures. The first is the disruption of taken-for-granted assumptions. This process includes a person’s recognition that there is a problem with either his/her physical reality or social relationships. Recognition of a change in physical or relational circumstances prompts this question: “what is going on here?” From the experience of a critical juncture emerges a new level of awareness about previously unexamined and taken-for granted ideas. Thus, the second aspect I will look at is how activists grapple with the uncertainty left in the wake of a disrupted or dismantled system for explaining the world. Earlier research on other types of critical junctures suggests that people often attempt to restore their former-self concept, resist disruption, or reestablish familiarity. The third and final dimension I will look at are the strategies for moving forward in an altered situation. For example, Bury (1982) suggests the disruption of explanatory systems catalyzes a comprehensive rethinking of self-concept. This involves accepting personal and life changes, letting go of the former self, and moving forward.

The concept of disruption and critical junctures has received much attention in recent years, as sociologists adapt and further define it (Bury 1991; 2001). As sociologists have noted, disruption may not be the norm for all people who experience a critical event. Critical events occur at a particular time and place, and in the context of a continually unfolding personal and social history. Therefore, relative to other events, a critical event may never disrupt a person’s life. In addition, sociologists have challenged the tacit assumption that core, taken-for-granted assumptions are disrupted in all cases (Bury 2001; Carricaburu and Pierret 1995; Ciambrone 2001; Ciambrone 2003; Williams 2000). These critiques suggest that perhaps disruption can be perceived in a matter of degrees, rather than in binary terms (i.e., it either happens or it doesn’t). Further, these critiques invite the idea that disruption may not necessarily be a negative experience. Even if a person perceives minimal disruption, he/she may still be presented with new opportunities, and may still experience a change in worldview.
In general, I found that activists experience disruption in many areas of their life and to different degrees, and they use multiple strategies to negotiate disruption and corresponding emotional responses. Their ability to navigate disruption and to creatively channel it into new opportunities for action and personal growth is an important mechanism for sustained involvement.

The remainder of the report will address activists’ experiences, often using the activists’ words. I have organized the report using the three dimensions described earlier. The first section—disruption and the activist experience—looks at how first-time activism alters patterns of thinking and moving through the social world, with a focus on how people came to recognize their was an environmental problem and that they needed to take action. The second section—negotiating disruption—focuses on how activists navigate new terrain as they became active in their community. The final section—embracing disruption—explores how activists channel a sense of disruption into new opportunities for engagement and action. The conclusion offers a discussion about the relevance of these issues to our collective understanding of what supports long-term engagement in community action. Before proceeding to my summarization of the interviews, I first review the methods used to generate this report.

Data and Methods

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed between March and October of 2003. Interviews were conducted in activists’ homes, most often at the kitchen table, and lasted between an hour and half and four hours in length. The interview questions asked about decision-making processes: how activists first became involved, how they prioritized multiple responsibilities, and what they did after their first campaign ended. Engaging activists retrospectively did not pose methodological concerns with respect to factual accuracy because interview questions probed their perceptions, rather than a factual account of their experiences. Robert Benford (2002) refers to the product of these interviews as participant narratives, which situate the activist as the main protagonist. Participant narratives provide an opportunity to understand respondents’ experience of social movement participation, and more specifically, their interpretations of participation at the local level. Interviews also allow researchers to explore meaning by focusing on how respondents tell stories about their participation, and how they relate their activism to other life events.

The sample of local activists was selected in collaboration with the director of Toxics Action Center (TAC), then Matt Wilson. Together, we constructed a sample of people to interview based on selection criteria described in the next paragraph. The director also helped facilitate my access by asking the activists’ permission to be contacted.

Community activists were chosen through a deliberate or purposive sampling process based upon characteristics of their experience. Participants were selected on the principle of similarity-dissimilarity (Blee and Taylor 2002). That is, the sample was chosen to compare how respondents’ interpretations from similar situations agree, and how respondents with varied circumstances differ. A short list of activists was developed
based on some simple selection criteria. Geographic feasibility was a limiting criterion, so the sample was restricted to activists from communities within a 50-mile radius of Boston. The remaining sample was then narrowed to those individuals who were novice activists with minimal grassroots experience, but also were key leaders in their local campaigns. All respondents were involved in (at least initially) a single-issue, local campaign (e.g., prevent permitting of an asphalt plant, prevent construction of school on contaminated site, address air and water pollution from neighboring coal-powered energy plant.) Where possible, male activists were included in the sample, although it was more difficult to piece together a gender-balanced sample, given pre-existing selection criteria and the fact that many local environmental activists are women (Brown and Ferguson 1995). In total, the final sample considered for the analysis included twenty individuals, fourteen women and six men. Two interviews were conducted with husband-wife teams who co-lead campaigns. The final sample reflected diversity with respect to subsequent movement or civic participation, issue type (reactive versus proactive), campaign status (concluded or ongoing), whether or not the primary organizing goals were achieved, and utilization of TAC resources. Two additional interviews were conducted with activists that had prior organizing experience to compare against first-time activists’ experiences. And finally, other activists’ experiences were gleaned from observations conducted at community group meetings, staff trainings for new TAC employees, a community leader development retreat, and two annual conferences. These observations were conducted between March of 2003 and April of 2004. The fieldwork provided additional opportunities to meet and hear local leaders speak about their experiences, as well as to reflect on anti-toxics activism at the regional level. Finally, interviews and fieldwork were supplemented by relevant literature from Toxics Action Center, from the community groups, and newspaper coverage about toxics in New England.

Interview transcripts and notes generated during observations were analyzed according to the standards of sociological research methods. Passages were grouped by theme. Passages emblematic of each theme were selected and included in the final report. The view or experience of every study participant appears in this text at least once. All participants who were interviewed for this project were sent drafts of the final report and invited to comment on any of my interpretations and findings, which I carefully reviewed and, where relevant, incorporated into this document.

**Limitations**

Interviews capture a single point in time. Therefore, interviewees’ perception of the significance of their activism is fluid and likely to change. At times my questions made them revisit unpleasant memories. For some, my questions posed a novel opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to situate them in the broader context of their lives—a process they may not have had the time, or the campaigns they describe, and narrating about them. The passage of time may lead participants to have richer, or more subdued perspective on their involvement. It is important to keep this in mind, given the range of participants’ experiences at the time of interview.
Narratives are also co-created phenomena. Narrative invites performance, and allows activists to select what and how much information to present to the interviewer, especially if experiences were difficult, embarrassing, or too emotionally charged to divulge to a researcher and stranger. Given this, it is important to note that some of the perceived transformations they communicated may be an artifact of the interview process itself, rather than explanatory of any subsequent personal or life change.

The interviewees lived in eighteen Massachusetts communities. With the exception of two, these communities are *not* among the most intensely and extensively polluted communities in Massachusetts (Faber 2001). In the state of Massachusetts, there are approximately 21,000 hazardous waste sites classified by the state Department of Environmental Protection. Of these, 3,389 are thought to pose threats to human health, and thirty-two are on the Environmental Protection Agency’s National Priorities, or Superfund List. A significantly disproportionate number of these sites are concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color (Faber 2001); the rest are interspersed throughout the state. Most of the communities represented in this project are perceived by most as ‘clean places’ that *seem* insulated from contamination. Three of these communities are anecdotally considered among the most prestigious in metro Boston. In Massachusetts, though, it is important to note that even predominantly middle- or upper-middle class Boston suburbs have a legacy of former industry and are still sited for new industrial facilities. Additionally, many Massachusetts communities once operated municipal landfills or hosted illegal dumps, and are now dealing with the proximity of land-filled wastes to residential neighborhood and private drinking-water wells. Likewise, many communities in this region look to repurposed land—some of which still harbors unsafe levels of heavy metals and other toxics—as the most feasible sites upon which to construct new schools or low-income and elderly housing. This region is serviced by a coal-fueled power plants and several trash incinerators, which emit airborne pollutants that defy geopolitical borders. Taken together, these communities comprise an interesting sample because they are *not* necessarily *extraordinary* in the environmental problems they face; they are places where most citizens have yet to realize the environmental costs of modern life.

