In Favor of Tipping the Balance: Animal Rights Activists in Defense of Residential Picketing

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Abstract
This discussion focuses on the rationales employed by animal rights activists to explain their involvement in, and support of, protest tactics that are controversial both inside and outside the animal rights movement. The paper centers on the use of residential picketing (“home demos”) in a campaign against a private, multinational animal testing firm. Using ethnographic data and semistructured interviews with activists, the discussion demonstrates that these activists are aware of the marginality of their tactics. Despite some ambivalence, however, activists accept full responsibility for their actions and justify their behavior by utilizing supportive rationales that stress the perceived efficacy of home demos. Specifically, they appeal to the immediate and long-term psychological and direct and indirect material impacts on protest targets. These narratives are explored as constructions that are shaped and disseminated within the context of the state’s preoccupation with “ecoterrorism” and the movement’s internal debates regarding acceptable protest tactics.

Keywords
animal rights movement, direct action, justifications, social movements, tactics

Introduction
Previous research on social movements, particularly the animal rights movement, has suggested that radical factions within a movement may serve to benefit the larger movement by generating visibility for activists’ concerns, swaying public opinion, and by making the demands of the moderates appear more reasonable (Munro, 2005a; Vanderheiden, 2005; Frank, 2004; Balser, 1997; Minkoff, 1995; Jamison & Lunch, 1992; Barkan, 1986; Haines, 1984). Critics believe that these tactics may be counterproductive to the movement’s objectives (Francione & Garner, 2010; Phelps, 2007; Hall, 2006; Munro, 2005b; Munro, 2001; Galvin & Herzog, 1998; Herzog et al., 1997; Tester & Walls, 1996; Munro, 1993/1994; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992).
While radical participants are the focus of media attention as well as criticism within the animal movement, little consideration has been directed to understanding why, given the existence of a sizable tactical repertoire, some animal rights activists choose to engage in the disruptive and confrontational approach of “nonviolent direct action,” and how they explain their involvement. By specifically exploring activists’ perspectives regarding the use of demonstrations at residential locations (“home demos”) in a campaign against animal experimentation, this paper expands the literature on supportive rationales constructed by social movement actors into a new and controversial substantive area.

Informed by the work on the social construction of motive (e.g., Scott & Lyman, 1968; Mills, 1940) and constructionist analyses of social problems (e.g., Spector & Kitsuse, 1987), this paper explores the rationales these “deviant” movement actors employ to explain and justify behaviors that may be viewed as illegitimate by the public, their targets, and, in many cases, fellow activists. This paper explores the sociopolitical environment in which these narratives emerge, the structural factors that shape them, and how activists have responded.

Further, we show that activists who engage in nonviolent direct action accept responsibility for their actions, despite some ambivalence. They explain these tactics by referring to the perceived efficacy (Einwohner, 1999; Benford, 1993) of home demos, in terms of their immediate and long-term psychological and direct and indirect material impacts. Their contentious actions, and the narratives offered to explain them, are part of the ongoing process of claims-making that defines the exploitation and inferior moral status of nonhuman animals as a social problem (Lowe, 2007) and proposes suitable lines of action to remedy the situation.

The focus of this paper is on the use of home demos, the most common form of nonviolent direct action employed by activists involved in the American arm of an international campaign called Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC). SHAC exclusively targets a United Kingdom-based private animal testing firm called Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS) and its affiliates.

