

Peer Review Article

Nurturing Activism:

Addressing Relational Tensions through the Social Field

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Abstract

This article will explore evolving thoughts on how the *social field* can be an effective lens to address *relational tensions* within activist groups. Gobby (2020) defines relational tensions as the ideological and social tensions that emerge in an activist group due to power inequalities, which are significant internal barriers for these groups to achieve their goals. I will draw on social movement literature and Scharmer's (2018) concept of social fields to show how the *source conditions* of the various individuals that make up these groups affect the quality of how they relate to each other, which give birth to practices and results that either align with their values or create conflictual tensions that can hold these groups back. Through a personal case study, I intend to show how, by shifting an activist group's social field towards one that places relationality at the forefront, these groups can improve how they work together and ultimately avoid breaking apart.

Keywords

social field, group process, activism, relational tensions, nurturing

Introduction

In David Graeber's (2009) ethnographic study of North American social movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he details the particular interactions of a tension-filled meeting among members of the Direct Action Network¹. In this meeting, the group attempted to discuss key issues related to gender inequalities and harassment; however two male members used the procedures to co-opt and block decisions that aimed at addressing this problem. Confusion ensued, frustrations kicked in, differences of opinion turned into chasms, and the key issues remained intact. The meeting was based on a *consensus* model, and despite the value-laden nature of the process as a more inclusive and democratic form of decision-making, people were left frustrated, angry with each other, and feeling unresolved (Gelderloos, 2006). He ends his ethnographic description with a quote from a meeting participant who notes, "The fault lines were in full display" (Graeber, 2009, p. 336).

Even though everyone in that meeting found themselves there with a similar purpose for change, of their voluntary nature, and with a desire to maintain a process that reflects their values, the results were frustrating, introducing friction between the group members and fracturing relationships. Graeber's experience is similar to my own working within activist groups (Starnino, 2021), which led me to a desire to explore and make sense of this contradiction and how to address it. It is here where the literature of the *social field* can act as an important theoretical and practical framework to add to our current understanding of activist group process.

Activism and Relational Tensions

What Do We Mean by Activist Groups?

I define activist groups as sustained and organized groups of individuals that come together under a common cause and use *direct action* as the main vehicle for generating social change. Direct actions often exist outside established institutional processes and aim to pressure stakeholders in positions of power to enact their desired outcomes.² These actions can take the form of protests,

¹ A coalition of anti-capitalist and anti-corporate activist groups emerged after the 1999 direct action, which shut down a meeting of World Trade Organization delegates.

² While in this paper I will not go into depth into the literature on activist group "outcomes," authors such as Gobby (2020), Tarrow (2011), and Gamson (1975) have identified social movement outcomes as varied, indirect, and unpredictable. They can range from creating and adopting new government policy, changes in institutional positions, shifts in public sensibilities around a particular issue, and the establishment of new interpersonal relationships and networks that may go onto form new groups.

blockades, and encampments (Alinsky, 1971; McAdam, 1997; Bobo et al., 2001; Ganz, 2010; Kauffman, 2017; Tarrow, 2011; Tilly et al., 2018). As journalist and activist, Kauffman states that, while direct action does not implicitly align with a political orientation, it is more commonly found in leftist activist groups whose organizing practices reject hierarchical structures, and traditional forms of top-down leadership, while seeking to embrace diversity of people and perspectives. In this article, I also draw upon Martin's (2007) differentiation between activist groups and social movements, to define activist groups as the individual organizations that form part of broader social movements (i.e., climate justice, animal rights, anti-racism, labour rights, 2SLGBTQIA+ rights). Thus, in focusing on activist groups, I seek to delineate entities that have established boundaries through an explicit *collective identity*, desired outcome of change, and/or set of practices but are not within themselves legally registered institutions with formalized and fixed organizational structures (as with the case of non-profit organizations³ for instance) (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). This last point is important as it means that active groups can break apart or disappear at any given time as there is nothing formalized that is holding them together.

