## Alone in the crowd: Lone protesters in Western European demonstrations

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**Abstract**

While corroborating the fact that the majority of protestors attend demonstrations together with friends, family and/or fellow members of their organizations, we show in this article that protesting alone remains an option for many people – under the right circumstances. Through multilevel analysis of survey data from participants in 69 demonstrations in eight Western European countries, we study lone protesters in different types of demonstrations. On the individual level, we show that protesting alone is closely linked to relative detachment from interpersonal mobilizing networks, as well as to short decision times. We also develop demonstration-level explanations for why lone protesters are more common in some demonstrations than in others. Precipitating events and inclusive social movement communities increase the proportion of lone demonstrators, which is also higher in static rallies than in moving demonstrations. These factors arguably make personal networks less crucial for protest mobilization.

**Keywords**

Mobilizing networks, precipitating events, protesting alone, protest participation, social movement communities, Western Europe

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## Introduction

*In the Charlie Chaplin movie* Modern Times *(1936), his character 'the tramp' is about to cross a street when a flag (presumably red) falls off a lorry platform. Our hero picks it up and starts to follow the lorry, while trying to catch the attention of its driver by shouting and waving the flag. Meanwhile, a political demonstration marches up from behind, creating the false impression of Chaplin as the leader of the demonstration. Chaplin marches on, oblivious to what is going on behind him, until the demonstration is dispersed by police and Chaplin is arrested as the instigator of public disorder.*

In this scene, Chaplin does virtually all the same things the demonstrators do, yet he is completely detached from the group to which he appears to belong. This comic sequence is an extreme case of the phenomenon we discuss in this article, that is, people who take part in demonstrations 'alone', in contrast to the majority of protesters who participate together with friends, family and/or fellow members of an organization. Sociologically, lone protesters are intriguing for at least two reasons. First, protest participants are typically mobilized through social interaction with interpersonal networks. In contrast, lone protesters appear to have made an independent decision to participate in a collective event. Second, lone protesters take part in a crowd yet perceive themselves as solitary, at least in relation to the other protesters. Whereas the general condition of being alone in large groups of people is a central characteristic of modern urban life, it is also a potential source of unease. Simmel (1950: 119) argued that: '[the] feeling of isolation is rarely as decisive and intense when one actually finds oneself physically alone, as when one is a stranger, without relations, among many physically close persons'. This underlines the tension between isolation and participation.

Early theorists of crowd behaviour, such as Le Bon (2001), would not have been surprised to find lone protesters in a 'crowd' since the traditional ontology of crowds

was one of initially detached individuals who came together and were absorbed into a larger collective entity. Individual anonymity was long regarded as conducive to collective behaviour, since it allegedly makes people feel less accountable and thereby more susceptible to social contagion in the crowd. The American collective behaviour tradition, which dominated the study of social protest around the 1950s and 1960s, was influenced by this perspective (McPhail, 1989), and even though it entertained less crude notions of the mass and the crowd, it still conceived the 'behaving collective' as basically composed of individuals coming together to mill around, then becoming excited and forming a crowd (Blumer, 1946). Although Blumer saw crowds as an early stage in the formation of social movements, this perspective was rightly criticized for ignoring the friendship networks and organizational ties that link most crowd participants. In a seminal study, Aveni (1977) surveyed participants in a sports crowd and demonstrated that most were actually there together with people they knew. Neil (1993) has suggested that individual anonymity actually makes participation in collective behaviour less likely since anonymous individuals communicate less than people who know each other. Research on protest mobilization has furthermore shown that pre-existing informal and formal social networks are important preconditions for mobilization (Passy, 2001). It is not surprising that contemporary research on social movements has devoted very little attention to atypical individuals who participate in collective action alone.

In a selection of 69 demonstrations, rallies, and protest marches in eight European countries surveyed during 2009–2012 within the research programme *Caught in the act of protest: Contextualizing contestation* (hereafter CCC),[1] the overall proportion of lone protesters was over 10%. Although this might seem a surprisingly high figure, it nevertheless confirms that protesting crowds are largely composed of people who are attached to networks of other participants. As we shall see, this proportion varied

significantly among protests, which indicates that different mobilization patterns and/or cultural conditions for lone protesting might be involved.

The presence of 'lone protesters' raises a number of questions that we intend to address. First, do lone protesters differ from the majority of participants in ways that could provide us with hints as to why they are alone, and do 'loners' typically follow mobilization patterns that deviate from those of the majority? Second, what demonstration-specific contextual factors facilitate 'lone' protest participation? Our analysis will focus on the influence of three such possible factors: (a) the physical characteristics of the gathering; (b) the degree of inclusiveness of different social movement communities (Staggenborg, 1998); and, (c) the presence of precipitating events (Owens, 2013).