One final caveat about my findings: disruption and dislocation may be most prevalent in working- and middle-class activists, who as a group tend to believe more than lower- or higher-income groups, that authority figures can and will assist them in addressing toxics (Freudenberg 1984). However, for many low-income communities and communities of color, the effects of community contamination and injustice are widespread and tangible. In these cases, toxic contamination and unsympathetic authority figures are not abstract concepts with far-removed implications; they are a part of everyday life. Feeling inadequately or unjustly treated by government officials in the process of challenging toxics may be less of a disrupting event because, rather than holding fast to idealized visions of democracy, they may have already experienced other forms of injustice, of which the challenges of organizing in response to contamination is just another example. Although toxic contamination does not respect political boundaries, sources of pollution are disproportionately located in low-income areas and communities of color (Faber 2001), and socioeconomic positioning mediates the
resources communities can organize to confront toxics. Activism may be a different experience when activists work multiple jobs, simultaneously contend with other economic and social issues, or do not belong to social networks comprised of sympathetic professionals with institutionally-trained legal, technical and or medical expertise.

**Interview Themes**

Researchers studying anti-toxics activism like Adeline Levine (1982), Andy Szasz (1994), Phil Brown (1990), Michael Edelstein (2004), and Celene Krauss (1998) have documented the challenges and frustrations activists experience when challenging toxics in their communities. This literature concludes that activists are changed by the experience of contamination and grassroots responses to it (Edelstein 2004; Brown and Mikkelsen 1990). Based on interviews with activists in Woburn, Massachusetts, Phil Brown and Edwin Mikkelsen (1990) encapsulate the experience of first-time activism quite poignantly:

> Organizing a community contaminated by toxic wastes is extremely difficult and full of contradictions. The victims and their families, already suffering physical and emotional pain, must relive painful memories as they delve into the causes of their trouble. Indeed, the more ammunition they find for their case, the more reasons they have to be angry and afraid. To become activists, citizens must overcome an ingrained reluctance to challenge authority: they must shed their preconceptions about the role and function of government and about democratic participation. They must also develop a new outlook on the nature of scientific inquiry and the participation of the public in scientific controversy. Activists must learn how to mobilize and organize the public to challenge government successfully. Most of all, as the affected families and other activists in Woburn discovered, enormous patience and energy are required, because the struggle can continue for more than a decade (p. 43).

As this passage suggests, these experiences shatter core assumption about the state of the environment. Likewise, these experiences alter perceptions about how local communities are run, and of the roles and responsibilities of hired and elected officials as compared to those of residents. As such, this work substantiates that grassroots activism introduces intense personal change because its demands radically disturb everyday routines and unchallenged assumptions.

Most of this research focuses on women, as they, more than men, have been an important, and often times the only voice opposing contamination in their communities (Brown and Ferguson 1995; Kraus 1998). Women from working- or lower-middle class backgrounds comprise the majority of the anti-toxics movement, most with no activist or political experience. Activism poses particular challenges for women because they have historically been marginalized from the public sphere. Many female activists also do
most of the childcare and domestic labor, in addition to working part- or full-time jobs. This suggests that some women activists may be working a “third shift.” That is, after women finish at their full- or part-time job (the first shift), they cook, clean and do homework with their children (what Arlie Hochschild (1989) calls the second shift), and then work on the campaign (the third shift). Published case studies consistently report on the incremental metamorphosis of housewives into activists, and the gender role conflict and marital strain that often accompanies this transformation (Brown and Ferguson, 1995).

Disruption, however, is not unique to women experiences. Disruption occurs in many life domains (Edelstein 2004) and to different degrees. Some perceive disruption at home; others feel it more in their relationship to their community; and, others still feel the disruption to how they understand society. Through the process of addressing toxic threats, activists experienced disrupted families and community routines, and their expectations about the responsiveness of community members and government officials were often unmet. Their perceptions were shifted—or disrupted—when these entities exceeded, met, or fell short of their expectations. In addition, they also experienced dislocated and disrupted selves. Activism brought with it new challenges that, at one time, may have appeared as impossibilities. Most had never been involved in local politics, with the exception of voting, (and several were not even registered to vote). During the campaign however, they were attending Board of Selectmen meetings, canvassing door-to-door, or for the first time, meeting with state senators. Activists grappled with these changes and uncertainties in a variety of ways. At times, activists negotiated disrupted terrain by minimizing its felt effects, and at other times, they embraced the disruption as an opportunity. The section will address each of these in turn.

Anti-Toxics Activism as a Disruptive Experience

Lois Gibbs, the organizer of Love Canal and a major national leader in environmental activism, writes that “people change as they become active” (1995), and often undergo this change in a series of successive stages (reprinted in Appendix C). For most, the process is initiated by a “rude awakening,” a realization that their community has been (or will be) contaminated. Following “the awakening” many local advocates experience stages marked by personal edification, moral outrage, creating community, and engaging in action. For Gibbs and colleagues, the final stages of transformation are: “making connections to other issues” and “figuring out activism is your life” (1995 p. 154). Gibbs acknowledges that people become politicized and undergo personal change at different rates, and different people may terminate this process at different points along the continuum. Some activists undergo politicization, and they make a transition from isolated participation in a local campaign to a lifelong commitment to activism around environmental health and democracy. Others do not.

The activists I interviewed recounted several biographically disrupting events that served as a critical juncture, motivated action, and sparked important revelations that moved them through these stages of change. Some felt disrupted by the realization that their homes or communities were contaminated, others by the realization that they, or
their loved ones, were sick, and that their illness could be attributable—at least in part—to toxics in their immediate environment. Some were disrupted less by their experiences with activism, but by realizing the inefficiency or biased operations of their government, and through realizing the power of a committed group of citizens. In both cases, activists experienced disruption in their physical lives as well as to their beliefs and ideas about the democracy and the environment. For some though, their experiences—of health problems, toxics, or activism—were very disrupting to their physical lives, but their experience did little to alter their self-image or call core assumptions into question. For them, any sacrifices or biographical disruption was perceived as a temporary upheaval with which they must cope, and they were relieved to resume life as they previously knew it when the campaign ended.

Grassroots campaigns are physically disruptive to activists’ lives. This was evident in the activists’ narratives. Consider the following summations:

“It [the campaign] really became a way of life—it affected every part of my life. All consuming.

I was eating, sleeping, drinking [the campaign], especially during the real tough times.

It was so time consuming, you have no idea. And if I had known that in the beginning, I don’t think I ever would have made the commitment. I wouldn’t do it now. I would not do it again. It turns your life upside down, and inside out.

Notice the use of food and eating metaphors to describe their experiences. These metaphors suggest the extent to which routines were disrupted by the time-intensive demands of activist work, and the all-consuming nature of this work. Given such drastic and dramatic changes to everyday life, these accounts also suggest that activism is in fact a critical juncture (Giddens 1979).

Disruption was also perceived in more subtle and cumulative ways. Activists realized that they were starting to think differently. One activist relayed the following experience. Here she describes a moment when she realized that an ideological shift—or turn, as she calls it—was occurring. She mused:

This training that I’ve had—business school—[taught me] that profit above all else is why you exist. So, to have me go from that to standing in a picket line holding a sign that demanded corporate accountability from a power plant… it was a big stretch. I felt that it went against a lot of what I had been taught. *I felt I had to make that turn.* [emphasis added].
This passage suggests one way in which activists adopted new ways of thinking about their lives. These ideological shifts occurred, as will be described in subsequent sections, in many domains, especially around beliefs about democracy, government legitimacy and toxic immunity (Edelstein 2004).

Whether all-encompassing or subtle, disruptions to family and community life, and to taken-for-granted explanations about how society “works” can have profound effects on self-concept. It was evident that participation in these campaigns came at a personal cost. For some, emotional stress was manifested either psychologically or physically. One activist summarized: “There is a price to pay for doing all this—and it’s personal.”