These groups' voluntary, non-institutional *and* contentious nature introduces dynamics different from traditional organizations (Ganz, 2010). They are sustained over time by *organizational structures* and *internal processes* that mobilize members towards desired actions and shape infrastructure. Tarrow (2011) defines these processes as *connective structures* that “link together members and leaders of a movement to permit coordination and aggregation, even in the face of a lack of formal organization” (p. 124). These connective structures tend to reflect the values and sensibilities of the group members, often shifting towards more decentralized and horizontal structures defined by consensus-based models (Engler & Engler, 2016). The level of influence activist group members often have over the shape and focus of the group process requires a way to agree on collective decisions to sustain them toward their desired goals. Thus, communication plays a key coordinating function within these groups to ensure all members are informed (Bobo et al., 2001; Graeber, 2009). In explicitly non-hierarchical groups, this coordination is key to ensure that unequal power dynamics do not form and that decision-making power is shared among the group (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020).

What Can Get in the Way? The Process of Relational Tensions

Multiple social movements scholars have shown relationships to be the foundation of any source of collective power (Alinsky, 1971; Bergman &

³ This delineation is not to say that the dynamics non-profits face may not resembles those I describe in this paper, it is only to establish a clear boundary on the type of group I am focusing on in my research.

Montgomery, 2018; Engler & Engler, 2016; Ganz, 2010; Gobby, 2020; Han et al., 2021; Tarrow, 2011). In particular, Han, McKenna, & Oyakawa (2021) have shown that the most successful outcomes result from the relational strength of a group's *constituency*, allowing for the flexibility to shift strategies, targets, and tactics when needed. The authors recognize power as relational, shifting as a group's relationship with its target evolves, requiring a sustained solidarity within activist groups to adapt to these circumstances. Thus, when imagining what can “get in the way” of these relationships, I draw on research from activist and scholar Jen Gobby (2020). In interviewing climate justice activists and indigenous land defenders on movement building, she identified *relational tensions* as the biggest internal barrier to achieving their desired outcomes.⁴ Relational tensions emerge when differences of opinion become unresolved and ideological. This creates what she describes as an “us vs. them” dynamic where divisions are drawn. Bushe and Coetzer (2007) have shown that groups where members have specific and clear task roles can avoid conflictual dynamics at the outset. This may explain why some larger activist groups can unite a mass of people around specific goals without explicit relationship-building activities, as shown by authors such as Engler & Engler (2016). However, as the group persists, questions and needs arise that invite uncertainty and ambiguity, introducing the potential for differences of opinion and conflict. Kauffman's (2017) historical account of American left movements of the 1970s, 80s, 90s and 2000s shows several instances of groups who fell to conflictual dynamics and tensions as diverse individual perspectives and needs began to emerge (i.e., issues of social identity, inclusion, and differences of opinion on strategy or tactics). Over time, these conflicts can eventually dissolve a group, a mechanism Tarrow (2011) calls *exhaustion*, where a group *runs out of steam* and becomes splintered with breakdowns in their connective structures, making them more difficult to sustain over time. Compounding this is that activist groups are sometimes reluctant to admit that these inequalities exist in their movement, leading to defensiveness and tensions when exposed (Gelderloos, 2006; Kauffman, 2017). Groups that lack established conflict resolution strategies have few ways to address these tensions, meaning they will go unresolved, leading to sustained interpersonal conflicts that eventually fracture a group (Roy et al., 2010).

Another element that differentiates activist groups and which can contribute to relational tensions is their *emotional energy*. The work of Jasper (2011) has made important contributions to our understanding of social movements and the various reflexive emotions and moods that motivate individuals and generate a

⁴ It is important to note that while these relational tensions impact the group internally, they can emerge due to external challenges a group can face, whether that be new threats from opponents, shifts in external contexts, or a lack of resources.