**Radicalization and Justification within the Animal Rights Movement**

Some researchers have suggested that the rise of radical factions of activists like SHAC within a movement may serve to benefit the movement at large by generating visibility for movement concerns, bolstering financial and ideological support for moderate factions, swaying public opinion and, especially,
by making the demands of the moderates, which once seemed extreme, appear more reasonable, thereby improving their bargaining position (Minkoff, 1995; Barkan, 1986). Analysts have suggested that this phenomenon, termed the positive radical flank effect (Haines, 1984), has operated in this way within the struggles for women's and civil rights, and, most recently, within the modern animal rights and environmental movements (Munro, 2005a; Frank, 2004; Benford, 1993; Jamison & Lunch, 1992; Scarce 1990). In the case of the radical environmental movement, insiders have acknowledged that the formation of the well-known direct action group Earth First! was an intentional strategy by activists “to allow the mainstream groups to look less radical and achieve more protection for the environment” (Scarce, 1990, p. 6). Some have suggested that this same dynamic exists in the animal rights movement (Taylor, 1998). Although individuals involved in nonviolent direct action comprise only a small minority of the entire animal rights activist population—estimates suggest that the US arm of the SHAC campaign “has only involved a few hundred participants at any given time” (Crimethinc, n.d.)—the effects of their work may be far-reaching.

Despite its potential utility, many activists and researchers working with animal rights groups have been skeptical of the efficacy of disruptive, confrontational forms of nonviolent direct action (e.g., Francione & Garner, 2010; Phelps, 2007; Hall, 2006). Studies have found that some activists eschew the use of nonviolent direct action to promote movement objectives and often make the claim that these activities are alienating and counterproductive and may lead to wider public scrutiny and political repression (see Mika, 2006; Kruse, 2001). Consequently, in order to retain the positive self-identity and movement identity crucial to the mobilization process, movement actors engaged in nonviolent direct action are regularly obliged to defend their support for, or participation in, a variety of controversial tactics to both fellow activists and the public.

Participants in social movements employ various rationales to justify their involvement and tactics. Mills (1940) focused on the connection between ideology and action when he conceptualized motives as “accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs or acts” (p. 907). In social movements, these vocabularies of motive are justifications offered by individual activists when the legitimacy of their actions is called into question and they are required to preserve their identities as responsible and moral citizens (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). They “become part of the everyday discourse of movement actors and thus an aspect of the movement’s culture” (Benford, 1993, p. 200). Actors may abandon plans for action when viable rationales are unavailable or not well received by the intended audience.
Actions without legitimating vocabularies of motive often fail to gain traction in movement circles.

**Method**

This discussion is based on data drawn from two major sources. From November 2005 through November 2007 the first author was directly involved with activists in organizational meetings, academic conferences, planning sessions, and demonstrations. He took field notes during and after these events. Having been directly involved in the animal rights movement for over 10 years, the first author had developed rapport with a wide variety of activists. This experience provided him with unquestioned access as well as a clear “cultural map” (Anspach, 1993) of the movement.

As is conventional, this ethnographic data was supplemented with face-to-face, semistructured, formal interviews conducted with 10 animal rights activists (5 women and 5 men between the ages of 18 and 54) directly involved in the SHAC campaign who identified themselves as proponents of, and as being involved in, nonviolent direct action. Interviewees were selected via the first author’s personal network. This snowball sample was structured so as to generate a group of interviewees that was diverse in gender, age, and geography. In addition, lengthy field interviews were conducted with another 8 interviewees as they participated in meetings or group actions. Activists interviewed were based in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Connecticut. Interviews and field conversations typically focused on motivations for movement involvement, the process of selecting protest tactics, the intended and unintended outcomes of employing these tactics, and activists’ perceptions of their role and the role of others in the movement. The formal interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Field interviews were incorporated into field notes. Participants were all aware of the researcher’s identity and his academic interests.

**The Rise of “SHACtivism”**

In 1999, activists initiated a campaign to force the closure of HLS, one of the world’s largest contract research organizations, through a focused, high-pressure, direct-action campaign. HLS reportedly kills between 71,000 and 180,000 animals annually in the testing of industrial chemicals, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and household cleaners at its facilities in New Jersey and
England (Halpern, 2006; House of Lords, 2001). Activists’ outrage over HLS’s animal experimentation has been fueled by undercover investigations that have gathered video footage of, among other things, HLS employees punching dogs and dissecting conscious monkeys. A US Department of Agriculture inspection of HLS’s New Jersey laboratory resulted in a $50,000 fine for violations of animal welfare regulations (Maag, 2006).

Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty USA (SHAC USA) was created to collect and disseminate information about HLS employees, associates, and their family members and to muster ideological support for protest activity against HLS and its affiliates (Best & Kahn, 2004). Most notably, the SHAC campaign focused demonstrations on “tertiary” targets, such as the investors, insurers, and suppliers that supported HLS and enabled it to operate profitably (Best & Kahn, 2004, p. 17). HLS’s senior counsel has stated that because of this “six degrees of separation” tactic many companies have stopped doing business with them (Cohen, 2007). By 2001, HLS’s stock values had plummeted from $15 to less than $1 per share. It ceased trading its stock on the London Exchange and moved its corporate headquarters to the United States and renamed itself.

SHAC’s US contingent, using nonviolent direct action tactics such as home demos and e-mail and phone blockades (where the e-mail boxes of employees at target companies are flooded with junk mail and phone lines tied up for hours), successfully coerced multinational conglomerates such as Wachovia, Schwab, and Bank of America into severing their ties with HLS (Potter, 2007). By November 2007, more than 250 companies had abandoned their connections to HLS (UK Indymedia, 2007). An activist who had worked to convince HLS’s auditors to sever their ties with the company praised the effectiveness of this approach:

It’s genius! Well, it’s not really genius, but it’s really smart because the companies are dealing with so many other businesses that they don’t need HLS to exist. But HLS needs them. The auditors have a lot of other customers, so if they drop HLS—and it’s quite feasible that they could drop HLS with enough pressure—it would be really, really difficult for HLS to get another auditor. So, it’s just finding the weak links and exploiting that.

Home Demonstrations as Nonviolent Direct Action

Demonstrations at residential locations traditionally have been used by labor activists, antiwar activists, environmentalists, antiabortion protestors, and
others as a means of airing grievances about social ills directly to those they believe are responsible. In the SHAC campaign, home demos typically consisted of activists holding signs and banners depicting graphic photos of appealing animals like dogs and monkeys who had been mutilated in experiments; marching; chanting; and distributing informational leaflets.

An article published in a “direct action publication” (No Compromise, 2003) offers an introduction to conducting and participating in home demos and closes with the line, “Most importantly, make your target aware that we know where they live and that they are going to be treated accordingly. Be it simple picketing or midnight sabotage, know the laws, be careful, and make the maximum impact!” Another No Compromise article on the topic reads, “Let’s face it, the animals never get a break, so why should those people who imprison, mutilate, and murder animals get one? We need to stop protesting outside of the torture labs, and start protesting the vivisectors homes! They need to be held personally accountable for their barbarity” (No Compromise, 1999).

Before she set out to participate in an anti-HLS demonstration, one experienced activist described the process of planning and carrying out a home demo:

Say you find out someone is on the board of, I don’t know, [one of HLS’s customers] and they also work for some other pharmaceutical company. Then basically it’s just a matter of public record, research on public record. You know, like finding where their address is, where they work. Usually it’s not taken past that… [When it is] confirmed that that person is the person who works there… that it’s their current address, [someone makes] a phone call or something like that just to make sure that it’s the right person. Then you advertise the demo, meet up somewhere near there and go… We always try to talk to the person and say like, “We’re a group of concerned citizens, and we just want to have a dialogue with you about this.” And then, nine times out of ten they slam in the door in our face and call the cops. So then we chant and that sort of thing. I guess the desired effect is, first, to educate them on the issue and then, when they predictably won’t listen us, to persuade them that it would be best for the animals if they didn’t work with that company anymore.

Conflict and backlash within the movement. Home demos have been criticized by movement insiders on both philosophical and tactical grounds. After being targeted with home demos by antiabortionists, activist Carol J. Adams has stated that home demos reflect a kind of radicalization in which activists’ sense of urgency to act on behalf of suffering animals leads them to “disengage… from a responsibility to other beings” (Adams, 2004). She maintains that this alienates other activists and may traumatize innocent individuals such as the children of protest targets. Adams’s criticism of home demos rests on the fact that they “deliver the trauma without the knowledge” of nonhuman animal suffering that activists so desperately want to share.
Others argue that it is speciesist to place the hypothetical fear or discomfort felt by protest targets’ children caused by home demos above the physical and psychological harm inflicted on animals in laboratories. Best maintains that “[u]ndue concern for children involved in a SHAC home demo… means more animals will suffer and die” (Best, n.d.).