## Theories and hypotheses

We use the label 'lone protesters' to describe people who take part in protests alone. It is an open question whether the lack of company is voluntary and how the participants feel about this – whether they would consider themselves as lonely, solitary, independent, or none of these. It is also entirely possible that a small minority of respondents subjectively experienced themselves as alone even though they participated in the immediate vicinity of people whom they knew and with whom they interacted.

We can a priori distinguish between three possible categories of lone protestors, based on why they end up alone at demonstrations.

1. Some may have had an appointment with someone – or simply assumed that they would meet someone they knew – and then failed to find this person in the crowd. In such cases, the original decision to take part was made with the belief that one would have company.

2. Others may have merely walked past and spontaneously decided to take part. In those instances, there was no planning phase, and the participant had no time to recruit others.

3. Yet others may have made a conscious decision to go to a demonstration despite their expectation that they would not be accompanied by someone they knew. The choice to participate alone was then made during the planning phase of protest participation.

At least a few participants probably belong to the first category of 'unplanned loners'. The size of this category might be affected by some contextual factors, such as very large demonstrations in which some might find it difficult to find their friends, but given the widespread use of mobile phones this should be a marginal problem. Category 2 is probably more common in static rallies staged in urban environments, which arguably require less determination to take part (perhaps sometimes merely out of curiosity), compared with moving demonstrations. Variation in this category may be attributable to what Zhao (1998) terms 'ecological factors' – whether the protest is located in or nearby areas that are much frequented by sympathizers who might spontaneously decide to join when they see it taking place. Category 3 is possibly the largest group and arguably the most sociologically interesting. It appears to represent an independent decision to participate in a protest regardless of whether members in one's social network will do so. This implies both a peripheral relation to (or even disconnectedness from) mobilizing interpersonal networks *and* sufficient individual independence and determination to turn up at the demonstration anyway.

*An unusual kind of protester?*

If our third category of lone protesters indeed constitutes a large share of the population of lone protest participants, then a predominant reason why people demonstrate alone could be that they are relatively disconnected from interpersonal mobilizing networks

(Walgrave and Verhulst, 2006). This, in turn, would make lone protesters an anomaly in the light of research stressing the general significance of such networks in contentious politics (Klandermans, 2004; Schussman and Soule, 2005; Snow et al., 1980). Informal and formal social ties can be important in several aspects of protest mobilization, from how people initially start to share the values of a movement, to how they get to hear about a particular protest event, and finally in influencing the decision to participate (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987; Passy 2001). Klandermans and Oegema (1987) went so far as to claim that 'links with informal networks seem to be *a necessary condition* for the arousal of motivation to participate in the demonstration [of their study]' (p. 527, our emphasis). However, later studies have argued that the importance of both personal and organizational ties for mobilization varies between events and among participants in events (Fisher, 2010; Klandermans et al., 2014; Passy and Monsch, 2014). The presence of lone participants in protests also demonstrates that mobilization is possible with little or no network push; sometimes impersonal mobilizing channels, such as mass media, may be sufficient (cf. Walgrave and Manssens, 2000). Presumably, lone protesters have also taken a relatively spontaneous decision to join a demonstration; the longer people have known about a protest, the more likely they are to have had time to ask others to join them (Walgrave and Wouters, 2014).

A different interpretation is that lone protesters express of a more 'individualized' approach to collective action, sometimes claimed to increasingly characterize political participation during our epoch of modernity (Micheletti, 2003; Sörbom and Wennerhag, 2013). A central theme in the interpretation of the transformations of political action during modernity has been the increasing tendency of citizens to be less committed to organizations (e.g. declining political party membership) or political identities based on social groupings (e.g. social class). Instead, more citizens engage in types of political participation that do not require organizational membership or shared social identities, and which often can be performed on one's own (signing petitions, boycotting goods for

political reasons, social media 'clicktivism', etc.). For some theorists, these practices have been conceived as 'individualized collective action' (Micheletti, 2003) or as 'personalized politics' (Bennett, 2012). Activists engaging in this type of political action may be alone, but can simultaneously act as part of a broader collective – to which they may not necessarily have personal or organizational bonds – for achieving social or political change.

*Contextual factors facilitating lone protest participation*

Generally, factors belonging to the context of demonstrations affect the composition of types of participants (Walgrave and Rucht, 2010). If variations in contextual factors are also correlated with the chance of finding lone protesters in a demonstration, these can contribute to a partial explanation of why a number of lone demonstrators attend despite the absence of social 'pull' factors. We suggest three types of contextual factors of potential importance: (a) physical characteristics of the gathering; (b) inclusiveness of collective identities; and (c) precipitating events.

