

United we stand: fostering cohesion in activist groups

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Abstract

Group cohesion is an important factor in the effectiveness of activist group work. Cohesion fostering practices and processes can be prioritised and adopted into an activist group's culture to improve group member and whole group wellbeing and effectiveness. Methods to improve the internal group dynamics of activist groups include broadening people's self-awareness and the ways they behave in their groups. As well, there is an emphasis on the relationships group members build and the deeper connections they make in order to develop a cohesive group culture. To date, very little group cohesion dynamics research has been conducted with activist groups. Analysis of interview data identified a range of cohesion fostering practices and processes that activist groups have applied. From those practices identified, a self-disclosure activity called personal narrative was tested in a workshop intervention. Data analysed from questionnaires, free text and observations showed a preliminary indication of increased prosocial feelings and behaviours consistent with improved group cohesion. No single tool or combination thereof is a panacea guaranteed to create collegial groups at all times. However, when an activist group actively and strategically focuses on its cohesion by inculcating cohesion skills, knowledge, practices and processes they are more likely to be more cohesive and effective.

Keywords: Activist groups, group cohesion, group dynamics, cohesion strategy, prosocial behaviour.

Introduction

Sixty thousand people rallied on the streets of Paris on the 21st of September 2014. The drummers led the march, and the rest of us chanted in rhythm to the beat; the energy was palpable. I felt as though I was part of something bigger than myself and we were all in this fight together. The People's Climate March organised by 350.org and supported by climate action groups across the globe saw millions of people attend 2646 rallies in 162 countries that year. It was the largest global action raising climate change awareness in history (350.org 2015).

Rallies like the one described above, and the broader campaigns and social movements they are part of, don't happen by accident. They are built from the ground up by individuals working together in activist groups. As activists, we

come together with a specific purpose or goal, often inspired by personal values and fuelled by our frustration with the level of dysfunction and inaction in the political, social and cultural spheres. Initially, it may feel as though our personal energy and passion rousing this momentum will carry us through to goal completion. Yet in my experience, and that of many others, the success or failure of an activist group often hinges on the group's internal dynamics. When activist groups devolve into internal conflict, factionalism, power plays and other dysfunctions, their effectiveness can be severely compromised (Vannucci & Singer 2010:31-40; Gastil 2014:89-107). I argue that prosocial self-knowledge and interpersonal skills, as well as cohesion fostering participatory group practices and processes, are vitally important in supporting a group to attain its goals.

On and off, for the past three decades I have been a member of an activist group, often several at a time. More often than not, at some point the group loses energy and focus, gets caught up in the minutiae of personal differences due to unmet individual expectations, or descends into internal conflict losing sight of and/or failing to achieve the group's initial goals. These familiar pitfalls are far too common in my experience, and for many years this has frustrated and confounded me. Group dysfunction or breakdown feels like a squandered opportunity at a time when we can least afford it. These experiences prompted me to ask, *would a whole group focus on cohesion offer any advantages to activist groups?* This query guided me in exploring some of the purposeful cultural changes that activist groups can apply to foster cohesion in their groups.

Rather than focusing on the factors from the external environment that influence and impact a group, I concentrated on what goes on within groups, including the thoughts and feelings of individual group members, and asked what kinds of group processes and training practices are effective for fostering activist group cohesion. There is research on cohesion and conflict in groups available in behavioural science, organisational behaviour and other social sciences, however little of this research is specifically oriented to activist groups. To overcome this omission, I examined activist training manuals and texts to identify cohesion fostering practices and processes currently available in activist literature. As well, I reviewed literature on group conflict and cohesion from behavioural science, organisational behaviour and other social sciences. From this, I developed a 2-stage research process. First, I invited Australian activists with nonviolent direct-action (NVDA) training to identify and list which practices and processes foster cohesion in their groups. Then I chose one of these cohesion fostering practices, called *personal narrative*, to test whether it fosters group cohesion in a research intervention. To the best of my knowledge, Australian NVDA trained activists have not been asked what practices and processes foster cohesion in their groups and the personal narrative practice has not been tested in an intervention to see whether it fosters cohesion in activist groups.

Stellan Vinthagen (2018:7-8), editor of the *Journal of Resistance Studies*, identified in an editorial a need for research exploring the efficacy of activist training manuals which provide hands-on specialised skills for front-line activists. He also suggested the need to develop practical activist knowledge by drawing upon the collective hard-won wisdom of resisters along with the academic conceptual discourse of resistance. He said that practical outcomes should be developed through a collaborative partnership between the activist and the academic. Vinthagen's recommendations framed my investigations into cohesion in activist groups. The goal of this research project is not to establish causal inference or produce highly generalizable scientific results. The sample size for this study is small so causal inference can not be established. The goal of this project was to ask NVDA trained activists what practices and processes they thought fostered group cohesion and to explore some of the purposeful and practical cultural changes that activist groups can apply to foster cohesion in their groups. As well, there is a hope that this project will encourage more group dynamics research undertaken collaboratively between activists and academics.

What follows is an outline of the group dynamics research that dissects group cohesion and endeavours to explain why cohesion is an important factor for activist groups. As well, the negative impacts of group cohesion such as *groupthink* are explored. Next, group conflict types are examined and some practices and processes to limit conflict in groups are highlighted. The research methodology is explained, and a brief outline of the research process is presented. The discussion section considers the importance of prioritising the skills, knowledge and practices that develop a cohesive group culture as part of a strategy for activist group effectiveness. Concluding statements highlight the importance of group dynamics research in activist groups.

