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Stretching the Elastic: UK Peace Activists' Understandings of Social Change

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Abstract

While much research has been conducted on the antecedents and outcomes of activism, relatively lesser attention has been paid within social and political psychological research to the understandings of people themselves about their involvement in activism or the ways in which they conceptualise social change. Informed by social representations theory, we conducted interviews with UK peace activists, to examine how they made sense of social change dynamics in the context of their activism, and how the beliefs, opinions, and perceptions of other people (meta-representations) were implicated in these understandings. Three themes were developed using reflexive thematic analysis: (1) imagining and enacting an alternative; (2) impression management; and (3) refining the argument. Participants consistently oriented towards meta-representations of militarism in their activism, which was were consequential both for the ways in which activists communicated with and presented themselves to the public. This reflexive orientation was described as a barrier to social change but also a potential source of strength. Findings are discussed in relation to previous theoretical and empirical work.

Keywords

peace activism, meta-representations, social change, militarism

Non-Technical Summary

Background

In many countries across the world, militarism, defined as "an attitude and a set of institutions which regard war and the preparation for war as a desirable and normal social activity" (Mann, M. [1984]. Capitalism and militarism. In M. Shaw [Ed.], War, state, and society [pp. 25-46]. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 25), can be argued to have a consensual quality. In countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), military discourse is salient in everyday life and culture. Commemorative military occasions such as Remembrance Sunday are an important means through which citizens are reminded of their national identities (Billig, M. [1995]. Banal nationalism. SAGE). War metaphors are also common in the UK context. The 'Blitz spirit' discourse, a narrative created by politicians during World War II which emphasised the resolve and stoicism of the British public in the face of the Nazi threat, is mobilised to the present day, for example in media reportage on the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London (Kelsey, 2013, https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2012.707034). More recently, World War II discourse was a noticeable feature of those supporting the UK campaign to leave the European Union (Stratton, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2019.1633073).

Why was this study done?

In this study, we focused on the UK peace movement as a unique context in which to investigate activists' understandings of social change. The UK peace movement offers a unique context because it aims to counter a consensual or hegemonic representation of militarism which is linked to British national culture and identity. Thus, their activism seeks to query and

offer a different, polemical representation of militarism which may be counter to the hegemonic representation associated with British national identity. This study examines the following research questions: How do UK peace activists make sense of the dynamics of social change (how it happens), its characteristics (what it looks like), and possibilities (strategies, prospects for success) in the context of their activism? And how are the beliefs, opinions, and perceptions of other people implicated in these understandings?

What did the researchers do and find?

Ten individual interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of UK peace activists (6 male) affiliated with a diverse range of pacifist and anti-war organisations. The interviews were semi-structured, with the schedule covering the following topics: (1) current involvement in the peace movement, (2) motivations for involvement; (3) perceived importance and effectiveness of activism as well as aims for the future; (4) personal advantages and disadvantages associated with activism; (5) personal constructions of peace and war and (6) understandings of peace and war attributed to other groups in society. A reflexive thematic analysis showed that our participants conceptualised social change as occurring through (1) changes to the political system and (2) the provision of new spaces where critical thinking among the public could be developed. Participants characterised the public's perceptions of peace activists as often negative (mad, dangerous, or idealistic) and these perceptions affected how they reported trying to achieve social change, both in terms of how they framed their arguments and presented themselves to the public.

What do these findings mean?

The findings provide novel insight into the ways in which UK peace activists resist the status quo and reflect on their activities. Participants' understandings of social change encompassed both formal actions and prefigurative work, that is, through changes to the political system and through the provision and enactment of new narrative spaces and practices via their activism, respectively. Across the activists' accounts, there was a continual reflexive stance taken towards the perceptions of the public. These perspectives could work as barriers to social change (i.e., closing off dialogue) but awareness of these perspectives was also a source of strength as it provided participants insight into how to alter and refine their messaging in their attempts to achieve social change. These findings, while context-dependent, are a useful addition to the social and political psychological literature on activism.

Previous social and political psychological research on activism has focused extensively on its antecedents (e.g., Klandermans, 1984; Van Zomeren & Spears, 2009) and consequences (e.g., Blackwood & Louis, 2012; Vestergren, Drury, & Chiriac, 2017) as well as the perceptions which activists and non-activists have of each other (e.g., Bashir et al., 2013; Kutlaca et al., 2020), linking these perceptions to the (often negative) potential for activists to achieve social change. Comparatively lesser attention has been paid within social and political psychological research to the understandings of people themselves about their involvement in activism (e.g., Batel & Castro; 2015; Castro et al., 2017).

Social representations theory (Moscovici, 1961/1976) offers an account of the content of commonsense knowledge and the processes which give rise to it. It is also commonly described as a theory of modern social change (e.g., Howarth, 2006a; Wagner et al., 1999), providing a framework for understanding the trajectory from the consensuality of collective representations to the plurality and fragmentation which characterises the social representations of the modern era. A core component of social representations are meta-representations, which reflect the perceptions and construals of *other people*, their beliefs and opinions (e.g., Elcheroth et al., 2011; Gillespie, 2008, 2020), and a developing line of empirical work demonstrates the significance of meta-representations for political behaviour (e.g., O'Dwyer et al., 2016; Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016; Obradović & Draper, 2022). Social representations theory thus provides a lens with which to understand activism: active minorities participate in social change through their attempts to displace commonsense understandings associated with the majority, and their engagement with meta-representations seems likely to play a key role.

