



## Some Benefits of Being an Activist: Measuring Activism and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being

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*Do activists lead happier and more fulfilled lives than the average person? Two online surveys using a sample of college students (N = 341) and a national sample of activists matched with a control group (N = 718) demonstrated that several indicators of activism were positively associated with measures of hedonic, eudaimonic, and social well-being. Furthermore, in both studies, activists were more likely to be “flourishing” (Keyes, 2002) than were nonactivists. A third study of college students (N = 296) explored the possible causal role of activism by measuring well-being after subjects either engaged in a brief activist behavior, a brief nonactivist behavior, or no behavior. Although well-being did not differ substantially between these three groups, the subjects who did the brief activist behavior reported significantly higher levels of subjective vitality than did the subjects who engaged in the nonactivist behavior. Potential mediators of the relationship between activism and well-being and the usefulness of these findings are discussed.*

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“Which way of life is the more desirable—to join with other citizens and share in the state’s activity, or to live in it like an alien, absolved from the ties of political society?”

Aristotle, *Politics* (350 BC/1948, p. 283)

Aristotle famously described humans as political animals by nature. One implication of this idea is that when people engage in political activity, they are expressing a basic motive fundamental to being human. If this is true, then Aristotle’s logic would further suggest that the extent to which people engage in

political activism might be positively associated with their well-being (see, e.g., Duvall & Dotson, 1998). Such a conclusion rests on Aristotle's conception of well-being, known as *eudaimonia*, which is maximized to the extent people make meaning out of their lives and express who they actually are (Ryan & Deci, 2001). A variety of psychological thinkers have similarly suggested that being politically active expresses a basic human motive necessary for well-being.

For example, Alfred Adler (1938/1964) held that *social interest*, or a concern with fostering the welfare of others, was a fundamental human striving and that expression of social interest was a prerequisite for psychological health. In support of this idea, Leak and Leak (2006) found that college students' scores on a self-report measure of social interest were positively correlated with their life satisfaction, self-esteem, self-actualization, vitality, and experiences of positive affect and negatively correlated with their psychological distress, feelings of alienation, and experiences of negative affect. Similarly, Erik Erikson's (1950) concept of *generativity* has much in common with political activism and social interest, for it concerns the desire to care about something bigger than the self and to foster the welfare of future generations. Although most prominent in midlife, generativity concerns were understood by Erikson as occurring throughout the life span and helping promote the healthy development of the person. Thus, generativity has been positively associated not only with political interest and activist behaviors (Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997), but also with life satisfaction (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995) and other measures of psychological well-being (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002); however, studies have yet to confirm a relationship between *behavioral* measures of generativity and well-being (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002).

More recent theory and research on the concepts of *volunteering* and *community feeling aspirations* similarly suggest that political activism might be motivating in and of itself, and thus benefit well-being because intrinsically motivating activities typically satisfy important psychological needs prerequisite for healthy functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). For example, Meier and Stutzer (2008) reviewed arguments for why volunteering is often intrinsically motivating, noting that it can support prosocial desires to benefit others, that it can provide opportunities to engage in interesting, challenging tasks and be with other individuals, and that the act of helping can be inherently enjoyable. Their analyses of a large German sample showed that volunteers were more satisfied with their lives and that the loss of volunteer opportunities was associated with diminished life satisfaction. Such findings extend past research demonstrating that volunteering benefits self-esteem and lowers mortality rates (Wilson, 2000). In a parallel fashion, Kasser (2002) argued that the pursuit of goals such as community feeling (or the desire to benefit the broader world) is often associated with intrinsically motivated behavior and typically creates circumstances that allow for greater psychological need satisfaction. Indeed, the higher the relative importance of community feeling goals to individuals, the more likely

they report higher well-being on a variety of indices (Carver & Baird, 1998; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Ryan et al., 1996).

Although these theories and data regarding social interest, generativity, volunteering, and community feeling aspirations concur that political activism might reflect a fundamental human motive whose expression promotes higher well-being, our ability to confidently reach such a conclusion is limited for at least three reasons. First, social interest, generativity, and volunteering have a somewhat broader scope than activism, as there are many ways one might enact them, not all of which involve political activism. Second, relatively little research has examined how actual behavioral manifestations, as opposed to self-reports, of these concepts affect a diverse array of well-being outcomes. Third, the direction of causality is hard to determine from past studies, as it may be that psychological health causes people to be more generative, socially interested, etc., and thus perhaps to engage in activism (although see Meier & Stutzer, 2008), rather than activism promoting well-being. Our studies set out to address these limits by more directly measuring the concept of activism, by examining its relationships to a variety of indicators of well-being, and, in Study 3, by experimentally manipulating activism to determine whether it might have causal effects on well-being.

### *The Present Studies*

Based on a definition by Corning and Myers (2002), we defined activism as the behavior of advocating some political cause (for instance, protecting the environment, human rights issues, opposing abortion, or preventing wars) via any of a large array of possible means, ranging, for example, from institutionalized acts such as starting a petition to unconventional acts such as civil disobedience. This definition is broad enough to encompass many different contents of activism and means of being an activist while at the same time focusing on the basic goal of improving society through political behavior. In an attempt to validly assess self-reported activism, we examined four dimensions of the construct: activist identity, commitment, behavioral intentions, and past behaviors. Activist identity was selected as a basic dimension because the extent to which one participates in activism clearly is associated with one's social or collective identity (Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000) and because self-identification with the activist role seems the most direct way of assessing activism. We also assessed commitment to activism, both because this motivational component is widely discussed in social movement research (e.g., Klandermans, 1997) and because research suggests that a strong predictor of activist behavior is the relative position of the activist identity in a person's hierarchy of roles (Stryker, 2000). Given that activism inherently involves actual behaviors, in Study 1 we also administered a measure that asks individuals to report the likelihood they will engage in a variety of activist behaviors in the future (Activism Orientation Scale: AOS; Corning & Myers, 2002); we complemented this measure in Study 2 by also asking about past behaviors.