Some activists suggest that using home demos in an attempt to stop the exploitation of animals reflects the philosophy of instrumentalism—seeing the harassment of animal abusers as a means by which to end animal abuse—that is the foundation of the exploitation of animals (An Animal-Friendly Life, 2008). Other activists blame nonviolent direct action tactics like those employed by SHAC for the increased government repression of the broader movement and for the media presentation of all activists as “ecoterrorists” (Hall, 2006). Some major animal welfare organizations have refused to attend or support conferences that SHAC-related organizations were to attend. Notably, Ennis (1987) found that in the nuclear disarmament movement confrontational protest tactics were the least supported among activists. These objections, together with the view that home demos simply “turn animal abusers into the victim” did not deter the SHAC activists. One said, for example:

Frankly, I don’t really care how other activists view my work that much, especially “moderate” activists. Moderate activists choose to continue to tie their hands behind their back and only work through a system that has repeatedly shown itself to be worthless in protecting animals.

The animal rights movement overwhelmingly—and many would say exclusively—employs nonviolent protest tactics (Munro, 2005b; Jamison & Lunch, 1992). Nonetheless, certain forms of nonviolent direct action (like home demos) continue to be viewed by both those within and outside of the movement as being ill-advised and unnecessarily confrontational.

**State and industry countermeasures.** Opponents of activities like those of animal rights activists commonly respond by attempting to delegitimize grievances (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). While SHAC’s activities are generally regarded as constitutionally protected free speech, opponents have maintained that targeting individuals constitutes stalking and harassment.

In 2005, during testimony to the US Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, John E. Lewis, FBI Deputy Assistant Director of the Counterterrorism Division, stated that “[o]ne of today’s most serious domestic terrorism threats comes from special interest extremist movements such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), and Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign” (Federal Bureau of
Investigation, 2005). Despite the fact that no action by American animal rights activists has ever physically harmed anyone (Vanderheiden, 2005; Taylor, 1998), Lewis claimed that “[t]he No. 1 domestic terrorism threat is the eco-terrorism, animal-rights movement” (Best, 2005).

A significant blow to the movement occurred in 2006 when, under the federal Animal Enterprise Protection Act of 1992 (AEPA), six activists suspected of running an informational website for the SHAC USA campaign were convicted for “animal enterprise terrorism” and sentenced to between one and six years in federal prison (Green is the new red, 2006; United States Attorney’s Office, 2006). While none of the evidence submitted in the case indicated that any of the defendants participated in, or directed others to participate in, criminal activity, the thrust of the “SHAC 7” case was that the maintenance of the SHAC USA website “encouraged and incited SHAC members and followers to direct their intimidation, harassment and violence against HLS and its targeted employees, as well as secondary targets . . . in an often successful attempt to get those companies to end their business relationships with HLS” (United States Attorney’s Office, 2006).

In November 2006 the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) was passed by both the US House and Senate (Hoch & Wilkens, 2007). The AETA broadened the definition of “animal enterprise terrorism” used in the AEPA to include nonphysical “harassment” and “intimidation” as punishable offenses (Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, 2006). As the use of strategies like home demos has become more pervasive, courts at the local level have also created restrictions like “protest-free” or “no harassment” zones that ban demonstrations within a certain distance of private residences and businesses (Surdin, 2008; Felix, 2007; BBC News, 2004). An experienced anti-HLS activist described attempts by law enforcement to infiltrate her organization. She reported being constantly followed to and from meetings and demonstrations by unmarked cars, being videotaped and photographed, having her family visited at home by the FBI, having her phone tapped, and having tracking devices placed on her friends’ cars. She explained how the SHAC indictments and this heavy surveillance had influenced her activism:

When [one of the SHAC 7 defendants] was indicted . . . we had to sit down and look at what we were doing and try and seek legal advice on what fell under [the AEPA] and what was legal and what was illegal. . . . [The indictment] makes me feel like if they say something is legal now it could change in five years, and I could go to jail for it, and I really don’t have any control over that. I try and be cautious . . . we try to stay away from certain chants. I know [another animal rights group] does it more so than we do, not saying “we know where you sleep at night” because it can be considered a threat or not saying that they want to “shut down” or “close” HLS because then they would be
pursuing the bankruptcy of a company…. We’re less strict with that I think just because, I don’t know, I guess I have a little bit of faith left in free speech, just a little glimmer.

Other activists maintained that the AETA had only marginal impact on their work:

I think the bill’s chilling effect is minimal simply because people have short memories. Activists are already forgetting, which I think is a good thing in many respects. Give it another six months and people will have almost totally forgotten and newcomers into the movement will probably have never even heard of it…. In the immediate aftermath of the bill’s passage, I would say that people were pretty freaked out. I think people still have good reason to be freaked out, but I would prefer that our movement continue ahead “business as usual” and deal with the ramifications later.

While legal controls like the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act of 2005 quelled the use of home demos and similar tactics in the United Kingdom (Haugen, 2007, p. 17), these approaches continued to be employed in the US SHAC campaign and beyond. This is largely because of activist groups’ “inner logic” (Ennis, 1987) that casts these methods as effective in accomplishing movement objectives and mobilizing other activists. As one activist stated, “The victory is very tangible because 300 or so companies have dropped [HLS as a client]. I think seeing that… sort of fuels action further. There’s a momentum that comes from that.”

**Rhetorical Support for Home Demos**

In his article on direct action approaches in the environmental movement, Schnurer noted that, “When we examine the varied justifications for radical direct action, we see, above all, young people coming to grips with privilege [and] expressing their outrage over social injustice” (2006, p. 349). The current interviewees grappled with these issues. They spoke about their pragmatic, outcomes-based approach to activism and selection of tactics. They chose home demos as a primary tactic because the approach had been effective in the past. Since the “success” of a protest or social movement is subjective and context-dependent, however, what activists perceive as “effective” is an issue of considerable interest. Most fundamentally, interviewees judged the effectiveness of home demos, and defended their participation in them, in light of their direct and indirect material impacts as well as their immediate and long-term psychological impacts on protest targets.
Appeals to material impact. Those involved in home demos during the SHAC campaign frequently emphasized the hundreds of millions of dollars HLS had suffered in lost revenue as a result of the campaign or how demonstrations had prompted individual companies to sever their ties with HLS. One activist emphasized the increased infrastructural expenses incurred by one company due to the anti-HLS campaign:

Simply by targeting customers and suppliers we've been able to take millions away from Huntingdon. We targeted their phone and internet provider—just protests and things like that—and in a month and a half they stopped providing services. And we found out at the SHAC 7 trial that it cost them half a million dollars because they had to have their whole system rewired by a new telecommunications company.

Another activist emphasized the effectiveness of home demos and the satisfaction he felt when his direct action resulted in “victory”:

Sometime in 2003, I started helping the SHAC campaign. We started protesting a local customer of Huntingdon Life Sciences…. On Friday, we hand-delivered HLS footage to their office and held a demonstration. On Saturday, we conducted a home demonstration outside the CEO’s home…. We held another home demonstration on Sunday. That Monday, [the company] dropped Huntingdon. It was essentially the first time in approximately three years as an activist that I’d ever tasted a measurable victory.

