

**Democratic Uprisings and Protest Politics: A Study of the Occupy San Diego Social
Movement**

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On October 7, 2011, two weeks after the Occupy Wall Street movement launched in New York, Occupy San Diego protesters gathered for the first time in a prominent downtown park near the San Diego harbor. From there, they marched about a dozen blocks to the Civic Center Plaza, where many of the participants set up camp for the next few months, officially kicking off their “occupation” of San Diego. Along the way, they carried signs and banners that signaled a deep distrust and abhorrence of the dominant social, economic, and political power structure – one that they viewed as corrupt and imbalanced (“People Over Profits – We Are the 99%” and “Corporate Greed and Endless War Crashed Our Economy” are just two examples). In reference to the bank and corporate bailouts of a few years prior, they angrily chanted “We got sold out! They got bailed out!”

Approximately 1,500 protesters gathered that day, stemming from all different walks of life. As Karla Peterson wryly described in a *UT San Diego* article on October 10, 2011, “There were dreadlocks and John Deere caps. [San Diego] Padres windbreakers and John Lennon T-shirts. There were strollers and tambourines and sleeping bags for the people who are in it for the long haul.” Indeed, over the next couple of months, hundreds of protesters spent their nights in downtown’s Civic Center Plaza. Though the numbers dwindled over those months as police raids and arrests took their toll, by early December, a core group of approximately 150 protesters remained in the Civic Center Plaza encampment.

This paper explores the Occupy San Diego movement during a critical period of time: the weeks after many were cleared from the plaza during the police sweeps of late October but before the encampments cleared out of the plaza entirely. In short, this paper

captures the heart of a movement in a transition phase, when its most dedicated activists are highly visible and active, yet after many of the initial protesters have headed home, perhaps to engage in more conventional, less risky forms of protest behavior.

This paper therefore seeks to deepen our understanding of the larger Occupy movement, by offering a case study glimpse of one of the major, urban Occupy sites. In particular, this paper asks the following questions of the Occupy San Diego movement: Who participated and why? What do they want? How do they want to achieve it? How do they organize themselves? In addressing these questions, this paper contributes to the social movement literature in a variety of ways. First, it enhances our understanding of the attitudes, behaviors, social characteristics and beliefs of movement participants, adding to the growing literature regarding why one becomes an activist (Green and Cowden 1992; della Porta and Diani 1999; Meyer 2007). Similarly, while we know much about the factors that mobilize individuals to participate in protest activity (Klandermans 1984; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Gould 1995; Staggenborg 2011), this paper offers a case study analysis of those factors at work – from the first email to the first demonstration. Second, this paper focuses on the issues and goals of the Occupy movement, a conversation that has produced a healthy level of debate and controversy since the movement's inception (Meyer 2011). Third, in dissecting one particular franchise of a larger movement, this research augments our knowledge of social movement strategies and tactics, particularly in light of state response to the movement (McAdam 1983; Tarrow 1998; Meyer 2007; Taylor and Van Dyke 2007). Finally, this paper offers us a detailed glimpse at the organizational aspects – in terms of choices, challenges, and schisms – of a movement known for its leaderless

nature. Social movement literature has long established that organization matters (McCarthy and Zald 1977; McAdam 1982; Clemens and Minkoff 2007), and while this case study does not counter these claims, it does illustrate the difficulty of maintaining organizational unity when one of the movement's founding principles is maintaining a leaderless nature. In addressing these questions through an in-depth case study analysis, our understanding of internal social movement dynamics is enhanced.

Methodology

As stated above, this paper utilizes case study analysis to explore internal social movement dynamics. Gerring (2007) describes a case as a “spatially delimited phenomenon (a unit) observed at a single point in time or over some period of time” (19). Case study research then, is the “intensive study” of one or a few cases, with the explicit purpose being to generalize findings to a larger group of cases (Gerring 2007, 20). In particular, the case that I study is the Occupy San Diego movement, occurring in the eighth most populous city in the United States, as an example of the nationwide, mostly urban-based Occupy movement that enveloped the country in the latter months of 2011. The research took place over a two week period, during the height of the Occupy San Diego movement and approximately a month and a half after the beginning of the protest activity in San Diego.

I utilize two research methods: interviews/surveys and direct observation. The interviews, primarily guided by survey questions, were conducted by a team of researchers and capture a wide swath of movement participants. Specifically, 73 surveys were completed during this time. Based on participants' estimates, 150 people were still

highly active in the movement at the time of research, thus providing about a 49% response rate among core participants. The second method used, direct observation, was also conducted by a team of researchers. The process was unstructured,¹ reliant on general, ethnographic observations, and consisted of attending General Assembly meetings, committee meetings, teach-ins, protest marches, as well as just hanging around the encampment. These two methods offer an in-depth look at the Occupy San Diego movement, with the direct observation methods adding richness to the detailed and nuanced comments from the interviews and surveys. In the sections that follow, I report on the findings of this research, exploring the four questions posed above – who participated and why? What did they want? How do they want to achieve it? How do they organize themselves?

Who participated and why?

Social characteristics of movement participants

Within the Occupy San Diego movement, 73% of the participants were male and 27% were female, with the majority of participants being under the age of 35 and about three-quarters of the participants being 45 years or younger. Table 1 shows the level of participation by age.