Notably, because the AOS differentiates between conventional and high-risk behaviors, we also examined whether these different forms of activism bore different relationships with well-being.

We assessed well-being constructs relevant to three research traditions distinguished in the literature. First, we drew from the hedonic tradition that typically assesses well-being by measuring the triumvirate of life satisfaction and the frequency of positive and negative emotions (Diener, 1984). Second, and most importantly for our purposes, we also drew from the eudaimonic tradition that “focuses on meaning and self-realization and defines well-being in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 141). To this end, we assessed meaning in life, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs that are theoretically proposed to be satisfied when one is intrinsically motivated for a task, and, in Study 3, the sense of vitality, which is theorized to reflect the energy of the self (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Third, we assessed social well-being, or one’s “appraisal of one’s circumstance and functioning in society” (Keyes, 1998, p. 122).

To test our hypotheses, we first conducted two studies that examined correlations between activism and well-being. In Study 1, utilizing a college student sample, and in Study 2, utilizing a national sample of activists matched with a community sample, we hypothesized that activist tendencies would be positively associated with hedonic and eudaimonic indicators of well-being. In both studies, we also tested the supplemental hypotheses that activists would be more likely to “flourish” (Keyes, 2002). Study 2 also examined social well-being as an outcome, with the expectation that activists would score higher on this aspect of functioning. Finally, in Study 3, we tested whether the opportunity to express political activism might *cause* increases in well-being. We did this by randomly assigning individuals to engage in a brief activist behavior, a nonactivist behavior, or no behavior before assessing aspects of their well-being.

## Study 1

### *Participants and Procedure*

An e-mail invitation was sent to all students of a small Midwestern U.S. college inviting them to participate in an online survey: 344 students participated, representing approximately 29% of the students on campus (average age 19.2 years, 62% female, 83% Caucasian). Incentives offered included a lottery with monetary prizes and extra-credit points from some instructors.

### *Measures*

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of and provides sample items from the questionnaires used in Study 1. As can be seen there, we assessed activist

**Table 1.** Scales of Activism and Well-Being Applied In Study 1

Name of the Scale	Items	Sample Item(s)	$\alpha$
Activism Orientation Scale	20		.96
— Conventional Activism	13	Send a letter or email about a political issue to a public official	.96
— High-Risk Activism	7	Engage in a political activity in which you knew you will be arrested.	.93
Activist Identity	4	Being an activist is central to who I am.	.96
Activist Commitment	4	I am truly committed to activism.	.95
Satisfaction with Life Scale	5	In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	.90
Positive Affect /	10	Excited; inspired.	.82
Negative Affect Scale	10	Afraid; scared.	.84
Meaning in Life Questionnaire Presence subscale	5	My life has a clear sense of purpose.	.90
Short Index of Self-Actualization	15	It is better to be yourself than to be popular.	.56
Basic Psychological Needs Scale	21		.87
Autonomy	7	I feel pressured in my life.	.69
Competence	6	Often, I do not feel very competent.	.75
Relatedness	8	I really like the people I interact with.	.80
State Hope Scale	6	I can think of many ways to reach my current goals.	.85
(including Agency subscale)	3	Right now, I see myself as being pretty successful.	.84

*Note.* See text for references.

behavioral intentions via a shortened version of the AOS<sup>1</sup> (Corning & Myers, 2002) by asking subjects to rate the likelihood they will engage in a variety of conventional and high-risk activist behaviors in the future; a factor analysis of the 20 items of the shortened AOS in our sample resulted in the standard two factors of conventional activist behaviors (with an eigenvalue of 9.6, explaining 48.2% of the variance) and high-risk activist behaviors (with an eigenvalue of 2.4, explaining 12.1% of the variance). Subjects were then presented with a description of activism (see Appendix A) before completing the activist identity and commitment scales (see Appendix B); notably, we adapted a subscale from the Social Identity-Specific Collectivism Scale (Reid, 2004) for the identity scale, but created the commitment scale ourselves.

<sup>1</sup> We only report results for a shortened version of the AOS since the original scale was found to have five factors with eigenvalues above 1 in Study 1. To ensure a clearer factor structure and to create a more economical measure for Study 2, we shortened the scale on the basis of item content, trying to keep the broad range of activities. From the original 28 items, 13 items were kept. This new scale correlated highly with the parent scale ( $r = .97$ ) and had a comparable internal consistency ( $\alpha = .94$  vs.  $\alpha = .96$ ). The correlation of both the original and the shortened scale with the high-risk activism subscale was identical at a moderate level ( $r = .59$ ). In support of this procedure, the shortening of the scale did not significantly change the correlations with the well-being indicators. In Study 2, we added the item “help organize a campaign on a social or political topic,” since campaigning seemed to be a common type of behavior that had not yet been addressed in the original version of the AOS.

Hedonic well-being was operationalized via frequently used scales for life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and positive and negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). This is a fairly standard means of assessing the three main dimensions of hedonic well-being (Diener, 1984): one's overall evaluation of one's life in general and the frequency with which one experiences both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Because our theoretical perspective suggested that eudaimonic well-being might also be particularly relevant to political activism, we also followed Ryan and Deci's (2001) suggestions by including scales for self-actualization, which is defined as "the discovery of the real self, and its expression and development" (Jones & Crandall, 1986, p. 63) and meaning in life (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). We also assessed the related construct of hope, which includes a scale for agency (Snyder et al., 1996). Hope is described as "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991, p. 287). Finally, because the kind of intrinsic motivation that might be expressed in political activism is theorized to be accompanied by the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, we assessed the extent to which individuals typically had the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others well-satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2007). Representative sample items for these well-being measures are also presented in Table 1.