Another recounted:

By the end of it I was so stressed out that it took a long time to kind of readjust. I was majorly stressed out.

A third activist said:

My body physically took tolls. I won’t go into it but, I had upset bellies, I had lots of anxiety all the time, especially when I had to go in front of the Selectmen [elected town officials].

The transaction costs of addressing environmental contamination through the public process are, as these passages suggest, high.

Activism was often associated with some degree of personal change, as one activist summarized:

No one can go through this and come out of it the same person. I think it is impossible. You can’t come out of this untouched.

Another activist offered this reflection:

…when you get involved for the first time, it is a very transforming experience.

Feeling touched or transformed, as these reflections noted, suggest that activism altered lives in positive ways as well. These kinds of summations were offered by other activists, often with specific examples of perceived change: new skill sets, acquired knowledge about the source of their drinking water or expertise in hydrogeology, confidence in public speaking, new social networks, or altered gendered roles in the household. As these examples illustrate, biographical disruption can also be a conduit for meaningful engagement, learning, and new affective ties. Taken together, these passages provide a flavor of the types and degrees of biographical disruption that the activists experienced.
In the remainder of this section, these disruptions will be explored more thoroughly by looking at four domains of interaction, which were gleaned from the activists’ narratives using the code scheme specified in Appendix B. These include interactions with governing bodies, communities, family members and the environment. Their experiences of biographical disruption occurred in interaction with others, or in activists’ perceptions about how these interactions would—or should—ensue. Grassroots campaigns introduced activists into potentially new networks with politicians and activists, or into new relationships with existing family and community networks. Likewise, they were also interacting with their environment, now contaminated or threatened, in a different way.

Legitimacy and Authority of Governing Bodies

Through their experiences challenging toxics, activists may come to realize their government officials often cannot or will not support them. They realized that their faith in government or elected officials was not matched by expected behaviors, and that authority figures could be unsympathetic or unreceptive to their concerns. One activist offered the following statement about her early expectations about what it would take to address the contaminated groundwater supply in her neighborhood. In response to the question, “what did you expect it would take to accomplish this?” she responded: “a couple of phone calls. Just a couple of phone calls and then it would be it done.” As this activist’s expectation suggests, in addition to assumptions about what government officials can and cannot do, will and will not do, are also assumptions about how democracy works. Activists grappled with the gap between their expectations and their assumptions about the democratic process, and the role activism plays in that process.

Activism was a new experience for the interviewees. All respondents reported that they neither came from activist families, nor had significant exposure to activism from other sources. Activism was thought to be an obstacle to the democratic process because activists raised conflict and debated the status quo. As Lynda Ames and Jeanne Ellsworth (1997) summarize, “conflict is often seen as dysfunctional, a symptom of a break down in communication, rather than as a positive concomitant to democracy” (p. 143). As such, many community members are apprehensive to raise their grievances publicly.

Given these starting assumptions, many of these non-activists self-identified themselves instead as concerned citizens and carefully measured their behavior to not appear “activist.” Paul Lichterman (2002) suggests this reflects a style or type of activism that is specific to suburbs and suburban culture, which esteems privacy and shames conflict (Baumgartner 1988; Lichterman 2002). Activists alluded to this culture:

I think especially in a place like [this town], it’s pretty important not to stray too far from the mainstream. I mean sometimes activists get too far out in front of the people that they need to work with. There, that just wouldn’t work. I think in a lot of places it wouldn’t work.
In the suburban context, as this activists’ reflection suggests, many activists don a “public mask” and work within the constraints of public decorum (Lichterman 2002), which includes not adopting the activist label, or engaging in radical, overtly “activist” tactics. Post-campaign, however, half did identify as activist. Even more, they reported that activism had become part of their core identity, and they incorporated it into their lifestyle as an essential “part of who [they] are.” One activist noted: “I ended up getting a taste for politics that I never knew even existed in my bones” [emphasis added]. When asked whether she identified with the term “activist,” a second woman replied: “I would say so. It’s in my blood” [emphasis added]. Their biological metaphors suggest that what started out as an extension of other priorities in their lives came to be a part of their physical being, a notion Passy and Giugni (2000) reflect in their discussion of activism and core life-sphere. Activists came to understand that activism and participation can be a part of a vital democracy, and not necessarily anathema to it. They also came to understand that democracy entails more than voting on a regular basis; it involves a rich and vibrant public where ideas are deliberated, and that citizens contribute to this lively debate.

In addition to realizing that the democratic process is messy and involves an active, even activist citizenry, many activists also realized that it is difficult to work with governing bodies. One activist realized that addressing the contamination posed one set of challenges, and wrestling government officials posed another:

I was taken aback by the lack of help from government, from the town. I actually learned quickly that government is not behind you, unless you can prove to them that they need to be.

A second activist reported a similar expectation that local, elected officials would help address their concerns:

We thought we’ll go to the town government, and they’re going to be behind us. We elect these people; they work for us. It didn’t take us long before, you know, a few of them tried to appease us by saying things, “Well we’ll look into it. We’ll find out. If something is going wrong, we’ll be sure to take care of it and all that.” But as we got deeper into it we realized that that wasn’t going to be true at all.

However, over time, whatever assumptions they held about government support were undermined by interacting with their local governing bodies. They learned the politicking and economic interests were often an integral part of a process they assumed would be legitimate and fair. One activist, who was addressing an issue that spanned the jurisdiction of three municipalities recounted:
What I’ve seen is very frightening. This was about a small-scale environmental decision. I can’t imagine how it goes on the national stage, it seems so corrupt to me at this level.

Another activist described how adversarial some of his interactions with town officials became:

It got really personal when you stood at a meeting with town officials. And it was personal. [There] was name calling from time to time. And not just by them; it was by us, too. There was plenty to go around for everyone. But it was confrontational. It wasn’t a comfortable situation.

This disruption of trust in government and authority can be profoundly disturbing, one activist noted:

The administration system was awful. The superintendent lied over and over, and delayed, and held things up. I would say that for me, it was very disheartening, because I felt betrayed. I believed in our government. I believed in my school system. I believed that people would always do the right thing. I really couldn’t believe that people would cover up things.

Later, she added the following summation of her experience:

I think that I was young, and trusting. And, I believed, and I wanted everything to be right. But if I can’t trust the people who are in charge, and are supposed to know about this stuff, and are supposed to do the right thing, what does that say about life? Society? That was the hardest issue for me to get over.

For many of the female activists, engaging in the public realm also meant that they were going before predominantly male boards. This meant that they were not only publicly voicing dissent against government officials (some for the first time), but they were also facing their own authority trivialized because they were women. For example, women who saw themselves as rational and competent, felt dismissed and overlooked at town or school board meetings. One woman recounted:

It was very clear to me that there were gender issues. When I spoke, it was like, “There is that hysterical woman again.” When a man spoke, it was listened to, paid more attention to, dealt with more, answered more. If you had a man stand up and ask a question at a public meeting, and a woman stand up and ask it, it was brushed over for the
woman and never answered. The man got answered. I saw that over and over.

Another female activist conveyed a similar concern:

> When I was a Selectman nobody thought I was a hysterical woman because I had the label “Selectman.” But if I was just going in there as myself, I had a horn and tail. I remember once—oh, I was so insulted—I got into the elevator at the State House and one of the legislators said to me, “Oh, are you working on your tan this summer?” I’m thinking: is this really what you think I’m doing? You see what I mean—humiliating. This is the image people have of you when you are involved in these environmental issues. Hysterical housewife.

Competent, articulate women were branded as “hysterical” or “hysterical housewives,” a label that has historically been used to psycho-pathologize women’s participation in the public sphere (Brown and Ferguson 1995).

Whether confronted by the hostility and inaction of town Selectmen, or by the bureaucratic inefficiencies of state agencies, activists realized that authority and many authority figures although powerful, were for the most part ineffective allies. For some, this catalyzed a rude awakening to how private interest and money pervade politics and the political process. As I will discuss in a subsequent section, others became disenchanted, and through a process of political divestment (Shemtov 2003), channeled their anger and frustration into an opportunity to become politically savvy and to become intimately involved in the democratic process. For example, one activist recounted that the moment he became “hooked” was learning about a backroom deal between a development company and local officials.