Appeals to psychological impact. The most common theme that arose during conversations with activists was the psychological impact that home demos had on movement targets and both the long- and short-term effects of these methods. Activists spoke of building “social capital” through the use of shaming and intimidation to achieve their objectives of deterring companies from conducting animal testing and persuading scientists not to pursue careers in animal experimentation. Many of the activists acknowledged that home demos were a form of activism that intimidated and generated fear in the targets. They justified this approach, however, by stressing its effectiveness. One interviewee spoke of the tactical importance of precipitating discomfort:

I’ve heard… that people probably think we’re crazy, and it’s kind of important to run with that, because if people don’t think that you’re a little crazy… they won’t take you seriously. Not that there needs to be an aspect of fear, but there needs to be an aspect where people are a little uncomfortable. I think that… any issues I’ve really been affected by, something that’s really made me think, has taken me out of my comfort zone. So I think that doing that for other people with different tactics is important because that’s kind of the only way to make people think. You know, I never got a nice little letter from PETA that made me change my life.
Another activist referred to a demonstration outside a pharmaceutical company’s on-site child-care center and stressed the psychological impact of invading people’s private lives:

If protesters continued, especially on a regular basis, to have a presence outside the day-care facility, it would cause enormous employee demoralization. I think it would even turn into massive turnover—especially if this were coupled with home demonstrations. Imagine coming to work and having your child’s day care demonstrated, then going home to find protesters follow you there as well. Any sense of a private life would be ruined.

Yet another interviewee offered a somewhat more measured assessment of home demos and their intended purpose:

I’m not about causing anybody harm or pain. I’m about causing them discomfort. No one ever died of embarrassment or humiliation that I know of, and that’s what I’m out to do. I’m out to humiliate them, and I’m out to make them very, very uncomfortable. So, to me, it’s not even about making them afraid… well, afraid in the sense that they don’t wanna be embarrassed. That’s the fear factor for me.

Through the use of home demonstrations and other forms of nonviolent action, activists intended to have more than immediate psychological impact on their targets. They also wanted to generate long-term psychological consequences and have larger, industry-wide impact. As one activist put it:

I think that… campaigns that really hit the targeted company or entity in a number of different directions… makes animal research less and less of a good way to go, an appealing field…. [A reporter who covers the pharmaceutical industry] said that the pharmaceutical companies are terrified of… the growth of the antivivisection movement right now… because they don’t know where we’re going to go next, and they know it’s successful. They know it doesn’t take a lot of resources, and it doesn’t take a lot of people.

Another interviewee stressed that a variety of activist approaches—both legal and illegal—helped build “social capital” and led to the desired long-term outcome:

(T)hat’s why some people have stopped doing animal research, and ultimately that’s why the vivisection industry will go, or at least be debilitated…. It works for campaigns where people fear being intimidated or having their house vandalized, or having their lab raided, and things like that. And they will take action based on that. I’ve had people who came up to me on the street and said, “My dad did some animal research… but he stopped because he thought that animal rights people were getting
too out of hand, and he didn't want to be targeted.” So building up the social capital of your movement, you can do it by increasing your numbers, increasing the economic boycott pressure, and things like that. But a small group of people can also add on to that pressure by doing illegal things like building up a reputation for being nasty or being thugs or whatever. And if it works, it works.

Several interviewees stressed that home demos led to the breakdown of the conventional, and highly valued, division between work life and home life and the separate identities assumed within these social spheres. As one activist observed:

Home demonstrations break that work/home barrier. [It’s] a barrier most Americans want to keep, but a barrier that really should be broken. I think so many people hate home demonstrations because the idea of protesting someone at home for what they do at work troubles them. Most people view that as a separate world in their life. What they do at their work they leave at the office, and they come home to relax. Home demonstrations send a clear message that every individual is accountable for what they do in the work place. I’m greatly surprised more movements haven’t used them on a more regular basis.

Another interviewee saw nonviolent direct action as threatening the distinction between humans and nonhuman animals and the rights that accrue to these categories:

[If] scaring people or breaking the law or destroying property has a decent chance, or some chance, of freeing animals that are really suffering right now, then I don’t give a fuck if human beings who are profiting off of it are feeling intimidated, or scared, or have their “property rights” violated. Life is much more important than that. Human beings live such a privileged life, and these animals are suffering so much. I’m totally in favor of tipping the balance and making the people who are doing the exploiting feel a little pain and suffering if it has a good chance of helping these animals.

