

“The Whole Thing Is a Juggling Act”: Qualitative Exploration of Goal Systems Among Activists and Nonactivists

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Supplementary Materials: Materials, Preregistration [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

Drawing on goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002), this preregistered study explored the relationships between political and non-political goals among individuals with varying levels of political engagement. We conducted 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews with activists, non-activists, and former activists from Poland and Norway. We identify three recurrent relationships between political and other life goals, such as work, relationships, health, and basic psychological needs: (1) suppression, where non-political goals eclipse activism or vice-versa; (2) conflict, experienced as chronic trade-offs that often precipitate burnout; and (3) facilitation, whereby non-political goals enable sustained engagement. These relationships manifest as four distinct goal structures. Activists typically displayed either a “juggling” structure that continuously balances multiple commitments, or a “political-dominant” structure in which the cause overrides alternative goals. Non-activists most often subordinated political aims, whereas former activists described a fluctuating “all-or-nothing” structure—initial single-minded commitment followed by strategic withdrawal when costs outweighed perceived impact. Cross-nationally, Polish participants reported more multi-issue activism and acute work–activism conflicts than Norwegians, potentially reflecting longer working hours and political dissatisfaction. Our findings corroborate goal systems theory by showing how dynamic configurations of goal relations underpin trajectories of engagement, disengagement and re-engagement.

Keywords

goal systems theory, political activism, goal facilitation, goal conflict, qualitative research

A growing number of individuals worldwide recognize the importance of pressing social and political issues, such as the climate crisis (United Nations, 2022) or gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2021). However, a significant gap emerges when we compare the number of people who express strong concern about these issues with those who actively participate in efforts to address them (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). This raises an important question: Why are some individuals highly active, others moderately involved, and some eventually withdraw or do not participate at all in political actions?



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To address this question, we adopt a general motivational perspective based on goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002). While much of the existing literature on goals focuses on the pursuit of single goals or dual-goal relationships, real-life scenarios often involve individuals managing multiple commitments (Emmons & King, 1988; Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Kung & Scholer, 2021). Goal systems theory not only acknowledges this complexity but also emphasizes the importance of considering an entire network of goals when predicting behavior (Kruglanski, Chernikova, et al., 2015). We apply this perspective to investigate and compare the motivational structures of activists and non-activists.

According to this theory, goal importance is just one factor necessary to trigger actions aligned with that goal. Another, often underestimated, aspect of motivated behavior is how a person's multiple goals are interconnected. Specifically, the theory predicts that a behavior will occur if the goal associated with that behavior is either more important than alternative goals or can be integrated with them. In contrast, if other goals are more important and conflict with the goal in question, the behavior is unlikely to occur.

There are at least three different goal network scenarios relevant for explaining political engagement (Kruglanski, Jasko, et al., 2015). First, either a political or non-political goal dominates, leading to the suppression or complete disengagement from the less dominant goal. Second, when an individual highly values both their political and non-political goals, they may find it difficult to disengage from either, resulting in an ongoing goal conflict. Third, if political goals are integrated with alternative goals, pursuing one goal may facilitate the achievement of other goals. We briefly discuss these scenarios as they pertain to political activism.

Goal Dominance

Literature on biographical availability and the biographical consequences of activism provides valuable insights into the role of goal dominance (Vestergren et al., 2017). It shows that factors such as family, job situation, and access to resources such as time and money can significantly impact—and be impacted by—an individual's engagement in political actions (Petrie, 2004). For example, research on activists participating in Freedom Summer, who volunteered to register Black voters in Mississippi in 1964, revealed that they were typically younger, unemployed, unmarried, and without children compared to the general population (Fernandez & McAdam, 1988). Longitudinal evidence also indicated that political activists married later and were less likely to have children than non-activists (Sherkat & Blocker, 1997). These studies suggest that a political goal may dominate over alternative goals when these alternative concerns are less salient or absent from a person's life.

In other cases, political engagement might prevail due to its overwhelming intensity. Research on political extremists reveals that they are willing to sacrifice close relationships and even personal safety to pursue political goals they consider sacred (Atran et al., 2014). Similarly, studies on obsessive and harmonious passion in the political context are revealing. While harmonious passion integrates with other life goals, obsessive passion often leads to the suppression of alternative goals (Vallerand, 2010). Activists frequently exhibit passion for their cause, which correlates positively with their political engagement (Rip et al., 2012). However, those with obsessive passion, as opposed to harmonious passion, are more likely to experience negative health consequences, partly due to their tendency to neglect their health and safety (St-Louis et al., 2016).

Finally, non-political goals may sometimes take precedence over political involvement, leading individuals to withdraw or refrain from political engagement. For instance, people balancing full-time work and family commitments may be less likely to participate in social activism (Dunham & Bengtson, 1994; Klatch, 2000). By including the group of non-activists in our study, we aimed at investigating the motivational dynamics behind a lack of engagement.