Group dynamics research

Conceptualising group cohesion and conflict

Cohesion is a complex group dynamic and arises in groups in multifaceted ways. Scholars have offered various definitions of cohesion, each being influenced by their research group's context, the scholar's theoretical perspective and the scholar's perceived source or origin of the cohesion (Levine & Moreland 1990:603; Siebold 1999:9). My preferred definition of cohesion was devised by Kurt Lewin 1948 cited in (Forsyth 2018:128):

the forces that keep groups intact by pushing members together as well as countering forces that push them apart.

Lewin's definition draws attention to the balance between the elements that hold groups together and those elements that can break the group apart. An example would be sharing communal meals after a meeting as a way to draw

members together while adopting processes that prevent destructive shouting matches. This is important because I'm focusing on cultivating constructive practices to deal with group conflict and ways of fostering cohesion in activist groups.

Cohesion can be understood as an *emergent state*. An emergent state is typically characterised by constant change and varies depending on the group's context (Marks et al. 2001: 357-8). Severt and Estrada (2015:21) offer a "structural conceptualisation" of cohesion to highlight why and how cohesion is so important to groups (see table 1). According to Severt and Estrada (2015:8-10) cohesion can be deconstructed into two functional properties, *affective and instrumental*, and four structural factors, *interpersonal, group pride, social and task*. Severt and Estrada looked at the emotional and interpersonal functions (affective) and the everyday practical functions (instrumental) of cohesion to uncover in more detail why and how cohesion is beneficial for group members and the group as a whole. These dimensions differ in the following ways: affective cohesion refers to the emotional support that group members can provide for each other, as well as a sense of belonging and group pride. Additionally, the interpersonal aspect refers to the friendship bonds that group members form over time. Instrumental cohesion, on the other hand points out the practical and functional aspects of coming together in groups. Social cohesion describes the improved flexible, positive and productive working relationships between group members. The examples identified in Table 1 give further explanation of each function of cohesion. Similar to Severt and Estrada (2015), Forsyth (2018:128-136) has identified five factors that express group cohesion. These factors, he suggests, are influential in developing cohesion in a group (see table 2). The following tables are a visual representation I have constructed of these concepts.

Table 1. Functional and structural factors of cohesion (drawing on Severt & Estrada 2015)

Functional properties	Structural facets	Examples
Affective (emotional)	Interpersonal	Feelings of belonging and connection. Emotional support, willingness to engage in personal/informal conversation
	Group pride	Pride in group values, connect with like-minded people, group principles strengthen members' identity
Instrumental (applied)	Social	Social bonds between group members – displaying behaviours of flexibility, positivity and reciprocity in working relationships.
	Task	Shared commitment to group task, belief that group task will be completed successfully, collective desire to perform task effectively

Table 2. Five factors of group cohesion (drawing on Forsyth 2018)

Five factors that express group cohesion	Examples
Emotional cohesion	Group pride and loyalty. Positive feeling attributed to the group and communicated in the group's morale and vitality
Collective cohesion	A "we are all in this together" feeling. The use of plural pronouns such as <i>we</i> and <i>us</i>
Social cohesion	Interpersonal connection and bonding between group members
Task cohesion	The group's focus is the task which is expressed as a collective commitment and trust
Structural cohesion	Defined responsibilities, clarity of roles, and standardised group processes. The group's behavioural norms are well established

What is important to notice in these two tables is the number of factors to consider when activists seek to foster cohesion in their groups. The functional properties identified by Severt and Estrada have *emotional* and *applied* components. The emotional components have two structural facets these are *interpersonal* and *group pride*. These are expressed as the level of interpersonal connection and bonding between group members as well as a deep pride in the group as a whole. The applied components have the structural facets of *social* and *task*. These are expressed as a shared commitment to task completion and the development of bonding and reciprocity in the group. However, it is interesting to note that the lines can blur between these factors. For example, some of the emotional, collective and social factors share similar properties. Forsyth also identified the importance of distinguishing between emotional and structural cohesion separating out emotional, collective and social cohesion from structural and task cohesion. Forsyth's five factors offer an even clearer distinction between the emotional and practical functions. The practical components that create cohesion include *clarity of roles and responsibilities*¹ as well as *established behavioural norms*. The two tables clearly demonstrate the complexity of the cohesion dynamic.

When we deconstruct cohesion in this way, we can begin to see how interwoven the affective and instrumental functional properties are in the behaviour of group members and the group as a whole, and how important cohesion is as an overall focus for activist groups. Although each of these components is highlighted separately, in order to foster group cohesion, the components can be viewed as being in cooperation, operating together to foster group cohesion. If instigated separately, the cohesion effect may not be achieved to its full potential. The value of group cohesion can be insufficiently recognised by activist groups and from my experience is rarely intentionally prioritised as part of an activist group's culture². Once an activist group has an awareness of this dynamic, it can develop a strategy to adopt skills, practices and processes to foster cohesion with these factors in mind.

It is important to note that not all outcomes of group cohesion are constructive or easily achieved. *Groupthink*, identified by Janis (1982:9), is an unhelpful group phenomenon recognised when group participants are more focused on remaining agreeable during group participation and decision-making than embarking on a dialogue that may be difficult. Groups that have fallen into groupthink have an over reliance on hierarchy and a desire to preserve group harmony. An awareness of the pitfalls of groupthink are needed so that all group

¹ Although these practices are described by Forsyth as important for structural cohesion, a reviewer has highlighted Kia and Ricketts (2018) as an example of other ways of organising in groups to build structural cohesion.