sense of *affective commitment* within these groups. These emotions can foster collectivity as people find resonance in their share fear, anger, or shock around a particular issue. This emotional energy also holds a strong influence on a group's dynamics. We can see how these emotions may come into play to generate and sustain relational tensions through the work of Bergman and Montgomery (2018), who introduce the phenomenon of *rigid radicalism*. They describe rigid radicalism as a force which finds itself within a group in which its members become “closed off” to each other by adopting a fixed or “rigid” set of morals, principles, or ideological tenets. Here differences become less about different needs or interests, and more about who is “radical enough.” Authors describe this phenomenon as paradoxical as many of these behaviors stem from the same oppressive societal forces that activists are trying to fight against. The tensions that arise through paradoxical forces is further explored in a 2021 paper I wrote, in which I aimed to establish the relationship between activist group process and Smith and Berg’s (1997) concept of *group paradoxes*. They view paradoxes as an inherent part of group life as members work through simultaneously being a *part* of a group and also within a *whole* group with a collective purpose. If unmanaged these paradoxes can produce *splitting* as the groups aim to contain the tensions often by choosing one “side” of the paradox over another. A common paradoxical dynamic found within activist groups is further echoed by Kahane’s (2010) concept of “Power and Love”, in which he speaks to “power” as the drive moving change forward and “love” as the drive keeping people together. These drives can be generative or degenerative. Generatively, within activist groups, they can motivate effective direct actions that help create successful outcomes for the group while also maintaining internal connective structures that sustain a group in order to realize these outcomes. Degenerative forces of power can look like groups prioritizing the need and urgency for direct actions over interpersonal relationships, creating conflict or, in the other extreme, degenerative love can look like being so concerned with internal matters that they become “anemic” and introspective, leading to a lack of actions or *stuckness* and fostering inequalities in the group. Jo Freeman (1972) further describes the impact of this degenerative dynamic in her seminal essay, “Tyranny of the Structurelessness.” She describes how a lack or aversion to clear structure in a group, often out of desire to mitigate power imbalances, can result in the opposite. These groups become very inward, with processes or ways of doing things hidden from the broader group and only known to an established subset of members. In turn this ensures those who have formed stronger ties exert greater influence on decisions made.

In speaking to how to address relational tensions Gobby (2020) also provides us with a broader ethos and vision which draws on the work of Collins (2008), Escobar (2020), Kimmerer (2013), Macy and Brown (2014), and brown (2017) to envision movements that shift beyond oppressive practices, dualistic thinking, and disconnection, toward a *life-giving* movement of interdependence and reciprocity to each other and the environment. It is important to note at this point that not all activist groups suffer from the relational tensions as described

in this article. Escobar (2020) has shown that indigenous-led movements, which are often based upon relational ontologies, can act as an inspiration for Western-based and white-dominated activist groups. Thus, while I hope to give a clearer picture of what might influence and generate relational tensions, what is missing in the literature is a model for shifting towards Gobby's (2020) vision, particularly for activist groups in which relationality does not actively form part of the base of their *source conditions*.

Social Field as a Lens for Understanding Activist Groups

Scharmer et al. (2022) describe the *social field* as “the entirety of the social system with an emphasis on the source conditions that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing, which in turn produce practical results” (p. 5). Figure 1 shows the three key levels of a social field that exist with visible and invisible dimensions. When applied to activist groups, the “visible layer” can be seen through the results of their work, including direct actions, tools and artifacts, such as public messaging and, visible to a certain extent, the patterns of relating that give the field its quality, including decision-making processes, group rituals, and organizational structures. Given that they are directly visible, they tend to be the focus of much of the current literature on social movements and activism. What is not visible is the evolving “source conditions,” or the level and quality of awareness from which these activist social systems form and that give rise to their quality of relating to one another. Scharmer et al. (2022) describe these as the interior conditions of individuals and the collective interior condition that influences and shapes a social field. This invisible dimension is often missing in social movement literature, as it relates to what is happening “in-between” group members, which is not fully perceptible until it is brought into awareness.