## Results

### *Preliminary Analyses*

All activism measures were found to have high reliabilities (Table 1). Exploratory factor analyses led us to conclude that the items assessing activist commitment and identity were indistinguishable, as the items from both scales loaded between .82 and .92 on a single factor that explained 76% of the variance. Given this finding, and the fact that the two scales correlated with the AOS conventional subscale at almost identical and moderately high levels ( $r = .66$  and  $.68$ , respectively), we formed a variable that averaged these two scales, hereafter referred to as AICS (Activist Identity and Commitment Scale;  $\alpha = .96$ ).<sup>2</sup>

To determine whether psychometric evidence would support the computation of a single composite activism measure, we first examined the correlation between the AOS and the AICS; they were highly related,  $r = .71$ . Next, we conducted a higher-order factor analysis, finding that the two variables loaded on one factor that explained 85% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 1.7. We therefore

<sup>2</sup> Due to high redundancy in this scale, it was shortened based on content from 12 to eight items. The correlation with the parent scale and the internal consistency remained high ( $r = .995$ ;  $\alpha = .96$ ).

transformed the AOS scale to match the 7-point scale of the AICS and then averaged the two scores to create a composite measure of activism.

### Primary Analyses

We tested our hypotheses by computing partial correlations between the well-being and the activism measures after controlling for demographics including age, gender, ethnicity, year in college, socioeconomic status, and marital status. As can be seen in Table 2, the activism composite, the AOS, and the AICS were each significantly positively correlated with positive affect, self-actualization, psychological need satisfaction, and hope. The AICS was also associated with higher meaning in life, whereas the AOS was also associated with higher Agency. Analyses of the two subscales of the AOS indicated that conventional rather than high-risk activism was associated with well-being: Conventional activist intentions were significantly correlated with six of the eight well-being measures, whereas high-risk activist intentions were correlated only with higher self-actualization.

To specifically test the idea that activism is associated with human flourishing, we adopted the definition proffered by Fredrickson and Losada (2005), who suggested that people with flourishing mental health have positive to negative affect ratios of 2.9 or above. Applied to the present sample, 6% of the students fulfilled this criterion ( $n = 19$ ). As predicted, this flourishing group of students scored significantly higher on the activism composite measure ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) than did their nonflourishing counterparts ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ),  $t(342) = 2.38$ ,  $p < .05$ . Analyzed differently, the individuals in our sample who scored above the mean on the activism composite were almost three times as likely to be “flourishing” than those who scored below the mean in activism (11% vs. 4%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 344) = 5.45$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 2.** Partial Correlations between Measures of Activism (Including Subscales) and Well-Being, when Controlling for Demographics (Study 1)

	Subjective Well-being			Eudaimonic Well-being				
	LS	PA	NA(r)	ML	SA	NS	Hope	Agency
Activism Composite	.08	.14*	.04	.10 <sup>+</sup>	.20**	.15**	.15*	.09
AICS	.07	.13*	.05	.13*	.20**	.14*	.12*	.07
AICS—Identity	.08	.13*	.07	.14*	.20**	.15**	.11*	.07
AICS—Commitment	.05	.12*	.01	.10 <sup>+</sup>	.17**	.11*	.12*	.08
AOS	.08	.14*	.03	.05	.15**	.17**	.18**	.12*
AOS—Conventional	.13*	.18**	.07	.08 <sup>+</sup>	.17**	.20**	.22**	.18**
AOS—High-Risk	-.06	.03	-.07	-.04	.13*	-.00	-.00	-.07

*Note.* + = below .10; \* = significant at the .05 level; \*\* = significant at the .01 level; LS: Life satisfaction; PA: Positive affect; NA(r): Negative affect—reversed scores; ML: Meaning in life; SA: Self-actualization; NS: Psychological need satisfaction. AOS = Activism Orientation Scale; AICS = Activist Identity and Commitment Scale.

### *Brief Discussion*

Study 1 showed that activism can be operationalized in a relatively short, multidimensional, and psychometrically sound manner. Further, in support of our hypotheses, the composite measure of activism was positively associated with measures of well-being derived from both hedonic and eudaimonic traditions. While not all correlations reached significance, activist identity and commitment, as well as intentions to engage in conventional activism, were found to be most strongly associated with well-being. With the exception of self-actualization, the intention to engage in high-risk activism generally did not have the same positive correlates. Although activists were almost three times as likely to be flourishing than nonactivists, we should note that our baseline flourishing level of 6% was substantially lower than the 17% of flourishing adults reported in a large national sample (Keyes, 2002); perhaps this difference may be explained by the fact that our study was conducted in the week before final exams, a period in which one might expect lower base rates for positive affect.

We next conducted a second study to replicate and extend the findings of Study 1 and to correct for some of its limitations. Specifically, we tested our hypotheses again in a sample of self-identified activists who were matched with community members. We also expanded our measurement of activism by assessing past activist behaviors (rather than solely intentions to engage in such behavior in the future). Finally, we added measures of social well-being, or “the appraisal of one’s circumstance and functioning in society” (Keyes, 1998, p. 124), which is an important third aspect of well-being that seems particularly relevant to activists, given its social dimensions.

## **Study 2**

### *Participants and Procedure*

In May 2006, we contacted via e-mail all of the approximately 2,400 individuals registered on the online network *CampusActivism.org* who reported living in the United States. Additionally, we e-mailed the contact person representing each of the approximately 1,400 groups registered on the website, asking them to forward an e-mail to the members of their groups. As in Study 1, a lottery served as incentive for participation. We selected *CampusActivism.org* as a means of sampling activists for two reasons. First, over 97 different types of activism were represented in the group’s home page, ranging from “Activists for Gay Equality” to “Workers’ International League.” Second, although focused on campus activists, many of the members of the organization have graduated from college, and thus we were able to obtain a relatively large number of noncollege and older subjects.