However, even when there is a trade-off between political and non-political goals, disengagement is not the only option as individuals may try to endure the conflict and pursue goals despite the challenges. We turn to this possibility next.

Goal Conflict

There is indeed evidence suggesting that activists often struggle with conflicts between their activism and other goals (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Kennelly, 2014; Vestergren et al., 2017). These conflicts can arise between activism and family life (Gildea, 2013) as some activists feel they must sacrifice connections with relatives or struggle to find time to nurture

these relationships (Aceros et al., 2021). Work and education can present challenges as well (Klatch, 2000; Whalen & Flacks, 1989), with some activists feeling overwhelmed and distracted by political matters they view as more urgent than their other responsibilities (Linder, 2019).

While the literature suggests that goal conflicts can negatively affect goal attainment and overall well-being (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013; Emmons & King, 1988), people may value these seemingly irreconcilable goals so highly that they are unwilling to relinquish them easily. However, this persistence may come with costs. Research on activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015) indicates that the trade-off between political engagement and other goals can be a significant source of distress. Therefore, it is possible that goal conflicts precede disengagement from activism due to their negative psychological impact.

Despite the importance of this issue, there is a scarcity of studies on the nature of goal conflicts that activists encounter. For instance, it is uncertain whether highly committed activists avoid potential conflicts among their goals by sacrificing aspects of their non-political life or whether they are more effective at managing these conflicts. Moreover, the prediction that the presence of alternative goals necessarily leads to disengagement or inner conflict is not as straightforward as it might seem.

Goal Facilitation

Studies investigating the effects of biographical availability yield mixed results in terms of its implications for goal relations. For instance, while some research identifies marriage and parenthood as negative predictors of engagement (e.g., Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991), other studies do not find a negative correlation between these factors and political participation (Nepstad & Smith, 1999). Some authors argue that biographical circumstances typically viewed as constraints to participation can also be considered facilitators of activism, depending on how they align with the goals of the movement (Almanzar & Herring, 2004).

Goal systems theory offers a potential explanation for the inconsistent findings. It suggests that when political goals are well integrated with other goals, the pursuit of one goal can facilitate the achievement of others. Facilitation may occur when one goal helps achieve another or when the means for achieving different goals overlap (e.g., meeting friends while participating in a protest; Kruglanski, Chernikova, et al., 2015). Previous research has shown that facilitating connections within a person's goal system are associated with greater goal achievement (Riediger et al., 2005). Individuals experiencing goal facilitation also tend to report higher levels of positive emotions and life satisfaction (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013).

Research in the domain of activism identified various gains activists experience, such as empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 2005) or acquiring new knowledge (Klandermans et al., 2008). It might be expected that the most dedicated activists are particularly skilled at finding synergy between their political and non-political goals compared to those who see them as mutually exclusive. However, research on goal facilitation versus goal conflict in activism documenting this possibility remains scarce.

Present Research

In summary, despite the extensive data on political engagement and alternative life goals, existing research has certain limitations. First, while some studies investigate multiple life domains, most tend to focus on a limited subset of goals (e.g., the relationship between family goals and political activism). They also often examine only one direction of influence (e.g., the consequences of political engagement for work goals). Moreover, the set of alternative goals is typically determined by researchers rather than emerging from the participants themselves. As a result, it remains unclear whether these goals are relevant to participants' decisions and whether they even constitute "constraints," as often assumed. Importantly, while some studies reveal negative relationships between alternative life domains and political engagement, others do not find such an impact, or even demonstrate a positive relationship. Finally, these studies do not include non-activists—a group whose motivational dynamics may offer important insights into the reasons behind lack of engagement, an area that remains understudied.

A systematic and theory-guided motivational analysis that addresses these inconsistencies is lacking. Our project aimed to fill these gaps by conducting a bottom-up analysis of the bidirectional relationships between political and

non-political goals among activists and non-activists. The primary objective was to explore the relationships between political goals and other important goals in individuals' lives from the participants' perspective. The second objective was to identify potential differences in overarching goal structures among individuals who consider political issues important but vary in their level of engagement. By examining the relationship between the political causes that non-activists consider important (despite not engaging with them) and their non-political goals, we aimed to better understand why people withdraw from or refrain from political engagement in the first place.