**Criticism and Tactical Ambivalence**

Many activists presented the privileged social status of humans as allowing those concerned with the lot of animals to choose less confrontational and controversial means of protest. One interviewee compared the animal rights movement to human liberationist movements when she observed:

Since animals can’t talk and can’t really fight for themselves, I think it’s really important to recognize the privilege that we have in being able to say, “You know, you shouldn’t engage in direct action, let’s just do it through legal means, it’ll be great.” …
There are animals out there that are obviously suffering and that obviously will benefit from direct action. So I guess that advocating for pacifism in any situation is sometimes tied to privilege, but I think people really need to be aware of their privilege in being able to think that veganism is the farthest you can go or that veganism is direct action. But I definitely don't think that it is.... People always [say] “Well, Gandhi was a pacifist, Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't engage in arson,” or something. But... there were people that did do direct action in that movement and a variety of tactics is really, really important.

Anti-HLS activists also spoke of how they negotiated the criticisms they received from the media, members of the public, and other activists. Many were critical of more indirect means of effecting change for animals. In the face of criticism by those both inside and outside the movement, activists regarded nonviolent direct action as a necessary stage in the escalation of tactics. In the face of criticism, activists presented nonviolent direct action as necessary and effective and as being worth any negative attention it might attract:

Home demos aren't radical at all. And I don't think that they're that big of a deal. But a lot of people... would find [home demos] definitely questionable.... A lot of people say, “Well, these people just need to make a living like us” and they really empathize with [the protest targets].... [But] I think it’s useful, and I think it works, and it provides results.

Despite these supportive rationales for home demos, some interviewees expressed ambivalence about employing confrontational forms of nonviolent direct action to promote the movement’s objectives:

There’s just things that you have to do. And, of course, nobody wants to do it. If these issues weren’t on the table, if [animal abuse] wasn’t going on, then we wouldn’t feel compelled to do it. But it is happening, so we do have to do it, and we’ll continue to do it until we get the job done.

Despite the personal discomfort generated by nonviolent direct action and tactical disagreements about it, interviewees consistently maintained that there were no viable alternatives, given the plight of the animals. While expressing some ambivalence, one activist still justified direct action with great passion:

If there was an alternative to getting [the targeted pharmaceutical company] to drop Huntingdon, I’d be open to hearing it. Until then, we have to ask ourselves the question: “Is it worth it to push the envelope this far?” Given what’s happening inside the
labs, and weighing that with the irritation of employees, I say it’s worth it. . . . I think we have to never forget what’s happening inside of [HLS]. Day in and day out, animals with mental and emotional characteristics very similar to our own are being strapped into chairs and experimented on while they struggle in vain to free themselves from what must appear to them to be the very minions of hell. Their stomachs are pumped full of toxic doses of chemicals. They are literally forced to live amongst their congealed blood, vomit, and waste. . . . It’s easy for us to forget the gravity of the situation—we’ve numbed ourselves to our own photos/videos after so many viewings, and we’ve never been inside these labs in person.

Conclusion

This discussion has focused attention on the construction and dissemination of rationales that activists employ to support tactics directed at changing social arrangements they find problematic. In essence, these vocabularies of organizational motive are designed to cast these activists as noble and their actions as necessary. When directed at movement adherents and potential members, the rationales are intended to encourage support for particular forms of action. When directed at the industrial/organizational elements that make up and perpetuate the perceived social problem, the rationales are intended to threaten the continued existence of the organizations and make organizational decision makers reevaluate and change their behavior. When directed at the society at large, the constructions are “claims” (Specter & Kitsuse, 1987) intended to convince the larger audience that the problem should be confronted and that the tactics are justifiable.

Clearly, these movement participants recognize the controversial nature of both the focus of change—the rights and welfare of nonhuman animals—and the tactics—nonviolent direct action—they employ. This controversy and conflict are both internal to the animal rights movement and external to it. Within the larger society those with vested interests in animal exploitation routinely cast advocates of nonviolent direct action within one of the most potent and discrediting of framing narratives—that of “terrorist” actors engaged in “terrorism” (see Vanderheiden, 2005; Jordon, 2002). This presentation of the animal rights movement and nonviolent direct action is intended as a “counterclaim” directed at redefining the issue of animal exploitation as insignificant or necessary for the welfare of humans and activists’ tactics as illegitimate and/or criminal.