Table 1 about here

¹ Unstructured direct observation is in contrast to structured direct observation, the latter of which includes the use of an observation protocol. Unstructured direct observation calls for the researcher to “pay attention to all that goes on in a debate, take careful notes, and analyze the notes in an effort to discover patterns that can provide a basis for theorizing” (Brians, Willnat, Manheim, and Rich, 328).

In terms of education level, 37% of movement participants had *at least* a college degree. Once you take into account those with some college experience, the number expands to 75.4%, as shown in Table 2. This data confirms previous research findings that show the importance of education in determining who will participate politically, with higher levels of education leading to higher levels of participation (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1987; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Meyer 2007). Within the movement, 30.1% were current students.

Table 2 about here

Given the rhetoric of the larger Occupy movement, we had a particular interest in the employment status of the movement participants. Indeed, 38.3% were unemployed and looking for work, but it was only a slightly smaller group (26.0%) that was employed full-time. In addition, once we take into consideration those that are employed part-time, the percentage of employed movement participants rises to 48%, illustrating that this movement was split about evenly between the employed (both full-time and part-time) and the unemployed.

The employment dynamics are also interesting when viewed alongside questions regarding income and economic status. While many movement participants were employed, the majority (56.2%) of them reported an annual income under \$30,000 annually, falling at around the average per capita annual income of San Diego which during 2006-10 was \$30,715. Perhaps most important to note is that fully 41.1% of movement participants reported an annual income in the lowest range (\$0-\$15,000),

indicating that the Occupy San Diego movement was in many ways a poor people's movement. Table 3 reports annual income for movement participants.

Table 3 about here

This evidence seems to counter the longstanding and well-documented claim that participants in the American political process are wealthier than non-participants (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1987; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Meyer 2007). Indeed, it could be the case that protest activity is an exceptional form of political participation and therefore an anomaly with regard to the type of activist involved, perhaps illustrating that it is an effective mode of participation that would harness the “political energy among the masses” (Piven and Cloward 1977, xxi). However, research indicates that protesters tend to have the same qualities – including higher levels of relative wealth – as more conventional political participants (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 189-90; Meyer 2007). Thus, Occupy San Diego was unusual in this sense, in that it attracted masses of lower-income San Diegans. Of course, one cannot ignore the fact that this is likely due to the movement's focus on economic inequality.

In addition to employment status and annual income, we asked participants about their economic status now as compared to four years ago. A vast majority of respondents reported a decline in their economic status. However, 12.3% of participants reported some improvement in their economic status despite the economic recession. However, these results should be read in light of the fact that 19.2% of respondents reported themselves as having no home address, indicating their homeless status. Table 4 illustrates the results for the question regarding economic status.

Table 4 about here

We also posed questions regarding political party and labor union affiliation. Despite popular media claims that the Occupy movement was intimately linked with the Democratic Party (Condon 2011), most (56.2%) Occupy San Diego movement participants were not aligned with a political party. However, of those who did say that they were attached to a political party, 53% were Democrats, 13.3% were Republicans, 6.6% were Green Party members, and 26.7% reported “other.” In addition, despite a great deal of public support from local labor union leaders in San Diego, the Occupy San Diego movement largely consisted of non-union members, as only 13.7% reported themselves as a union member.

With regard to voting activity, the majority of movement participants had voted in the 2008 presidential election, but most had not voted in the 2010 midterm election. And almost 2/3 of movement participants reported that they planned to vote in the 2012 presidential election. This confirms social science research that has shown that people tend to choose their mode of political participation and stay within it, though they are likely to also engage in other modes of activity from time to time (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1987; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Dalton 2008). In short, political protesters may primarily engage in direct, disruptive action, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that they avoid other political activities entirely. Voting patterns are laid out in Tables 5a-5c.

Table 5 about here

Finally, we asked an open-ended question regarding race and ethnicity. Just over half of the respondents (52%) reported their race as white alone, with another 6.8% self-

identifying as white, along with another race or ethnicity (Hispanic, Native American, etc). Only 5.4% were Hispanic alone and only 2.7% were black alone. The remaining one third of participants either did not answer the question (9.5%), or reported another non-white race or mixed race. In short, the Occupy San Diego movement was predominantly white, a factor that affected many organizational, mobilization, and community-building aspects. These effects will be discussed later, when we turn to the organization of the Occupy San Diego movement.

Individual mobilization and involvement of movement participants

The vast majority of those involved in Occupy San Diego had been involved since the very beginning, approximately two months prior to our research. Indeed, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of participants noted that they had been involved since the first week, with most indicating they had been there since the first day. When we take into consideration those who joined the movement in weeks two and three, 87.7% of movement participants were there by week three. In addition, most participants reported that they were very involved in the movement. Table 6 reports level of involvement for movement participants.

We also sought to understand what had motivated or mobilized participants to join the movement. The social movements literature has long suggested that social networks are a major recruiting tool in mobilizing people to participate politically, including in the form of collective action (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Tarrow 1998, Meyer 2007). In light of these findings, we asked participants what had caused them to come to the Civic Center Plaza and join the movement. We then grouped their answers into those that could be classified as network influence of some kind, including a friend

asking them to come and/or hearing about it on a social networking site. 45.3% of respondents reported that they had been recruited by a friend or networking site. Only 5.5% reported themselves to be an original organizer of the movement, and the remaining half of participants noted that they read about it, saw it on television or online, or literally walked upon the protest activity and joined the movement. These results slightly contradict previous research in that fully half of the participants appear to have been self-motivated to join the movement.