Whereas most previous studies in this context have relied on quantitative methodologies, we employed a qualitative approach. Applying a qualitative approach allowed us to understand 1) the complexities within participants' goal relations rather than restricting them to indicate either a facilitation or a conflict as is typically the case with quantitative assessments (e.g., see [Emmons & King, 1988](#)) and 2) how goal relations develop over time. It also enabled participants to identify and define their own most important goals, rather than responding to a researcher-defined set as is typically done in matrix approaches ([Gray et al., 2017](#)). We studied these processes in two European countries with historically distinct political systems and traditions of political engagement: Poland and Norway.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We conducted 40 semi-structured individual interviews with self-identified activists and non-activists in Poland and Norway (10 activists and 10 non-activists per country). The sample size was determined a priori based on data saturation estimates for meta-themes in cross-cultural, multi-site qualitative research ([Hagaman & Wutich, 2017](#)). Recruitment was executed via activist mailing lists and social media. Interviews (duration: 70 – 150 minutes) took place in Polish or English between February and June 2022 in person or online. To be eligible, participants had to self-identify either as a) activists or b) non-activists, and express interest in gender equality or climate change matters in a prescreening survey (see [SOM](#) for details). Participants received approximately 40 euros in compensation. The final sample consisted of 13 men, 26 women, and 1 nonbinary participant aged between 20 to 60+ (see Table S1, see [SOM](#) for details).

After providing informed consent, participants were asked about the biographical context of their activist engagement or interest respectively. Afterward, participants were encouraged to reflect on the relations between their political and non-political goals. To facilitate this process, they were invited to map out these goals and their interconnectedness using post-it notes or Google Jamboard. The full interview guides and the preliminary coding scheme are available in the preregistration.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. MAXQDA ([VERBI Software, 2021](#)) and NVivo ([Lumivero, 2020](#)) software were utilized to analyze the transcripts. All study procedures were approved by the Ethics Committees of Jagiellonian University and the University of Oslo.

Analytic Strategy

During analysis, we focused on two distinct analytical questions: 1) How do participants experience the relations between political and other life goals? and 2) What goal structures between political and other life goals exist among participants at various levels of political engagement?

We applied an inductive-deductive codebook-based thematic analysis ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#); [Proudfoot, 2023](#)), as it allows—through descriptive and latent coding—for moving beyond the description of the observed content of the interviews to identification and explanation of relationships and possible underlying psychological and social mechanisms reflective of critical realism ([Christodoulou, 2024](#); [Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021](#)).

During data analysis and interpretation, to ensure trustworthiness, we followed the reflexive steps outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). After data familiarization, we applied our preregistered coding tree to the first five transcripts. Following our inductive-deductive analysis approach, we coded the data both according to our predefined categories as well as openly to capture concepts that were not originally included in the coding tree but were relevant to the study's aims (more details in [SOM](#)). After coding the first five transcripts, an extensive discussion between team members

followed, aiming at obtaining intercoder consensus and resulting in coding tree modifications. The revised version was then used to guide coding for subsequent transcripts in an iterative process. While the analysis focused on recurring themes and patterns across the data, we also looked for diverging cases and their contexts to enrich our framework (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Results

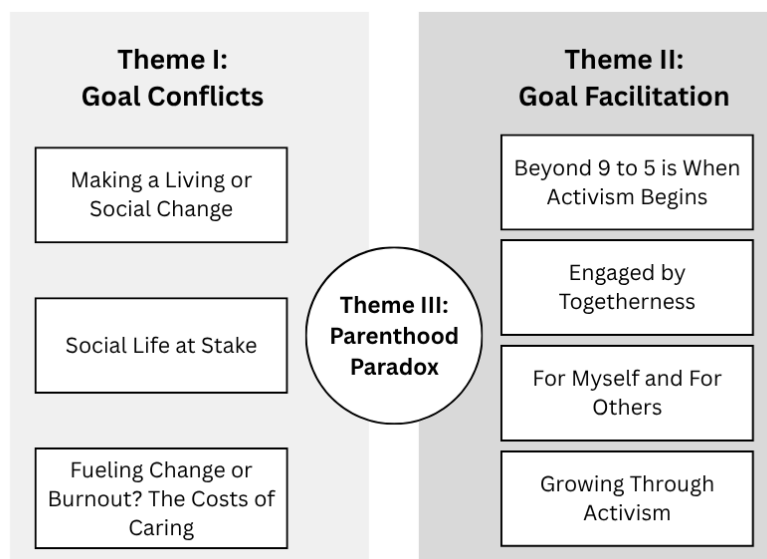
In the following sections, we present the results of the analysis with our primary focus laying on activists (respondents referred to as ACT) with non-activists (respondents referred to as NACT) serving as a contrast group, enabling us to observe the uniqueness of the activists' goal structures.

1) How Are the Relations Between Political and Non-Political Goals Experienced?

Notably, specific goals were generated by the participants themselves, without interviewers' guidance (goal examples are provided in Table S2 in SOM). Three overarching themes and several sub-themes capture the relations between participants' political and other life goals identified in this study (see Figure 1). We detail each theme below.

Figure 1

Final Thematic Map: Experiences of Relationship Between Political and Non-Political Goals



THEME I: Goal Conflicts

First, many participants (both activists and non-activists) experienced conflicts between their political and other life goals. While some participants discussed conflicts they were currently experiencing, others reflected on past but resolved struggles or mentioned potential trade-offs that they had preemptively addressed. We identified three main categories of goals that conflicted with activism: professional, social, and health-related goals.