Via this recruitment strategy, we obtained 359 participants, 47% of whom reported no longer being students. As these participants were recruited through an

activist homepage, we expected this group to be highly engaged in activism. To obtain a comparison group of individuals less engaged in activism but similar in other basic demographics, we hired a survey sampling agency to recruit another 359 participants. The agency sent out e-mail invitations to participate in this study to people who had earlier registered to be in their database in exchange for chances to win lottery prizes. The sampling agency selected individuals from their database so as to match our activist group on age, gender, and education level. This matching was quite successful for gender and education but not for age, as the activist group ( $M = 27.01$ ,  $SD = 10.31$ ) was younger than the control group ( $M = 37.31$ ,  $SD = 13.46$ ),  $t(716) = 11.51$ ,  $p < .001$ . We therefore statistically controlled for these and other basic demographics (see below) in most of our analyses.

Together, the 718 participants had an average age of 32, 67% were female, 84% were Caucasian, and 31% were married. Besides these demographics we also assessed income, occupation, level of education, the size of the community in which subjects lived, and political orientation. We dichotomized the demographics of ethnicity (Caucasian yes/no), marital status (married yes/no), and occupation (student yes/no) to use as control variables for further analyses.

### Measures

Table 3 summarizes the scale characteristics used in Study 2 and provides sample items as well. We used the same activism measures as in Study 1 (i.e., the AICS and the AOS short form). We also adapted the AOS short form to measure past behaviors by rephrasing instructions (“to what extent did you engage in each of the following activities in the past year”) and using new rating scale labels (*not at all*, *a little*, *moderately*, *a lot*); we hereafter refer to these past and future short forms of the AOS as AOS-P and AOS-F, respectively. Participants were asked to rate each activist behavior first for past occurrence and then for future intentions before going to the next behavior.

We used some of the same scales as in Study 1 to assess well-being here, but added a 43-item version of the frequently used psychological well-being scale of Ryff (1989). This scale is commonly used as an operationalization of eudaimonic well-being and consists of six subscales, thereby providing a more differentiated profile of well-being than do the other measures of subjective well-being. Another advantage of this scale is that three of the subscales (i.e., autonomy, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others) correspond to the three psychological needs assessed in Study 1, and the other three (i.e., personal growth, self-acceptance, and purpose in life) connect well with other aspects of eudaimonic well-being, particularly with meaning in life.

We also applied the social well-being scales of Keyes (1998), measuring “the appraisal of one’s circumstance and functioning in society” (p. 122). Keyes differentiated five different facets of social well-being: social integration, social

**Table 3.** Scales and Subscales of Activism, Psychological Well-Being, and Social Well-Being Applied in Study 2

Name of the Scale	Items	Sample Items	$\alpha$
AICS (identity/commitment)	8	Being an activist is central to who I am. I am truly committed to activism.	.99
AOS-F (future intentions)	22		.97
— AOS-F Conventional	15	Send a letter or email about a political issue to a public official.	.97
— AOS-F High-Risk	7	Engage in a political activity in which you knew you will be arrested.	.94
AOS-P (past behavior)	22		.95
— AOS-P Conventional	15	Send a letter or email about a political issue to a public official.	.95
— AOS-P High-Risk	7	Engage in a political activity in which you knew you will be arrested.	.90
Psychological Well-being	43		.94
— Autonomy	7	I tend to worry about what other people think of me.	.78
— Environmental Mastery	7	The demands of everyday life often get me down.	.81
— Personal Growth	7	For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth.	.79
— Positive Relations	7	People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others.	.79
— Self-Acceptance	7	In general, I feel confident and positive about myself.	.88
— Purpose in Life	8	I have a sense of direction and purpose in life.	.78
Social Well-being	15		.83
— Social Integration	3	I feel close to other people in my community.	.86
— Social Acceptance	3	I believe that people are kind.	.64
— Social Contribution	3	I have something valuable to give to the world.	.76
— Social Actualization	3	The world is becoming a better place for everyone.	.72
— Social Coherence	3	The world is too complex for me.	.46

*Note.* The scales of subjective well-being were identical to the ones used in Study 1. See text for references.

contribution, social coherence, social actualization, and social acceptance. See Table 3 for details.

## Results

### *Preliminary Analyses*

The reliabilities of all activism scales were comparable to Study 1 (see Table 3). In a principal component factor analysis, the items of the AOS-F showed the expected factors of conventional activism (explaining 58.7% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 12.9) and high-risk activism (explaining 12.1% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 2.7). The same procedure for the AOS-P led to similar results, yielding a conventional activism factor (explaining 49.1% of the

variance with an eigenvalue of 10.8) and a high-risk activism factor (explaining 11.9% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 2.6). The AOS-P scale correlated well with the AICS ( $r = .79$ ) and with the AOS-F ( $r = .85$ ). A higher order factor analysis of the AOS-F, AOS-P, and AICS resulted in a single factor accounting for 88% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 2.6. Such results again support the creation of a composite measure of activism consisting of the average of these three components.