Finally, with regard to mobilization to join the movement, we cannot ignore the glaring reality that almost a fifth of survey respondents in this study were homeless. This point warrants a few words of caution. First, because of the nature of the research, it is possible that the homeless participants were oversampled as compared to non-homeless participants. The research was conducted in the Civic Center Plaza and the surrounding streets at various times of day, and it is possible that many activists had permanently exited the streets, conducting the business of movement planning from their cell phones and computers from their homes. We surveyed movement participants at a few events that tended to draw “non-occupiers” (those no longer camped out in the plaza), but these events were less frequent than the everyday hanging out that occurred. Second, with regard to the typical costs and benefits of collective action, the homeless population faces a different kind of process in weighing the obstacles and potential rewards. While the non-homeless population would likely perceive the costs of occupation as uncomfortable nights spent sleeping on a cold, hard pavement, risk of arrest, risk of assault, and being socially ostracized to name a few, for the homeless these are everyday realities and alternatives are simply not an option. Therefore, because of the high number of homeless

participants as compared to other protest movements, mobilization in the movement may have differed from other movements, as the costs differed for a sizable portion of the movement.

What did they want?

Issue Focus and Policy Goals

In reporting on the Occupy movement nationally, the popular media often noted the lack of focus, goals, and consensus. The movement was deemed inchoate, muddled, and incoherent. The *New York Times* printed one young woman's advice to a new protester: "It's about taking down systems; it doesn't matter what you're protesting, just protest" (Baker, Moynihan, and Maslin Nir 2011). Critics pounced on such statements, often reprinting it as evidence of the movement's unsophisticated and unfocused nature. However, the movement often accepted these labels with pride, touting their mass-based decentralization as the strength of the movement.

In San Diego, similar rhetoric was used by both defenders and critics of the movement; however, this research indicates that the focus was narrower than either side was perhaps willing to concede. Because of the media's portrayal of the movement as amorphous and vague, we asked an open-ended question regarding issues. Specifically, we asked protesters: "What do you see as the primary issues that the Occupy San Diego movement seeks to address?" Two issues emerged as the main focus of the movement, as 58.9% of respondents specifically named inequality or corporate power (or both) as the primary issue or issues that they wanted to tackle. With regard to inequality, the vast majority specified economic inequality, though a few others mentioned social and

political. With regard to corporations, most respondents mentioned greed and the power of big business in politics.

Three more issues that were often mentioned were: social justice (11%), the amount of money in politics (11%), and civil and constitutional rights (5%). These issues were often not mentioned alone, but rather in conjunction with one another or with inequality or corporate power. In short, in this open-ended question, 78% of respondents named at least one of the following when asked about the primary issues that the movement sought to address: inequality, corporate power, social justice, the amount of money in politics, or civil and constitutional rights. Given the similarity between issues – for instance, inequality and social justice, as well as corporate power and money in politics – it seems that the movement was fairly focused and specific, even if the issues themselves were broad.

With regard to policy goals, the movement was similarly focused in terms of naming the perceived problems, but vague in how to actually affect change. When asked the question, “What do you see as the primary goals of the Occupy San Diego movement?,” most respondents again mentioned the five issues discussed above. However, in the context of being asked about goals rather than just issues, most respondents simply added a verb, for instance: change, address, raise awareness, fix, educate, or spread the word. Indeed, despite a great deal of specification with regard to what the problems were, there was little offered in terms of goal specification. In classifying responses, the largest category is one that emphasizes awareness of some kind, even if the phrase is not used explicitly, and 26% of respondents fall in this category. 28.8% of respondents did mention a specific goal, such as welfare reform, free

higher education, health care reform, restructuring the mortgage industry, living wages, homeless services, and term limits. However, few of these goals were repeated by more than a few respondents. Thus, while the movement had a good deal of consensus in terms of what the issues and goals were, neither question prompted much specificity in terms of what exactly should be done to affect change.

This was perhaps intentional, as the movement may have seen the power of simple consciousness-raising, as well as a widespread shift in cultural norms and values (Earl 2007). Indeed, as Nathan Schneider reports in *The Nation*, the original call for protest from the magazine *Adbusters* posed the policy-specific question: “what is our one demand?” (Schneider 2011). And while the magazine initially offered many specifics, the movement soon opted for theatrical disruption over policy details. Schneider writes, “*Adbusters*, as well as people at the General Assembly, pitched in their suggestions: a “Tobin tax” on financial transactions, reinstating the Glass-Steagall Act or revoking corporate personhood...but the discussions never seemed to get anywhere. No single demand seemed like enough to address the problems of the system, and few of these upstarts relished the thought of begging for anything from the powers that be” (Schneider 2011). Again, this may have been the intentional strategy for the entire Occupy movement, as a vague social movement can be an effective social movement. Social movements may recognize that their influence may be greatest at an earlier stage of the policy process – agenda-setting – rather than the later policy adoption or implementation stages (Kingdon 1997; Johnson 2008; Anderson 2011). The earlier stages require that the movement only raise awareness, rather than offer policy specifics. It shields the movement from labels of failure, as they cannot be blamed for failing to achieve what

they never asked for. It also allows politicians to hash out the policy details through the regular channels of the political process, and offers social movements the chance to focus on strategies and tactics, rather than outcomes. Regarding their “one demand,” Schneider writes of Occupy Wall Street, “Tabling that discussion week after week, the General Assembly focused on more practical matters. There were debates about tactics, fundraising, food, and...the website. Over time, the sense emerged that demands weren’t the right thing to be after” (Schneider 2011). With Occupy San Diego, this also seemed to be the case, as strategies and tactics seemed to trump policy goals.