Different protests may present varying social barriers to lone participation, based on the physical characteristics of the gathering itself. Most obviously, it should demand less effort to join a standing rally at a square, compared with joining a march, since the group boundaries of a static rally are often less distinct. This would be an example of how spatial (Sewell, 2001) or ecological (Zhao, 1998) aspects of a protest affect patterns of mobilization. Furthermore, larger demonstrations may imply mobilizing patterns different to those of smaller ones, with an impact on the proportion of lone participants, and this should be controlled for in analyses. We nevertheless limit ourselves to the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 1:* Lone participants are more likely to be found in static rallies compared with moving demonstrations.

It is also possible that social aspects of different protest events can make them appear more or less appealing to take part in alone. Some collectives may convey an atmosphere of inclusiveness, while others make prospective participants feel awkward unless they know the cultural codes of the social movement community (Staggenborg, 1998) and feel prepared to adopt and represent a specific movement identity. Such obstacles to participation may be particularly acute for protesters who participate without a close peer group with whom they feel secure. This can be theoretically elaborated through the concept of collective identity in social movements. According to Taylor and Whittier (1999: 170), '[collective] identity is the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity.' Collective identities can be more or less inclusive, and in different degrees anchored in widely held values, interests and experiences (Klein and Simon, 2006).

The individual correlate of collective identity is social identity – 'that *part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group […] together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1978: 63). Participation in a movement becomes more likely if one identifies with the social category that the movement represents (Klandermans and de Weerd, 2000; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Deciding merely to participate in an occasional protest arguably requires a moderate degree of group identification, although strengthened identification with the other participants is typically an outcome of participation (Drury and Reicher, 2000).

Strong identification with an accompanying peer group can compensate for a relatively weak identification with a specific protest. Conversely, lone participants, even if they are technically members of the organization staging the protest, have no personal connections present who can reinforce their social identification with the movement. Potential lone protesters may therefore be particularly reluctant to participate in protests with more exclusive collective identities. Likewise, one might expect that those who

come to protest alone as an expression of a more individualized or personalized attitude to political participation would be put off from protest campaigns that are not very broad and inclusive.

Differences between demonstrations in these respects may be subtle and difficult to measure directly. However, there are good reasons to believe that systematic variation is linked to different types of protest mobilizations. Broad and inclusive protest mobilizations – *rainbow coalitions* (Peterson, 1997) – are typical of protests during the early stages of a protest cycle, before movement identities have become more consolidated and exclusive (Rohlinger and Klein, Forthcoming). Friedman and McAdam (1992) also pointed to the paradoxical effect that, as single-issue organizations successively widen the scope of their missions, they risk putting off members with interests that conflict with any of these new missions. Therefore, it is arguably easier for those less involved in the movement to participate in protest events organized by a broad group of people focusing on a single issue (e.g. anti-nuclear demonstrations), compared with protests organized by a narrower group of organizations with a more developed collective identity (e.g. Pride, women's, May Day and trade union demonstrations).

A contemporary case of broad and inclusive protest mobilizations are the various European anti-austerity protests associated with the label 'indignados', along with European 'occupy' protests. These mobilizations specifically emphasized diversity and rejected specific political identities in an attempt to represent 'the 99%' (cf. Halvorsen, 2012; Perugorria and Tejerina, 2013). Similarly, the environmental protests in connection with the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen mobilized a strikingly diverse range of political actors (Wahlström et al., 2013). In these types of mobilizations one should be more likely to find lone protesters.

*Hypothesis 2:* Lone demonstrators are less likely to be found in demonstrations on issues that typically mobilize social movement communities with relatively consolidated and exclusive collective identities and are more likely to be found in protests based on weak and/or inclusive collective identities.

Moreover, radically increased mobilization to social movements is often connected to specific precipitating events (Owens, 2013). Generally, people are unlikely to be recruited outside social networks linked to a movement, except 'when an event or situation raises such a sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action' (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995: 498). According to Jasper and Poulsen (1995), precipitating events increase mobilization to protests by imposing 'moral shocks' on broader segments of the population. Moral shocks may provide people with enough motivation to join a demonstration, even in the absence of company. 'Moral' should here not be understood as only referring to 'moral issues' in the everyday sense, but to the moral indignation to which most grievances – including economic – can give rise. The main 'propelling force' here is arguably moral judgements and moral emotions that amplify motivation to a degree where the pull from social ties becomes less important for mobilization. (However, this does *not* imply that lone participants should be *more* emotional or *more* strongly motivated than other participants in the same demonstration (cf. Klandermans et al., 2014)). Even though grievances that are gradually imposed on a population may give rise to moral shocks, it is likely that a collective sense of strong moral outrage is linked to a specific precipitating event. Walsh (1981) conceptualized this as 'suddenly imposed grievances', which increase the probability of mobilizing less protest-prone groups. In the absence of events triggering the demonstration, one would expect that mobilization is more limited to members of

pre-existing networks and organizations, who are more likely to attend protests in the company of others.

*Hypothesis 3:* Lone demonstrators are more likely to be found in demonstrations precipitated by a specific event that draws attention to grievances addressed by the demonstration.