However, few studies have explored how activists reflect on their attempts to influence social change. How do they make sense of the *dynamics* of social change (how it happens), its *characteristics* (what it looks like), and *possibilities* (strategies, prospects for success) in the context of their activism? And how are the beliefs, opinions, and perceptions of other people (meta-representations) implicated in these understandings? The present study applies a social represen-

tations lens to examine these questions in the context of peace activism in the United Kingdom (UK), chosen because of its aim to dismantle and replace a hegemonic social representation of militarism, which we argue is inextricably linked to British national identity (e.g., Billig, 1995; Gee, 2014).

Social Representations, Meta-Representations, and Social Change

Social representations theory focuses on the content of common sense, and the processes which give rise to it. It is concerned with the interplay of individuals, groups, the media, civic and political actors, and institutions, in producing lay understandings and interpretations. It is concerned with the way in which these understandings are tied to existing value and belief systems (the process of *anchoring*), as well as how they are given an "iconic aspect" (Wagner & Hayes, 2005, p. 208) through, for example, the use of imagery and metaphor (the process of *objectification*). Since the development of the theory by Serge Moscovici in 1961, the theory has been usefully applied to elucidate the content and structure of socially shared understandings of diverse topics, including mental illness (Jodelet, 1989), organ donation (Moloney, Hall, & Walker, 2005), and the social construction of white Muslims (Amer & Howarth, 2018), among others. These are always *localised* understandings of social objects, tied to particular social, political, and historical contexts and to specific groups and their projects.

Social representations theory is also commonly described as a theory of modern social change (e.g., Howarth, 2006a; Wagner et al., 1999). Relevant here is the categorisation of social representations depending on the degree to which they are shared in a society, and the intergroup relations in which they are embedded (Moscovici, 1988). Hegemonic representations are shared by all members of a group and are coercive, akin to Durkheim's notion of collective representations. Emancipated representations denote the different representations used by subgroups in a society, which coexist. Finally, polemical representations are defined as "generated in the course of social conflict, social controversy, and society as a whole does not share them" (p. 221). Active minorities, for example activist groups, try to achieve social change by changing social representations – advancing polemical representations with the objective of supplanting coercive hegemonic social representations. The question of which representations 'win out' is one which is deeply influenced by power dynamics (Howarth, 2006a).

A core component of social representations are meta-representations, broadly defined here as "perceptions of what most others value or reject…along with beliefs regarding what relevant others know, think or intend to do more generally" (Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016, p. 662). They are *part of* a group's social representation of an object and have the potential to both threaten the group (by destabilising its social representation) and provide it with the discursive resources to resist this alternative representation, and develop counterarguments (Gillespie, 2008). Meta-representations are managed through the use of semantic barriers, defined as "communicative tools that play a crucial role in safeguarding one's own beliefs from the threat of alterity" (Obradović & Draper, 2022, p. 218). Several semantic barriers have been described (Gillespie, 2008; Sammut & Sartawi, 2012) which enable the alternative representation to be avoided, delegitimized, or its impact limited (Gillespie, 2020). For example, the semantic barrier of "prohibited thoughts" works to close down dialogue by constructing the representation as dangerous, while "stigma" is evident in how groups to which the meta-representation is linked are devalued and constructed as 'other' (Gillespie, 2008). However, importantly, exposure to meta-representations may also stimulate self-reflection – a process in which a social representation becomes the object rather than the medium of thought and action – which can itself drive social representational change (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015).

Recent empirical work has underscored the link between meta-representations and political behaviour. An experimental study conducted in a traditionally left-wing Parisian university found that manipulating perceived social norms about the far-right National Front party, specifically the belief that other students agreed with their policies, impacted willingness to participate in a workshop to discuss the party's polies (Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016). In Ireland, younger people's discussions of the foreign policy orientation of neutrality, in contrast to older participants, revealed an awareness of and orientation towards neutrality as commonly understood and practiced as hypocritical, partial, and equivocal (O'Dwyer et al., 2016). Furthermore, it was the recognition of these meta-representations which opened a space for younger participants to argue for alternative foreign policy positions or understandings of neutrality – either the practice of a 'fuller', less equivocal neutrality, or its abandonment. Similarly, an interview study with UK

residents who voted against the decision to leave the European Union (EU) demonstrated that, the way in which public opinion on 'Brexit' was constructed, was linked by participants to their preference for individual anti- 'Brexit' actions rather than collective action (O'Dwyer, 2020). These studies, taken together, demonstrate the significant ways in which meta-representations shape people's willingness to take political action, as well as their preferred modes of action.

A social representations framework foregrounds the essential dialogicality of the political sphere; it centres *communication* in the understanding of political action and social change dynamics. Political actors such as active minorities act on the basis of an audience, whether that is the silent majority or powerful groups in society, and the way in which actors orient to and communicate with their audiences may be central to the understanding of why and how social change takes place (Batel & Castro, 2015). Further, while other work has highlighted other people's perceptions as a *barrier* to the potential ability of activists to achieve social change (e.g., Bashir et al., 2013), this line of research suggests that activists' recognition of these perceptions offers the possibility of refining and sharpening their polemical social representations. We apply these theoretical concepts here to the question of how UK peace activists understand their attempts to influence social change in the context of countering a hegemonic social representation of militarism.