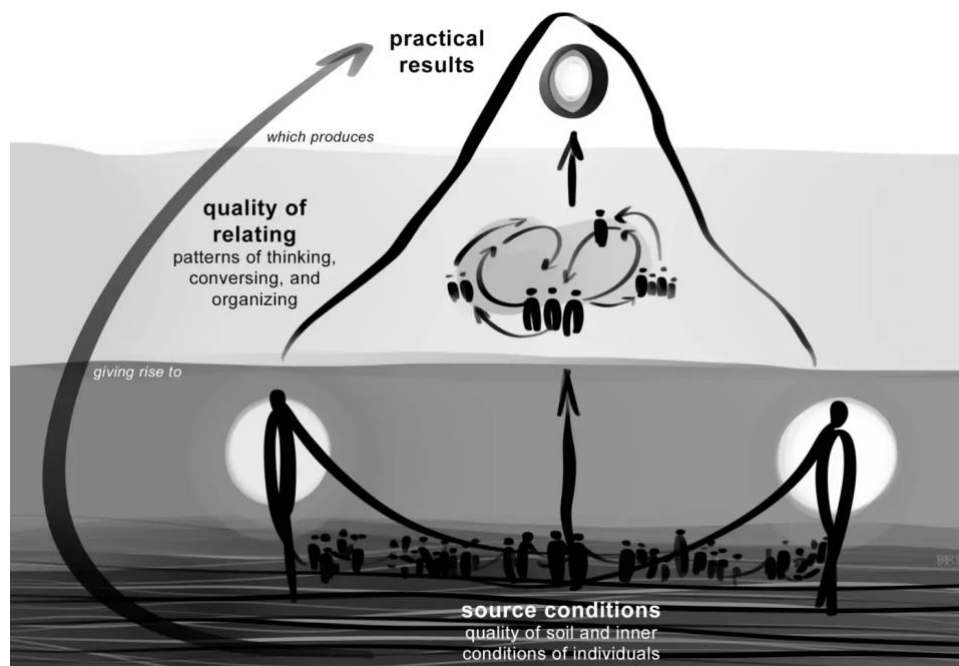


Figure 1. Visual representation of the social field's key dimensions shows how a group's source conditions act as part of the invisible layer that gives rise to the more visible patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing, producing practical results (Image by Kelvy Bird in Scharmer et al., 2022, p. 635).

Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) define three interrelated properties of social fields—*intercorporeality*, *autonomy*, and *affordance*. Intercorporeality refers to the collective affective and bodily experiences of a group as they come into dynamic interaction with one another to form a *social body*. Through this intercorporeality, ways of relating arise which take on their own autonomy, leading to patterns of interaction beyond the intentionality of any single individual. Lastly, the affordance of a social field gives these interactions their “quality,” reinforcing certain patterns of interaction and holding back other patterns. Looking at these properties through an activist group context, we can see this intercorporeality emerge in the various protests, meetings, and gatherings where activists join to plan or fight for change. As these “bodies” of activists come together to form a collective identity, an autonomous social field emerges, creating patterns of interactions which can either facilitate conflict and fragmentation or strengthen relationships. As established by social movement literature, as these relationships strengthen, so too does the possibility of the group sustaining through the various external or internal challenges they face (Ganz, 2010; Gobby, 2020; Han et al., 2021).

The social field becomes an effective theory through which to analyze activist groups, given its ability to adapt to the emergent and ephemeral nature of these collectives whose boundaries and membership are porous (Ganz, 2010, 2014). This lens aligns with the work of Fuchs (2006), who applies concepts from complex adaptive systems literature to social movements. Seeking to go beyond the limitations of traditional social movement literature, he defines activist

groups as dynamic self-organized systems, constantly shaping new structures that constrain or enable actors within that movement. Looking at movements through this perspective means interventions that solely target individuals without considering the collective may not be sustainable as members of these groups rarely remain fixed. Thus, intervening at the level of the social field may be more effective due to its autonomous nature and focus on collective and emergent processes of change (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023).