## Methods and data

### *Dataset and sampling method*

The data used in this paper are taken from postal surveys distributed within the research programme CCC to participants in demonstrations and rallies. Our present analyses are based on a dataset from 69 demonstrations and 14,932 individual cases. These include demonstrations from 8 countries – Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom – between 2009 and 2012. All respondents were sampled using the standardized method of the CCC research program, which ensures that the data are both representative for all participants taking part in the demonstrations and comparable between countries (see Klandermans, van Stekelenburg and Walgrave's introduction to this special issue).

### *Operationalization*

*Dependent variable.* The dependent variable was constructed from an item regarding the respondent's company at the protest.[2] Only those who replied 'alone' and no other alternatives were coded as 'lone protesters'. Response to none of the alternatives was coded as 'missing'. As noted above, not all loners are equally theoretically interesting. We therefore refined the category. First, if protesters were asked by someone to participate,[3] it seems likely that they went to the protest assuming that they would have

company during the event and are thereby not distinguished from other protesters by lack of network push. Second, lone protesters who are members of a staging organization should perhaps count as 'less lonely' compared with non-members. These two variables can be cross-tabulated into four categories of lone protesters (see Table 1). Of the 1540 lone protesters in the sample, 1343 persons had valid responses to both of the other two questions. Altogether 32% had been asked by someone to join (compared to 66% in the entire population). The remaining 68% were lone protesters not asked by anyone; among these, roughly one-third were members of an organization staging the event. The remaining 45% of loners might be regarded as the proper 'isolates'. However, if participants who were members of the staging organization were not asked by a co-member to participate and did not perceive themselves to be in the company of co-members during the event, they are for our purposes as alone as any non-member participating alone. Hence, after having established a clear link between lone protesting and relative disconnectedness from mobilizing networks, we decided that a fusion of the two lower quadrants in Table 1 (in grey) would be the most appropriate operationalization of 'lone protesters' in our further analysis. Hereafter, 'lone protesters' refer only to those protesting alone who have not been asked by anyone to join.[4]

[Table 1]

One peculiarity of these data that might be easily overlooked is that although the sampling of the participants was done during a protest event, the questionnaires were not filled in until after the demonstration. This means that while some items are relatively safe measures of events prior to the demonstration, such as whether one was asked by someone to join, other items are best understood as measures of attitudes that are held after the event and that may be affected by participation, such as degree of identification with the other participants. In the case of initially lone participants, there

is always a possibility that they develop 'fleeting relationships' with other demonstrators, and therefore cease to consider themselves alone at some point (cf. Morrill and Snow, 2005). However, we can then be quite certain that someone who after the event claimed to have been alone was indeed 'alone' during the entire event, and not just at the time of receiving the survey.

*Independent variables.* As control variables we included gender, age and a dummy for university education. Apart from controlling for possible selection bias, the control variables may all have consequences for the size of social networks and the general 'biographic availability' (McAdam, 1986) of the respondent for protest.We created a measure related to the issue of the demonstration, listing altogether 13 issues. For most cases, these issues correspond directly to specific social movement contexts (e.g. anti-nuclear, climate, women's rights, peace, LGBT, student, regionalist/separatist, anti-abortion, or anti-racist issues/movements). Labour Movement demonstrations were principally divided into two 'issues' – May Day marches and trade union protests – but a few were also included under the issue 'anti-austerity', for cases in which this issue was the demonstration's main theme and a trade union was not the dominant organizer.

For other contextual variables, we relied on factsheets filled in by the surveying researchers of the different national teams of the CCC programme. The demonstration size measure was based on the local researchers' estimations. The variable for precipitating events was based on a set of questions about events preceding the demonstration and the demonstration context. To count as a precipitating event, it had to be an identifiable 'triggering' event that was sufficiently close in time (i.e., not more than 3 months preceding) and which was deemed necessary for the demonstration to take place. The event had to be external in relation to the movement or the potential mobilization context – i.e., a demonstration supporting an ongoing general strike was not regarded as caused by a precipitating event. International summit meetings were not

regarded as ‘precipitating events’, since they had been planned long beforehand. According to this definition, 24 of the 69 events had been precipitated by an event, including: the Fukushima nuclear disaster, national parliaments passing controversial laws or decrees, the closing of a major car factory, and the election of a party with neo-Nazi origins into parliament.

*Analyses*

The analyses rely on multivariate binary logistic regression with ‘protesting alone (and not asked to join)’ as the dependent variable. Since the dataset was clustered, in terms of demonstrators nested within demonstrations, and demonstrations nested within countries, a three-level random intercept regression model was required (Goldstein, 2011). Thus, it is possible to estimate the variance that is unexplained on the demonstration and country levels, and to make more moderate estimations of the differences between countries or demonstrations compared with using dummies. We used the multilevel software MLwiN.