How did they want to achieve it?

Strategies and Tactics

Social movements employ particular tactics to garner attention for their cause, and these tactics, along with their demands and choice of venue for making these demands, make up the larger movement strategy (Meyer 2007, 82). In other words, the strategy of the social movement involves the broad choices that movements make regarding what they want, what they’ll do to demand it, and where they’ll go about making their claims. The tactics of a social movement are a narrower concept, involving the “tool kit” of activities employed by the movement, such as vigils, demonstrations, pamphleteering, hunger strikes, artwork, public meetings, press statements, marches, and sit-ins (Tarrow 1998; Munro 2005; Meyer 2007; McAdam and Snow 2010; Staggenborg 2011). These “repertoires of contention” as Tilly referred to them, are meant to “create uncertainty and express their views... [in a way that will] build support and mobilize allies” (Meyer 2007, 81).

We asked the Occupy San Diego participants about the tactics of the movement. Because the movement itself was defined by one dominant tactic – twenty-four hour encampment of public spaces² – we sought to ask the question in a way that would distinguish this act from others. Thus, we asked the open-ended question: “Besides occupation, what is a primary tactic of the Occupy San Diego movement?” Most respondents mentioned marches, demonstrations, and protests as the primary tactics. Indeed, 46.5% noted one of the three of these tactics. In San Diego, these acts included bank sit-ins (at one point, the protest shut down a Bank of America), Wal-Mart protests, marches through the streets of downtown, and a brief port shutdown. Signs and flyers were another tactic, as 11% of respondents mentioned them. About 1 in 10 respondents mentioned the “teach-ins,” an informal event where the movement hosted experts on certain subjects as a means to educate and inform movement participants.

Interestingly, while the movement was touted as a highly technological movement, only 9.6% mentioned any kind of internet or social media as a tactic. It should also be noted that 38.3% of respondents did not mention any of these tactics, instead providing answers such as “communication,” “expose the issues,” “take care of each other,” “raise attention...and motivate people,” “show exploitation,” “symbolism,” “support picket lines,” “build alliances,” and “get people’s attention.” These vague answers may have been the result of the phrasing of the question as the word “tactics” may have been cumbersome terminology. However, these answers may also indicate the

² The encampment tactic was the original intent of *Adbusters*, as they immediately declared that Occupy Wall Street was “inspired by the Egyptian Tahrir Square uprising and the Spanish *acampadas*,” the latter of which were protest camps that began four months prior to Occupy Wall Street (MacDonald 2011). The encampment tactic was also manifestly proposed in the original flyer as *Adbusters* printed simple instructions: “Bring Tent.”

outcome of a leaderless movement that at times was rather indecisive in their approach and course of action, outside of the tactical decision to occupy the plaza.

Finally, only one respondent mentioned conventional political participation (“contacting city council”) as a tactic, illustrating the way in which this social movement operated almost entirely outside of the traditional political arena. Some movements employ both conventional and unconventional political tactics, but this was a social movement whose primary tactics were aimed at disruption, leaving the policy specific decisions to the policymakers.

How did they organize themselves?

In this section, I turn to the organizational aspects of the Occupy San Diego movement. The larger Occupy movement was often portrayed in the larger media as being disorganized, amorphous, and unanchored. The characterization was not completely off the mark, as one of the movement’s main components was horizontal accountability and non-hierarchical organization, emphasizing the lack of leadership as a strength of the movement and a “living out” of their anti-elite message. The internal focus was on consensus building among movement participants, as decisions were meant to be collectively made. In San Diego, the Occupy movement designed their local movement based on the structure of the original Occupy Wall Street movement, adopting the collective leadership model of governance. In the sections that follow, I detail the Occupy San Diego movement’s organization, including the perception of leadership, decision-making tools, and divisions that arose in response to this diverse group of actors.

Leadership

Social movement research has long illustrated the importance of leaders, pointing to the critical role they play as they “inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognize opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands, and influence outcomes” (Morris and Staggenborg 2007, 171). However, the Occupy movement explicitly rejected a hierarchal structure of governance, instead organizing the movement as a leaderless, “real people’s movement” (Woodman 2011). Indeed, a participant in the Occupy Oakland movement notes:

What sets this apart from any other movement is that there are no leaders. There are people who step up and take more responsibility, take on facilitator duties, and more leadership roles inside committees, but anyone can do that...It’s important for everyone to be as active as the next person, and as accountable as the next person, and encourage others to stand up and speak. Because if you push someone to the top then you’re just replicating this hierarchy we’re trying to undo (Bardi 2012).