Making a Living or a Social Change? — For activists, one of the major sources of goal conflicts revolved around their professional goals, though what aspects were perceived as hindrance varied. First, several activists voiced time-based conflicts, experiencing work to constrain the time that could be allocated to their political engagement. For instance,

ACT39 mentioned that their workload in a corporate job made it very challenging to take a day off for activism when needed. For others, such as ACT24, anticipated time issues between their work and activist goals led them to decline certain job opportunities, thereby preventing them from furthering their professional development. Activists pursuing higher education shared similar concerns, naming heavy workloads as the most common conflict. ACT3 described the difficulty of balancing these two goals, saying, “my last year in [organization] has been kinda hard because I’ve been in the [coordinating team], which has really affected my ability to write my Master’s degree, because it’s been a lot of work.” Critically, time-based conflicts between work and activism were particularly prevalent among Polish participants. One reason may be that, on average Poles work 5.4 hours more per week than Norwegians (Yanatma, 2023), leaving less time and energy that can be allocated to activism.

Engaging in activism also posed challenges to professional development due to location issues. Some participants voiced not applying for professional opportunities abroad in favor of their local political engagement. Similarly, several student activists expressed conflict with their educational pursuits, making it challenging to participate in valuable courses or exchange programs whilst committing to their activism:

“I was gonna take a class (...) but then I wanted to be very active in the working group on climate (...). So then I rearranged my semester to do it. (...) I also wanted to do an exchange half a year, but then I didn’t, because I – for the same reason basically.” (ACT6)

For others, relocation for work hindered their ability to remain as involved in activism as before. For example, ACT37, who had emigrated from Poland, expressed “I feel sadness about activism and work. It hasn’t unfolded as I had hoped, and I find myself becoming a normie [more average person].” While this participant managed to remain engaged online in Poland, establishing a new activist network in her new country was challenging due to language barriers and work demands.

Moreover, some activists encountered that their political engagement was perceived as a threat to their professionalism. One participant who pursued a scientific career had to limit her public appearances as an activist since activism was perceived as a threat to scientific “objectivity” (ACT4). Relatedly, an activist pursuing higher education voiced that she felt her professors held a lower opinion of her due to her engagement:

“I think I also made a sacrifice about my reputation among professors, too. Because (...) they don’t really like feminist students.” (ACT1)

Non-activists also mentioned conflicts when trying to balance their professional goals and political interests. Changing jobs or having limited free time due to long working hours caused significant stress, leaving little room for other important matters. Many non-activists preferred to spend their limited free time on relaxation instead of activism, as NACT33 expressed, “a little egoistically I would like to rest and spend time with my friends.” Similarly to activist students, non-activist students expressed study-related constraints as a barrier to becoming politically engaged. For instance, NACT15 mentioned the need to prioritize educational goals: “I would say climate is important for me (...) but I would still prioritize, like right now [my priority] is passing my test and stuff like that.”

Thus, both groups narrated various conflicts between their professional and political goals. However, while non-activists mostly used such conflicts as an explanation for their lack of active engagement, activists’ narratives suggest they use more complex strategies. As demonstrated above, some specifically made professional choices that would reduce conflict with their political goals (e.g., ACT24). Others (e.g., ACT4) decided to limit their activist engagement to a certain extent to retain their professional position but they did not drop out from activism.

Social Life at Stake — Both activists and non-activists mentioned encountering conflicts with their close relations because of their political engagement or interests. For activists, the primary challenge constituted striking a thematic and temporal balance between their political involvement and social relations outside their activist circle. For example, ACT37 shared that when she and her partner became engaged in activism, their non-activist friends “dropped out” of their social circle. Similarly, ACT7 reflected on how her engagement in climate events affected her friendships when a friend provided feedback, saying, “Yeah, we don’t hang out that much because you will only invite us to, like, climate events.” Such social relationship conflicts often led activists to experience loss and guilt. Critically, on one occasion, lack

of time was associated with very severe social consequences as one activist attributed his divorce to his intense political engagement: “Due to my activism, it led to a divorce, (...) because I didn’t dedicate enough time to her [wife]” (ACT29).

Social conflicts experienced by non-activists mostly resulted from diverging political opinions and perceived stigmatization. For some, expressing their political opinions and engaging in discussions on contentious issues led to disagreements and negative social judgment from friends and family. Some non-activists also feared being labeled as argumentative or facing social repercussions if they actively engaged: “When I heard opinions about, for example, discrimination against Black people, I went through a phase where I reacted strongly, but then I quickly faced repercussions and lost some friendships. I was labeled as ‘quarrelsome’” (NACT26). One of the non-activists reported a lack of courage to engage in public due to the fear of social evaluation and judgment saying “I feel like I lack courage. I’m a bit too shy, a bit too averse to crowds, a bit too hesitant to stand out” (NACT23).