² Despite the general truth of this statement, as suggested by a reviewer some groups have systematically worked to develop cohesion. The Australian Nonviolence Network conducted a comprehensive and compulsory 3-day training at the 1982 Franklin river blockade that prioritised cohesion building exercises.

members participate equally in group discussion and decision-making processes and that space is opened for voicing of alternative viewpoints. Likewise, to achieve cohesion, Lakey (2010:51-2) cautions that cohesion building is a gentle process that cannot be forced. He stresses the need to provide a group culture that nurtures cohesion to flourish over time.

Conflict regularly occurs in groups. Group conflict can arise when everyday dealings are disrupted by disagreement or irritation due to the awareness of discrepancies or conflicting interests (Forsyth 2018:410-11). Research into group conflict has identified three conflict types - task, relationship and process (Jehn & Mannix 2001:238). These conflict types correspond loosely with the functional properties of cohesion listed above. Several practices and processes were identified in the group conflict literature that enhance the potential for group cohesion. One of the practices known as *emotions management*, the inner work we do to be more emotionally flexible, works to enhance cooperation and limit the disruptive consequences of conflict. Emotions management can improve group functioning across the three conflict types listed above (Barker et al. 2008:423-24; Jiang et al. 2013:726-30). Similarly, task, relationship and process conflict are reduced when group members are skilled in deliberative dialogue processes. The practice of deliberative dialogue has a set of clear principles that guide a discussion. These principles ask group members to seek clarification of others' views and attitudes before disagreement, provide equal opportunity for group members to contribute to discussion and respectful listening (amongst other skills) to help foster open mindedness and a more relaxed attitude towards disagreement (Johnson et al. 2014:77; Schirch & Camp 2015:9-10). Other research has highlighted the importance of a conflict style that is pre-emptive rather than reactive by employing practices such as being pragmatic in anticipating when group conflict may arise. Also useful is developing and implementing management measures such as acknowledging the perspectives of all group members, co-creating group rules that make expectations clear and balancing the individual interests of group members with the collective interests of the group (Behfar et al. 2008:185).

Research into whether conflict has a negative or a positive impact on the effectiveness of a group has been inconsistent. Research into the productive nature of conflict shows some positive benefit of low-level task conflict (Jehn and Mannix 2001). However, subsequent research undertaken by De Dreu & Weingart (2003:748) suggests that both task and relationship conflict are negatively correlated with group performance. Additionally, further research into relationship conflict highlighted the need for careful management as there is no beneficial level of relationship conflict to the longevity of a group (Behfar et al. 2008). However, as identified above, how a group anticipates and proactively deals with any potential group conflict can often be an important factor in its management.

This section has undertaken to deconstruct the concept of cohesion in order to show why group cohesion is important for activist groups, but also to provide a

description of the essential elements that come together to foster group cohesion. These cohesion elements are important for activist groups to be aware of when developing their group cohesion strategy. Similarly, this section has broken down the essential workings of group conflict in the hope that, when understood, triggering elements can be anticipated and prevented. The next section looks at a review of activist literature to uncover what sort of practices and processes they suggest for fostering cohesion in groups.

Insights from activists

A group's cohesion strategy can include the adoption and inculcation of individual member and whole group cohesion capabilities. To identify these capabilities, I explored English-language writing by and for activists to gather information on the kinds of practices and processes available to activists and to ascertain whether cohesion is identified as a valuable quality in activist group culture. Training manuals reviewed include the nonviolent direct-action (NVDA) *Trainers Resource Manual 2005*, which is used as a training guide by NVDA trainers when conducting workshops. Helpful texts were also reviewed, include *Getting Our Act Together* (Ochre 2013) a practical guide containing practices and processes to help group members overcome common problems and work better together; *In the Tiger's Mouth* (Shields 1991) which offers applied methods for engaging with others in social action; and *Come Hell or High Water: a handbook on collective process gone awry* (Vannucci & Singer 2010) which offers insights into the group dynamics of egalitarian organisations and the problems that can be experienced in this type of group³. These and other writings gave me an awareness of the types of resources currently available to activists⁴. Further information on group practices and processes was found in group dynamics, social science, psychology and organisational management journals.

Some of the personal practices identified in the literature include self-awareness through self-reflection, emotions regulation, deliberative dialogue skills, and respectful listening (Johnson et al. 2014; Schirch & Campt 2015). These prosocial practices add to a group member's capacity for emotional flexibility and a personal awareness of their impacts on their group. Emotional flexibility is defined as having the ability to reflect on and gain a greater insight into one's own ways of thinking, viewpoints and biases about a topic (Schirch & Campt 2015:15). Some of the helpful group processes include fair and inclusive decision-making, check-ins, safe meeting principles and the conscious inclusion of all group members so that they feel encouraged to share their ideas, opinions and contributions. Group processes such as these offer ways of supporting the

³ These are just a sample of the texts and manuals I reviewed for this research.

⁴ As suggested by a reviewer, there are many other texts and manuals that can be examined in this context: Branagan (2013), Cohen et al. (2011), Popovic et al. (2007), Ricketts (2012), WRI (2009).

group's culture that embraces empowerment, respect, self-responsibility and belonging (Lahey 2010:24; Mindell 2014:18,33; Ochre 2013:31-2; Shields 1991:12-28; Starhawk 2011:44; Vannucci & Singer 2010:30-1). These are all vital components for activist groups to flourish (Severt & Estrada 2015:4).