The key grounding perspectives used by the advocates of nonviolent direct action presented here emphasize a conventional “ends justify the means” orientation and, more importantly, stress that the adverse outcome intended (i.e., property damage, personal harassment, inconvenience) is minimal when com-
pared to the captivity, exploitation, and death of nonhuman animals. In offering this overarching supportive rationale, nonviolent direct action advocates are subverting a basic cultural understanding that humans and their presumed interests hold precedence over nonhuman animals and their rights and welfare. In attacking what Arluke and Sanders (1996) refer to as the “sociozoológical scale,” animal rights movement participants have a considerable disadvantage since the hierarchical placement of humans over animals is “so pervasive and central to the thought of [the] culture that over time people uncritically apply these ideas” (Arluke & Sanders, 1996, p. 169).

What is most interesting about the construction of the subversive orientations, tactics, and supportive rationales discussed above—and what is central to this paper—is that such vocabularies of motive are not always totally effective in establishing a foundation for justifiable actions directed at social change. When individuals directly involved in, or in some way allied with, the animal rights movement are not convinced by the justifying rationales, they experience guilt, anxiety, and/or ambivalence (see Weigert, 1991) and may not participate—at least with enthusiasm—in movement activities. When the activists’ claims are effectively countered by the opposition or are not broadly accepted for whatever reason within the host society, controversy and conflict result. Individual and collective ambivalence have clear implications for the recruitment of social movement adherents and their participation in activism. Ambivalence is a shaky foundation for commitment and collective action (Einwohner, 2002). On the larger societal front, in turn, uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of the movement’s master narrative attacking sociozological conventions and widespread doubts about certain key tactics draw away support, strengthen the efficacy of counterclaims, and lead to the continuation of status quo arrangements and practices that activists believe to be cruel and oppressive.

Notes

1. “Direct action” refers to protest tactics that aim to assert moral claims and achieve goals through activists’ own activity, rather than through the actions of others (e.g., home demos vs. lobbying Congress). Direct action encompasses activities that are legal or extralegal, violent or nonviolent, physical or nonphysical and can include tactics such as demonstrations, civil disobedience, vandalism, and property damage (Doherty et al., 2003, p. 670).

The description of the protest tactics employed by the animal rights movement as “nonviolent” is consistent with the definitions of many movement insiders and social movement scholars, but it is often described as “violence” or “terrorism” by other activists, the media, the public, the countermovement, and social scientists.

Scarce (1990) notes that to many animal rights activists, “‘violence’ means inflicting harm on a living being… The practical implication of this definition is to exclude the destruction of
human artifacts—machines and the like—from the realm of violence” (p. 12). Activists view it as impossible to treat inanimate property violently (Tester, 1989).

Similarly, Gene Sharp defines violence as “physical violence against persons to inflict injury or death . . . not as a term of moral or political opinion” (Sharp, 2003, p. 1). All the tactics employed by activists interviewed for this paper—and by the animal rights movement overall—fall under Sharp’s category of “non-violent resistance and direct action” (1959, pp. 44-45), although he does note that sabotage such as property destruction and arson “is more closely related to violent than to nonviolent action because of the risk of unintentional injury to persons” (1973, p. 609). Taylor (1998) reiterates the same point, expressing that for radical environmentalists and animal rights activists, “nonviolence is consistent with actions that do risk injuries and even death, although sometimes these activists simply do not foresee the risks” (p. 8). Also see Johnson (1997).

2. The 392 US actions related to the SHAC campaign during the period of this study as reported on www.CloseHLS.net were 336 home demos, 53 office demos, 2 leafleting events, and 1 leaflet mailing.

3. Social scientists have suggested that some researchers have been steered away from certain areas of animal experimentation because of animal rights activists (Kempner, Perlis, & Merz, 2005).

References