Militarism and National Identity: The UK Context

Militarism is defined here as "an attitude and a set of institutions which regard war and the preparation for war as a desirable and normal social activity" (Mann, 1984, p. 25). To use the distinction described by Howarth (2006b), it can be considered a *social* as well as an individual attitude, embedded in the institutional and political structures of nations, as well as intertwined with their cultural and educational practices. Indeed, Bernazzoli and Flint (2009) contend that the distinction between military and civilian society is often an artificial one; militarism locates itself in everyday life in multiple, sometimes unnoticeable, ways, for example in education and popular culture. The social representation of militarism can thus be said to have a consensual quality in many societies (Hewer, 2012). This can partly be explained through its inextricable and dynamic link with national identity. Bloom (1990) states that there is no greater motivator for the promotion of national identity than international conflict, risk of war, and collective memories of war. War enhances national identity through the creation of a threatening 'other' and unites the nation against it. By derogating this 'other', perhaps in the form of dehumanising 'them', it can serve to heighten the positive distinctiveness of national identity (e.g., Hamley et al., 2020; Viki & Calitri, 2008). Further, the relationship between war and national identity is dynamic, with experiences of war and military intervention also contributing to the national identity *content* (e.g., O'Dwyer et al., 2016).

In the UK, as in many countries, militarism is rendered banal and reproduced in everyday life, for example in popular culture and sport (e.g., Gee, 2014; Kelly, 2023). Commemorative military occasions such as Remembrance Sunday are an important means through which citizens are reminded of their national identities (Billig, 1995). War metaphors are also common in the UK context. The 'Blitz spirit' discourse, a narrative created by politicians during World War II which emphasised the resolve and stoicism of the British public in the face of the Nazi threat, is mobilised to the present day, for example in media reportage on the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London (Kelsey, 2013). More recently, World War II discourse was a noticeable feature of those supporting the UK campaign to leave the European Union (Stratton, 2019). Thus, we contend that militarism is part and parcel of everyday life in the UK and is bound up with constructions of and belonging to the national group. In this context then, peace activists work to advance an alternative representation of militarism, which may be resisted due to its link to national identity.

UK Peace Activism

While there is a wealth of research on predictors of attitudes towards war and militarism (e.g., Cohrs et al., 2005; Musgrove & McGarty, 2008), there is a limited amount of (particularly current) research on the specific issue of peace activism. Antecedents of involvement in peace activism have been identified in the literature, including high priority of the value of universalism (Mayton & Furnham, 1994), higher levels of education, activist identification and networks, specific foreign policy attitudes, and a positive view on the efficacy of protest (Swank & Fahs, 2011). Relevant qualitative work has investigated the mobilisation of identity in the talk of US peace activists (Hunt & Benford, 1994) or the ways in which Italian peace activists and non-activists represented war and peace (Sarrica & Contarello, 2004). Using social

representations theory, an analysis of word association data revealed that peace activists tended to represent war in terms of the steps needed to counter it, while non-activists viewed it as something tragic and inevitable, which gave rise to feelings of despondency (Sarrica & Contarello, 2004).

In the UK, there are over seventy organisations affiliated with the Network for Peace, which seeks to coordinate the actions of national organisations working towards 'peace, disarmament, or similar' (Network for Peace, n.d.). It is a heterogenous movement. Affiliated organisations differ in terms of the extent to which they identify as pacifist, are opposed to specific conflicts, are linked to political parties, feminist, or religious organisations, are loosely connected or centrally organised, possess a domestic or international outlook, and have either a specific and particular objective (e.g., Campaign against the Arms Trade) or a broader anti-war goal (e.g., pacifist organisations) (Pickerill & Webster, 2006). However, we argue that they are united in terms of their contestation of a hegemonic social representation of militarism (or aspects of it) in UK society.

The Present Study

In this study, we focused on the UK peace movement as a unique context in which to investigate activists' understandings of social change and their participation in it. The UK peace movement, we contend, offered a unique context because it works to counter a hegemonic social representation of militarism which is tightly linked to British national culture and identity. We adopted a social representations approach (e.g., Elcheroth et al., 2011; Gillespie, 2008, 2020) to examine the following research questions: How do UK peace activists make sense of the *dynamics* of social change (how it happens), its *characteristics* (what it looks like), and *possibilities* (strategies, prospects for success) in the context of their activism? And how are the beliefs, opinions, and perceptions of other people (meta-representations) implicated in these understandings? To examine these issues, we conducted ten individual interviews with UK peace activists.

Method

Participants

We interviewed ten participants (6 male) in the Greater London area between March and August 2015. Participants were affiliated with a diverse range of pacifist and anti-war organisations, both religious and secular. While the sample was a convenience sample, the groups included in the study represented a wide range of pacifist and anti-war organisations, both religious and secular, characteristic of the diversity of the UK peace movement more broadly (Pickerill & Webster, 2006). Reflecting the demographic of the peace movement in the UK, participants tended to be older, with many being long-standing members of organisations that were founded in the 1970s or 1980s. Thus, for the most part, older participants had been involved in activism for a longer period of time. Participant information is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Religious/Secular Organisation
Anne	50-60	Religious
Astha	50-60	Religious
Gabriel	30-40	Religious
James	70-80	Secular
Jennifer	20-30	Religious
Kate	40-50	Secular
Sarah	60-70	Religious
Simon	60-70	Secular
Thomas	60-70	Secular
William	70-80	Religious

The majority of participants mentioned that they were affiliated with a range of different organisations in the interviews, not just one specific anti-war organisation: if *any* of their affiliations were religious in nature, this was specified in the table. All religious affiliations mentioned by participants were Quaker, Catholic, or Church of England.