Many of these same themes were borne out in activists’ experiences at the state level as well, for example in activists’ interactions with regulatory agencies. In addition to working with local governing bodies, many citizens’ groups also challenged the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) siting and review process, or negotiated with the DEP about their degree of oversight of existing contamination. To provide some context for understanding activists’ experiences, it is helpful to understand that the DEP does not work with every community facing contamination. The DEP revised its Superfund law in the early 1990s, and privatized oversight of many of the state’s hazardous waste sites in order to free up DEP resources to address the most dangerous sites. Not all sites are severe enough—according to the DEP’s tiered categorization of hazardous waste sites—to garner DEP oversight. For those cases that are not categorized as among the most hazardous, Massachusetts state law mandates the polluting company to hire a Licensed Site Professional (LSP) to oversee the cleanup. The DEP then audits LSP-managed sites at random to ensure regulations are being
upheld. Privatization of hazardous waste sites has been contentious, and criticized for allowing the “fox to watch the hen house” (Birk 2000), and as such, introduces an important variation into the experiences of citizen groups. While some communities had DEP oversight from the start, other communities did not initially garner DEP oversight and involved a protracted battle to push the DEP into realizing the extent of the problem, the complacency of corporate-hired LSPs, and the necessity for better oversight.

Different activists had different experiences with state agencies like the DEP, but many of their experiences were a product of overburdened and under-funded offices that struggled to be responsive to citizens’ groups. Furthermore, activists expressed frustration that state agencies did not have an infrastructure to support inter-agency communication, for example between the Department of Environmental Protection and Department of Public Health. One activist relayed the following exchange:

It was clear that the DEP had no idea that the Department of Health was actually doing [a health study]. And, I said, how come you don’t know that?

[The DEP staff person] said, “well… the two agencies don’t talk. Well, we don’t really intersect. DPH does historical, we do current and future.”

Other activists realized that the Department of Environmental Protection was ineffective at regulating corporate polluters:

The DEP’s role is to sway wherever the political force is better. If the citizens have more politicians on their side, they go with the citizens. But unfortunately, they pit the citizens and the company against each other, and the DEP sits in the background… There’s much hand-wringing.

Another activist added this additional interpretation:

They couldn’t keep up and they couldn’t afford it. They were broke. DEP has been regularly broke over the years. They will get flushed with cash for a while if the economy is good. But when the budget starts to get cut, and depending upon who the governor is and how concerned he is about environmental affairs… It was just that there were too many irons in the fire for the politicians to really deal with you honestly.

Political and economic constraints on DEP authority translated into repeated and unproductive interactions with DEP officials. Activists targeted the DEP for missing files, minimal enforcement and lax permitting decisions. Although the DEP was one of the few organizations that could—in theory—assist community groups with addressing
toxics at the local level through public involvement processes, technical assistance grants and environmental review processes, funding and political barriers, in addition to a high degree of bureaucratization, often prevented the office from fulfilling its mandate. These experiences were among the most frustrating for the activists, as they were time-consuming and often contentious.

**Disruption to Community Life**

When faced with campaign demands, activists looked to the community for support and assistance; however, they often found community networks sparse, divided, or hostile. Activists did not experience the cohesive community they expected. Some expressed disappointment in the lack of community involvement, and felt unduly burdened with carrying the full-weight of tasks for which they assumed other community members would take responsibility. One activist offered this reflection on community apathy:

> When you first start you think, you’re gonna make the phone call, and someone’s going to do the right thing. Or that somebody else is going to do this. That it is somebody else’s job. But, it isn’t. It’s no one’s job. That’s the problem. Hillary Clinton’s book, *It Takes A Village To Raise Child*—she’s wrong. It takes one person to accept responsibility, because when everybody’s watching the children, no one’s watching the children.

By alluding to Clinton’s book, she offers powerful commentary on a commonly held assumption about how small communities function. In her experience, towns run on the efforts of a few dedicated individuals, although many assume that their communities have a high degree of cohesion and involvement.

Even still, challenging toxics divides communities (Brown and Mikkelsen 1990; Edelstein 2004; Freudenberg 1984; Levine 1982), and incites anger in residents who may not otherwise be involved in their community. While some community members were supportive of activists’ organizing in response to toxics, others sharply criticized or personally attacked activists. The most extreme of instance of this is receiving an anonymous death threat, which was the experience of at least two activists. One activist summarized her experience of disrupted community as follows:

> The teachers became divided. The town became divided. The town departments became divided. The parents became divided. Some kids would not let their kids play with my kid because I was the one. There was lots of unhappiness.

Community disruption may be rooted in several causes, including a widespread fear that the campaign will compromise the town’s reputation, and thus lower property values
or jeopardize jobs. It could also stem from psychological resistance to realizing the threat of toxic exposure, and of realizing that the conveniences of modern life sometimes bear environmental and health consequences (Edelstein 2004; Brown and Mikkelson 1990). Finally, it may be specific to the cultural context in which many of these campaigns took place. As discussed in the previous section, suburban culture may have certain norms against “speaking out” that make activism a particularly disrupting experience for both activist and communities (Lichterman 2002). This idea resonates in two activists metaphorically referring to their communities as “Mayberry RFD,” a sitcom that ran on in CBS in the late 1960s and early 1970s about life in what one activist summarized, a “nice, quiet community.”

Activists’ lives as members of a larger community are also disrupted by their new political roles. They are attacked in person, and through the local paper. Their lives transitioned from private to public, and outings into the community—even to run daily errands—present opportunities to receive public comment, both positive and negative. For example, the local grocery store is one place where community members aired their grievances. One activist relayed the following experience:

> I tell you, it was this bad, that sometimes I wouldn’t go to Stop & Shop. I’d go to a different town ‘cause I didn’t want to talk to anybody. Or, I didn’t want to get looks.

Another activist expressed a similar experience at the local grocery store:

> I’d be food shopping, and I couldn’t even get through the store. People would be hugging me. People would be crying. People would see me, and say, “Why don’t you mind your own business!” You know, this is a small town. I couldn’t go anywhere without it being constantly in my face.

Here, the grocery store served as a community crossroads, and as such, provided opportunity for community members to engage one another. The grocery store as public stockade is a powerful symbol of a community disrupted.

As relayed in their narratives, local activists seemed to experience “inversion of community,” where perceived community disruption undermined their perception of familiarity, security, and cohesiveness. This idea expands on Edelstein’s (2004) theory that toxics destabilize homeowners’ feelings of refuge or safe haven—“inversion of the home”—by extending the concept to community membership, and attributing it to both disrupted (i.e., contaminated) ecology and disrupted, polarized community life in response to toxics.
Disruption to Family Norms and Routines

The demands of grassroots organizing also disrupted family norms and routines. In order to meet the time-consuming demands of campaign leadership, activists looked to their spouses and families for support, and for assistance with routine tasks. For some, family was a critical resource from which they derived motivation or refuge. Family members took on new roles and responsibilities to enable the activist to spend time researching, networking, and strategizing. When campaigns forced activists to spend time away from home and family, spouses played an important role in fulfilling the obligations that come along with home and family, as well as absorbing the additional stress that results from over-extension, personal attack, and role strain. One activist joked that a support group should be established for leaders’ spouses because the routines and patterns of their relationship are overwhelmed by campaign demands.

Four people became involved in activism with their spouse. Activism, for them, became an important part of their family life, something they did together; however, it also provided another arena in which they needed to negotiate roles and responsibilities, both inside the home and for their campaign.

But for many, family life was an additional source of stress. Sometimes the demands of the campaigns colored family experiences of holidays and other important events. One activist recalled:

It affects a lot of milestones in your life. Even when we adopted my son, it was such a joyous moment, but I had all this other stuff to contend with, too.