In sum, whereas activists primarily experienced strained relationships due to spending too little quality time with family or friends in favor of their engagement, non-activists perceived social conflicts to stem primarily from diverging political opinions and the expression thereof, leading them to not engage or disengage.

Fueling Change or Burnout? The Costs of Caring — A third significant source of conflict experienced primarily by activists was related to their physical and psychological health. Few narratives revealed instances where activists engaged in actions that could pose threats to their physical or psychological safety. ACT4, for instance, recounted fellow activists disengaging after risking their health in Norway’s cold winter protests and getting negatively exposed by the media, sometimes resulting in burnout. More often, political engagement limited activists’ capacity to rest and practice self-care: “it’s been a lot of work, I guess in such small organizations there are very few people that do that much, and then you get burned out” (ACT3). Intense engagement over prolonged periods or without visible impact was experienced as particularly challenging:

“Yes, we got the price, we got the recognition, but nothing changed. And that’s a problem. (...) You have a lot of knowledge, but nothing changes essentially. And at that time, I got depressed.” (ACT2)

Indeed, ACT2 explained that she temporarily disengaged to restore her health. However, at the same time, many felt they held a responsibility to engage for the cause that outweighed their own needs: “I had a very strong motivation to just be there, and even if I was falling on my face, I had to be on the streets” (ACT30). Similarly, ACT6 described her struggles of trying to do less but worrying that other people would not show up to support her cause:

“Right now I’m thinking I need to scale down actually because I feel like I am on the brink of burn-out. (...) I often have this awful feeling that if I stopped doing the things I do, it doesn’t automatically mean that a lot of people would appear to do it.” (ACT6)

Finally, some activists perceived their political engagement to conflict with their need for personal or free time: “I definitely often complain about the lack of time for myself. It’s like the main topic whenever I complain about anything [regarding activism]” (ACT39). Interestingly, evaluations regarding the lack of personal time differed among activists – while some perceived it as a sacrifice (even “sacrifice of myself,” ACT30), others did not. Health conflicts were rarely mentioned among non-activists, likely as these were perceived to directly result from active political engagement.

THEME II: Goal Facilitation

Most activists described some facilitation between their political and other goals. Interestingly, while certain categories of alternative goals led to conflict for some participants, the same goals were well-integrated—and even served to facilitate political engagement—for others. Notably, only activists mentioned experiencing goal facilitation.

Beyond 9 to 5 Is When Activism Begins — Although work was one of the major sources of conflict for some activists, for others, their jobs supported political engagement. This occurred when they had flexible working hours, could work remotely, or held part-time positions. For example, ACT36 stated:

“This privilege of having such an opportunity comes from the fact that I work in an organization and have a monthly salary that meets my basic needs. So, I can use my free time for [activism], and even some work time.”

Notably, some highly engaged participants acknowledged that they intentionally pursued, or currently held, jobs that enabled them to remain deeply involved in activism. Some activists even found employment with organizations that shared their causes such as ACT36, who worked at an environmental NGO and also engaged in climate-related activism among other causes, enabling a two-way facilitation. Another climate activist employed at a climate organization voiced: “And of right now, these are – the [activist] organization part is (...) connected to work, because that’s (...) what I do and what I want to do. And I (...) follow my dreams. By doing everything in this [social] bubble.” (ACT6)

Furthermore, for some activists, their professionally acquired skills facilitated their political engagement. ACT38 (i.e., an art student and climate activist) explicitly noted that her political activism and artistic development complemented and supported each other. While her understanding of environmental concerns informed her use of art in activism, this also positively influenced her artistic practice in return. Similarly, ACT8 explained that he “possessed some skills that the [activist] organization needs.” Interestingly, most of the cases of facilitation occurred among individuals who held creative, freelance or other types of jobs allowing more flexibility, which underlines the importance of structural circumstances in political engagement on a larger scale.

Engaged by Togetherness — The significance of achieving social goals through activism was also evident in most activists’ interviews. Many participants shared how their involvement allowed them to meet new people who shared their interests and values, enabling them to expand their social circles. This seemed particularly relevant after relocating to a new city or country as activism provided an opportunity to forge new friendships:

“It was the first time I lived in the city and I didn’t know anybody so I thought it would be nice to try to find a circle of people (...) It helped me to learn [the language], helped me to learn a lot about [the topic] and probably gave me more understanding of problems or more drive to want to do something about it.” (ACT10)

Others highlighted that their existing network helped them to either start pursuing their political goals or increase their engagement. For example, ACT1 explained being drawn to activism because her friends were involved: “All other people were joining, so I did as well.” Several participants also noted that their partners played a significant role in their activist journey. For some individuals, participating in activism alongside their partner was seen as a means to creating shared experiences and inspiring each other. Recognizing the importance of taking action, or dedicating time spent together to activism further enhanced their engagement. An illustrative example comes from a climate activist, whose husband was also actively engaged, although they did not share all activist causes:

“We both do activism, partially together, we also inspire each other. Sometimes we differ, meaning that each of us has topics we care more about (...). When I care about a specific cause, he helps, but let’s say he is an auxiliary helper.” (ACT30)

Another climate activist recounted how he “dragged” his partner to become involved in activism, as she shared his values but had been inactive before their relationship (ACT36). Social connections (i.e., friends, romantic partners) can thus function as a facilitator for political engagement. Importantly, not only existing, but also newfound relationships played a supportive role in activists’ engagement: “When you have that kind of social network within youth organizations and spend a lot of time there, that kind of reinforces (...) how much time you spend and how updated you are on the climate engagement thing.” (ACT7).

Finally, some activists’ narratives revealed that the experiences they gathered during their engagement positively influenced their relationships beyond activism by enhancing their empathy for others: “This is something I’ve been experiencing recently, some improvement in my relationship with my family. And that’s something I’m very happy about. I see how it [my political engagement] all affects each other.” (ACT39)

Taken together, for many, the social aspect of activism appears to create a self-sustaining cycle, where individuals become more engaged as they form relationships with fellow activists, even as their relationships outside of activism may fade. As people are invested in maintaining their connections with their friends within the movement, disengaging becomes more difficult as it would mean losing the core of their social circle. Simultaneously, for a few participants, pursuing activism also improved social relations outside the activist organization by enhancing their social skills.

Engaging for Myself and Others — Several activists expressed that their political engagement allowed them to also fulfill deeper psychological needs. Indeed, many participants expressed that they engaged both due to egoistic and altruistic reasons. That is, they wanted to support others whilst feeling good about themselves:

“There is a note of selfishness in every altruism. (...) I feel better about myself the moment I know I’ve done something, helped somehow. But also, sort of, other people benefit a little bit too, so maybe it’s not totally egoistic.” (ACT39)

This sentiment resonated with several others who voiced that it made them feel better to see the positive impact their help had on others, to create change, or to be acknowledged and respected. Such feelings of personal significance, meaning and recognition of their actions were important motivational factors for activists. Indeed, an interviewee in her 50s, who previously experienced ageism and found support in an activist group, voiced:

“People do [engage] for themselves. For others too, of course, but generally activism is, to some extent, doing something for yourself (...) As long as I can, I will work, I will do things for myself and for the world. Yes, of course it’s for myself because I’m taken into account, I am noticed [by others] and that’s very important to me. That’s what drives me.” (ACT25)

Another frequently expressed category of psychological needs fulfilled by activism was self-efficacy. One participant claimed that while the protests she engaged in might not yield immediate political changes, they helped her mitigate feelings of helplessness:

“I am aware which protests make more sense because we are practically able to achieve something, and which [I attend] just for myself, so that I can say to myself ‘I have done something,’ so that I don’t feel powerless, so that I feel that I am doing something.” (ACT40)

Resonating with this narrative, several other participants described how activism enabled them to address difficult emotions that stemmed from observing and experiencing injustices: “I feel that I’m doing something constructive about this horrifying knowledge concerning use of nuclear energy” (ACT2). Her narrative suggested that her climate engagement gave her a feeling of consolation in the face of the climate crisis she was acutely aware of, thus enhancing her activist goal pursuit.

Furthermore, some activists utilized their political engagement to fulfill their need for stimulation and sensation-seeking (see Zuckerman et al., 1972). For example, one interviewee with experience in non-violent direct action explicitly acknowledged: “I know that I take part in certain events to experience something extreme” (ACT36). He elaborated on being aware of various purposes of his engagement: “There are different layers and different levels of this purposefulness. And I can do something meaningless, that I know will not produce the expected results on a strategic level, but it satisfies my [other] needs” (ACT36). In this case, awareness of all his goals (i.e., political goals and the personal goal of wanting to experience the extreme) facilitated his engagement despite the anticipated lack of political success while activism was often related to experiences of stress and discomfort, the ways activists made sense of their engagement sometimes transformed the discomfort into positive emotional states, such as experiencing flow or a thrill of adrenaline. This process further encouraged their engagement:

“These emotions are very addictive. And they’re not positive, but somehow, I see them in a positive light. When I’m at a protest and I hear that they’ve locked someone up again and you have to go and do [solidarity demonstration] and I’m getting ready to spend the whole night outside, I feel alive!” (ACT24)

Some activists highlighted the joy they experienced due to their engagement. For example, ACT30, who employs art to raise awareness about environmental issues, shared her thoughts on her group's efforts: "We were sitting, embroidering, singing some songs, and then there was this action, so cheerful, colorful... It showed me that there are different methods (...). That it is possible to also be joyful." Her account illustrates how the means of achieving political goals, if consistent with individual interests or preferences, may facilitate ongoing engagement. Thus, many activists perceived their political engagement as a means to feeling content about themselves, enhancing their self-efficacy, satisfying their sensation seeking, or experiencing joy.

