

Radical Civic Engagement: Motivations, Strategies and Outcomes¹

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Abstract

Little is known about how local contexts influence decisions about appropriate forms of civic engagement, especially the motivations for pursuing political objectives outside of traditional democratic processes. The purposes of this paper, therefore, are to:

- explore the phenomenon of grassroots activists in Hong Kong striving against both the Central and local governments for greater democratic participation;
- highlight the motivations and strategies of these activists as well as their expected outcomes; and
- provide a ‘bottom up’ theoretical framework in which social movements based on radical forms of civic engagement can be better understood.
- Individual interviews were conducted with local Hong Kong activists and narrative analysis was used to produce ‘portraits’ of each activist. Each ‘portrait’ was coded to identify the participant’s motivations, strategies and expected outcomes from involvement in civic activities associated with his/her protest.
- There were four main themes emerging from the analysis:
- Disillusion with democratic processes that were seen to be associated with an older generation;
- Socioeconomic disadvantage especially for young people;
- Anti –China feelings that were both political (against the Chinese Communist Party) and social (against Mainland Chinese tourists in Hong Kong)
- Violence was not ruled out as a tool for social and political change

Keywords

Protest, Civic Engagement, Citizenship, Social Movement

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Globally we are witnessing radical forms of civic engagement that bypass traditional democratic processes. In relation to Europe, these forms are associated with right wing groups eager to challenge the European consensus and revert to a more nationalist orientation. This is as true in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Austria as it is in the post-Brexit United Kingdom. A similar phenomenon is evident in Trump's reengineering of the social and political landscape in the United States. Yet Europe and the United States are not the only jurisdictions experiencing an upsurge of radical politics. Often this has meant recourse to street protest, generation of 'fake' news through social media and direct confrontation with authorities.

Similar movements can be identified in Latin America, Australia and Asia. The globalization of communications technologies ensures that we receive never ending 'updates' about these global social movements but little is known about grassroots engagement in these macro movements. Also, little is known about local contexts and how these influence decisions about appropriate forms of civic engagement, especially the motivations for pursuing political objectives outside of traditional democratic processes. The purposes of this paper, therefore, are to:

- explore the phenomenon of grassroots activists in Hong Kong striving against both the Central and local governments for greater democratic participation;
- highlight the motivations and strategies of individual activists and their expected outcomes; and
- evaluate a methodology that gives priority to the views of individuals rather than reducing individual views to a set of common themes.

Background issues

In our first paper, we described the background issues in this way (Ng & Kennedy under review):

The rise of localism in recent years has reshaped the politics of Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous special administrative region (SAR) of China governed under "one country, two systems" framework since 1997. As an emerging ideology featuring strong anti-China sentiments and Hong Kong identity, localism has become a full-blown social movement in this former British colony after the Umbrella Movement (UM) in 2014. The emergence of localism has attracted many scholars to explore its ideas and the factors behind its rise.

We saw the contribution of our research representing the views and beliefs of the young activists who participated in this social movement – a focus overlooked in most other research.

Methodological issues

We used interviews to collect data from the participants. The issue we want to raise in this paper is the analysis of this data, which we described like this:

Data analysis started with a careful reading of the interview transcripts by the authors, who then made notes of the main ideas of each interview. After that, we produced for each interview a summary consisting of a detailed list of main points. Based on the framework set in the interview guide, the main points were then grouped into themes related to the interviewees' political beliefs, political socialisation, and the factors they perceived have mobilised them into localist activism. Excerpts of the transcripts corresponding to the themes were extracted and sorted with the assistance of data management software NVivo. Lastly, cross-case analysis was conducted to compare the similarities and differences of the interviewees.

This kind of thematic analysis yielded interesting results that can be found in our paper. We think we now better understand why many young people became involved in radical forms of civic engagement and how their political beliefs were formed. We have produced in our paper a kind of “average” young localist! Yet these young people are also individuals and while they may contribute to this “average” picture, there is in all likelihood more to them than the average. What happens when we move from an approach to analysis that values the thematic contribution of the individual to an approach that values the whole individual? Can we learn from more holistic portrayal of individuals in addition to the way individual contribute to common themes? This was the key question pursued in this paper.

How can such portrayals be created? We are aware that researchers such as Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and the late Elliott Eisner have made very distinctive contributions as advocates for and practitioners of research methods that are more holistic, more aesthetic and more conscious of the whole rather than the parts. We do not wish to follow one or the other of these giants. Rather, we want, as a first step, to gain deeper insights into our data and what it has to teach about the individuals who were part of our project.

As a first step, we have gone back to the original interview transcripts (English versions) and re-read them with an eye to see again what they are saying about themselves with no preconceived ideas about themes, commonalities or similarities. The results are shown in the three portraits below – we still have work to do on 19 other interviews – so what we show here is the beginning of our re-analysis.