The information assembled from activist writings and the practices and processes from the group dynamics literature offer a repertoire of skills that can be implemented to foster cohesion in activist groups. These skills purposefully create the conditions that support a more collegial group. However, I haven't come across any research that prioritises cohesion building as a group strategy or any reference to a group cohesion strategy as a proactive approach to activist group function. Additionally, it seems that there is little or no research on group cohesion specifically oriented to activist groups. What is needed is an intentional approach to cohesion building in activist groups that promotes prosocial capabilities to shape a regenerative group culture.

Methodology

To determine how to better foster cohesion in activist groups, I set out to answer the practical question, *what kinds of group processes and training practices are effective for fostering cohesion in activist groups?* I interviewed ten environmental/social justice activists across Australia who had participated in nonviolent direct action (NVDA) training and asked them to identify which practices and processes they found fostered cohesion in their groups. Then I took one of the suggested practices called *personal narrative* and, working collaboratively with my activist allies, applying an action research approach where the researcher is also a participant in the intervention, tested whether it fostered cohesion in our activist group. For action research, the participant-researcher undertakes an investigation with the intention of influencing change within their organisation or to improving their group's practices. Action research was originally developed in the 1930's by John Collier. It was further developed in the 1940's by social psychologist Kurt Lewin whose focus was on organisational behaviour, and understanding and improving decision making in workplaces, schools, communities and national and state governments (Lewin 1946:34; McNiff & Whitehead 2011:41-42; De Chesnay 2014:6-7). Since then, action research as a method has been applied to many workplace environments including teaching and nursing. Similarly, it has been applied as a research method when investigating environmental advocacy, and also in conflict resolution and activist research (Coleman et al. 2014:1064-1065; McNiff & Whitehead 2011:41-42; Whelan 2002:179).

When determining the meaning of a group process and a training practice I used the following definitions. *Practices* were defined as interpersonal and self-awareness skills, bonding actions or behavioural expectations that enhance group members' prosocial capacity and psychological flexibility, enriching the group's overall cohesion. Practices in this instance would include *deliberative dialogue skills*. These skills would manifest as a capacity to listen respectfully to

a challenger's ideas and opinions, seeking clarification of ideas before disagreement and detaching personal worth from the critique of their own ideas and do the same for their challenger. A *process* denotes the methods adopted by the group to facilitate group governance and have a cohering effect on a group's culture. An example of a group process would be *consensus decision-making*. When facilitated well and group members participate in good faith, this group process offers all group members the opportunity to express an opinion and to cooperatively participate in the group's decision-making.

Research stage 1

The lack of publicly available lists of NVDA trained activists made it a challenge to make contact and invite them to participate in the research. To counter this, I used snowball sampling in the following way. I contacted my NVDA trained activist friends to invite them to be interviewed and then asked them to make contact with their NVDA activist friends and networks to let others know about this research project. To collect the relevant data, a simple structured interview was devised. I had two aims: collecting recommended cohesion fostering techniques and connecting with other NVDA trained activist to become participants.

I asked each activist two questions:

1. I'd like you to think back on your experiences with nonviolent direct-action training. Did any of the techniques seem useful for fostering cohesion and/or resilience in groups? Which ones would you recommend?
2. Can you suggest one or two other activists that you know who have participated in NVDA training and that might be interested in participating in this research?

The first cohort of interviewees were NVDA trained activists who lived in my local community, so I could talk to them face-to-face. Their ages ranged from 50-60 years; they were all women of Anglo origin who had participated in NVDA training between 1980 and 1990. The other interviewees were spread throughout Australia. I interviewed them by phone, so their gender and age were unknown to me. These activists had undertaken NVDA training within the past ten years. I contacted and interviewed activists until the information they shared started to be repeated.

Research stage 2

I then undertook a second research stage which was to devise and implement an intervention that would test the cohesion-fostering efficacy of one of the

suggested practices. Based on the findings in stage 1 and supported by the literature of the positive effect storytelling has on group cohesion, I chose to test in stage 2 the practice called *personal narrative*⁵. The research methods underpinning the design were action research, observations and questionnaires.

Personal narrative

The *personal narrative* practice asks group members to write down and share the story of their activist journey, exploring deeply their personal values and the motivators for their activist identity. These stories, when shared with other group members, are often inspirational and uniting (Light 2013). Nummenmaa et al. (2014:498-99, 508) measured brain activity whilst research participants listened to recorded stories, demonstrating that participants *caught* the emotions heard in the narrative. Emotional sharing, foundational to the personal narrative practice, is a central factor in creating social bonding and group cohesion (Rennung & Goritz 2015:4). As a consequence, story-sharing creates a “we are all in this together” feeling, which was identified as significant to group cohesion by many of the NVDA-trained activists.

Theoretical perspective

I employed Tuckman’s small-group development theory as the underpinning theoretical perspective in the research design. Tuckman’s small-group development theory sees groups moving through several development stages, often not sequentially: *forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning* (Tuckman 1965). Tuckman’s theory was a natural choice as it provided a clear way of coding when a group is either not cohesive (storming), cohering (norming) or productively cohesive (performing). Tuckman’s original study in 1965, as well as Miller (2003) and Kiweewa et al. (2018), provided key words for the coding frame that denoted emotions, and phrases that define observable behaviours (see Table 3). The coding frame was chosen prior to data collection and used to analyse the data gathered from questionnaires and observations. I formulated Table 3, below, to show words denoting emotions and observable behaviour themes identified in the studies conducted by Tuckman (1965), Miller (2003) and Kiweewa et al. (2018). The words denoting emotions and observable behaviours indicate which of Tuckman’s (1965) group development stages a group is in. Tuckman, Miller and Kiweewa et al.’s themes were analysed to produce the coding themes for this study, which are identified in the column on the far right. I focused on the storming, norming and performing stages in my study because the participant group (research stage 2) is a well-established group with no plans to fold in the near future.