Growing Through Activism — Importantly, political goals were often seen as enabling fulfillment of activists' self-development goals. That is, activists associated their political engagement with personal growth and self-realization: "In general, the 'sisterhood' and the development of my activism, (...) it is not only us working like crazy, but that we also somehow grow [as people], together" (ACT30). We can interpret self-growth as a 'byproduct' of political engagement undertaken due to moral motivations. Another climate activist elaborated on how his political engagement yielded tangible self-development outcomes in the form of knowledge acquisition: "[my activism] has to have a solid foundation. So, I read laws, regulations about energy, consider how to remodel the energy distribution network, how much it will cost... there it is. This is my activism-related self-development" (ACT21).

Others elaborated on how their involvement in activism transcended the mere accomplishment of specific political goals to enable self-actualization: "Through action [activism], I somehow experience the world. Through creation, I somehow actualize myself. And this is also an expression of my values, also action, activism. It is connected: self-realization, creation through action" (ACT40). Together, these quotes suggest that striving for their political goals was strongly interlinked with, and often perceived as instrumental means to achieve self-development goals that were not political in nature.

THEME III: The Parenthood Paradox: A Case of Simultaneous Conflict and Facilitation

The last theme related to the experiences of activists who were parents revealed a paradox in which parenthood-based goals were both regarded as a hindrance and facilitation to their political goals. On the one hand, being a parent made it more difficult to engage as participants needed time to take care of their children. On the other hand, thinking of the future well-being of their children increased the perceived relative importance of political causes such as climate change or gender equality, and made them worth pursuing. For example, for one activist engaged for women's rights, having a child was an impulse to also engage for the climate:

"At some point, the issue of climate also became (...) I mean, I know that it has been said for a long time, but the child appeared and the future of the child. And Greta's strikes began. Well, we were also in the initiation group of 'Parents for the climate' in our city." (ACT37)

She also mentioned how being on a health leave during the pregnancy allowed her to "fulfill [her] activist aspirations" as she had more free time, whilst stating that her engagement later during the maternity leave "was a bit more challenging, but I achieved [a significant political success] with a three-month-old child. Simply a child in a baby sling."

Another activist, mother of three, asked about how having children affected her engagement, stated "when you have children, you can't attend every protest, only the ones when I have the time and the opportunity, and my children happen not to fall asleep in my arms at that moment" (ACT40). At the same time, while speaking of climate issues, she mentioned feeling fear regarding the future of her children and that visualizing how their lives will look when they grow up "pushes [her] to protest." In short, these examples demonstrate that the same life circumstances can influence political engagement in various ways even within the same individuals.

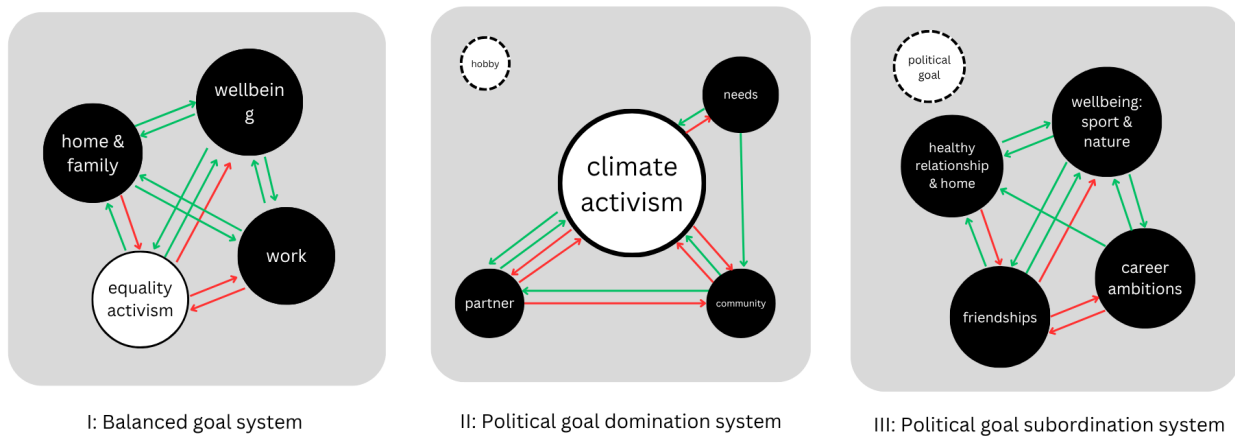
2) What Goal Structures Exist Among Participants With Various Levels of Political Engagement?