Procedure

A convenience sample of participants was recruited to the study through email contact with a wide range of UK pacifist and anti-war organisations identified on the Network for Peace website (Network for Peace, n.d.). Interviews were conducted in public spaces or workplaces, according to participants' preferences. All interviews were conducted by the first author. They lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded. The interviews were semi-structured, with the schedule covering the following topics: (1) current involvement in the peace movement, (2) motivations for involvement; (3) perceived importance and effectiveness of activism as well as aims for the future; (4) personal advantages and disadvantages associated with activism; (5) personal constructions of peace and war and (6) perceptions of other groups' beliefs and opinions about peace and war. The study received a favourable ethical opinion from the ethics committee of the first author's university.

Analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by both authors using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018). We adopted a primarily inductive approach to the data with a critical realist epistemological position (Bhaskar, 1975; Fletcher, 2017). The process of thematic analysis comprises of three steps (1) initial coding of data; (2) development and labelling of themes from codes of similar meaning; and (3) review of themes to ensure distinctiveness and finally providing a description and detailed analysis. As there were two analysts, the process was more complex and iterative. Both authors were responsible for the initial coding of five transcripts each, guided by the research questions. After we had coded one transcript each, we met to discuss the codes, and subsequently swapped transcripts, adding further codes until no more could be generated for the transcript. This process of meeting to discuss codes and then reviewing the other's transcript continued for each pair of transcripts. After the initial coding stage, we reviewed the generated codes and discarded, split, or merged them through discussion. Following this, we visually displayed the codes on a large board and sorted them on the basis of shared meaning to form sub-themes. Jointly, we then reviewed these sub-themes and organised them into more abstract themes. The first author was primarily responsible for the detailed description and interpretation of the themes produced in the final stage of the analysis.

Results

The analysis resulted in the development of three themes, which related to participants' understandings of the process of social change – (1) *imagining and enacting an alternative*, (2) *impression management*, and (3) *refining the argument*. The thematic structure is depicted in Table 2. Each of these themes spoke to the ways in which activists described the process of social change, in terms of the strategies and arguments employed as well as possibilities offered in the current social and political context. The first theme – *imagining and enacting an alternative* – related to participants' views about the process of social change in the context of their activism – its drivers, facilitators, and characteristics. The latter themes – *impression management* and *refining the argument* – referred to the complex interpersonal and discursive negotiations and strategies in which activists engaged to try to achieve social change. Each of these themes will now be discussed in turn.

Table 2

Thematic Structure

Codes	Sub-themes	Themes
• Traditional channels of political influence • Addressing root causes • Creating new narrative spaces • Responding to change • A slow process • Social change through critical thinking • Importance of being strategic	*Drivers and facilitators* *Characteristics*	**1. Imagining and enacting alternative** "…how we commemorate war and how we look at the alternative stories of the First and Second World War, and the stories of conscientious objections, peace movements at the time…" (Anne)
• Threatening • Deluded idealists • Projecting a positive image • Moderation or extremism	*Negative representations of peace activism* *Countering the negative perception of peace activism*	**2. Impression management** "I think a lot of people see activists as nutcases, so, and, and actually, when I look at us sometimes, um, some of my more extreme, I think, oh, gosh, you know, did you have to wear that?" (Sarah)
• Carefully devised arguments • Emphasise cost of wars • A prepared alternative message • What would you do about X? • 'Clear-cut' cases for military action and self-defence • Difficulty of reconciling peace with personal experiences	*Rhetorical readiness* *Responding to rhetorical commonplaces*	**3. Refining the argument** "Well like, for example, when we talk about a deterrent, that sounds really neutral. When you talk about airstrikes, that doesn't say like, well, we're bombing towns" (Jennifer)

Imagining and Enacting an Alternative

This theme provided insight into participants' understandings of the *drivers and facilitators* of social change in the context of the peace movement, as well as their views on its *characteristics*. Social change was described as a *slow process* - people needed time to consider and process alternative messages, and *critical thinking*, considered essential for social change, also took time to develop. While participants were frequently pessimistic about the prospect of success in the short-term, they were able to imagine and describe an alternative, more peaceful society in the medium to long-term future, and described actions that could contribute to its realisation.

In terms of drivers and facilitators of social change, participants mentioned the necessity of using *traditional channels of political influence* to achieve their aims, for example through "intense lobbying" (Kate), and "people sending letters and writing petitions" (Jennifer). However, participants also described more fundamental strategies. They first emphasised the importance of taking a broader perspective on peace by addressing the *root causes* of militarism. Participants were frequently concerned with tackling issues such as the arms industry, which was seen to sustain and promote wars and militarism in society. Addressing these more fundamental issues, in addition to protesting about individual wars and conflicts, was perceived to be particularly effective: "It's more important to put effort into fixing root causes of things because it's, it's more efficient in terms of the amount of change you get" (Simon). This pragmatic position reflects a representation of militarism as multi-layered, with structural issues causing more specific and localised problems in society.