The Occupy San Diego movement sought the same goal of collective leadership.

In our research, we posed the open-ended question: “Who do you see as the leader or leaders, if any, of the Occupy San Diego movement?” Two-thirds of the participants responded that there are no leaders, everyone is a leader, or mentioned the horizontal nature of the movement. 5.5% of respondents mentioned an actual person by name and 20.8% noted the emergence of what many called “core” members or “strong” voices. In our direct observation, we did begin to notice regular contributors, strong organizers, and informal leaders, if only by virtue of their consistent contributions, technology skills, and articulation abilities. Thus, despite the leaderless nature of the movement – designed by intention to embody their democratic message – influence among members did emerge in a disproportionate manner. It is to this point that I now turn.

Decision-Making

Michels' notion of the iron law of oligarchy has long warned groups of the inevitability of disproportional power distribution within the group. Along these lines, Jane Mansbridge's landmark study (1980) of direct democracy and equality found that equal participation does not mean equal power. And Piven and Cloward (1977) warned protest groups against too much organization, arguing that the protest spirit stems from the masses, not leaders focused on hierarchical structures. Three and a half decades after Piven and Cloward wrote *Poor People's Movements*, Frances Fox Piven stood before the Occupy crowd, conveying a message of support for the self-proclaimed participation-based, direct democracy movement (Berrett 2011). Indeed, the Occupy movement was built on the idea of mass participation and, as discussed above, the notion of "everybody as leader." As a result of this model, the movement adopted consensus-based decision-making tools, including a nightly General Assembly where participants made group decisions on all aspects of the movement, from tactics to food distribution (Berrett 2011).

In the Occupy San Diego movement, the General Assembly (GA) was held every evening at 7:00pm. Smaller committee meetings were held in the hour before the GA, with the explicit purpose of delegating some issues to individual groups of participants. These committee meetings were meant to be held to the same standard of consensus in decision-making. In our research, we asked questions of decision-making in both the GA and the committee system; the results are reported below.

In response to the question, "the committee system of the Occupy San Diego Movement has been an effective decision-making tool," 64.4% either agreed or strongly agreed. Only 4.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 23.3% answered that they were neutral in their assessment. We also posed a question about equality in the committee

system (“all voices are equally heard through the committee system of the Occupy San Diego movement”). A strong majority (58.9%) either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and 12.4% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Approximately a quarter of respondents replied that they were neutral. Finally, we asked about a desire to keep the committee system. Almost three quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, with only 6.9% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

With regard to the GA system, the results were similar. In response to the question of “the system of general assembly voting within the Occupy San Diego movement has been an effective decision-making tool,” a majority (56.2%) agreed or strongly agreed. In terms of whether or not voices are heard equally in the GA voting system, the same percentage of respondents (58.9%) as above (in response to the committee system) responded that they agree or strongly agree, with 13.7% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. And again, more than three quarters of respondents (76.7%) said that they would keep the GA voting system.

The responses from these six questions – generally geared toward governance, organization, and voice – illustrate a few things. First, the committee and GA systems were largely supported by the participants of the Occupy San Diego movement, even two months into the movement. Second, while some activists were more tepid in their assessment of the efficacy of and equality within the committee and GA systems, movement participants indicated a strong dedication to keeping the systems in place. Finally, while this support emerged in response to close-ended questions, direct observation produced a slightly different perspective, as frustrations seemed to be voiced more often than is indicated in the survey responses.

During our time researching the Occupy San Diego movement, we observed a number of different venues, events, and activities. In both formal and informal settings, we consistently heard frustrations voiced regarding the consensus model of decision-making. The concerns centered on a few different aspects, including what level of consensus is required for decisions to be made, the power to block decisions, and the tolerance of intolerant speech.

With regard to level of consensus, Occupy San Diego protesters at times debated how much consensus was needed to achieve their egalitarian aims. Initially, the movement called for 100% consensus, but one protester mentioned that in some cases, this number had been reduced to 90%. There did not seem to be a clear rule for which decisions required full consensus and which could be made at a lower level of approval. Indeed, the consensus decision-making appeared to cause a dilemma in the movement – while the consensus norms of unanimity underscored the basic principles of the movement, they also threatened the level of efficacy and organization of the movement. At one General Assembly, one man summed up this tension, noting that they needed unity, organization, and to “just do.” With regard to organization, he said, “we are close to really, really bad,” illustrating that the quest for unity was threatening the basic organization. He then noted that the consensus model was not intended for every decision, stating “the consensus model is only if something is going to affect everyone – we don’t need consensus to go to the bathroom.” A second participant concurred, agreeing that the organization of the movement was poor, but he added that this is not a critical default and that in fact, the disruptive protest activities will triumph over the lack of organization. However, at another event, a young woman publicly declared her disdain

for consensus-voting: “I hate consensus – sorry, full disclosure.” She argued that it doesn’t work, noting that the process was forcing indecision. She continued, arguing that many people do not attend the General Assembly because it does not work. This was a frequently made comment. Our own observations supported these statements as people would often end their 6:00pm committee meetings and leave the plaza, despite the General Assembly occurring immediately after the committees and in the same venue. This young woman finished her argument, stating bluntly that the entire process focused on blocking decisions, rather than making decisions.