Holiday celebrations were also disrupted because, as many activists deduced, important information always seemed to be released just prior to holidays, as one described:

Lots of stuff always happened around the holidays. I remember thinking that there were so many holidays were my mind was totally elsewhere. I would be there physically, but my mind was racing somewhere else. I just felt this huge sense of responsibility that people were counting on me, and I didn’t want to let them down. So there were so many holidays that were tempered with this stuff that was going on in the background.

In addition to disruption of family milestones and holidays, activism affects everyday routines as well, especially for parents. Many activists were raising children while leading campaigns. This is not a coincidence, since many activists also expressed that their activism was an extensive of their caretaking and protective role. One activist, who had an elementary school-aged son and two teenage stepchildren, reported that household routines were often disrupted:
I got phone calls morning, noon, and night. And, I fed them cereal at night, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, making them while on the phone, just trying to organize things, and get people together, and get this report, and that report. Doing homework with them while on the phone, talking to somebody in another state about another site. I can remember [my son] saying to me one day, “Mommy! You’re always on the phone! Can I just talk to you alone?” Obviously my kid survived, but I felt guilty for the time I spent away from them, or not with them.

In addition to time away from children and the stressors of not meeting role expectations, children are also witness to parents’ emotional strain, as indicated by another activist:

It was hard sometimes, when my oldest daughter would know I was crying because someone was not being nice to me in the paper, or I would hear a rumor. That’s tough—it takes a toll on you.

As these passages suggest, the added responsibilities of activism requires parents—especially mothers—not only to creatively juggle roles, but also to work through feelings such as sacrifice and guilt that are associated with gender role strain.

Marital strain and conflict are also a part of activists’ experiences. The literature on anti-toxics activism is quite clear on this; participation in these campaigns is a major source of marital conflict, often leading to separation or divorce (Brown and Ferguson 1995). Some husbands, who previously did not contribute to domestic responsibilities and childrearing, willingly incorporated those tasks into their lives; other husbands struggled with their new domestic roles. As one woman recounted:

It was a little tricky with my husband. He wasn’t used to folding laundry, and having to bring dinner home, or things like that. It was an adjustment that we’ve all become accustomed to.

Disrupted expectations about gender and gendered roles were often the source of this conflict. While some families adjusted, others did not. So in order to meet the added demands of activism, many women were required to work a “third shift,” often late into the night.

For many women, marital tension was a difficult subject to discuss, was imbued with ambivalence, and often alluded to using humor or jest. One woman recounted the support she received from her family. But later she offered a different account, followed again by a qualification—“he was a good husband,” but under stressful circumstances. At first she recollected:
My family life had changed so much—from just being a soccer mom, going to soccer games and cooking dinner and cleaning up the house. My husband would clean it. I spent a lot of time on the phone and on the computer. He was the most wonderful husband. He took over a lot with the kids.

Then after some additional reflection, she conceded that:

Deep down it was bad. We became more separate. It was hard then that we had become independent of each other. We had to get back to married life. I was just depressed.

And then later:

He was good, really good. He definitely was an old-fashioned kind of father. He let me have my space, but it wasn’t like it was so simple. That [pointing to a disheveled binder of campaign-related paperwork] didn’t fall down the stairs, [he] threw that down that stairs.

This account, although I believe she was reticent to communicate these difficulties, is more indicative of other female anti-toxics activists, both in this sample and in the literature more generally.

The family is often the "locus of disruption" (Becker 1997), the place where the effects of both physical and biographical disruption are often felt. The family can buffer against the effects of disruption, but when disruption also affects family relationships and routines, people can be left without a way to effectively work through and cope with the biographical disruption perceived in other life domains.

Disruptions to Toxic Immunity

Edelstein (2004) suggests that perceived turbulence or disruption emanates from two sources: toxics and the social responses to toxics. For the most part, this paper has looked at biographical disrupted as a result of the social responses to toxics; however, any discussion of the subjective experience of anti-toxics activism must also include a discussion of the experience, or potential experience, of toxics. As Michael Edelstein (2004) summarizes, “despite the readily available media images of contaminated communities, people are ill prepared for the prospect of becoming toxic victims” (p. 281). The majority of middle-class Americans are insulated and isolated from having to think about environmental contamination as anything but an abstraction that happens to some unnamed “other.” That is, the environment and contamination seems a remote possibility with little meaning in the context of day-to-day life (Edelstein 2004). Therefore, when toxics pose an immediate threat to a person’s home and livelihood, it often comes as quite
a shock. Secondly, there is popular uncertainty about whether and how toxics affect human health, a point both Michael Edelstein (2004) and Henry Vyner (1988) thoroughly address in their books Contaminated Communities and Invisible Trauma, respectively. As such, confronting toxics adds an additional layer to the complexity of living through a grassroots campaign because it introduces further uncertainty and instability into people’s lives. For example, one activist told the following story about how he learned his well was laced with trichloroethylene:

The DEP came around the neighborhood a day or two before Christmas and knocked on doors and told everybody not to shower, not to use their water, so on and so forth. Initially my first reaction is that it’s doomsday. What are you going to do, move out? There are a couple people that did go to hotels until it was sorted out. But the fact of the matter was that everybody had been living with it…

As this activist’s narrative suggestions, there was uncertainty about how long his well water had been contaminated with high levels of trichloroethylene. His family—including his young child—stayed in the house after the announcement, but adhered to strict warnings about not drinking, bathing in or cooking with the water. Meanwhile, amidst the unsettling uncertainty and the turmoil of disrupted family bathing and cooking routines—he began organizing his neighbors.

Through the experience of addressing toxics in the community, many activists come to see the importance of the environment to their day-to-day living. Others may even realize their own complicity in furthering environmental degradation through investment or purchasing practices. The assumption of environment as an innocuous backdrop to our lives, as a place only relevant to conservationists and naturalists, is one of the major disrupted assumptions in which anti-toxics activists must grapple (Edelstein 2004). This revelation may contribute to biographical disruption, as some activists cannot conceive of another way of life. For those who can find a way to proactively cope in a “changed perceptual environment” (Edelstein 2004), and who can understand the broader issues people face as a result of industrial and technological advances, this realization can alter one’s behaviors and life activities. This can also lead to biographical change.

Several of the activists spoke of an awakening. One woman, who had lived most of her life in sight of the local power plant’s emissions stacks, offered the following account of her activating moment, i.e., the moment she recognized that the power plant’s emissions posed a problem for the well-being of her family, and that a response was imperative:

[The] insurance adjuster [for the power plant] sent me a letter saying, “we’ve done an analysis of what was [i.e., black soot] on your deck. As part of our good neighbor policy, we will agree to power wash the furniture on your deck for no charge.” I stood there holding that letter, and I
looked down at my kids, and I actually verbalized, “[they] missed my point.” I am not concerned about my deck. I am not concerned about my furniture. But who is going to power wash my family? Who is going to clean out their lungs? That moment set me off; everything I do almost entirely, but certainly environmentally, is defined by that moment.

Later in the interview, she again reflected on her realization that the power plant and its regular releases of ashen soot—which had been a fixture in her childhood environment—was not benign: “I grew up here; I had never noticed.”

In summary, activists were not uniformly transformed by their experiences with local anti-toxics campaigns. Activists experience biographical disruption in different domains and to different degrees. Most lives were physically disrupted, although this was often mediated by gender. Routines and relationships were forced to accommodate new responsibilities, social networks, emotions, work (i.e., organizing work), or they had to adjust to altered physical realities, for example a contaminated water supply that was not safe for consumption or bathing. But people’s lives were disrupted in other ways—in phenomenological ways. Their experiences called into question taken-for-granted assumptions about government and democracy, and about the relationship between environmental and their everyday lives. They realized that activism provided them with an outlet for creating meaning in their lives, an opportunity to feel pride in their work, or to engage with a new community of people. For some, their experiences catapulted their lives in a new direction. For those that were previously unregistered voters, personal changes are evident in their running for political office. Other activists incorporated more subtle changes into their lives—the acquisition of news skills, such as public speaking; the development of new routines, such as campaigning for local candidates; the cultivating of a radicalized perspective, such as applying a more critical eye when reading the newspaper; or as lifestyle changes, such as forgoing pesticide use. And still others reported no perceived changes; activism was a brief spell of intense activity that came and went without biographical disruptions or consequences. Biographies are complex, and any changes are often piecemeal—we can think of them as micro-level negotiations between the emerging and former self. These changes are often perceived as biographical contradictions as new worldviews and lifestyle choices are woven into one’s existing life, identity and biography. In the next two sections, I review how activists both negotiated disruption in their lives and embraced it as an opportunity for growth and further engagement.