Re-reading Kong's young activists

Socio economic motivations for engagement in protest were not highlighted in our thematic analysis – but for Alvin, a 29 year old associated with the Kowloon

East Community² and unemployed, they were quite fundamental:

Interviewer: *When did politics become part of your life?*

Adrian: *Politics have begun to be part of my life when I realized that I cannot own an apartment with my income. My first girlfriend expected me to own an apartment as soon as I began working. I hate that the fact that a person needs to spend all of the saving of one's life for an apartment. Everyone is working hard to survive in the society but we need to spend all on an apartment. My girlfriend's mother said, "You cannot make my daughter happy if you cannot afford to own your own apartment." All of these experiences have contributed to my interested in politics.*

Later, Adrian adds:

Young people need to pay rent with their entire monthly income. Then, the young people would be unsatisfied. It is normal and the government should know the feelings of the young people. The government just doesn't think about the young people.

and there seems to have been some engagement with major theoretical issues related to socio economic contexts:

Interviewer: *What subjects did you study in university?*

Adrian: *I studied contemporary social issues and quality. I studied many political systems and ideologies such as Marxism or capitalism*

There were also professors, and one in particular, who influenced Adrian:

He said that the society really values us as young generations and the media only reports part of the truth. I asked him many questions about the social issues and he also gave me many suggestions. I was not very interested in studying but he rekindled my desire for education. I wanted to learn a lot from his classes. I have realized that social science helps us to understand the society and the characteristics of various social systems.

Adrian's experiences in secondary school were also important, especially since it seems he came from a poor background:

My family felt it was a waste for me to attend school. I wanted to study so bad and tried to collect money for my school life. I also found a social worker and received lunch money. Social workers actually can help a lot. The lunch assistance gave me a relief from the pressure. The teachers also gave me advice because many of the students lost confidence somehow, I believe. The teachers were very encouraging and they influenced me much.

To put these quotations in context, they form only a very small part of the interview that highlights much more Alvin's political attitudes, including all the themes we identified in our thematic analysis. Yet given the salience of socio

² One of a number of localist groups in Hong Kong.

economic contexts for him, it seems quite possible to speculate that that such contexts played a significant motivation for him, perhaps even a basic motivation, as he struggled with the power of the Hong Kong and Central governments. It is an issue worth considering and exploring further.

Another area that we considered not so important was the influence of families on participants political attitudes. Yet for Angela, a 26 year old researcher also associated with the Kowloon East Community, her family was important. She went out of her way to engage her family in discussions, especially her Father. She responded to the interviewer's question:

Interviewer: Do you think your family have influenced your political view?

Angela: No. I have influenced them more than they have influenced me. Well, I cannot say there is completely no effect on me actually. Let me say it again. I tend to be more peaceful because I need to consider their feelings as well. They would discuss with me rationally. My father would discuss with me even our political views are different. We can understand each other's ideas better. I cannot say it shortens our distance but we need to know the feelings of each other in order to know what their reactions to my actions.

She describes a lengthy interaction with her Father in which she writes him a 1000 word letter, seeking his views on a forth coming election followed by a conversation about her own political views regarding Hong Kong's independence. This kind of discussion in no way changes her "mind" about her own views despite her Mother's indifference and her Father's skepticism about independence. Yet it does highlight that for at least Angela, her family plays a role even if is only that of a sounding board for her own ideas.

We noted in our original analysis that there were some "idiosyncratic factors" influencing young people's decisions to engage in radical activities. This was meant to suggest that these were not standard or generalised reasons. One of these factors was 'religious beliefs'. Yet for Carl, a 20-year-old university student, religious beliefs were important:

I am a Christian. I studied the bible at church when I was young. It talked about how Jesus helped those weak ones and challenged the powerful ones. He had a value of justice. All of these have become my values later on. If Christ helps the weak ones and challenged the powerful ones, we should also do the same.

Carl's beliefs were not just theoretical – they led to action as shown in the following exchange:

Interviewer: Is there any conflict between your Christian belief and localism?

Carl: The idea [of localism] has no conflicts with religion only actions do. That was why I did not attend the violent actions on Chinese New Year day but I supported them as a backup and helped them to watch the potential attackers. It is not okay to let other people get hurt because you don't protect them. A police could get much help from many but a protestor would not. In the bible,

there were many wars as well. We want to keep things in peace of course but we need to help the weak when violence occurs.

This is a quite nuanced view that balances different sets of beliefs. It was not a mainstream view as we pointed out but for at least this individual it was important dictating both principles and action.

Conclusion

We have shown above some of the distinctive characteristics of our young activists – what the statisticians might call “the outliers”. We realise this is very early work and we shall continue the process of re-analysis. But already we are thinking how to include these distinctive characteristics into a broader picture and how to balance the parts (the themes) with the more fully blown individual portraits to provide more rounded pictures that acknowledge the diversity amongst the activist community. This is our challenge that we shall continue to take forward but it is not a simple technical issue about research method. Rather, it is a commitment to more transparent research that acknowledges the importance of identifying the full range of meanings that stem from the interactions we have with our participants. Themes highlight the average or most dominant responses across any range of participants. Individual portraits highlight what might be called the heterogeneity in any group of participants. It is important to understand both of these dimensions in any research process and to ensure that they feature in the way results are reported.

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