In order to track changes in the proportion of the total unexplained variance attributable to the demonstration level, we used the measure ‘variance partition coefficient’ (VPC), a figure between 0 and 1, which in our models is equivalent to a so-called ‘intra-class correlation’. However, calculating and interpreting the VPC for a binary response model is not as straightforward as with linear modelling (Goldstein, 2011: 127-131). We used an approach recommended by Snijders and Bosker (2012: 305) where the level-1 residuals are treated as logistically distributed. This is based on an assumption of an underlying continuous variable for the propensity to demonstrate alone.[5]

*Descriptive analyses*

On average, the proportion of respondents in the sample of demonstrations who demonstrated alone and were not asked to join was 7.2%. Among the demonstrations the average varied between a minimum of 0% (Non-profit demonstration, Brussels, 2011) and a maximum of 28.1% (Take back Parliament demonstration, London, 2010).

In Table 2 the demonstration issue types within the sample are listed, along with the average percentage of lone protesters within each issue type. The numbers of demonstrations and individual cases within each type are also shown.

[Table 2]

Marked differences can be seen in the total percentage of lone protestors between demonstration issues. Although the percentage of lone protestors also varies greatly within several demonstration issue types, the regressions below confirm that there are nevertheless significant issue-level differences. The types of demonstration issue that drew the highest degree of lone protestors were 'anti-austerity' (15%) followed by 'anti-racism' and 'democracy' (12%), while 'peace' had the lowest percentage (2%),[6] just below 'Pride parades' and 'regionalist' (4%).

The percentage of lone protesters also varied both between and within countries. For instance, in the UK, different demonstrations have attracted between 2 and 28% lone protesters. However, if one compares the total percentage of lone protesters country-wise, differences can still be discerned. The country in which the demonstrations had the highest average proportion of lone protesters was the UK (12%), with Denmark and Italy at the lower end of the spectrum (4%).

**Results and analyses**

First we present a simple bivariate analysis of how lone protesters differ from the majority of protesters. As one can see in Table 3, the lone protesters are somewhat less organizationally embedded: they are to a lesser degree members of, and identify less with, the organization staging the protest. Although these differences are statistically significant, they should not be exaggerated. Lone demonstrators appear more likely than others to have received information about the event through impersonal channels such as mass media, but the difference is once again quite small. Also, as expected, lone protesters typically decided to join the demonstration later than did other protesters. Table 3 also demonstrates that the proportion of people with little previous experience of earlier demonstrations is only slightly larger among the lone protesters. As regards our control variables – age, gender and education – the analyses reveal significant differences between lone protesters and other demonstrators. Notably, lone protestors were on average almost 7 years older than other protestors, and there were fewer women (35%) among the lone protesters.

[Table 3]

We now shift focus to the presence versus absence of lone protesters in demonstrations. Without representative data on those who did *not* take part in each protest, we cannot directly study the differences between participants and non-participants. However, through a binary logistic regression of the chance of finding lone protesters in a sample from the protests, we can indirectly identify some factors that contribute to the participation of lone protesters.[7]

Most of the independent variables are categorical, except two: age and demonstration size. We judged that age could be treated as a continuous variable in the regressions.

Similarly, the proportions of lone protesters appeared to be linearly related to the logarithm of the demonstration size. The regression coefficient in this case corresponds to the change in the dependent variable for every 10-times change in the size of a demonstration. A change in demonstration size from 1000 to 10,000 participants is assumed to have the same effect as a change from 10,000 to 100,000 participants.

Turning to the first logistic regressions (Table 4), we first note in Model 1 that while the national level does not significantly contribute to the variation in the dependent variable, there are considerable differences between demonstrations. Two of the three control variables have a significant impact: the chance of protesting alone increases with age, while men are more likely to demonstrate alone than women. University education has no significant effect.

In Model 2, we added the first two explanatory variables at the demonstration level: demonstration size and whether the demonstration was moving or static. Static demonstrations indeed seem to increase the chance of finding lone demonstrators, providing support for Hypothesis 1. The size of a demonstration is significantly and negatively correlated with lone participation; a finding that we find no obvious explanations to.

[Table 4]

In Model 3 (Table 5), the 'demonstration type' was added to the model, with 'May Day demonstration' as the reference category, since we considered it closest to our ideal type of protests staged by often well-established social movement communities. In accordance with hypothesis 2, lone protesters are significantly more likely to be found in the anti-austerity, anti-nuclear, anti-racist and democracy demonstrations. Conversely, the trade union, regionalist, and student demonstrations, along with the Pride parades, do not significantly differ from May Day demonstrations in this respect. The

demonstration-level VPC is reduced from 0.11 in Model 1 to 0.05 in Model 3, which indicates that the physical characteristics of the demonstration and the issue type explain a significant share of the variance between demonstrations. However, hypothesis 2 cannot be regarded as corroborated until we have tested plausible alternative explanations. The differences between issue types might not be caused by the character of the social movement community, but by precipitating events or different mobilization patterns.