The term “social field” also echoes similar concepts within social movement literature. Siméant-Germanos (2021) highlights the various ways in which the relational contexts of activist social spaces are defined through terms such as “social movement space”, “organizational field”, “strategic action field”, “sectors”, and “arenas”. However, even though these terms draw on the notion of relationality, they often are used to define activist group actions through a more structural view. For instance “arena” looks at activism through the lens of a “game,” with players, rules, and strategies. In contrast, the concept of the social field adds a more experiential dimension to our understanding of activist groups. A key tenet of the social field is that it requires us to look from “within” to fully understand it through what is called, a *first-person perspective*. This perspective allows us to get a sense of the quality of relating within a group, defined as a *second-person* or inter-subjective *perspective*, and how that quality produces the objective results we see and can study, also called the *third-person* perspective (Scharmer et al., 2022). That you can only “shift from within” is a relevant dimension for non-hierarchical activist groups whose members are often given more agency to enact change. Thus, social field theory can help these activists who form part of groups to better understand what might be producing relational tensions they are affected by and be more intentional in the ways of collectively addressing these challenges.

Applying the Social Field to a Climate Activist Case Study

In an effort to bring added tangibility and further connect some of the key principles of the social field to activist groups, I will present a case study from a *process consultation intervention* in which I drew upon *action research* to intervene in a climate activist group (Schein, 1999). In that spirit, this case study is written in a *first-person form*, bringing my experience and awareness of group dynamics into action in order to further advance the application of social field theory.

In 2019, I was asked to partner with a local Canadian chapter of an international climate action group. This group did not have a specific environmental cause they solely advocated for, seeking to be a space for multiple causes. However, they aimed to directly influence local and national government policies towards adopting more radical commitments to eliminate climate emissions. While the group's members held a diversity of identities, most members were white, university-educated and ranged between the ages of

20 to 30 years old. This group was organized using a decentralized affinity group model and had successfully achieved direct actions that attracted the interest of news media and, as a result, had seen a growth in new members.⁵ Many communication materials, digital tools, and tactics had been copied from the broader international activist group, including an organizational model with specific and defined decision-making processes.

I was initially contracted to work with issues that had emerged due to efforts in scaling their membership. However, as I began the project and observed their meetings, I noticed an apparent desire to prioritize actions and achievements over relationships, leading to persistent tensions. After an initial contracting period, the focus of my intervention switched to the coordination group whose function was to act as a space for spokespeople from the various affinity groups to share updates and discuss chapter wide issues. Given the diversity of perspectives and needs the conflictual dynamics of the group became the most apparent here. Meetings consistently exceeded time and often included many agenda items, and tightly controlled talking turns. The length of meetings meant they had to follow a strict pre-established structure that allowed for little space to address the numerous challenges that had emerged, such as power inequalities between the various affinity groups, a growing phenomenon of burnout amongst members, and sexual harassment issues that had gone ignored by the group as a whole, despite female members continuous interventions on this dynamic. As these issues remained unaddressed, tensions would find their way into the meeting through outbursts but would quickly be stopped and controlled by adding them as an “agenda item.” As a result, rather than dealing with them as a collective, they would be discussed informally, leading to gossip and bad-mouthing of certain members and affinity groups.

As a consultant, I could feel this rigidity myself. I began feeling bored and uninspired while observing the coordination group. Their fluidity of membership made it difficult to establish any clear relationship with group members while also introducing challenges in terms of my boundaries as an external consultant

⁵ Affinity groups are a self-governing model comprising sub-groups of broader activist organizations. These groups are composed of members who have an affinity with each other (for instance, geographic location) and are often autonomous in their decision-making. Affinity groups coordinate using “spokespeople” within a “spokes council.”

and where it was ‘my place’ to intervene. As a result, I found myself forming stronger relationships to a few of the more stable members, repeating the patterns of informal power dynamics within an explicitly non-hierarchical group.

As the project moved past the data gathering phase I presented my initial findings in a facilitated feedback session to a subset of the coordination group who had been most active in my project. My rigidity made me hesitant to speak directly to the conflictual dynamics I witnessed, instead presenting them as two high level “themes” drawing on the theories of Kahane’s (2010) “Power and Love”. My hope was that engaging in an unstructured and open conversation would create the conditions for these deeper conflictual issues to emerge. However, as I began to facilitate the meeting, I quickly realized that without the strict structures that the group had been used to, holding space for this type of dialogue would be increasingly difficult. While the group did not disagree with my themes, they could not come to an understanding amongst each other on how to move forward. Members began to speak over each other, moving the conversation in multiple directions and jumping to solutions without engaging in any meaningful dialogue. I became increasingly anxious, and forceful in my own facilitation, interrupting members myself and attempting to introduce questions to better direct (or in this case steer) the conversation. While we had identified power and leadership as key areas to address, the conversation remained high-level and amorphous with the meeting ending without any resolution or concrete action plan defined. I left feeling a sense of incompetence and overall stuckness. I had begun seriously considering whether what I witnessed could be changed or if I would be better off quitting the project altogether, leaving the group with my findings as a “result.”