⁵ I chose to test personal narrative simply because the intervention was easy to conduct in the time I had to complete my research. As well, I found the literature investigating the positive effects of storytelling intriguing and I wanted to explore this further.

Table 3. Observable themes table

Tuckman's stages	Themes identified from Tuckman, B (1965)		Themes identified from Miller (2003: 126)	Themes identified from Kiweewa et al. (2018: 286)	Feelings words for the stage 2 intervention
	Observable themes	Corresponding feelings and qualities	Observable themes	Observable themes	Feelings wheel
Storming	Criticism of ideas, poor attendance, polarization, coalition formation, rules are broken, increased friction	Defensiveness, jealousy, heightened negative emotions, fight-flight tendency, hostility, frustration	<p>There was conflict between group members</p> <p>Individuals demonstrated resistance towards the demands of the task</p> <p>The group was experiencing some friction</p> <p>Group members became hostile towards one another</p>	<p>Vicarious modelling</p> <p>Dealing with conflict</p>	Defensive Inadequate Stupid Jealous Frustrated Furious Irritated Sceptical Bewildered Discouraged Insignificant Weak Foolish Anxious Confused Rejected Critical Hateful Angry Hostile Hurt
Norming	Agreement on procedures, reduction in role ambiguity, acceptance of members' idiosyncrasies, group establishes new group norms to ensure	Harmonious, trusting, thoughtful, openness, relaxed, appreciative/ appreciated, unified	<p>Individuals identified with the group</p> <p>The team felt like it had become a functioning unit</p>	<p>Cohesiveness/ bonding</p> <p>Genuineness/ authenticity</p> <p>Self-disclosure</p>	Harmonious Relaxed Content Sentimental Thankful Cheerful Appreciated

	existence, open exchange of ideas on tasks, increased “we-feeling”		Group norms were developed Team members had become comfortable with each other		Hopeful Faithful Nurturing Trusting Thoughtful Peaceful Joyful
Performing	Decision making; problem solving; mutual cooperation, minimal emotional interference, practical solutions-based discussion	Creative, friendliness, encouraging, connected, intelligent, responsive, respectful/respected, cooperative	A unified group approach was applied to the task Constructive attempts were made to resolve project issues Solutions were developed and chosen	Genuineness/authenticity Self-disclosure Validation/acceptance	Creative, encouraging, cooperative innovative assertive proactive Daring Fascinating Stimulating Satisfied Valuable Worthwhile Intelligent Confident Responsive Important Respectful/ed Proud Aware Creative Playful Energetic Excited Powerful

Questionnaire design

In designing the questionnaire for the intervention, I deliberately avoided asking participants their perceived level of cohesion in their group. Research suggests individuals have faulty recall of past actions and a tendency to make up

unreliable retroactive justifications of behavioural responses⁶ (Johansson et al. 2005; Miller 2003). As well, I designed the questionnaire to rule out potential biases such as social desirability where research participants respond in ways they think others will see as desirable. This can impact the validity of the data collected (Miller 2003:123). To do this, I designed the questionnaire using hypothetical group scenarios that were general in nature and did not ask direct questions about their group. Factoring in social desirability bias is important due to the nature of action research. Often, when conducting action research, the participant-researcher has a close friendship with the research participants and the research participants are aware (in general) of the research topic, which makes it vital to design data collection instruments that anticipate these potential human characteristics and biases. Additionally, the questionnaire design took advantage of the ideas on group cohesion dynamics gathered from the literature, as well as the suggestions gathered from the NVDA trained activists (more detail can be found in Author 2019).

The participant group

A political activist group, of which I am a member and that is based in regional New South Wales, agreed to participate in the intervention. Established in the early 1990's, the group undertakes activism in the environmental and social justice arena. Six group members agreed to participate in the intervention; I, as the participant-researcher, brought the total to seven participants. Prior to conducting the intervention workshop, I observed the group's behaviour to identify which current group practices and process could be improved or which new processes instigated. Additionally, after the intervention I observed group members to see whether they had changed their behaviour as a result of the intervention.

The intervention

The seven people who agreed to participate in the intervention came together one morning in a specified location. First, participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire, which asked them to comment on a series of scenarios (listed in Table 4) using both a feelings wheel⁷ and written responses to three questions. The participants were asked to indicate on a feelings wheel what feelings were evoked by the scenario and to write a written response explaining how they would respond to each scenario. The questions requiring a written response were the same for each scenario and were:

⁶ Nevertheless, as suggested by a reviewer, some useful data may have been gained by asking this and comparing answers.

⁷ A feelings wheel is a circular tool that has feelings listed in a spoke-type display that enables people to identify, indicate and articulate the emotions they are feeling in relation to a particular situation or context.

1. Please explain your feelings if you can.
2. How do you respond to the scenario? What actions would you take?
3. What are your reasons for your actions?