Participants also discussed the importance of *creating new narrative spaces* as a driver of social change. This encompassed the necessity of making people aware of possible alternative futures, different ways of doing things, and the benefit of stimulating debate about peace-related issues in and of itself. Related to this was a conceptualisation of social change as coming about by dialogue and encourage *critical thinking* about war and peace. Anne described the work done by her organisation:

> And the key issues would be um, sort of the challenging militarism in our culture, so it would be looking at things like challenging the arms trade, raising awareness around that. Looking at nuclear issues, and nuclear weapons policy issues in relation to our government. Um, looking now in recent years at um, how we commemorate war and how we look at the alternative stories of the First and Second World War, and the stories of conscientious objections, peace movements at the time…

The work of her organisation, and those of organisations with which other participants were affiliated, centred on "surfacing" (Anne) militarism, exposing its consensual nature in UK society, and stimulating debate about this. By creating new spaces, questions could be asked about the appropriateness of military recruitment in schools, or the sponsorship of cultural events by arms manufacturers, for example. For the general public, war and militarism were "a nice thing to forget about" (Simon), thus a primary task of the peace movement, and a key strategy for social change, was to confront people with these difficult issues and through this, facilitate the critical thinking necessary for change. A mark of success on this criterion could then be "Um, one, one person stopping by a stall and saying, cor (sic), I've never thought about that, you know?" (Gabriel). Social change was conceptualised as possible within the context of interpersonal encounters, which reinforced its characterisation as a slow process.

Participants identified a further key facilitator of social change, which was *responding to changes* in public opinion, which were often precipitated by social and political events. Political events, which were widely perceived as negative (e.g., the Iraq war), were often viewed as beneficial to the work of the peace movement, having a direct impact on its work through increased membership, or else sufficiently changing the 'public mood' to make it more receptive to its messaging. On the first consequence, Simon described the disproportionate influence of negative events on public opinion and its capacity to effect change:

> Sometimes I feel like a friend that I had at school who was a communist and was very keen to hasten the revolution so he never left a tip in the café because he wanted the working class to be as discontented as possible…if you look back, um, you find that some decisions have been made because things got so bad that finally, um, everybody agreed that something had to be done and often it's a good idea not actually to encourage people to paper over the cracks, um, but to encourage things to get worse and worse and then the general public can be taken along with your, your view of what needs to be done.

Here, social change is more likely to occur when the situation has "got so bad" that it is impossible to ignore. Simon contrasts the role of the responsible citizen, in the short-term, who would "paper over the cracks", with that of the activist who recognises the way in which this plays into the maintenance of the status quo. By allowing things to deteriorate, the public "can then be taken along". While not inviting negative events, Simon nevertheless recognises the positive consequences they may have for social change. Thus, for the committed activist in pursuit of long-term objectives, doing nothing may sometimes be as or more effective than trying to influence matters. This points to an interesting tension between action and the status quo in activist understandings of their work.

Many participants constructed particular disastrous wars as having had a significant effect on the 'public mood', which in turn made people more open to the messages of the peace movement. James stated that in the UK there had been "a public loss of faith in wars, foreign wars, being involved in foreign wars". Anne elaborated further:

> Even on you know, obviously those explicit experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq, and then Iraq again, and um, I think those experiences definitely, um, and I think things like you know, I think people are beginning to see behind things like the hypocrisy of the arms trade and arms industry, and I think they… you know the whole thing of the shift of the Cold War in relation to unleashing nuclear weapons. I think the argumentation, governments tend to work harder at defending our need to have an independent nuclear deterrent, because I think the public are a bit more critical now.

These particular negative experiences of past wars had led to more questioning among the public about issues related to militarism ("the public are a bit more critical now"), as well as to the greater effort which politicians were having to expend in order to ensure the public's support, in this example in relation to the debate at the time about the renewal of Trident, the UK's nuclear defence system. Even when ostensibly negative, social and political events were constructed as being potentially helpful to the work of the peace movement. These events are constructed here as having resulted in more critical thinking among the public in relation to hegemonic representations of militarism.

Impression Management

This theme referred to the complex interpersonal negotiations in which activists reported engaging to try to influence the public. Participants' descriptions of their interactions with the public as part of their activism indicated that the public used semantic barriers in order to shut down dialogue with their polemical representation of militarism (Gillespie, 2008). The use of two semantic barriers – prohibited thoughts and stigma – was apparent in the ways in which participants described how they viewed others to perceive peace activists (e.g., as mad, idealistic, or dangerous). Consequently, participants needed to continually orient towards these meta-representations in their activism. However, from their accounts it also appeared that participants were grappling with a dilemma – attempting to convince the public to engage with their polemical social representation of militarism in a way that did not dilute their radical anti-war or pacifist position.

Participants spoke about their involvement in activism in ways that suggested sensitivity to the perceptions that other people (the public, politicians) had about peace activists, as well as to the beliefs and opinions of these groups about war and peace. These perceptions were described as not flattering. Participants described two frequent types of interaction which they experienced with the public. On the one hand, activists reported being characterised as *threatening* to the current social and political system, and that their attempts at persuasion were vehemently rejected. On the other hand, participants spoke about the public simultaneously endorsing their arguments *and* dismissing them as *deluded idealists*. The following statement typifies this mixed reaction:

> I talk to the police liaison officers, um, I think they think we're nuts because they just have ordinary jobs, they've got a family and if they had a free afternoon they would go fishing or they'd go to a football match or something, they wouldn't be out pointlessly waving banners. Um, so I think that's probably how they see us; some of them, I think, think, think we're doing a good job, that they wouldn't do it themselves but are happy to see us, um, doing it. Um, and obviously the ones who disagree, um, they think we're spoiling things, we're, um, reducing the possibility of making money from selling arms and so on. Um, and the ones who are genuinely scared think, think we need a nuclear deterrent and think, and, and wish that CND (*Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament)* would keep quiet because...we would actually be physically in danger in some way in this country if we got rid of our nuclear deterrent, I think there are people who seriously think that and that the peace movement are, are increasing the possibility that this might happen, and, and I just don't see it at all. (Simon)

Those who advocate for peace believe that they are constructed by others as either out of touch with ('nuts'), or fundamentally threatening to the existence and economic viability of the country ('wish that CND would keep quiet'). These perceptions were accompanied by often negative responses, including hostility: "somebody will come up to you and say something, you know, like, um, 'you are absolutely ridiculous, live in the real world" (Sarah). Similarly, Gabriel described an awkward situation in which he voiced opposition to the decision taken by an organisation, with which he was involved, to donate to a campaign which aimed to erect a statue to commemorate "a military hero". While some agreed with his position, others "were incredibly rude". Importantly he constructed this sort of reaction as affecting his continued willingness to speak out: "and those kinds of experiences can make it quite difficult to, to keep speaking out". The other type of public reaction reported by participants was disinterest. The public was characterised as uninformed and switched off to debates around militarism and war.

We interpret these perceptions as indicative of the mobilisation of semantic barriers – particularly stigma and prohibited thoughts – by the public when confronted with peace activists' polemical representations of militarism. These strategies enable the public to avoid dialogue with the polemical social representation of the peace movement, mitigating the threat to their understandings and identity. And, as seen with the example of Gabriel above, this resistance to the polemical representation via the use of semantic barriers may also influence the activists' willingness to continue to try to achieve social change through their activism.

Nevertheless, participants' orientation towards these meta-representations led them to discuss ways of mitigating or managing them. A number of different strategies were reported, all of which tended to revolve around *projecting a positive image*. One concerned the necessity of appearing 'normal' when interacting with the public:

> …I think a lot of people see activists as nutcases, so, and, and actually, when I look at us sometimes, um, some of my more extreme, I think, oh, gosh, you know, did you have to wear that... because, you know, we're just going to look ridiculous. You know, we have to look reasonably intelligent, I think, but if you're going to have sort of great knitted nonsense all over the place, hats, you're going to look like idiots. (Sarah)

In this statement, Sarah constructs social influence as contingent on the extent to which other people are able to identify with you. To persuade, one must appear "reasonably intelligent' so as to counter the stereotype of "nutcases" disconnected from political reality. The credibility of active minorities and the polemical representation they advance needs to be established and wearing "great knitted nonsense" is constructed here as not being particularly helpful in this respect.

However, by attempting to appear 'normal' and unthreatening to regular people and their concerns, this led to the question of whether, through this attempt, the inherently radical and destabilising polemical social representation of the peace movement might be diluted. Thomas described this dilemma of choosing between *moderation or extremism* eloquently:

> But there are arguments for, for taking the extremist view in any case because it alters the parameters of the debate, you know. If you've got people saying should be big wars, little wars, not so many wars, the sensible middle ground is medium-sized wars...it stretches the spectrum and it moves where the middle ground is. It alters the total parameter of the debate. Now, you've got to be careful, there are particular situations if you pull the elastic too far it snaps and then people take no notice of what you, of you whatsoever.

Thomas characterises the 'extremist view' as the logical position to take in the context of countering militarism. Occupying the 'sensible middle ground' on this issue is constructed here as akin to supporting militarism and thus the only positive position to take on these issues is unequivocal rejection. Contrarily, this 'logical' 'extremist' view must be tempered by some sort of regard for the way in which these sorts of positions might be received by the public, i.e., an orientation towards meta-representations. Otherwise, there is little capacity for influence ("people take no notice…of you whatsoever"), and by extension social change.

The dilemma illustrated above problematizes the notion of projecting a positive image of peace activists by querying its potential to achieve any sort of meaningful social or political change. For a realistic prospect of success, should peace activists try to position themselves as moderate, as people with whom the public can identify, or should they maintain an outsider, deviant position, as "troublemakers" (Thomas)? It remains an open question here as to which strategy has the most potential to influence social change.

Refining the Argument

Participants frequently discussed the need to develop and utilise effective counterarguments to encourage dialogue with their polemical representation of militarism. Activists needed to have *carefully devised arguments* which would challenge existing assumptions and these arguments needed to possess a number of characteristics. First, they needed to be tangible and pragmatic, rather than abstract and idealistic. This appeared to be related to the motivation discussed above, to appear 'normal' to the public in order to offset negative perceptions of peace activists. Some participants spoke about *emphasising the cost of wars* in order to foster more war-critical attitudes. For example, Jennifer discussed a direct action in which she had participated, which involved cycling past one of the organisations which operated Trident. The protesters decided to make another stop, at a hospital:

> So they stopped at Ealing Hospital. Um, whose maternity unit is likely to be shut down and so we were really trying to make, trying to make links between the people who were suffering because the government cuts and the hundred billion pounds being spent on Trident.

In a context of economic hardship and austerity, the economic argument was perceived to be effective "because that chimes with the…public mood" (James). However, like the tension between taking a radical or moderate position which was discussed previously, this line of argument might also be problematic. James posited that the use of economic arguments to counter nuclear weapons might imply to some that their use would be acceptable if the national economic situation were improved. In that sense, such arguments might detract from the fundamental *moral* or ideological problems with nuclear weapons.