Because May Day demonstrations are typically planned long beforehand and not precipitated by specific events, one might presume that the difference between demonstration types would be reduced when we control for precipitating events in Model 4. Precipitating events indeed have a significant positive effect on lone protesting, and the unexplained demonstration-level variance is no longer significant in Model 4. We therefore find support for our third hypothesis, and there are only minor changes to the effects of demonstration type. Only the anti-nuclear demonstrations no longer remain significantly different from the May Day demonstrations. Most anti-nuclear demonstrations in the sample occurred 1–2 months after the Fukushima disaster, which appears to be the main explanation for the typically high proportion of lone protesters in these demonstrations.

As noted above, low proportions of lone protesters in some demonstration types may also be explained by more closed mobilization patterns, in the sense that more participants are members of the staging organization, and therefore more likely to have company. In Model 5 we therefore control for whether the respondents were (knowingly) members of a staging organization. Whereas the dummy for ‘anti-racist demonstration’ no longer has a significant effect on lone protesting, protesters remain roughly twice as likely to be alone in climate, anti-austerity and democracy demonstrations regardless of whether the respondent was a member of the staging organization or not. The demonstration-level variance is again significant, with a

corresponding rise in VPC compared to model 4. However, this can be a statistical artefact of more variance explained at the individual level. In sum, we find support, albeit somewhat mixed, for our second hypothesis: lone demonstrators are more likely to be found in protests based on weak and/or inclusive collective identities.

[Table 5]

## Conclusion

In the introduction to this article we asked what distinguishes lone protesters from other protest participants, and what contextual factors explain the varying proportions of lone protesters in different demonstrations. In an initial analysis we established that lone protesting is linked to relative detachment from interpersonal mobilizing networks. Thereafter we focused our analysis on those lone protesters who also had not been asked to join the protest, in order to capture what we regarded as the most sociologically interesting aspect of lone protesting. First, our expectations regarding lone protesters' distinctive characteristics were largely confirmed. Typical lone protesters found out about the protest through impersonal sources such as news media slightly more often than did other protesters. They also tended to decide to participate on shorter notice and had slightly less protest experience. Further, lone protesters tended to not be members of the organizations staging the protest, but differed only marginally from others in terms of identification with these organizations.

Some contextual factors facilitate lone protesting and make personal networks less vital for protest mobilization. Lone protesters appear to be more likely to be found in static rallies compared with moving demonstrations (although the difference was no longer significant in our more inclusive models). The demonstration issue also affects

the proportion of lone participants. This appears to be partly related to the proportion of formally organized participants. We argue that this is also an effect of the degree of consolidation of the social movement community organizing the protest event and the development of a distinct collective identity. The more inclusive characteristics of non-consolidated movement communities presumably attract a higher proportion of citizens who wish to express their political engagement in more individualized forms, which does not demand membership in organizations. Among the types of events that are least populated by lone protesters, the protests of 'old social movements' can be found, but also demonstrations staged by organizations usually associated with the 'new social movements', such as the Pride parades of the LGBT movement. Other types of 'new social movement' demonstrations – e.g. climate protests – have a higher percentage of lone protestors, together with the even newer types of anti-austerity protests.

Finally, we confirmed the importance of specific precipitating events for bringing attention to issues and providing sufficiently strong incentives for people to participate, even without company. This supports Jasper and Paulsen's (1995) research, which indicated that 'moral shocks' can be an alternative to interpersonal networks as an impetus for protest participation. We conjecture that protests attract a greater proportion of lone protesters early in protest cycles and that protest events themselves mobilize these participants for future involvement in a social movement.

It is worth emphasizing that our analyses do not overturn either the old observation that most participants in collective action are in the company of people they know, or the general importance of pre-existing informal and formal social networks for mobilizing individuals to protest participation. However, for these established theories people attending demonstrations without company are only the unexplained residual that deviates from the general explanation. Our analyses are a step towards a better understanding of this exception to the rule. Follow-up studies should evaluate whether lone protest participation is typically only a step towards more active involvement in a

movement – thus revealing a grain of truth in Blumer's (1946) stage-wise model of how milling individuals form movements – or whether lone protesters primarily reflect an approach to political participation as something done collectively but disconnected from personal affinities and networks – resembling forms of everyday individualized collective actions such as political consumerism (Micheletti, 2003).

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**Footnotes**

[1] See URL: www.protestsurvey.eu and the introductory article in this issue.