Study 2 provided four opportunities to test the construct validity of our activism composite. First, our assumption that the group of individuals recruited from *CampusActivism.org* would be higher in activism than the control group recruited by the survey sampling agency was supported, as the two groups differed significantly on the Activism Composite ( $M$  (activists) = 4.28,  $SD = 1.29$ ;  $M$  (control) = 2.15,  $SD = 1.07$ ;  $t$  (716) = 23.96,  $p < .001$ ). Second, we found that people who indicated that they were a member of a group or organization that advocates for a social or political cause scored significantly higher on the activism composite ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) than did those who did not indicate membership in such a group ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ),  $t$  (716) = 24.90,  $p < .001$ . Third, participants were asked to name all of the activist groups they belonged to; we found that the activism composite correlated highly with the number of groups they named ( $r = .61$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, we offered all subjects the opportunity to donate a percentage of their potential lottery prize winnings to a cause of their choice. After controlling for nine demographic variables (gender, age, ethnicity, income, level of education, student status, marital status, size of community, and political orientation), we found that participants scoring higher on the activism composite reported being willing to donate a larger percentage of their potential lottery winnings ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Primary Analyses

Table 4 reports partial correlations between the activism and the well-being measures, after controlling for the above-mentioned nine demographic variables. As can be seen, the activism composite was positively associated with life satisfaction, positive affect, all the Ryff (1989) scales of psychological well-being, and all of the Keyes (1998) scales of social well-being. Whereas the AICS and the AOS conventional subscales (past and future) correlated with each well-being scale to a similar extent, the past and future high-risk activism scales yielded much weaker associations with well-being.

We next examined the extent to which participants were flourishing. Keyes (2002) operationalized this construct as occurring when a subject scored at “a high level (high = upper tertile) on one of the two measures of emotional well-being [i.e., life satisfaction or positive affect] and high levels on six of the 11 scales of positive functioning [i.e., scales of psychological and social well-being]” (p. 210). We applied this operationalization with one minor variation.

**Table 4.** Partial Correlations of Activism and Well-Being, When Controlling For Demographics (Study 2)

		Activism Composite	AICS	AOS-F Convent.	AOS-P Convent.	AOS-F High-Risk	AOS-P High-Risk
<b>SWB</b>	LS	.19**	.18**	.17**	.19**	.06	.07*
	PA	.26**	.26**	.23**	.26**	.08*	.11**
	NA(r)	.00	.04	-.02	.01	-.06	-.07
	Average	.24**	.26**	.23**	.23**	.04	.05
<b>Psychological Well-being</b>	— AU	.23**	.23**	.21**	.20**	.08*	.08*
	— EM	.09*	.10**	.09	.10**	-.04	.00
	— PG	.28**	.30**	.28**	.22**	.10*	.05
	— PR	.15**	.16**	.15**	.13**	.01	.01
	— PL	.26**	.27**	.25**	.23**	.04	.04
	— SA	.19**	.19**	.16**	.19**	.04	.06
	Average	.26**	.28**	.25**	.22**	.06	.03
	Accept.	.10*	.13**	.10*	.07	-.00	-.03
<b>Social Well-being</b>	Integr.	.25**	.24**	.26**	.23**	.08*	.05
	Actual.	.05	.09*	.04	.02	-.05	-.06
	Coher.	.22**	.20**	.21**	.19**	.11*	.10*
	Contrib.	.33**	.34**	.32**	.29**	.08*	.06

*Note.* \* = significant at the .05 level; \*\* = significant at the .01 level; SWB = Subjective Well-being; AU = Autonomy; EM = Environmental Mastery; PG = Personal Growth; PR = Positive Relations; PL = Purpose in Life; SA = Self-Acceptance; Accept. = Social Acceptance; Integr. = Social Integration; Actual. = Social Actualization; Coher. = Social Coherence; Contrib. = Social Contribution. AOS = Activism Orientation Scale; AICS = Activist Identity and Commitment Scale.

Specifically, in his study Keyes applied z-scores, which are of course sample dependent as each value is calculated in relation to the other values. In the present case, such a procedure would be inappropriate, given that we found that activists have higher well-being than non-activists; computing z-scores by combining the two groups with different well-being levels would therefore overestimate the scores of activists and underestimate the scores of nonactivists. To solve this issue, we used the upper quintile of the original scales instead of the upper tertile of z-scores (a procedure approved by Keyes, personal communication, December 15, 2006).

By this method, 18% of our community sample recruited by the survey agency was categorized as flourishing, a percentage quite comparable to Keyes' (2002) figure of 17% in a large national sample of adults. As predicted, however, a significantly larger percentage of the individuals recruited via *CampusActivism.org* were classified as flourishing, namely 28%,  $\chi^2(1, N = 718) = 12.75, p < .001$ . (Virtually the same results were obtained when splitting participants according to the activism composite, as done in Study 1.) Analyzed differently, scores on the activism composite were significantly higher among the individuals who were

classified as flourishing ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ) than those who did not receive this classification ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ),  $t(716) = 3.78$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### *Brief Discussion*

The results of Study 2 provided additional support for our hypotheses. As in Study 1, we found that activism was associated with higher psychological well-being, at least for conventional as opposed to high-risk activist behaviors,<sup>3</sup> and that activists were more likely to flourish than were nonactivists. In terms of intrinsic motivation and need satisfaction, the indicators of autonomy, competence (environmental mastery), and relatedness (positive relations with others) were all significantly correlated with the activism composite.

Study 2 also extended Study 1's results by replicating findings in a national sample that included substantial numbers of adults and noncollege students and by examining relations between activism and additional measures of psychological and social well-being.

Although we attempted to improve the construct validity of the activism measures, we recognize that self-reported behaviors are not ideal assessment procedures and should be complemented by other techniques in the future. Also, despite the better sampling procedures in this study compared to Study 1, and despite our attempts to formulate neutral invitation e-mails so as to obtain participants from varied fields of activism, we must note that the majority of the activists in our sample described their political orientation from somewhat to far left on a 7-point scale ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.63$  on a scale of 1 = far left, 7 = far right). Importantly, as we statistically controlled for political orientation in our correlations, this variable is not likely to have affected the results.