Second, messages and arguments needed to be specific and clear. For example, participants frequently mentioned the need to be prepared to respond specifically to particular *rhetorical commonplaces* that they encountered. These were often questions of the '*What would you do about (X)?*' variety. Gabriel stated that he had "stock answers" for these questions due to the frequency with which they were encountered, in which apparently '*clear-cut' cases for military action and self-defence* were outlined. William gave more specific details on this:

> …very often they start off with Hitler?…Um, you know, what would I do about it? So anyway, there are lots of um, techniques of non-violent conflict resolution, but I've begun to realise that there isn't a book that I could... or a booklet even... that I could say, here you are, we've thought about it carefully and looked up all the sources, there are lots of people who've done work on non-violent conflict resolution, it needs to be tied together somehow.

However, being prepared with counterarguments was described as limited in particular circumstances, particularly where there was a difficulty of *reconciling peace with personal experiences*, as Sarah's statement typifies:

> "…a Syrian came up to me, he said, you know, I can see that you, you don't want to have, uh, arms, um, and it was against, um, using air strikes in Syria, and, um, he said, but what are you going to do?"

When participants reported encountering individuals with lived experience of war, stock counterarguments were more difficult to mobilise, as Sarah later reported responding to the Syrian man, "I don't know what to say, really, but that's my belief system".

Nevertheless, participants emphasised the importance of being prepared to counter such questions with coherent and specific answers. There needed to be a *prepared alternative message*, which specified different ways in which conflict might be addressed, rather than abstract ideals that were unlikely to resonate with people's lives. William acknowledges that such a comprehensive and specific alternative might not be readily accessible to activists, and more needed to be done in this respect ("it needs to be tied together somehow").

Discussion

Participants' reflections on their involvement in peace activism revealed the complexity and difficulty of their endeavours to achieve social change. Social change was constructed as a slow and gradual process, because of the necessity to change individual attitudes through the facilitation of critical thinking within close interpersonal contexts. Participants were alert to the power of language and framing to win arguments and persuade people, and aware of the necessity of refining their message in the optimal way (e.g., by emphasising the cost of war). However, they also clearly and consistently oriented towards meta-representations in their activism and reported encountering the public's use of semantic barriers – most salient here was the way in which they perceived other people and groups in society to view peace activists as mad, idealistic, and dangerous. The analysis suggests that these negative perceptions had a two-fold negative effect on the potential to achieve social change, by closing down opportunities for dialogue with the public, and also by demotivating activists themselves.

Participants' understanding of social change as a slow process dependent on interpersonal communication links with previous work on meta-representations and social change (e.g., Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015). Particularly, participants' talk about the process of social change emphasised the importance of facilitating self-reflection in relation to the hegemonic social representation of militarism, which was described as banal, as something about which the public would prefer to forget. Participants characterised their activism as 'surfacing' this hegemonic social representation exposing its embeddedness within social and cultural practices (Bernazzoli & Flint, 2009) in order to stimulate joint consideration of both the hegemonic and polemical representation (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015).

Social change was explicitly linked to the facilitation of self-reflection, however our analysis pointed towards ambivalence in terms of how best to encourage this process. Tensions were evident, between 'moderation' and 'extremism', as well as the use of pragmatic (e.g., economic) and abstract arguments to convince the public. On the first tension, Castro and colleagues' (2017) study of climate change activists identified a similar process, in that they reported the strategic use of more moderate argumentative strategies in their attempts to achieve quite radical social change, in order to offset negative perceptions, particularly to avoid being perceived as uncooperative. Relatedly, a qualitative analysis of website material and interviews with members of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (a direct-action anti-whaling organisation) suggested that the group's adoption of the radical 'pirate' identity positioned them as being uniquely passionate about stopping whaling, but also had negative consequences for achieving social change, as their controversial methods could be viewed as their distinguishing feature (Stuart et al., 2013). Being radical, and espousing radical methods, the authors suggested, might only then be effective at achieving change when 'moderate' aligned groups which conform to social norms are able to translate the attention the radical group has attracted to the issue, to achieve actual social change (Piven & Cloward, 1977). It is plausible that this could also be the case with UK peace activists, as more moderate groups might be able to side-step the negative perceptions of peace activists and, as a consequence, their arguments might meet a more receptive audience.

Our findings clearly show that the relationship between adopting a radical/moderate position and social change is not straight-forward. However, it is also worth noting here that a focus on the 'efficacy' of peace activism may be slightly misleading. Our findings suggested that the participants were engaged in a process whereby they were describing as well as *enacting* their polemical representation of militarism in dialogue with the public. Their work was clearly prefigurative (e.g., Holloway, 2010; Trott, 2016) in that the *means to achieve change* was also a concern for our participants. Their attempts to provide narrative spaces where difficult questions in relation to militarism could be raised, was clearly one way of enacting this alternative peaceful and demilitarised future. Future research could further explore the ways in which peace activism seeks to prefigure *as well as* bring about social change through traditional routes such as policy changes – the organisational and structural dynamics of activist organisations would be particularly important to focus on here.