**Negotiating Disruption**

Some activists addressed disruption by holding fast to their self-concept or identity, and to maintain a sense of consistency, despite the campaign’s disruptive effects. Several different strategies were utilized to maintain a sense of normalcy, including resigned acceptance of environmental problems (i.e., they are a part of modern life), seeking
professional assistance, challenging stereotypes of women and activists, constructing continuity in their lives, and retreating or ultimately withdrawing from activism. These strategies—all attempts to mitigate disruption—will be presented in this section.

Some activists framed the contamination as a regulatory problem, not an environmental one. For example, one activist’s organizing efforts targeted the state regulatory bodies, rather than the corporation that was mismanaging a landfill. As she concluded:

I’m not against them having a landfill. You want to have a landfill that is right next door to me, I’m okay with that. All I ask is that, you follow the regulations so that you are not adversely impacting me.

Her framing of the problem emphasized bureaucratic incompetence, and normalized both pollution and technological solutions to mitigate and control it. To her, pollution was the result of permitted activity, and better regulations and enforcement were the means to insulate her home and family. With the problem framed as such, the solution was to go after the permit-granters and regulators, not the polluters. Her framing of the problem incorporated a “resigned acceptance” (Brown and Mikkelsen 1990) by envisaging landfills as a part of modern life, and when properly regulated, otherwise benign. Similarly, she emphasized the importance of good technology and good policy—suggesting a faith in technology and policy as adequate means to ameliorate problems with toxics.

In order to address the disruption, some activists sought counseling services. One activist recounted that, mid-campaign, in the local grocery store, she became “uncontrollably upset” and forgot why she was there. Realizing she was on overload, she called a doctor asking for help. Soon thereafter, and when her demanding schedule relented, she enrolled in therapy. Another activist recounted:

I did go to a counselor, for a while. I couldn’t understand how people reacted, how they were, and why. I just needed somebody outside all of this—separate—to be able to talk to about my personal feelings, and why it upset me so much.

As these cases suggest, some activists sought assistance to patch together the disrupted elements of their lives.

Another activist worked to invert stereotypes that dismissed her knowledge and competence as a woman:

Always allow them to underestimate you because, as long as they underestimate you, they will never anticipate you. They were never able to anticipate what I would come up
with because I was just a dumb woman. And, they would actually say that to me. “If you had an engineering degree, maybe you could understand some of the things we are trying to tell you.” Oh no—don’t be offended. Enjoy it! Cause where are they today? And, where am I? They’re closed and out-of-business. I am okay with that. As long as they underestimated me, they could never anticipate me. That became my motto.

This strategy helped the activist contend with discriminatory behaviors, and did so in a way that framed the perceived gender discrimination as a means to an end.

Many of the female activists recognized that they were treated differently than male activists. To cope with this, many adopted backstage roles in public forums, and allowed male group members to speak on behalf of the citizens’ group. After doing all of the work to prepare public presentations, they would ask male colleagues to present the information to the governing bodies. Rather than inverting the stereotype, these activists adapted to discrimination by negotiating within its boundaries. One activist recounted:

It took me a while to figure out that I needed to use these fathers that were PhDs, researchers, doctors, lawyers, to be the ones to speak at the public meetings… These guys would come in at night to the meeting that I spent researching for seven days—on the phone, read books, gone to [for advice], got the paperwork, put it all together— and I would go like this: ok, here’s what we found out. Here’s what we need to say at this meeting. Here’s what you need to ask. And, all they were doing is reading what I gave them.

Others adapted by working harder:

It [gender stereotypes] worked toward our advantage honestly. I think they didn’t take use seriously because we were both housewives. We were. We were housewives. Well, I thought, I’ll show them! We just worked doubly, doubly hard. There were stereotypes. In the beginning, we did do a lot of rallies so it was easy for the [state authorities] to portray us as over-the-top, hysterical, and emotional. It was easy to portray as NIMBY’s, as emotional. But they didn’t realize that underneath all those public demonstrations, there was a lot of strategic thinking going on.

Inverting gender stereotypes, and even working within them, was a strategy for some female activists to cope with threats to their self-efficacy.
As discussed in the previous section, activists also encountered stereotypes about activism—especially in suburbia, where conflict is often adverse to suburban culture (Lichterman 2002). When asked how they defined an “activist,” most suggested that activism involves other attributes than simply being active in one’s community. That is, activism, the noun, was disconnected from the verb, active, from which it is derived. Activism, for them, conjures an entire persona, whereas their did not translate their politics into every aspect of their private lives. Thus, given these starting assumptions about what activism should entail, self-identifying as activist felt contradictory. Even after some experience with grassroots campaigns against toxics, half of the respondents included in the sample did not identify as “activist.” This may be a strategy to counter perceived dissonance, and to avoid negative stereotypes attached to activism.

Some of the activists tried to create a sense of linearity and continuity in their lives, or used teleological reasoning to give meaning to the chaos and turbulence in their lives. Anthropologist Gay Becker (1997) suggests that in the United States, we assume our lives will unfold in a continuous, orderly fashion, that we expect continuity even though discontinuity is more often the norm. Given this, medical sociologist Garreth Williams (1984) suggests that, in the face of a disrupting event, we often narrate our stories by imposing on them order and linearity. That is, people creatively use narrative to conjure a sense of meaning and stability in the wake of a critical juncture or disruptive experience.

Several of the male activists constructed a sense of continuity in their narratives by invoking their professional skills. They described their experiences with grassroots activism as just another way to put their professional training and experience into practice. For example, one activist said:

Even when we originally started this, I sat down and thought that it had to be treated as a business. I’ve done that before, but not on the environment. If you look at this as a project at the beginning, and you said, “it’s a project, it’s a business.” How do you start? How do you form a successful business? Short-term goals. Long-term goals. Milestones. Stick to the plan. That’s how you get a successful business.

Other activists drew on their religion, or constructed their narratives as building toward an end, a telos, and implied that grassroots activism was part of a master plan. Consider the following activists’ reflections:

I believe there is a reason in life for everything, and there was a reason that the people that go through this have to go through it. There is something that they are not finding out on their own that they are finding out through this.
Sometimes I feel like I was sent down this path. I don’t feel as if I chose it. I feel like it was chosen for me, or for some reason… I never would have set out to do what I have done.

Grassroots activism is an intense experience that affects many facets of a person’s life. While participation can be personally rewarding, it can also be equally taxing. And while it can generate new relationships, it can also deplete existing ones. Many activists adopted strategies for dealing with feeling “burned out.” Many of them talked about periodically retreating into their private lives. For example, consider the following reflection of one activist:

…By the end of the week and a half, between the hearing, my phone ringing off the hook from people with issues, I was so depressed. I hit this rock bottom; I couldn’t listen to these stories anymore. I suddenly felt that—oh my god—that everybody had toxics stories, and nobody was organizing all these people. What am I going to do? How can I help these people? I finally said to my husband, “you’ve got to answer the phone for me.” I put it aside for a weekend, got my act together, and then came back to it.

Many also talked about taking time off, even for just an evening out, for an ice cream cone, or spending times with friends. Others leaned on the friends they made through activism to reinvigorate them. Even still, others retreated from activist roles for longer periods of time, but remained posed for future action. As another activist exclaimed, she was in “low cell” at the time of interview, temporarily attuned to her children and providing the primary source of income for her family.