Through critical self-reflective journaling, alongside various coaching conversations with practitioners that were not part of the project, I became aware of how the dynamics of unexpressed emotion and prioritization of solutions over understanding were also present within the broader activist group. Thus, by attempting to maintain ‘distance’ and not expressing my own underlying feelings and concerns I was reproducing this broader dynamic. This forced me to challenge my role as an “external consultant” by recognizing that the fluid nature of the group’s membership meant that no matter what my intentions were, I was also part of the system. I decided to be more proactive and to share my perspectives openly and directly. We convened again, where I presented my realizations in the form of a visual, I had designed,

(drawing on my previous background as a graphic designer) which illustrated this pattern. Expressing and visualizing my perspectives and feelings prompted a deeper and more productive dialogue, as members began openly disclosing unexpressed challenges they faced within the movement. Recognizing my role as part of the group I also contributed to the conversation by proposing possible solutions. This caused a personal tension and vulnerability. As a facilitator I felt I was not “supposed” to intervene in content, however shedding those beliefs together with the group we moved past our previous stuckness towards the co-design of a workshop for all members of the local chapter. It aimed at changing the way the broader chapter understood and dealt with power, leadership, and emotions – topics that were seen as a root-cause dynamic producing the more symptomatic issues they were experiencing. Recognizing a need to change the way these conversations were typically held, the workshop was based on theories and practices that drew on spirituality, relationality, ritual, and collective leadership.

The final workshop invited members of the entire activist group chapter and contained a good mix of participants of all affinity groups. Based on our learnings from the feedback session, it was designed to balance experiential learning activities on leadership and power, a desire for solutions, and the need to express emotion and naming of tensions that were collectively felt but never openly expressed. This led to the development of new practices and personal commitments by those who attended. In speaking to some members afterwards, they noted how despite the lack of agreed-upon group-wide policies, the workshop had created space for a new type of expression and introduced a language that ran counter to their task-based focus. The workshop was received positively and led to new internal actions that sought to bring these ritual practices within the day-to-day activities of the group. However, despite this the group would continue to face unresolved and unaddressed challenges with their internal dynamics, leading to their dissolution as the COVID pandemic arrived. (Starnino, 2021)

Understanding My Experience Through the Social Field

From the outside, this group had seemed successful, primarily through media-attracting direct actions and the implementation of non-hierarchical structures and principles intended to foster a more equitable group dynamic. However, once I was within the group, I witnessed how those same structures would hold them back from being able to express themselves, leading to relational tensions. If we draw upon the language of the social field, these structures led to “ways of relating” that continuously prioritized short-term solutions to the deeper,

complex challenges affecting the group. This in turn produced burnout, conflict, and a lack of engagement. In speaking about the social field and its relation to racial justice, Cunningham (2021) draws on Scharmer's (2018) metaphor of the "farmers' field" to say:

In a farmer's field, there are weeds and rocks and roots and bugs. And what is cultivated is what grows. Understanding that we exist within a field and that we can cultivate it toward more generative or more violent outcomes is a powerful leadership tool in racial justice work. (p. 11)

Cunningham's quote reminds us that the social field as a concept does not inherently describe generative forms of relating, but rather is a way of seeing how social systems produce the results they do. The social field of this group was not "cultivated," despite the intentions to do so through their principles and practices, producing relational tensions. Similar points are also described by Seneque et al. (2021) in their article "Striving for Justice." Drawing on a process of co-inquiry, they highlight the concept of *contradictory convictions*:

And we have all witnessed that once you get to that point of polarization, people become entrenched. And because they cannot challenge each other lovingly, they cannot live out that living with contradictory convictions. They're not able to articulate that. (Seneque et al., 2021, p. 131)

These "contradictory convictions" resembles Kahane's (2010) notion of power and love mentioned earlier, presenting a dynamic that particularly affects activist groups. However, despite recognizing those dynamics in my observation of the group, my own incapacity to live within contradictory convictions emerged. I experienced how my inability to name the issues I was experiencing replicated many of those internal dynamics I witnessed in my initial observations of the group. As I experienced the tensions, I felt myself becoming rigid. I initially saw my role as "apart" from the social field, so I assumed that rigidity was mine. I felt incapable of intervening in it to communicate what I was seeing and witnessing. As the project evolved and I presented my results, the impact of that lack of openness came to a front. Despite being a "facilitator," I could not create space for a productive conversation. This, in turn, generated a belief that this was due to my lack of capacity as a practitioner. We eventually got stuck as we attempted to move forward without addressing our difficulties. Thus, once I allowed myself to "join" the group's social field and reflected on my own experience as a part of the group, I gained a deeper clarity of the dynamic affecting us. This experience speaks to the importance of recognizing the difference between first, second, and third-person perspectives. My first-person perspective allowed me to connect to the third-person observational data collected previously. This in turn prompted a change at the intersubjective level by bringing into the room this dynamic and prompting a dialogue that allowed for a deepening of collective awareness.

Shifting the Social Field

I recognize now that I was attempting to create a shift in the current social field of the activist group by naming not just the challenges of the group but the quality of *attention* the group was paying to these challenges. Scharmer (2019) states “stepping into” a social field requires “action” to uncover the knowledge hidden within it. In my own context it was by stepping within the social field that I could reflect on my own first-person experiences recognizing the ways I already formed part of it. Pomeroy et al. (2021) speak to recognizing and naming the social field as key to creating collective awareness of it. By visualizing it and presenting back, we were able to engage in a deeper dialogue that allowed the group to “sense itself” in the moment, something Scharmer (2018) describes as *presencing*. I see this “stepping within” as not just psychological but profoundly embodied, speaking to the inter-corporeal property of social fields, in which collective awareness was generated around our way of being together (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023).

This was, in fact, a stark contrast to the more individually focused and more cognitive approach I used in the first feedback session. As I joined by extending myself toward others, I could sense I was more open and vulnerable in sharing perspectives and feelings. After doing so, I noticed a shift in our interactions. The *atmosphere* of the session had changed, echoing a term used by Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) to describe the way we experience social fields. The conversation slowed and deepened as members began to speak more about their own felt experiences, expressing feelings they had been withholding. Rather than jumping to solutions they explored the conditions that caused these issues, discussing their challenges at the level of the dynamic. This “shift” in the quality of talking and listening can be described by what Kahane (2017) calls *enacting new realities*. The quality of the conversation moved from a factual one, in which we were attempting to find a single “right” answer to our problems, to one that placed empathy and reflection at the center. This experiential shift opened space for new possibilities, something that Kahane (2007) states is needed in situations where opposing perspectives have to work together in order to *experiment a way forward*.

The experience also exposed me to the limitations caused by my assumptions of neutrality. As I changed my stance, I believe that the power and privilege of my position as facilitator supported a new form of resonance within the group. In doing so, I had to challenge the logic of my positionality as a white, male, university-educated individual who, within this group, found shared comfort in embracing behaviors that got in the way of our capacity to *be* together. This *critical self-reflexivity* and self-development that breeds broader change is spoken to by Udoewa and Gress (2023) and Guenther (2022) as essential for facilitators in order to hold spaces for groups to shift towards relationality. Thus, as the social field shifted, so did new possibilities to tend to it.