This leads to the second point regarding consensus decisions. Occupy San Diego protesters often voiced frustration that, under a consensus model of decision-making, a very small minority could block decisions. One woman declared: “all it takes is one bigot to say ‘we don’t want queers’ when we’re talking about a declaration of tolerance.” Another added: “the power to block is giving power to [white men].” Another participant voiced her concern that women did not feel comfortable at the General Assemblies, leading to the disproportionate numbers of men attending them, often at double the rate of women. Here the aims of the movement, in terms of maximizing equality and horizontal power dynamics, were perceived by some in the movement to be turned on their heads. The perception caused many to complain that General Assembly was not only ineffective, but was actually counter to the movement’s goals. It was a common refrain for movement participants to say that General Assembly was not well-attended or well-received. Indeed, at the point of research, a common conversation at the General Assembly was what to do with dwindling numbers. However, others did not agree that the consensus model was problematic for decision-making. One man spoke at General

Assembly, stating, “we don’t need a bunch of naysayers...[so many people] say it won’t work.” He urged the group to continue with the consensus model, and his remarks were followed by a raucous round of applause and cheers.

Finally, we encountered a few occasions where the consensus model ran headlong into the need to hear all forms of speech. As mentioned above, this sometimes took the form of needing to allow intolerant speech toward certain members of the movement. At other moments, the concern centered on the way in which consensus norms reproduced the very societal inequalities that the movement was seeking to eradicate. At one “Feminist Friday” teach-in (teach-ins directed toward discussions of gender and discrimination), this erupted in a rather antagonistic exchange between a group of women and one young man. One woman noted that the first General Assemblies were male-dominated, leading to the establishment of Feminist Fridays and other female-only events. As the conversation continued to draw on themes of male-dominance, a young, white man then entered the circle, first sitting on the outside of the circle, but then slowly inching his way into an inner, more central location. As he moved, he began consistently interrupting the group, asking questions that alternated between a passive questioning and an aggressive challenge to their points. When he loudly declared that “we are all discriminated against equally...we are all oppressed people,” one woman responded by saying “a lot of us are very offended – can we cut this off?” Another responded: “don’t shut off someone’s free speech.” A heated conversation erupted, with the group debating the need to allow him to speak (free speech) and the need to curb offensive language (hate speech). The conversation ended when the young man stormed off, yelling expletives at the group. The consensus norm and focus on people power ran into

problems in this situation and others, and while debate and discussion was lively, engaged, and civil, resolve never arrived and the consensus norm continued. This, as well as the previously mentioned issues with consensus, likely led to the dwindling numbers that were often spoken of at the General Assembly. And given the frustration with the egalitarian model in practice, it's not surprising that a number of divisions arose, threatening the movement's focus on unity.

Divisions and Diversity

Social movements are typically not unitary actors and often act as a loose coalition of actors with diverse goals, interests, and strategies (Olzak and Ryo 2007; Meyer 2007). Indeed, the study of social movements has often pointed to the different branches and offshoots – at times seriously at odds with the dominant sector of the movement – of major social movements, including the environmental movement, the women's movement, and the global justice movement. With regard to the latter, the diversity of actors in the global justice movement is often illustrated with a discussion of the 1999 “Battle in Seattle” protests against the World Trade Organization, as “[union] teamsters, ‘black block’ anarchists, environmentalists, vegetarian fundamentalists, lesbian feminists, and white nationalists marched together in an alliance that must have been uneasy” (Meyer 2007, 60). To mount a successful movement for contentious collective action requires a great deal of organization, but such cohesion can exist even in the midst of grand, loosely aligned coalitions where agreement on such things as resources and tactics are hard to come by.

The broader Occupy Wall Street movement was no different in its patchwork nature. Historian Steve Fraser noted: “community organizations, housing advocates, environmentalists, and even official delegations of trade unionists not normally at ease hanging out with anarchists and hippies gave the whole affair a social muscularity and reach that was exhilarating to experience” (Fraser quoted in Buell 2011). Thus, the Occupy movement, as with most modern-day social movements, did not act as a unitary actor; instead, it was a hodge-podge of groups, individuals, and organizations, uniting briefly under an umbrella of grievances, loosely aimed at the politically and economically powerful.

Occupy San Diego was similarly diverse. The movement consisted of anti-establishment activists, homeless persons, young, highly educated feminists, non-profit workers, attorneys, middle-aged, middle-income former hippies, teachers, college students, marijuana-rights activists, current military members and older war veterans, and many more. These categories are of course not mutually exclusive, nor is the list exhaustive. And while the movement touted these differences and distinctions, they did at times create problems.

Over the few weeks that we observed the Occupy San Diego movement, we witnessed a number of schisms in the group, from small annoyances to large impasses, each threatening to send branches of the movement into other venues and arenas. I will briefly address some of the areas of discord in the movement, before moving onto a discussion of the ways in which these rifts tended to show themselves. One major schism that was apparent on almost every visit that I made to the site was between what I called the “social justice advocates” and the “constitutionalists.” The social justice advocates

were often younger, highly educated, and focused on economic, political, and social power imbalances in the country. They tended to use the language of positive freedoms – rights *to* things (education, health care, social services). In contrast, the constitutionalists were often middle-age and older, less educated, and focused on constitutional freedoms. They tended to use the language of negative freedoms – freedom *from* government intervention (wiretapping, detainment, press restrictions). These groups did not necessarily clash in a negative way, but they often seemed to be traveling the same path in very different vehicles.