For several activists, negotiating biographical disruption meant bowing out when their campaign felt like it was not succeeding, or the campaign came to an end. One activist summarized the various reasons she felt activists “went home,” or ceased organizing in their community:

The reason some people go home because: a spouse will not be happy; it costs money; it’s too much time; they don’t think they’re going to win; they don’t want to invest any more time in something that is not going to win. For the most part, these efforts are like swimming upstream—salmon swimming upstream, all the time. And, you don’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell of winning. You can’t possibly win this, so why are you doing it?

Some activists were exhausted by their experiences, even though they may have achieved their goals in organizing and successfully challenged toxics in their community. Sometimes, biographical disruption was too much to negotiate, so people removed
themselves from activism altogether, seeking a sense of what they perceived to be a “normal” life. For example, these activists recounted:

I couldn’t wait to slide back into anonymity, you know, being like everybody else who lived here. I was so glad when it was done. I felt like it took much more of a toll than it should have.

This is something that needed to be done. It’s over. Let’s live a normal life.

And, activists felt this way, even though they admitted to learning a lot from their experiences, or enjoying new friendships and social networks. Take, for example, the reflections of another activist:

I learned a lot. I met a lot of people. It’s done. But no thank you— wouldn’t do it again.

And finally, some activists could not longer justify the disruption activism introduced into their lives with other goals and responsibilities. This point is summed up nicely by one activist:

It’s [activism] a hard thing to sustain after it’s over. Like if you do it right, you’re usually so tired and so drained that you don’t want to do it anymore. I mean some people do, but other people don’t. If you have any sense of irony, I think, it’s hard to continue because as you’re going along you and other people will be saying things like, “Well we have to do this for our families and our children.” Then the children will ask you something or the spouse will ask you something and you say, “Not now, I have to go to a meeting.”

To review: for first-time activists, challenging toxics in local communities can be a contentious and highly disruptive event. Organizing around contaminated sites requires significant amounts of time to acquire technical literacy and to become familiar with state regulations for permitting, siting, and hazardous waste cleanup. Then there are networking and organizational tasks such as attending meetings, preparing presentations, publishing newsletters, raising funds, consulting with experts, and negotiating with government officials. These time- and resource-intensive demands disrupt campaign leaders’ home, family and work routines. With their free time allocated to campaign responsibilities, they often rely on spouses and family members to help juggle their other responsibilities such as homeowner and/or parent. Moreover, community life is disrupted when groups draw attention to existing or suspected contamination. Activism that pressures the government or confronts the polluter also generates negative publicity, which engenders harsh responses from residents concerned about the town’s reputation and property values. As community residents grapple with the uncertainty about the health risks posed by contamination, sharp divisions emerge. Some feel vulnerable and
react strongly; others deny a problem exists. Activists often face apathy or opposition from fellow residents, and insensitivity from government officials. They often come to see the public process as riddled with bureaucratic inefficiency, and realize that state agencies in charge of overseeing public health hold little authority when economic and corporate interests are at stake. Because of disruptions to routines and expectations about family, community and governing bodies, participation in these campaigns can also be biographically disruptive.

Embracing Disruption

During intense campaigns and in the wake of disrupted lives, many activists struggle to incorporate activism into their biography, and to make decisions about what to do next. They feel their lives are “turned inside out.” They negotiate disruption in various ways: by identifying strategies to mitigate its effects, by denying or normalizing it, by affixing meaning and continuity to it, and finally by retreating from the experiences unseating their sense of normalcy. They also work to counteract ideological changes, and to regain a sense of “normalcy.” But over time, some activists stop resisting change. In this section, I explore instances where activists embrace disruption as an opportunity for growth, engagement, or new relationships. These activists realized that, although sometimes difficult to cope with, disruption can be a positive experience.

Even while experience dissonance and uncertainty about their new circumstances, activists embrace subtle changes. For example, they adopt new purchasing practices, as was the case for this activist. In response to the question, “did participation affect any change in your life?” she responded:

Well, it’s funny. I shop more at Wild Oats. I do some more organic-type shopping. I’ve looked into other sorta organic-type things. I support organic lawn, gardening products. So, all kinds of little personal type changes that have changed my own little nucleus.

Or, another activist said:

Using the stuff… [like] the peppermint smelling stuff for the ants instead of ... I mean you do try and not use so much stuff that could be bad for you and bad for the environment, though sometimes you can’t help yourself. But you do pay attention to it.

Subtle changes also manifest in political behaviors. Unregistered votes register to vote. Others subscribe to local newspapers, and stay abreast of—even involved in—local political campaigns and committees. Or, activism alters how they filter and process information: “It [the campaign] has affected the way I watch the news. It’s affected the way I look at different political situations.”
Many activists channel their disenchantment with local politicians into an opportunity to gain new skills, and to take on new roles. Many develop political savvy and a knack for politicking. For example:

It is almost a joke [within the organization] how unpolitically savvy I was. I never paid attention presidential politics, history. I could maybe go back a few years and name the presidents. I was a political novice, really. That’s even being too kind. Apolitical. But I’ve become very political, and I’ve become a political player.

Activists then translate this political know-how into a run for public office. Of the twenty people included in this sample, seven activists ran for elected positions—school board, board of selectmen, or the board of health. In addition, two activists were taking steps toward switching careers. One woman mused:

I have thought repeatedly—because I am teacher, that’s what I went to school for—when I do go back to work, do I want to go back to teaching? Or, do I want to go back and go something environmental? So, who knows? I still don’t know—I’d love to do something part time that would support a cause, maybe non-profit fundraising.

The other activist involved in a career change was, at the time of the interview, applying to law school. She wanted to become a “professional activist” rather than balancing a separate and sometimes disconnected career with activism:

I consider myself the unlikely activist, but it’s become how I live my life. I’ll always probably be involved in this on some level for my whole life. I don’t want to be an activist forever; I’d like turn this into a career, and make myself even more effective.

These excerpts show how disruption does not always lead to role strain and loss. How activists respond to biographical disruption can also lead to new role acquisition (Kiecolt 1994; Kiecolt 2000).

Rather than negotiating and normalizing challenges to disrupted explanatory systems, activists also embrace new guiding assumptions about toxics and environmental health. Some of the activists initially perceived their work as disconnected from campaigns in other communities. Already overwhelmed by biographical disruption in their lives, they resisted building coalitions or allying with other groups for fear that they would spread themselves too thin. In contrast, some activists feel burn out would result if their focus remained too localized. These activists reach across communities to build regional organizations that address a myriad of public health and environmental problems while simultaneously working on campaigns closer to home. They feel toxics could not be
addressed in isolation from other issues. This suggests that activists embraced radicalized perspectives. Radicalization involves appreciating connections to other communities’ struggles as well as one’s own complicity in environmental degradation (Krauss, 1998). When activists envisage what they do as part of something bigger, when they see the problem as part of a global problem, they receive validation for what they are doing in the first place.

Embracing disruption not only meant adopting a radicalized perspective on political participation, but it also meant adopting a radicalized perspective on how to address toxics. While many activists initially assumed their homes were insulated from toxics, they came to realize that toxics are ubiquitous substances that pose real threats to their health. This can be an alarming realization. However, as many activists recounted, remaining gripped with fear and on the defensive is emotional, exhausting work:

I’m telling you, it’s just one thing after the other. Every two or three years [new toxic threats move into the community]. I don’t know how much more of this I can really do, because I find that we are always butting heads with someone. It’s draining.

Part of why it’s so hard to stay involved afterwards, I think, is that while you’re going through it, it’s almost a necessity that you have to demonize the people on the other side. Mentally that’s not a real healthy place to be long term where you have to keep making people out to be bad, or you have to make them out to be the enemy. I mean you can do that up to a point until you either win, or you get exhausted. But to keep on doing that, to start that whole cycle all over again, it just doesn’t seem like a good place to be.

But, some activists realized a difference between blocking sources of contamination in their communities, and proactively supporting sustainable change, sometimes in collaboration with government and/or industry. They shifted from a singular focus on preventing pollution to also supporting sustainable change through solutions-focused activism (Edelstein 2004), such as generating town-wide recycling campaigns to minimize dependence on landfill and incineration, participating in state-run panels on building healthy schools, supporting green agriculture, or participating in regional conferences about sustainable sources of energy. In this case, activists embraced a new perspective of the environment and what needs to be done to address toxics.