Another weakness of Study 2 concerns its correlational design, which does not allow us to make conclusions regarding whether activism might actually *cause*

<sup>3</sup> For researchers interested in the details of measuring high-risk activism, it should be mentioned that whereas the AOS-F-C, the AOS-P-C, and the AICS are a homogeneous set of scales ( $r = .81$  to  $.85$ ), the two high-risk activism scales ( $r = .69$ ) seem to be a different type of measure as their correlations with the first set are rather lower ( $r$ s between  $.40$  and  $.61$ ). Also, their correlations with well-being differ from the first set of activism measures (see Table 4). In addition, a clear shortcoming of the high-risk scales is their low variance, as they are skewed towards not reporting high risk behaviors; this makes sense, as it is likely that relatively few high-risk activists participated in the study and that participants may have hesitated to provide sensitive data over the Internet about sometimes illegal activities. Although such limitations would suggest excluding high-risk activism as a composite variable, we nonetheless retained the items so as to: (a) apply the existing operationalization of activism via the AOS along with our new measures, (b) avoid the impression of only reporting results most favorable to our hypotheses (i.e., excluding the high-risk scales would have increased the correlations between our activism composite and well-being between  $.01$  to  $.05$ ), and (c) avoid limiting our conclusions to the group of conventional activists, as even among the 109 "high-risk activists" who scored above the mean on the HR-Intention scale, the AICS correlated with psychological well-being at  $r = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that even people engaged in high risk activism may profit from committing to and identifying with being an activist. Further studies that focus on this special subgroup of activists would be necessary to clarify these somewhat contradictory findings.

well-being. Ideally, of course, we would randomly assign individuals to engage in some set of relatively long-term activist behaviors, as that would be both most externally valid and provide the strongest intervention to test this hypothesis. Given the impracticality of doing so, however, we therefore opted to compare the well-being effects of engaging in a relatively brief and easy activist behavior versus engaging in a similar nonactivist behavior or versus engaging in no behavior at all. At the same time that such a manipulation decreases the likelihood of finding any well-being benefits of activism, it would make any significant results that are detected all the more noteworthy.

### Study 3

#### *Participants and Procedure*

All students at the same small Midwestern college sampled in Study 1 received an e-mail invitation to participate in an online survey about the college cafeteria; they were told that survey responses would be anonymously provided to the director of the college's food services department and were offered the chance to win a lottery prize for participating. Recipients of the e-mail were assigned to one of three groups: an activist group, a nonactivist comparison group, and a control group which provided a well-being baseline comparison. Each group received a different internet link to a set of surveys that corresponded with the relevant manipulation. Assignment to groups was done with a "randomized block design" by randomizing subjects to conditions within the blocking factors of gender, year in college, and whether the student had purchased a prepaid meal plan from the college or whether he or she cooks primarily for him or herself.

Participants assigned to the activist group ( $n = 112$ ) and the nonactivist group ( $n = 94$ ) were asked to complete a survey about their opinions regarding various aspects of the food service at the college. As a manipulation of activism, participants were provided with four suggestions for improving either *ethical-political aspects* (activist condition) of the food in the cafeteria or more *hedonic, self-oriented aspects* (nonactivist condition) of the food in the cafeteria. For each of the four suggestions, participants rated how important each of two reasons were to them. Participants assigned to the activist group were provided with suggestions that concerned ethical/political/social aspects of the food served, such as offering more local, organic, vegetarian, or fair trade food. For example, subjects in the activist group read "The cafeteria should offer fair trade coffee and other fair trade products . . ." and then rated the importance of the two reasons: ". . . to support farmers and their families in developing countries" and ". . . to foster a just global economic system." In contrast, those in the nonactivist group were provided with suggestions that primarily concerned hedonic or self-centered aspects of the food, such as lowering the prices of the food or improving its variety, taste, or quality.

For example, one nonactivist item read “The taste of the cafeteria food should be improved . . .” and the reasons subjects rated were “. . . to make the cafeteria experience more interesting” and “. . . so I can enjoy the food more.” Both groups were then asked to write a personal comment to the director of the cafeteria about the aspects of food of highest importance to them. At the end of the survey, participants in the activist and nonactivist groups completed well-being scales (see below). A third group of subjects ( $n = 90$ ) answered these well-being questions before taking the cafeteria survey, in order to provide us with a baseline well-being assessment for comparison purposes. In summary, the activist group engaged in a brief act in which they advocated for social or political causes (see our definition of activism in Appendix A) before completing the well-being measures, the non-activist group made more self-interested requests before completing the well-being measures, and the control group made requests only *after* completing the well-being questionnaires.

### *Well-Being Scales*

The well-being scales in the order administered included the presence subscale of the meaning in life questionnaire ( $\alpha = .90$ ; Steger et al., 2006) and an item from the satisfaction with life scale ( $\alpha = .92$ ; Diener et al., 1985); both of these measures were used in Study 1 but were adapted here to focus on the present moment by adding “currently” or “at this time” to the items (e.g., the life satisfaction item was changed to “Right now, I am satisfied with life”). In addition, we included the state level version of the vitality scale (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Vitality is a concept related to intrinsic motivation and eudaimonic well-being, comprising facets of feeling energized, alert, and alive (Ryan & Deci, 2008); the scale had a reliability of  $\alpha = .92$  in the present sample and was comprised of six items rated on a 7-point scale from *not at all true* to *very true*. A representative item was “At this time, I have energy and spirit.” Finally, we assessed the state version of the positive affect/negative affect scale ( $\alpha = .91/.86$ ; Watson et al., 1988), which was previously described in Study 1.

### **Results**

We first conducted ANOVAs on each of the four well-being variables to assess any potential effects of our activism manipulation. Although the effects on most of the well-being scales pointed in the hypothesized direction, only effects for vitality approached significance ( $F(2, 293) = 2.43, p = .09$ ). Follow-up t-tests revealed that neither of the two “intervention groups” differed significantly from the “baseline group,” but that participants assigned to the activism group reported significantly higher vitality than participants assigned to the nonactivist group,  $t(204) = 2.19, p < .05$ . See Table 5 for means and standard deviations of the well-being variables.