Table 4. Questionnaire scenarios

Scenarios	Justification for scenario context
<p>Scenario 1</p> <p>You belong to an activist group that is in the process of deciding on your group's foundational values that will be included in the organisation's constitution. The debate is getting heated and Kia starts to criticise your ideas and opinions.</p>	<p>Scenario 1 has drawn upon ideas from Gastil (2014:11-34) and Johnson et al. (2014:76-103) which recommends that group members develop and engender communication practices that foster cohesion.</p>
<p>Scenario 2</p> <p>You are part of an activist group that is running a campaign and one or two people seem to be taking on the majority of the responsibility for organising and completing the tasks/actions. You're feeling a little left out and annoyed that they're not including you.</p>	<p>The justification for scenario 2 also draws from ideas in Gastil (2014:11-34) which highlight the importance of a whole group approach to creating a cohesive group. Each group member can participate proactively in task allocation.</p>
<p>Scenario 3</p> <p>Frankie, a group member, has suggested we start having a shared meal with our monthly meetings.</p>	<p>The ideas behind scenario 3 came from the NVDA trained activists interviewed in stage 1, and Lakey (2010:42-52) who emphasised the extraordinary influence informal socialising had in fostering cohesion in groups.</p>

Second, they participated in a workshop that took them through the process of writing a personal narrative. Writing a personal narrative involved telling the story of their activist journey, sharing their personal experiences, feelings, values and motivations in relation to their activist group and the broader movement the group is a part of (Shields 1991:89-90). There is a growing body of evidence that suggests connecting through storytelling fosters cohesion in groups (Aron et al. 1997:327; Heffernan 2015; Laloux 2014:159-64; Pollack & Matous 2019:473). Finally, if/when comfortable, the participants were asked to share their personal narrative with the group. Two weeks after the workshop, participants were asked to fill in the same questionnaire. The participant group held a regular monthly meeting after the intervention and before the second round of questionnaires were completed. I spent time in the meeting observing the intervention participants to note any change in their behaviour.

As highlighted above, for this study I collated Tuckman's words that denote emotions and behaviours into a coding frame of themes. Additionally, feelings words and behaviours applied in the group dynamics research conducted by Miller (2003) and Kiweewa et al. (2018) influenced the final compilation of feelings words used in the feelings wheel (see Table 3). Their studies were relevant because they were also based on Tuckman's research. These predetermined feelings words provided the basis for the thematic analysis of data collected from the feelings wheel in the questionnaire. Thematic analysis is a tool commonly used to collect and analyse data in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke 2006:78). The data collected from the initial questionnaire was compared to the data collected from the second questionnaire to identify any feelings or behavioural changes.

Results

Research stage 1

During the interviews, I took notes as we talked and highlighted the practices and processes that were recommended. Question 1 was completely open-ended, and the participants' responses formed the raw data.

I'd like you to think back on your experiences with nonviolent direct-action training. Did any of the techniques seem useful for fostering cohesion and/or resilience in groups? Which ones would you recommend?

The table below is a complete list of the practices and processes suggested by participants during their interviews. Informal socialising, consensus decision making, and personal narrative are examples from over thirty suggested cohesion fostering practices and processes gathered from the activist participants. Some of the more popular practices suggested were group member support, active listening, conscious inclusion and respect. Table 5 below gives a

breakdown of the practices and processes suggested by my interviewees, and the number of them who suggested each method.

Table 5. Cohesion fostering practices and processes suggested by interviewees

Cohesion fostering practices and processes	Number of suggesters
Consensus decision-making	6
Affinity Groups	5
Informal socialising	5
Roleplay/spectrum exercises/trust games (not themselves but the practice learned within)	5
Swapping stories/personal narrative/stories of self	3
Learning together/working together	3
Introductions/check ins/ understanding others' motivations for being there	2
Buddy up	2
Police liaison	2
Group code of conduct/shared agreement/collective understanding	2
Facilitation skills	2
Group member support	1
Emotional welfare	1
Active listening	1
Communication	1
Conscious inclusion	1
Respect/non-hierarchal	1
Egalitarian	1
Fishbowl ⁸	1
Step up-step down ⁹	1
Community of selves	1
Naming the ghost ¹⁰	1

⁸ A process where group members observe the functioning of their group. Some group members sit in an inner circle conducting normal business whilst others sit in an outer circle observing the groups behaviour and issues of group process

⁹ A practice where group members step into leadership positions when needed and then step back to allow others to lead

¹⁰ A practice of naming the unspoken feelings or events that haven't been raised because some in the group may think it will cause upset or conflict in the group (Ochre 2013:47)

1 participant didn't think fostering cohesion was the focus of NVDA training and could not directly relate the training to group cohesion building.	
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1 participant was purposely excluded because of phone connection problems during interview.	
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Research stage 2

The initial questionnaire undertaken prior to the intervention provided a baseline of each participant's feelings and observable behavioural themes. The questionnaire had two sections: a feelings wheel and free text responses. In Table 3, the column on the far right titled *words for stage 2 intervention*, shows a list of words that were built into a feelings wheel and categorised to represent the storming, norming and performing words. Themes of feelings identified by the respondents in both questionnaires were compared and any differences were noted (see Table 6). Table 6 is an extract of the original data showing the results of scenario 1 and shows a comparison of the responses between the first and second questionnaires. As an example, the feelings wheel data from the first questionnaires were compared with the post intervention questionnaires. Similarly, the free text responses from the first questionnaires were compared with the free text responses from the post intervention questionnaires.

Example – Participant A – Scenario 1 – first questionnaire

Scenario 1

You belong to an activist group that is in the process of deciding on your group's foundational values that will be included in the organisation's constitution. The debate is getting heated, and Kia starts to criticise your ideas and opinions.

In response to scenario 1 in questionnaire 1 prior to participating in the stories of self workshop, Participant A marked down the following Storming feelings on the feelings wheel: *inadequate, stupid, frustrated, irritated, discouraged, insignificant, weak, anxious, angry, hurt* and the Norming feeling of *thoughtful*. These are the feelings participant A associated with scenario 1. You can see this represented in Table 6: participant A identified ten storming feelings, one norming feeling and no performing feelings.