A second area of division was between the so-called “24/7s” and the media group. One occupier of the plaza, a middle-age homeless man, told us of his attempts to enter the media office of Occupy San Diego in a nearby office building. He told us that they physically prevented him from entering the office and then forcibly escorted him down the elevator. We could not verify the story, nor the existence of the media office, but his mere perception of these incidents indicates that he felt sidelined, frustrated, and unappreciated. This division may have been indicative of a larger issue and rift between the homeless and the media-savvy, higher socioeconomic status movement members. Indeed, one member noted a concern that people passing by the plaza may say “they’re just bums.” This concern for movement image likely impacted group relations, as each side sought appreciation for their influence and contribution.

A third source of division fell along gender lines. From the beginning of my observation period, we heard many complaints about the gendered nature of the movement, with women often feeling at best marginalized and disempowered, and at worst, physically threatened. As noted above, the number of men outnumbered the

number of women in terms of regular occupiers. One teach-in leader told me that the constant police raids had driven away the less aggressive male activists, leaving what he called the “intimidators,” who could sustain the raids but who did not make the women feel safe.

However, most gendered discussion drew on more subtle forms of gender inequality in the movement. At the first Feminist Friday that I attended, over fifty women gathered in a large circle in the Civic Center Plaza to discuss societal patriarchy in America today. The conversation, however, quickly turned to a discussion of patriarchy within the Occupy San Diego movement. One of the first women to speak stated that she had “concern for [her] experience in the Occupy San Diego movement,” especially in the working groups as men were consistently “stepping over [her] voice in a project that [they were] working on together.” A second woman pointed out that many women were initially put in support roles in the Occupy San Diego movement, tasked with such aspects as feeding people and finding showers. Another agreed, stating “it is assumed that I’ll do the relationship work.” One woman mentioned that the first General Assemblies were male dominated, leading to the eventual creation of a “women only” microphone at marches and at General Assembly. Another woman then pointed out the creation of a radical women’s group within Occupy San Diego, in addition to the already formed Women Occupy San Diego, a female-only branch of the Occupy San Diego movement. Both of these women’s groups operated alongside the larger movement, with the radical women’s group engaging more in discussion and support efforts, and the Women Occupy group focusing more on separate protest activities, sit-ins, and marches. As noted above, one concern of these women was that consensus decision-making tended to favor the

already powerful; one woman noted that “the power to block [decisions]” is giving power to the already dominant white men of the group. It should be noted that feminist discussions did not consist of only female voices, as many men offered verbal support in the Feminist Friday group. Nor were all the anti-feminist comments from men. For instance, one older woman sat in a chair just outside the Feminist Friday circle and loudly stated: “I can’t stand this bitch emotion.”

At another teach-in, this one a non-gendered discussion of the history of Western colonialism, the group was more racially diverse than other activities, but it did not include many women. An hour into the teach-in, twenty-seven people were in attendance, and only five of them were women. The discussion lasted almost two hours and during that time, only one woman spoke. She spoke briefly, only once, and only toward the end of the teach-in.

One final note bears worth mentioning with regard to a lack of cohesion. Many events and activities lacked crossover, resulting in groups that congregated in a location but had little contact with one another. For instance, one Friday evening, I arrived in the late afternoon and spoke with some 24/7ers about recent developments. Feminist Friday began at 6:00pm and very few of the 24/7ers joined the group, despite being only feet away from the gathering. After Feminist Friday ended, just before 7:00pm, most of this group quickly dispersed and left the plaza, while yet another group arrived for the 7:00pm General Assembly. These participation patterns were quite common, with movement activists seeming to adopt “their” mode of participation, engaging in few other activities.

The divisions and schisms often showed themselves in small ways. For instance, smoking cigarettes was a deep annoyance for some of the more environmental, health-conscious participants, while it was a consistent part of life for others. Irritated requests for smokers to leave the area were common, and smokers sometimes responded with frustration at being pushed from the circle of discussion. Other times, the rifts emerged very publicly, such as at a General Assembly meeting. For instance, on a few occasions, we heard public complaints regarding perceived intolerance toward LGBT participants. A second example emerged during the colonialism teach-in, when one participant took issue with the discussion regarding solidarity with the U.S./Mexico border in San Diego, noting his concern with the permissive and apologetic nature of the conversation regarding border crossings, immigration, and American hegemony. Finally, these divisions could be seen in ways that truly threatened the ability of the movement to function. For example, at least six Facebook pages or groups were established, as well as a few different websites. Indeed, the online world of Occupy San Diego was often fragmented and incomplete, as well as distant from the on-the-ground activities.