Nurturing the Social Field

Echoing similar sentiments to Cunningham's (2021) farmers field, Pomeroy (2022) states, "The social field, once born, can be thought of as a living entity. To become a generative source, it needs to be consciously supported and nurtured" (para. 22). This quote directly references the autonomous nature of social fields. It was not enough that this climate activist group had written principles and norms for interacting and organizing—the actual patterns of interactions emerged independent of these desires, creating the "practical results" of burnout, conflict, and disconnection. Recognizing social fields as autonomous entities requires us to "nurture" it to keep the social field generative. In activist contexts, nurturing might be found through practices such as the "solidarity circles" described in the article *Striving for Justice*:

So, these solidarity circles that Charity's talking about where people share struggles, the listening through lived experience that Jill's talking about, that you all refer to, it is actually about opening ourselves up. (Seneque et al., 2021, p. 137)

Jasper (2011) describes these moments as *interaction rituals* used in activist group gatherings to infuse emotional energy, instill confidence and reinforce a group's identity. Here, we recognize the property of affordance within social fields. Whereas the social field of the climate action group afforded an orientation towards task, productivity, and emotional suppression, these interaction rituals aimed to nurture a social field that afforded relationality, expression, and openness. Our dialogue led to the co-design of a workshop to address relational tensions within the group by radically shifting the established patterns of interactions towards ones that can be described as nurturing. This is similar to what is described by Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) when speaking to social field interventions,

Framed through the lens of the social field, participants could understand that experimenting with new patterns of interaction held the potential to effect change beyond the individual due to the deep inter-affect and interrelatedness of members of the field. (p. 14)

The workshop allowed the space to express emotions while productively looking for ways to build the capacity to have conflictual conversations about power and collective leadership. This was done in an attempt to challenge the dominant *ways of relating* of rigid agenda-based meetings and to replace them with more relationally based practices. Drawing on the group process rituals of Starhawk (1986, 2011) and Macy and Brown's (2014) spiritual practices of the Work that Reconnects, there was an attempt to introduce a relational ontology exposing the group to, as Chilisia (2019) describes, their own "*web of connections*" (p. 108, emphasis added).

Ultimately my intervention did not prevent the broader chapter from experiencing its dissolution. Similar to wanting to save an unwatered plant that,

despite attempts to care for it, still dies, the difficulties of shifting autonomous social fields with entrenched patterns of interactions proved too much for my intervention. However, the felt experiences that emerged both in the development and implementation of the workshops point to the possibilities of *nurturing* the social field to address and move through relational tensions.

Concluding Thoughts

My intention with this article was to introduce the implications of the social field as a way of addressing relational tensions within activist groups. While social movement studies provide us with a lens to explain why relational tensions might come about, what is missing is an understanding of how to shift these tensions from within these groups. Through my case study I aimed to show this in practice as it was only by acknowledging my first-person perspective that we were able to generate collective awareness around the dynamics influencing our relational tensions. Then by introducing new patterns of interactions that focused on nurturing the group's source conditions, I witnessed a qualitative shift in their atmosphere. In this way I view the social field not just as an explanatory framework but as an embodied and practical one, that acknowledges these groups emergent, collective, and ever-changing nature. Perhaps most importantly, it points to the need of cultivating a field of awareness that goes deeper than the "visible" and seeks to understand the source conditions these groups are working from.

Beyond becoming a relevant theory for both activists or practitioners working with and within activist groups, the social field can be a powerful lens for social movement researchers who work in a more embedded and participatory way within these communities. This builds upon the work of movement-relevant scholars which seek to center the voices and needs of the activists they work with (Bevington & Dixon, 2005; Valocchi, 2010; Gobby, 2020). While the case study postulates the implications of the social field, more research on how we might nurture social fields in activist spaces will be needed. What are possible methods, tools, and practices that bring out collective awareness to social fields and help us nurture them? Which ones might be more effective within activist groups? This area of future study can be seen in the work of Gonçalves and Hayashi (2021), who conceptualize a *pattern language* for social field shifts by drawing on art-based theater methods and awareness-based design prompts. In addition, Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) also highlight various intervention strategies aimed at the three interrelated properties of the social field. By experimenting and documenting these strategies, we can more intentionally measure their impacts and effectiveness in activist groups. Through this research, we contribute not just to the theoretical understanding of activism but to the ways activists, and those who aim to support them, might be able to affect systems-based change through a deeper awareness of themselves and the collectives they form a part of.

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