Finally, activists embraced new social networks, especially as a source of support and renewal. The development of new friendships was a theme reiterated by many:

It sounds kind of strange, but part of it is social, too, and just having the opportunity to work with a lot of people that you really like and respect I think has a lot of appeal. I think that that is what keeps people going. In fact, that’s like one of the big things. Because if it’s just for a cause, you can only go so far with that.
Strategic alliances and social networks, such as those built by facilitating organizations like Toxics Action Center through conferences and newsletters, allowed committed activists to share ideas and to see their community’s problems as part of a broader issue, and to view their community group as part of a broader community or social network.

Social networks were also sources of meaning and opportunities for activism (Passy and Giugni 2000; 2001; Shemtov 2003). This was an underlying sentiment in many of their narratives. Whereas initially many shied from associating with other activists, over time the entire sample came to value the work of other anti-toxics activists. Prior victories of earlier campaigns against toxics, and an imagined community of grassroots leaders, becomes the fodder current activists use to validate and sustain meaning in their own battles. Although activists lost trust in community and government networks, they also restored their sense of possibility through new social networks. For example, one activist said: “Just to know that there are people like [other anti-toxics activists in Massachusetts] in the world—that was so positive, and hopeful.”

In this project, I sought to explore the activist experience, and how these experiences might affect decisions to sustain involvement. The activists interviewed for this project did not follow a linear path towards a radicalized perspective, or lifelong activism. Even those that sustained involvement actively resisted, or even denied, biographical disruption. They worked to prevent, or to repair it through resigned acceptance of environmental problems, inverting or avoiding stereotypes and by seeking teleological or linear explanations. In doing so, they retained biographical consistency, and saw activism as a temporary break from normal (i.e., pre-activist or un-political) life. They challenged ideological overhaul, or the process by which they might come to see themselves and their world through a different, more radicalized lens. They resisted seeing the political process as flawed, and their homes and schools as vulnerable to environmental contamination. This resistance was emotionally expensive, and psychological exhausting. At other times however, activists relinquished their old vision for their lives and for society. They allowed their experiences to change their perspective on community, the environment, or government. Through embracing these changes, they were able to sustained their activism over longer periods.

By making this argument, I am not suggesting that those who saw themselves as activist and who remained active never worked to prevent or repair disruption; likewise, I am also not implying that those who did not identify as activist and discontinued political activity never politicized their experiences. Their biographies were far too complex to be understood formulaically. Rather, I am suggesting that the activists reacted to disruption in both ways—simultaneously. While they may have embraced biographical disruption in one area of their lives, they negotiated and mitigated against it in others.

Conclusion

Too often the stories of social movements are told without enough attention to what the experience of being part of that movement meant.
to and felt like to those who participated in the movement. I don’t believe we can understand the agency of political actors without recognizing that politics is lived, believed, felt, and acted all at once. Incorporating the experience of social movement involvement into analysis and theories about social movements may be difficult, but it adds a great deal to what we can learn about politics, social transformation, and political subjectivities (Morgen 2002).

As Sandra Morgen suggests, studying the experience of activism is instructive. Activists and researchers alike reflect on the experience of activism, especially through the use of personal narratives (Davis 2002). Examining local grassroots activism as an example of a critical juncture provides a framework for exploring activist narratives. First, the concept of disruption focuses our attention on the disrupting event or events, and points us to explore the various levels of disruption, and where its effects are felt. It pushes us to consider whether disruption even occurred. It also suggests that to understand why activism can be a disruptive experience, we must explore expectations activists have about social institutions (e.g., government, family, or community). Finally, by exploring first-time activism as a biographically disruptive event cues us to investigate how activists cope with disruption, and how they negotiate the challenges to their lifestyle or worldview. So, this framework offers a way to explore the emotional and relational aspects of social movement participation that contribute to attitudinal and biographical change.

Disruption also offers a framework to explore how activists sustain their involvement over time. Some sociologists suspect that first-time activists who lead locally-focused, single-issue campaigns (or, NIMBY campaigns), disengage after they achieve their goal(s) or after the target of their activism ceases to exist (for example, see DiChiro 1998). Many activists, in the course of challenging toxics at the local level, approached the ‘limits of democracy’ (Naples 1998), felt the significance of their political involvement denied, or were overwhelmed by the potentially adversarial and prolonged process of challenging toxics at the local level. But, while some resign in defeat and withdraw from further political or activist commitments, others fight harder. This is true for activists mid-campaign as well as post-campaign. In both instances, people must decide whether to maintain their effort. First-time activists sustained their involvement in a myriad of ways: through short-term measures to mitigate against drastic change, and over the long haul, through accepting—even embracing—the changes to their life and worldview.

In applying this notion of disruption to explore sustained involvement, two conclusions can be drawn. First, sustained activism involves a series of decisions, and is not always the result of a fixed decision made within discrete time frame. Rather, sustained participation is the product of a series of “yes’s” to smaller decisions—Should I serve on the Board of Health? Should I advise or mentor another community group? Should I build a coalition with other communities addressing the same issue? This is a divergence from popular and scholarly writing on the subject, which has tended to consider activists’ commitments in a static, dualistic way. Activists evaluate what they
are doing and why, and they do this often. Thus, when thinking about fostering commitments, it is useful to think about what supports the entire activist experience, but most especially during periods when their assumptions and social worlds are most overturned. We know from earlier work that deepening connections to other people and ideas, particularly across contexts and time (i.e., connecting them to a shared history) significantly alters the experience of first-time organizing.

Second, activism has different consequences and may lead to biographical change through different pathways, depending on when in their lifecourse activists become involved in grassroots organizing. As the activists’ narratives suggest, activism is a different experience for parents than for young adults without life partners or children or demanding jobs. Thus, decision-making about commitments is an interactional process situated within a specific social, organizational, and historical contexts (Anspach 1993). Renee Anspach (1993) argues that “decisions are collective acts, not individual acts” (p. 21). As we have seen by looking at activism as a disrupting event, engaging in local campaigns throws activists into new social relationships with regulatory agencies, local officials, corporate public relations representatives, and community organizations, and introduces new variables into already existing family and community relationships. All of these interactions, and the disruptions that result, combine to produce activists’ overall assessment of their involvement. These interactions, in turn, engender emotional responses, which are shaped by social expectations and role expectations at the micro- and meso-level (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001). Therefore, decisions about continuing activism are not made by individuals, but by an individual in interaction with others—with family members, fellow activists, social networks, government officials, and community members. So taken together, sustained activism involves a dynamic, interactional decision-making process. This process is imbued with emotion and reflects activists’ stage in the lifecourse as well as their experience with continually navigating disrupted terrain. Thus, when considering how to support activists’ commitments, it may be worthwhile to support them not only as activists, but as activists with important responsibilities to families, jobs, and community organizations that play a central role in their decisions about long-term involvement.

There are additional questions worthy of further investigation. What information we have on the experience of social movement participation is about the activist and not about the consequences for non-activists (e.g., spouses or family members). Because activists’ experiences are entwined with others in the household and family, further studies looking at decisions made at the family level will likely provide some interesting insights into the experience and maintenance of social movement participation. Future research could adopt a lifecourse perspective and look at the experience of first-time activism at different time points in people’s lives. As well, we know from other scholars that women are doing most of the work to address toxics at the community level (Brown and Ferguson 1995; Kraus 1993), and it was evident in this project that biographical disruption is gendered; this merits further research to fully explore why and how activism can lead to biographical disruption. There are a good number of men doing this work, too, so a more thorough, comparative analysis of their experiences also might yield insights into activism and democratic participation around toxics. Because perceived
disruption depends on prior experiences and assumptions, it is instructive to look at activism in other contexts as well, especially the lived experience of environmental justice activists for whom social, political, and economic marginalization is an important component of their experience of toxi
cs.

References