Following is Participant A's written response in questionnaire 1 to the question *please explain your feelings if you can*

I guess it would depend a bit on what I already thought/know about Kia. If I respected/admired her and thought her very intelligent, I would feel that I must be wrong in my ideas. This would lead to feeling embarrassed, stupid, alone, anxious etc. It would make me doubt my opinions and this would be uncomfortable. On the other hand, it might also depend on how strongly I felt

about my opinions. If I know I hadn't thought them through very well, I would wish I had kept my mouth shut – so again feeling wrong and stupid. If I didn't respect Kia all this would be different.

Example – Participant A – Scenario 1 – second questionnaire

In response to scenario 1 in the second questionnaire (post intervention), participant A marked down the following Storming feelings on the feelings wheel: *frustrated, anxious*. As well, participant marked down the following Norming feelings: *relaxed, thoughtful, hopeful, trusting*, and these Performing feelings: *confident, responsive, creative, energetic*. These are the feelings participant A associated with scenario 1 post interaction.

Following is Participant A's written response in the free text section of the questionnaire to the question *please explain your feelings if you can*

I am really surprised at my change of feelings for this scenario. Somehow (obviously through the workshop and this process) the possibility of experiencing Kia's opposition to my ideas as an opportunity rather than a threat. In the first questionnaire I focused on the "things are getting heated" but this time I didn't so much. And even if I take that into account, I feel unthreatened by it.

As you can see by the written responses, the participant's feelings in response to scenario I has shifted, and the participant was feeling less threatened, more open, trusting and confident in the second questionnaire.

Table 6. Example of coding- scenario 1

Participant	Storming feeling themes			Norming feeling themes			Performing feeling themes		
	Q1	Q2	Difference	Q1	Q2	Difference	Q1	Q2	Difference
Participant A	10	2	-8	1	4	3	0	4	4
Participant B	5	1	-4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Participant C	6	5	-1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Participant D	7	9	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Participant E	4	3	-1	1	2	1	5	4	-1
Participant F	14	10	-4	0	1	1	1	0	1
Total	46	30	-16	2	7	5	7	9	4

Table 6 shows the different responses in scenario 1 from each participant between the first questionnaire they completed (Q1) and the second questionnaire they completed (Q2). When I compared the results, I found a

reduction in Storming feelings and behaviours and an increase in Norming and Performing feelings and behaviours.

Observations post the intervention for any changes to the group's dynamic were made during the participant group's monthly meeting held four days after the intervention and the completion of the first round of questionnaires. There were three possible outcome paths that could have eventuated after the intervention. These outcomes were anticipated as I undertook observations of the participant group's monthly meeting. Possible outcome 1: the interpersonal interactions between group members could have deteriorated into the group norms identified in a storming stage (research participants more disconnected, more hostile or defensive, experiencing friction). Possible outcome 2: interactions could have stayed the same as prior to intervention. Possible outcome 3: interactions could have improved: research participants could have become more engaged, more comfortable in expressing their opinions with the group, goal oriented, solutions discussed and acted upon as noted in the norming and performing stages. Due to the already identified level of cohesiveness of the participant group (between norming and performing), I was aware the potential impacts of the intervention (workshop) may have been subtle or difficult to observe. The following is an extract from my notes:

Overall, the research participants exhibited more confidence, organisation, self-assuredness and trust. Participant group members also displayed increased connection to the group and the broader movement the group is part of. Participants reluctant to take on new roles in the past volunteered more readily. Towards the end of the meeting, a group member reminded the group of a prior commitment to have a shared meal at the regular monthly meetings. All research participants showed heightened enthusiasm and commitment to this idea with generous offers of contribution.

Finally, data collected from the questionnaire, free text and observations were triangulated to offer a combined perspective of the impacts of the intervention. Individually, each data collection method showed only a small change to the group members' feelings and behaviour. However, combining the evaluation methods shows these data are sufficiently promising and creates a clearer picture of increased prosocial behavioural characteristics amongst the group members. Despite this outcome, concrete conclusions cannot be drawn that prove causation. Additional research would need to be pursued to provide more solid evidence that the personal narrative practice was the cause of the increased group cohesion.

Discussion

Several practical concerns underpinned this research project. Firstly, I wanted to assemble research that would support my and other activist groups to be

more cohesive. Additionally, I intended my research to help bridge the academic-activist divide by drawing upon Australian activists' contextual knowledge and applying this to my group in an action research setting.

The literature reviewed for this project was gathered from three key areas: group cohesion dynamics, group conflict dynamics and activist training manuals and texts. The group cohesion literature highlighted the mostly constructive aspects of cohesion in groups. As well, it drew attention to the reasons why prioritising cohesion practices and processes as an essential factor of group culture is important. Conflict management processes that have a pre-emptive and pragmatic approach were emphasised as a supportive feature to enhance group cohesion. Activist training manuals and texts revealed many cohesion fostering practices and processes that can be implemented to support activist group cohesion. My stage 1 research in this study reinforced the value of some of the techniques described in existing activist literature. The literature reviewed, along with the research conducted, has established the value of cohesion in groups and strongly supports an argument for the prioritising of cohesion as a group focus.