**Table 5.** Means (and Standard Deviations) of Well-Being Variables for each Experimental Condition, Study 3

	Activist Group (n = 112)	Nonactivist Group (n = 94)	Control Group (n = 90)
<b>Vitality</b>	4.32 (1.36)	3.88 (1.53)	4.14 (1.42)
<b>Meaning in Life</b>	4.91 (1.30)	4.84 (1.35)	4.71 (1.36)
<b>Positive Affect</b>	2.84 (.84)	2.71 (.86)	2.80 (.83)
<b>Negative Affect</b>	1.82 (.63)	1.99 (.84)	1.92 (.73)

We tested whether the effects of our manipulation on vitality might be due to the possibility that those in the activist group cared more about the issues they had rated than did those in the nonactivist group; that is, perhaps affirming values improved subjects' vitality. No support was obtained for this hypothesis, however, as the four suggestions for improving the cafeteria's food were rated as significantly *less* important by participants in the activist group ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) than in the nonactivist group ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = .54$ ),  $t(204) = 5.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . This suggests that vitality was higher among participants assigned to the activist group *despite* the fact that they cared less about the political issues they rated than the nonactivists cared about the personal issues they rated.

We also examined the possibility that increases in vitality due to the activism intervention only occurred for previously politically active participants. No support was obtained for this alternative hypothesis either, as vitality was unrelated to the interaction between group assignment and how active participants reported being in political groups on campus,  $\beta = .02$ ,  $t(202) = .16$ ,  $p = .88$ . Such analyses suggest that something about engaging in activism itself improved subjects' feelings of vitality, regardless of their past political activism.

### Brief Discussion

Study 3 demonstrated that engaging in a brief, low-involvement activist behavior led to significantly higher vitality than engaging in a nonactivist behavior; this effect was neither due to caring more about the activist opinions expressed nor to preexisting political commitment. These results should be treated with caution, however, since generally speaking the causal effects of activism on well-being were rather weak. Further, although results were similar for the five well-being indicators, the only significant effects occurred for vitality. Perhaps the cognitive judgments necessary for participants to rate their feelings of meaning in life and life satisfaction are too stable to be affected by such a brief, relatively

subtle manipulation. It may also be that no significant results were obtained for the other affect measures because the potential well-being effects of engaging in a very brief, low-involvement activist behavior may have already vanished by the time participants answered the PANAS (last in our measures). The fact that vitality yielded the only significant effect is theoretically interesting, however, given that this index of well-being has been proposed to be a direct reflection of the energy of the self and of intrinsically motivated action (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Such a result supports our proposal that political activism is often intrinsically motivating and may reflect a fundamental human motivation.

Nonetheless, we would note that our manipulation was perhaps not as strong as would be needed to discern differences in other measures of well-being. The fact that participants in the activist condition rated the issues they were presented with as less important than did the nonactivist group suggests that they may not have cared enough about the political issues in which we asked them to engage in order to affect their well-being. Future research might individualize activist behaviors to fit participant interests, ask participants to engage in a longer-term activist behavior of their own choice, or assess changes in well-being and activism over the course of a longer-term, longitudinal study.

## General Discussion

These three studies provide some support for the hypothesis that engaging in political activism is associated with higher levels of well-being. In both college-student and national samples, well-being was higher to the extent people self-identified as an activist, expressed commitment to the activist role, and reported engaging or intending to engage in activist behaviors. Results were similar across measures of hedonic well-being (e.g., life satisfaction and positive affect), eudaimonic well-being (e.g., personal growth, purpose in life, vitality), and social well-being (e.g., social integration). The results of both studies also suggest that activists are more likely to experience the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, an indicator of more frequent experiences of intrinsic motivation. Both Studies 1 and 2 also showed that significantly larger percentages of activists met preexisting criteria for “human flourishing” (Keyes, 2002) than did those less engaged in activism.

Klandermans (1989) has argued that, if activists are indeed higher in well-being, their “happiness might reflect the basic sense of security people need to become actively involved in their society” (p. 61). While this may be so and our analyses are admittedly preliminary, the results of Study 3 provided some data suggesting that the causal arrow may (also) flow from activism towards well-being. That is, we found that subjects assigned to engage in a short-term, low-involvement activist behavior reported higher vitality afterwards than did subjects engaged in a nonactivist behavior; further analyses did not support two

alternative explanations for this finding. This result is congruent with our theoretical assumption that activism fosters the expression of intrinsic motivation, as vitality is closely linked to this type of autonomous motivation: "Intrinsically motivated activity should be accompanied by feelings of vitality, in that such activity represents a spontaneous expression of the organizational tendency of life" (Ryan & Frederick, 1997, p. 534). Although it is in some ways remarkable that a relatively brief and subtle manipulation had any effects on well-being whatsoever, it must also be noted that these results were somewhat weak and limited to a single measure of well-being. Therefore the conclusions that can be drawn from this result should sound a note of caution. Nonetheless, such evidence for the potential causal role of activism in people's well-being is not only consistent with other preexisting qualitative research (e.g., Downton & Wehr, 1997) and quantitative research on volunteering (e.g., Meier & Stutzer, 2008), but might suggest that even if activism attracts individuals with psychological deficits such as a "spoiled identity" (Kaplan & Liu, 2000) or low self-esteem (Baumeister, Dale, & Muraven, 2000), activism might promote positive personal development from "shame and loneliness" to "pride and solidarity" (Britt & Heise, 2000, p. 252).