[2] The question was formulated as follows: 'Were you at this demonstration (Check as many as apply): *Alone?*; *With your partner?*; *With your children?*; *With relatives?*; *With friends?*; *With acquaintances?*; *With colleagues or fellow students?*; *With members of an organization of which you are a member?*'

[3] Measured with the item: 'Which of the following people specifically asked you to take part in the demonstration […]? (Check as many as apply): *No one*; *Partner or family*; *Relatives*; *Friends*; *Acquaintances*; *Colleagues or fellow students*; *Co-members of an organization of which I am a member*'. Response to none of the alternatives was coded as 'missing'

[4] Analyses where the members of staging organizations were excluded from the dependent variable gave very similar results to the analyses presented here, albeit with fewer significant coefficients.

[5] An estimation of VPC according to the alternative 'binary linear model' (Goldstein 2011) produced somewhat lower figures, but essentially the same relative pattern between regression models.

[6] However, the 'peace' category must be treated as a special case. It included only one demonstration, a 24-kilometre peace march between the Italian cities of Perugia and Assisi.

[7] Some might argue that this reasoning implies that the proper unit of our analysis is the *proportion* of lone protesters in each of the protest events. However, technically this is equivalent to identifying the chance of each protester in a demonstration of being alone. The main advantage of an individual-level analysis is that it is possible to control for individual-level variables, thereby eliminating some possible sampling bias.

**Table 1. Categories of lone protesters.**

| | | | Member staging organization | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | No (or unsure) | Yes | |
| Asked by someone to participate? | Asked by someone | Count | 207 | 222 | 429 |
| | | % of Total | 15.4% | 16.5% | 31.9% |
| | Not asked by anyone | Count | 601 | 313 | 914 |
| | | % of Total | 44.8% | 23.3% | 68.1% |
| Total | | Count | 808 | 535 | 1343 |
| | | % of Total | 60.2% | 39.8% | 100.0% |

**Table 2. Proportion of 'lone protesters' in demonstrations, by demonstration issue type.**

| Demonstration issue type | Number of demonstrations | Lonely demonstrators who have not been asked (average %) | Valid cases (N) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Anti-abortion** | 1 | **9** | 264 |
| **Anti-austerity** | 4 | **15** | 617 |
| **Anti-nuclear** | 5 | **9** | 1611 |
| **Anti-racism** | 4 | **12** | 580 |
| **Climate change** | 5 | **8** | 1265 |
| **Democracy** | 5 | **12** | 1196 |
| **May Day** | 15 | **5** | 2023 |
| **Peace** | 1 | **2** | 229 |
| **Pride parade** | 6 | **4** | 889 |
| **Regionalist** | 3 | **4** | 827 |
| **Student** | 4 | **5** | 629 |
| **Trade union** | 13 | **5** | 2438 |
| **Women** | 3 | **7** | 476 |
| **Total** | **69** | **7** | **13 044** |

**Table 3. The mobilization channels, organizational embeddedness and decision time of lone protesters and protesters in company.**

| | Lone protesters who have not been asked | Other protesters | Total (N) | Cramer's V / Eta | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Member of the organization(s) staging the demonstration (%) | 34 | 48 | 12,737 | .071 | *** |
| *Degree of identification with… (mean value; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much)* | | | | | |
| The participants of the demonstration | 3.9 | 4.0 | 12,772 | .040 | *** |
| The organizations staging the demonstration | 3.6 | 3.8 | 12,299 | .034 | *** |
| *Found out about the demonstration via (%) (alternatives not mutually exclusive)* | | | | | |
| Mass media | 60 | 47 | 13,044 | .068 | *** |
| Advertisement, flyers, and/or posters | 19 | 25 | 13,044 | .036 | *** |
| Family, friends, and/or colleagues | 16 | 50 | 13,044 | .174 | *** |
| (Fellow) members of an organization or association | 12 | 35 | 13,044 | .127 | *** |
| An organization (magazine, meeting, website, mailing list…) | 33 | 37 | 13,044 | .020 | * |
| Online social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) | 20 | 23 | 13,044 | .019 | * |
| *Decided to participate in the demonstration (%)* | | | | | |
| The day of the demonstration | 20 | 8 | 12,939 | .106 | *** |
| A few days before the demonstration | 37 | 30 | 12,939 | .043 | *** |
| Earlier | 43 | 62 | 12,939 | .103 | *** |
| *The number of demonstrations the respondent has ever participated in earlier (%)* | | | | | |
| None | 9 | 8 | 12,561 | n.s. | |
| 1–5 | 34 | 27 | 12,561 | .040 | *** |
| More than 5 | 57 | 65 | 12,561 | .041 | *** |
| *Socio-demographic features of the protestors* | | | | | |
| Age (mean value) | 50.1 | 43.5 | 12,874 | .110 | *** |
| Women (%) | 38 | 50 | 12,639 | .057 | *** |
| University education (%) | 68 | 65 | 12,739 | .020 | * |

Note: For percentages, the used measure of association between the variables is Cramer's V. For mean values, the used measure of association is Eta. * = 5%, ** = 1%, and *** = 0.1% significance. n.s. = not significant.