The purpose of the first stage of research was to gather information from NVDA trained activists of the practices and processes that foster group cohesion. The ten activists interviewed for the first stage of research identified many cohesion fostering practices and processes whilst undertaking NVDA training (see Table 5). When asked to name which NVDA techniques fostered cohesion in groups, only one participant said that they didn't think fostering cohesion was the focus of NVDA training. However, during the interview this participant recalled many techniques such as trust games, managing emotions and check ins which are considered cohesion building techniques. They also mentioned the strong bonds that were built with other participants during the training that still remain forty years later. Many of the other research participants in stage 1 believed the practices, processes and knowledge gained during NVDA training were cohesion building and were transferable to other groups they participated in. Additionally, one participant articulated that:

it was all the things that happened around the training that built cohesion – emotions welfare, buddy systems, eating together, sharing stories, going to the pub or sharing a meal after training. Or participating in creative stuff like painting a banner or writing a protest song – these activities fostered cohesion.

The detailed information shared in participant interviews identified many techniques that fostered cohesion and were consistent with the techniques established in literature reviewed for this research.

The purpose of the second stage of research was to test whether the personal narrative practice fostered cohesion in an activist group. The data analysed from the questionnaires, free text and observations showed a preliminary indication

of increased prosocial feelings and behaviours consistent with improved group cohesion according to the observable themes identified by Tuckman, Kiweewa et al. and Miller (see table 3). When there is a reduction in Storming and an increase in Norming and Performing feelings, this indicates a shift to more prosocial feelings and behaviours. The participants are moving away from divergent feelings and moving towards more cohering and productively cohesive feelings.

Understanding the structure of cohesion was identified as an important aspect when nurturing cohesive groups (see *Group dynamics research* section above). A group cohesion strategy that takes into account the five critical cohesion areas — *social, collective, emotional, structural and task* — should become a factor in the formation of a group's cultural structure. Group cohesion skills and knowledge, as well as practices and processes based on these five areas, would form the foundation of a proactive group cohesion approach. Intentionally prioritising cohesion as a group practice reinforces group member skills in interpersonal connection, which can improve group wellbeing and the effectiveness of the group as a whole.

Established as well as newly formed groups could develop and implement a cohesion strategy to underpin the resilience of their group and the wellbeing of the group members. The factors considered in a group cohesion strategy would pivot around five critical cohesion areas: *social, collective, emotional, structural and task*. Cohesion capabilities that support each of the critical cohesion areas would form the foundation of a proactive and pre-emptive group governance approach. Group members would be encouraged to be responsible for their level of contribution using constructive deliberative processes. Since much of our behaviour happens at an unconscious level, self-awareness through self-reflection techniques and being accountable for our own behaviour are important factors for group members and a significant factor in a group's cohesion strategy.

I think that, as activists, when we collectively imagine and practise prioritising group cohesion, we begin to collaboratively develop new skills that intentionally keep our groups connected, self-sustaining and resilient. This is a different kind of commitment to our group. It is a commitment to a regenerative culture, one that has intentionality and review in the design. This approach, I believe nurtures a whole group culture that embraces respect, self-responsibility and belonging as well as individual and whole group wellbeing and flourishing. No single tool or combination thereof is a panacea guaranteed to create collegial groups at all times. However, an activist group can actively and strategically focus on its cohesion by inculcating cohesion skills, knowledge, practices and processes.

Limitations

The methodological design for the study was a pilot. Other researchers may benefit from retesting or modifying the design. Some modifications to consider would include altering the wording and construction of the scenarios devised in the questionnaire. Removing the words that describe emotions as well as names that gender the actors in the scenarios may change the results. The reason for this suggestion is because several of the participants assumed a gender to the actors in the scenario. Feedback from these participants indicated they would have responded differently to the scenario if they had assumed a different gender.

The study was conducted in Australia and recruited a small sample size. Ten NVDA trained activists participated in the first stage and only one activist group participated in the second stage. Interviewing a higher number of participants located in other parts of Australia or the world may yield other practices and processes that foster cohesion in activist groups. Likewise, more conclusive outcomes may be arrived at if multiple activist groups take part in the intervention. Similarly, other conclusions may be drawn if the research was conducted over a longer time frame. Additionally, the underpinning framework for this study, Tuckman's Small Group Development Theory, should be reviewed as there may be more suitable choices available. Other insights and/or conclusions may be reached by applying a different group development theory to the methodological design.

Conclusion

To date, most of the published activist research focuses on the external factors that influence activist groups and the big picture implications of activist group work (Atkinson 2017:12). This research usually explores the impacts activists have on the political, social and environmental power structures and may include topics such as how activists can mobilise civil society to act on climate change (Gunningham 2018), how effective nonviolent protest is (Chenoweth & Stephan 2011), and the role humour can play in facilitating resistance (Sørensen 2014). I have argued there is value in researching the internal workings that can influence and have an impact on activist groups and their effectiveness. Developing research projects that prioritise the internal factors can provide information, knowledge and skills that support and/or strengthen our activist groups to be more effective, cohesive and stable. Activist research that focuses on group dynamics can be shared in activist group circles to support other groups to be more robust. This in turn, strengthens the social movements the activist groups are part of and the vital work they perform.

There are a variety of ways to go about conducting group dynamics research in activist groups. In my research on group cohesion, I devised a research methodology that provides an example of one way of exploring the group dynamics of activist groups. This research involved getting suggestions from

experienced activists and then designing an intervention to investigate one of their suggestions. My intervention involved testing the personal narrative practice. However, there are many other intervention design possibilities. Applying the action research method is one such way for activist groups to assess or review their group processes, governance and/or group culture to support their groups to be more robust and resilient. Attention is needed in order to produce rigorous research data. Research can potentially validate what we think we already know, offer ideas for new group practices, or has the potential to reveal that widely used and accepted practices are not as effective as believed. These shortcomings will only be revealed with further research. More research in the group dynamics of activist groups is needed to reveal the group practices and processes that are effective in supporting our groups to be more robust and cohesive.

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