Our analysis provides rich qualitative detail on the process by which UK peace activists orient towards meta-representations in order to achieve social change. In line with previous work (Gillespie, 2008; O'Dwyer, 2020), this orientation forced reflection on the preferred type and extent of political action. The awareness of meta-representations of militarism (e.g., war is necessary, particularly in cases of extreme despotism) enabled participants to refine their arguments, to be simultaneously aware of and prepared for the common questions that the public would likely ask. Similarly, it motivated participants to frame their messages in ways that resonated with the economic concerns of the public, rather than lofty pacifist principles. The analysis also suggested that peace activists' attempts to advance their polemical representation of war and militarism came up against the public's use of semantic barriers (particularly stigma and prohibited thoughts) (Gillespie, 2008; Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015); the use of these semantic barriers, we argued, underpinned the stigmatising perceptions which the activists attributed to the public about themselves (e.g., as mad, or dangerous). However, as with the acknowledgement of meta-representations, detailed above, our participants' understanding of these semantic barriers and the associated negative perceptions, appeared to have an empowering effect, particularly to motivate activists to mitigate these negative perceptions by appearing 'normal' in some way. Contrarily, these perceptions sometimes negatively affected affect the willingness of activists to continue to engage in peace activism. These findings, taken together, provide a direct window into the relevance of considerations of meta-representations on how political actors working towards social change, actually view this process playing out. Our study extends this line of research by evidencing the way in which activists' understandings of social change

were dynamically related to considerations of meta-representations, which consequently affect both the willingness of activists to engage politically as well as influence the strategies that they employ in order to effect change.

The analysis showed that participants reported a range of negative responses from the UK public, from hostility to ridicule. We have already interpreted these stigmatising responses as indicative of the public's deployment of semantic barriers to limit dialogue with the peace movement's polemical representation. Additionally, we argued that this finding gives weight to our conceptualisation of militarism as intimately bound up with British national identity (e.g., Billig, 1995). Social representations are inextricably linked to identity processes (Breakwell, 1993) therefore a threat to the social representation of militarism could have been perceived as a threat to British national identity. Thus, the use of semantic barriers can also be seen as a way of managing identity threat (Breakwell, 1986). The public's negative responses to peace activists might also be influenced by negative perceptions of activists more generally e.g., as militant, and eccentric, with more unfavourable reactions elicited from the public the more dedication activists demonstrated (Bashir et al., 2013). This is supported by the finding that one of the key strategies reported by participants to offset the negative representations of peace activists was to appear 'normal' in their interactions with the public. This strategy may then have had a two-fold effect: (1) to offset the identity threats that the polemical representation of militarism posed and (2) to allow activists to disassociate from negative representations of the 'typical'' activist.

Notwithstanding the many likely differences between peace activism and other types of activism, as well as between the UK context and others, our analysis suggests a number of implications for activists and groups which attempt to bring about social change. Firstly, as in the current study, activists may encounter negative perceptions and hostility: this is likely to be underpinned by resistance to the destabilising potential of the polemical representation which they advance. Activists should continue to attempt to find opportunities to encourage self-reflection, during which the polemical representation and the hegemonic social representation can be jointly considered. Our participants described self-reflection as possible within interpersonal encounters, therefore activists should attempt to foreground this in their activities. Consideration should be paid to the question of how to make this possible in online spaces. Secondly, we cautiously suggest that activists focus to a lesser extent on judgements of efficacy in formal terms (e.g., the law was changed) but also consider the role of their social practices in driving social change itself. Acknowledging this may also work to offset some of the demotivating aspects of activism which are experienced as a consequence of the public's response.

There are a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, we based our analysis on interviews with a small convenience sample of UK peace activists. However, it was not the aim of this study to provide a representative study of the peace movement in the UK. Given the heterogeneity of the movement, or perhaps more appropriately, 'movement of movements' (Pickerill & Webster, 2006, p. 416), such an endeavour would have been very difficult. Each of our participants was, however, engaged in activities that aimed to resist militarism in one way or another, general or specific, and it was this orientation to a hegemonic representation that interested us. Secondly, many of our participants were middle-aged or over and there was wide variation in terms of the length of participants' involvement in peace activism. The sample size did not permit us to analyse differences related to length of involvement or age – these would be interesting possibilities for future research to pursue, especially given previous work which has reported generational differences in positions towards war and foreign policy (e.g., Burris, 2008). Third, many of our participants participated in the peace movement through, or in addition to their involvement in religious organisations. Religious organisations, such as the Quakers, are key actors in UK peace activism. Given the predominantly secular nature of UK society, peace activists affiliated with such organisations may face greater challenges in their attempts to achieve social change – future research should examine this possibility. Finally, the analysis was based on interviews conducted in 2015. Around the time of the interviews and up until 2020, Jeremy Corbyn, a noted anti-war campaigner, was leader of the main opposition political party in the UK. There is a slight possibility that his leadership of the party could have caused some change in the UK public's attitudes towards war and peace, which would lead to different findings if this study were conducted in the present day – future studies on UK peace activism could explore this further.

In conclusion, we have shown that UK peace activists understood social change in both formal and prefigurative terms, encompassing both changes to the political system and through the provision and enactment of new narrative spaces and practices. Facilitating self-reflection through dialogue appeared to be a critical element for social change, however this was hindered by the public's negative perceptions of activists, a consequence of its encounter with a po-

lemical social representation and the use of semantic barriers. Meta-representations were oriented towards consistently in the data and this orientation had consequences for the ways in which activists communicated with and presented themselves to the public. This continual engagement with meta-representations could be a barrier for social change – by diluting the radical message of the peace movement – but it was also a source of strength, which could facilitate self-reflection and thus the transformation of social representations.

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