One area where Occupy San Diego *lacked* diversity was in its racial and ethnic make-up. As noted above, the group was predominantly white. In fact, despite San Diego County being home to the tenth largest population of Hispanics in the country – with Hispanics being close to a third of the population of the county – the Occupy San Diego movement lacked representation from the Latino community. Of those who answered the open-ended question regarding race and ethnicity, only 13.6% mentioned having a Latino or Hispanic heritage, either alone or in combination with another race or ethnicity. Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans were similarly underrepresented in the movement

as compared to the numbers living in San Diego County, while whites were overrepresented.³ In regards to the lack of diversity in the larger Occupy movement, Campbell (2011) writes, “it is difficult to understand how this predominantly, in fact, overwhelmingly, white movement proves worthy for black people to join.” He quotes Nathalie Thandiwe, a radio host and producer in New York: “Occupy Wall Street was started by whites and is about their concern with their plight. Now that capitalism isn’t working for ‘everybody,’ some are protesting” (Thandiwe quoted in Campbell 2011). Campbell concurs, arguing that her comments align with the “economic and financial realities for black and Latino/a people,” and reflect frustration with a continued norm of white privilege within the movement – and one that largely mirrors racial inequalities in society.

In Occupy San Diego, despite the power-challenging rhetoric of the movement, race played a role in power distribution and equal representation. For instance, at the largest Feminist Friday that I attended (over fifty people), people of color were almost completely absent from the group. When the one most identifiably black woman did speak in support of comments recently made by the group, people began to stand and move around, engaged in side discussions, looked around in a disinterested manner, and generally ignored her comments. This was a common occurrence, with white men tending to speak more often and more than once per session. In contrast, non-whites and women attended less frequently and therefore spoke less frequently. Thus, despite the

³ If we look only at the City of San Diego, blacks and Asians are even more underrepresented in the Occupy San Diego movement, and whites are even more overrepresented. Hispanics, on the other hand, are less underrepresented when comparing participation rates to the demographics of the city. This is because many Hispanics live in San Diego live outside the city proper, in the many suburbs and surrounding jurisdictions in the county.

egalitarian principles of the Occupy movement – or perhaps *because of* these principles – the racial dynamics of the Occupy San Diego movement were unequal and unrepresentative of minority voices in the San Diego community.

Discussion

This research has offered a snapshot glimpse into a major social movement as it operated in one of the largest urban cities in the United States. Occupy San Diego, in its quest to challenge the ruling political, economic, and social order of the country, grabbed the attention of the region with its disruptive tactics and thought-provoking claims. A few of the findings from this research are worth reiterating here. First, the typical participant in the Occupy San Diego movement was a white, educated, lower-income male. In this sense, the movement is to some extent reflective of the larger political process in America, with the exception of the income variable. Second, movement participants were heavily focused on two issues: inequality and corporate power. In terms of movement goals, they were less clear or specific, often indicating a range of goals and means to achieve them. Third, participants mentioned three main tactics other than occupation: marches, demonstrations, and protests. However, occupying the plaza remained the primary tactic of the movement. Finally, the Occupy San Diego movement was an intentionally decentralized movement, proud of its leaderless and non-hierarchical structure. Participants tended to respond that they liked the consensus norms of the movement, though side conversations tended to uncover a less optimistic view. In short, this study of the Occupy San Diego movement illustrates a present-day social movement and allows us to better understand movement dynamics, tactics, and outcomes.

	Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-25 years	31.5	31.5
26-34 years	21.9	53.4
35-45 years	19.2	72.6
46-55 years	9.6	82.2
56-64 years	9.6	91.8
65+ years	4.1	95.9
Missing	4.1	100.0
Total	100.0	

Table 1: Age of Occupy San Diego Participants

	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Some high school	6.8	6.8
High school graduate	12.3	19.2
Some college	38.4	57.5
College graduate	24.7	82.2
Some graduate school	4.1	86.3
Advanced degree obtained	8.2	94.5
Missing	5.5	100.0
Total	100.0	

Table 2: Education Level of Occupy San Diego Participants

	Percent	Cumulative Percent
\$0-15,000	41.1	41.1
\$15,001-\$30,000	15.1	56.2
\$30,001-\$45,000	6.8	63.0
\$45,001-\$60,000	8.2	71.2
\$60,001-\$75,000	9.6	80.8
Over \$75,000	1.4	82.2
Prefer not to answer	9.6	91.8
Missing	8.2	100.0
Total	100.0	

Table 3: Annual Income Level of Occupy San Diego Participants

	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Drastic Decline	35.6	35.6
Moderate Decline	28.8	64.4
About the Same	19.2	82.2
Moderate Improvement	9.6	91.8
Drastic Improvement	2.7	94.5
Missing	4.1	100.0
Total	100.0	

Table 4: Economic Status of Occupy San Diego Participants, Comparing Now to Four
Years Ago

	Percent who voted in 2008	Cumulative Percent
Yes	58.9	58.9
No	32.9	91.8
Missing	8.2	100.0
Total	100.0	

Table 5a

	Percent who voted in 2010	Cumulative Percent
Yes	43.8	43.8
No	49.3	93.2
Missing	6.8	100.0
Total	100.0	

Table 5b

	Percent who plan to vote in 2012	Cumulative Percent
Yes	63.0	63.0
No	19.2	82.2
Missing	17.8	100.0
Total	100.0	

Table 5c

Tables 5a-5c: Voting Patterns Among Occupy San Diego Participants

	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Involved	58.9	58.9
Somewhat Involved	32.9	91.8
Not Very Involved	8.2	100.0
Total	100.0	

Table 6: Level of Involvement of Occupy San Diego Participants

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