**Table 4. Binary logistic regression with 'protesting alone (and not having been asked to join)' as dependent variable.**

| | **Model 1**<br><br>**Individual control variables** | | | **Model 2**<br>**Physical demonstration characteristics** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | | Exp(B) | B | | Exp(B) |
| **Fixed Part** | | | | | | |
| cons | –3.139 | ** | 0.043 | –3.323 | ** | 0.036 |
| *Individual-level control variables* | | | | | | |
| Age (centred on grand mean) | 0.029 | ** | 1.029 | 0.028 | ** | 1.028 |
| Man | 0.433 | ** | 1.542 | 0.432 | ** | 1.540 |
| University education | 0.066 | | 1.068 | 0.07 | | 1.073 |
| *Demonstration-level variables* | | | | | | |
| Static rally | | | | 0.606 | ** | 1.833 |
| Demonstration size (log) | | | | –0.432 | ** | 0.649 |
| **Random Part** | | | | | | |
| Country-level variance | 0.093 | | | 0.019 | | |
| Demonstration-level variance | 0.401 | ** | | 0.269 | ** | |
| Demonstration-level VPC | 0.106 | | | 0.075 | | |
| Units: country | 8 | | | 8 | | |
| Units: demo | 69 | | | 68 | | |
| Units: id | 12382 | | | 12331 | | |

Note: Level of significance = * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

**Table 5. Binary logistic regressions with 'protesting alone (and not having been asked to join)' as dependent variable.**

| | **Model 3** | | | **Model 4** | | | **Model 5** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Physical characteristics and issue** | | | **Physical characteristics, issue and precipitating event** | | | **Full model** | | |
| | B | | Exp(B) | B | | Exp(B) | B | | Exp(B) |
| **Fixed Part** | | | | | | | | | |
| Intercept | –3.659 | ** | 0.026 | –3.658 | ** | 0.026 | –3.352 | ** | 0.035 |
| ***Individual-level variables*** | | | | | | | | | |
| Age (centred on grand mean) | 0.028 | ** | 1.028 | 0.028 | ** | 1.028 | 0.031 | ** | 1.031 |
| Gender: Woman | 0.435 | ** | 1.545 | 0.436 | ** | 1.547 | 0.459 | ** | 1.582 |
| University education | 0.059 | | 1.061 | 0.06 | | 1.062 | 0.069 | | 1.071 |
| Member of staging org. | | | | | | | –0.663 | ** | 0.515 |
| ***Demonstration-level variables*** | | | | | | | | | |
| Static rally | 0.188 | | 1.207 | 0.024 | | 1.024 | 0.002 | | 1.002 |
| Demo size (log), centred on grand mean | –0.519 | ** | 0.595 | –0.579 | ** | 0.560 | –0.602 | ** | 0.548 |
| Precipitating event | | | | 0.43 | * | 1.537 | 0.421 | * | 1.523 |
| *Demonstration type (ref. 'May Day Demonstration')* | | | | | | | | | |
| Other | 0.753 | | 2.123 | 0.542 | | 1.719 | 0.357 | | 1.429 |
| Anti-austerity | 1.134 | ** | 3.108 | 1.042 | ** | 2.835 | 0.841 | ** | 2.319 |
| Anti-nuclear | 0.669 | * | 1.952 | 0.469 | | 1.598 | 0.437 | | 1.548 |
| Anti-racism | 0.774 | * | 2.168 | 0.687 | * | 1.988 | 0.553 | | 1.738 |
| Climate change | 0.638 | * | 1.893 | 0.693 | * | 2.000 | 0.736 | ** | 2.088 |
| Democracy | 1.011 | ** | 2.748 | 0.867 | ** | 2.380 | 0.668 | * | 1.950 |
| Pride parade | –0.02 | | 0.980 | –0.039 | | 0.962 | –0.195 | | 0.823 |
| Regionalist | 0.529 | | 1.697 | 0.151 | | 1.163 | 0.076 | | 1.079 |
| Student | 0.564 | | 1.758 | 0.248 | | 1.281 | 0.215 | | 1.240 |
| Trade union | 0.273 | | 1.314 | 0.054 | | 1.055 | 0.211 | | 1.235 |
| Women | 0.353 | | 1.423 | 0.356 | | 1.428 | 0.287 | | 1.332 |
| **Random Part** | | | | | | | | | |
| Country-level variance | 0.032 | | | 0.042 | | | 0.037 | | |
| Demonstration-level variance | 0.163 | ** | | 0.042 | | | 0.128 | ** | |
| Demonstration-level VPC | 0.047 | | | 0.012 | | | 0.037 | | |
| Units: country | 8 | | | 8 | | | 8 | | |
| Units: demo | 68 | | | 68 | | | 68 | | |
| Units: id | 12331 | | | 12331 | | | 12045 | | |

Note: Level of significance = * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.