Along these lines, it is also worth noting that although activism was consistently correlated with higher positive affect, it was consistently not related to negative affect. It may be that some activists experience low negative affect as a result of this lifestyle, whereas other activists experience relatively higher levels, especially when they perceive injustice (VanYperen, Hagedoorn, Zweers, & Postma, 2000). As Adams (1987) wrote, "Like the spark that ignites the fuel in an engine, anger is the stimulus that initiates action" (p. 10). Perhaps taking some concrete actions helps to alleviate, at least temporarily, such preexisting, injustice-related negative affect. Future research will need to explore that question in more detail than we did here.

It is also interesting to note that conventional and high-risk activist behaviors did not provide similar patterns of results in Studies 1 and 2. For example, factor analyses of the AOS consistently revealed that conventional and high-risk activist behaviors were empirically distinguishable. Further, whereas conventional activist behaviors correlated with activist commitment and identity at  $r = .70$  in Study 2, high-risk activist behaviors were correlated with the same measure at  $r = .53$ , thus accounting for only about half as much of joint variance. These results indicate that, compared to associations for conventional activism, the extent to which people pursue high-risk forms of activism has a somewhat weaker relationship with how much they see themselves as activists or feel committed to activism. Finally, the high-risk behavior scales did not correlate strongly with the well-being measures, generally yielding nonsignificant results. Three possible reasons occur to us for these differences between conventional and high-risk activists. First, it may be that the high-risk scale is of lower quality, thus yielding weaker results with well-being outcomes. Second, perhaps high-risk activists are less generative

and socially interested, and thus reap fewer well-being benefits. Third, it may be that this group feels a greater sense of injustice and hopelessness, which not only makes them less happy but impels them to more extreme activist behaviors, including illegal ones.

### *Future Research*

This discussion leads us to wonder whether it may be possible to distinguish certain particularly “healthy” activist behaviors from those that are less beneficial (while at the same time noting that we did not find any activist behaviors that harmed well-being). Future research could identify a considerably broader range of activities and perhaps determine which types are most beneficial for well-being; of course, experimental manipulations would be particularly useful in answering such a question. Further, although our results controlled for political orientation, it would be interesting to examine whether well-being differs between activists with different political orientations, who have different causes, or who advocate their own interests (e.g., for their group to be treated equally) versus the causes of others (e.g., for children or the environment at large).

Further research should also empirically examine potential mediators of the activism well-being relationship; several possibilities spring to mind. For example, might broader attitudes and values such as social interest, community feeling, and generativity be relevant? In addition, it seems likely that activists might be higher in the tendency to engage in *problem-focused coping* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which could benefit their well-being. Or perhaps their activism leads them to experience greater consistency between their deeply held (political) beliefs and values and their actions, thereby reducing unpleasant *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957). Finally, would experience sampling methods show that when engaged in political activism, people report feeling more intrinsically motivated and having their needs better satisfied, and would such reports mediate the positive associations between well-being and activism?

### *Limitations*

Two important limitations of this research deserve special mention. First, none of the samples we recruited were truly representative, and it is quite possible that our use of e-mail recruitment and online surveys biased the samples as well. However, we would note that this strategy allowed us to offer every single student on (and off) campus the opportunity to participate in Study 1, as they all had an e-mail address and internet access. Further, e-mailing and the Internet are also frequently used tools of activists and may be particularly relevant for this group of people. We would also note that some evidence suggests that results obtained through online surveys are closely comparable to lab results (Azar, 2000).

Second, our activism measures and the well-being scales used were self-report measures, which have widely known limitations. As such, further research should replicate the findings with other assessment strategies.

### Conclusion

We hope the results of the present set of studies may be of use in at least three ways. First, by showing that activism is associated not only with subjective well-being, but also with eudaimonic and social well-being, we hope to have made a small contribution to the field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which has a strong focus on fostering well-being. Second, our elaboration and testing of measures of activism might be helpful for future research to increase our knowledge of the population of activists. And last but not least, our findings may be used to both recruit new activists and maintain the motivation of established activists. That is, activist groups might use these results to help recruit new members from a broader range of people who might be motivated to engage in political action more by opportunities for personal development than by other well-known (often times ethical) arguments alone. Further, they might be able to find ways to emphasize the psychological benefits of activism to help encourage current activists in their daily struggle for a better society.

## Appendix A

### *Description of Activism in Study 1*

To help you understand the next questions on “activism,” please read the following:

- The goal of activism is to *advocate a social or political cause*, such as protecting the environment, human-rights issues, opposing abortion, or preventing wars.
- A person engaged in activism is *often an active member of a group* that is advocating a social or political cause, such as Greenpeace, a local human-rights club, or a national “pro-life” group.
- *Often*, activism means to *actively participate in democracy*, for example by *protesting, campaigning, educating others, raising awareness, and lobbying* for social or political causes.
- Some behaviors can only be identified as activism by looking at the *underlying (“political”) motivation* (i.e., some even see “turning off the light” as an activism-related behavior if it is aimed at protecting the environment by saving energy—but not if the motive is to save money).
- The various *behaviors that you rated before* are considered to be representative of activism.

*Description of Activism in Study 2*

To help you understand the next questions, please read the following broad definition of activism:

“The goal of activism is to advocate a social or political cause (e.g. protecting the environment, human-rights issues, opposing abortion, or preventing wars); the means of activism can vary greatly, e.g. from institutionalized acts like starting a petition to unconventional acts like civil disobedience.”

## Appendix B

*AICS (Activist Identity and Commitment Scale) Used in Study 1 and 2*

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

1. Being an activist is central to who I am.
2. I am truly committed to engage in activism.
3. I identify myself as an activist.
4. I make time for activism, even when I'm busy.
5. People who know me well would call me an activist.
6. I go out of my way to engage in activism.
7. Being an activist is an important reflection of who I am.
8. I take the time I need to engage in activism.

[Odd numbers: Activist Identity; Even numbers: Activist Commitment]

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