Having established that both activists and non-activists experienced various types of relations between their political and other life goals, in a second step, we wanted to investigate potential differences in the overarching patterns reflected

in these complex goal relations. Based on theoretical conceptualizations (Kruglanski et al., 2018), we deductively tested to what extent participants displayed any of the following goal structures (i.e., 1) the balanced goal system, 2) the political goal domination system, and 3) the political goal subordination system (see Figure 2), whilst inductively identifying potential mechanisms underlying the differences in goal structures between activists. Goal structure variations depended on the relative importance of participants' political goals, the relations between political and other life goals, and the strategies employed to cope with goal conflicts.

Figure 2

Types of Goal Structures Observed in the Study



I: The Balanced Goal System: “The whole thing is a juggling act”

The first goal structure identified in participants' narratives was characterized by relative balance between political and other life goals (e.g., family, friends, work). That is, participants with this type of goal system focused on committing to various goals without favoring one single goal category over another:

“If there was a protest or any actions happening on the weekend, (...) I would probably participate. (...) I’m willing to get involved, but I wouldn’t spend the whole weekend thinking about what we can do to improve air quality.” (ACT40)

Other activists pointed out that, even if some issue was very important to them, their engagement depended on their resource availability such as their mental or physical capacity. As ACT30 put it, “sometimes it’s a matter of acknowledging that something is important but being aware that humans have limited time and even limited mental energy to dedicate to certain things.”

Individuals adopting this goal structure generally used a balancing strategy aimed at achieving an equilibrium between their different goals in the long run, even if it meant temporarily choosing one goal over the others. For example, ACT30 described that she realized that skipping one evening of activism would not lead to catastrophic consequences but would help her replenish her well-being. This balancing strategy, which could also be labeled as the “have-it-all” approach, was the strategy most commonly employed by activists. It involved a specific, event-based approach, where activists strived to balance all their goals without resigning from any of them when encountering conflicts between different obligations.

She also pointed out how she has to dynamically make decisions regarding which of her multiple goals should have a priority in a certain situation, stating:

“The whole thing is a juggling act. We’ve had a lot of activist stuff lately, and yet someone’s birthday fell in the middle of it, and I had this kind of ‘okay, we’ll be there, because we don’t have any [event] overlap,’ even though I’m already a little tired and I’d most like to sit at home.” (ACT30).

However, such a “juggling” approach comes with its own challenges, particularly concerning their well-being. Even when feeling tired or desiring to stay home, some activists still felt pressured to participate in activist events due to their goal system. While the ideal scenario in their opinion would involve finding a compromise between different commitments, at times, feelings of guilt and responsibility to take action arose. As ACT24 put it: “I feel guilty that maybe I should push myself harder, stop dramatizing, and recognize that things need to be done because if I don’t do them, no one else will.”

In short, participants with this motivational structure – characterized by balancing political and non-political goals – stayed politically engaged but their level of engagement was constrained by the importance they placed on other life goals. Typically, participants expressing this type of goal system were moderately involved in activism.

II: The Political Goal Dominance System: “Activism is kinda my way of living”

The second type of goal system that we identified captures a structure in which political goals dominate above all other goals (i.e., Political goal domination system, see [Figure 2](#)):

“[Activism] is kinda my way of living. At this point, actually, most areas of my life are somehow connected, dependent, influenced by activism. (...) I do quite a lot of things in my life apart from being an activist, but at the same time [activism] is such a huge part of my life that whatever I do [is somehow related to activism].” (ACT24)

Relatedly, an older multi-issue activist (ACT25) elaborated on how her other life goals were always interrelated and often subordinated to the issue of her political engagement for human rights.

As illustrated by these examples, a political-goal-dominant system makes conflicts between political and other life goals overall less salient as clear prioritization of their political goals helps in resolving any emerging trade-offs. However, in cases where participants experienced conflicts as salient, they actively employed political goal prioritization as their primary conflict resolution strategy. ACT24, for example, stated: “If I see a job offer that expects me to be at the office from 9 am to 5 pm, I think that it won’t work because of many reasons, but activism is the most important reason.” To do so, they re-appraised other goals (e.g., finances, professional, health goals) as relatively less important in favor of dedicating themselves to the political cause: “I gave up on the pleasures in order to fully participate in these projects instead of earning money. (...) Well, I have rearranged things in my mind” (ACT21). Indeed, this climate activist made a conscious decision to fully commit to climate activism by taking on a remote working role to align his activities with his overarching political goal. Another participant, ACT24, who suffered from chronic headaches, acknowledged that spending a lot of time in activist actions hindered their healing and recovery, yet they chose to do it anyway.

Interestingly, whereas political goal prioritization often resulted in strongly imbalanced and sometimes self-harming goal structures as evidenced by the previous example, this strategy was often expressed as a conscious, fulfilling life choice. For example, one activist willingly gave up his dream to dive in a coral reef, because he prioritized the need to protect the environment:

“The dream of seeing the world? Well, it used to be significant for me. But... I’m quite old, and I got into activism quite late, so this change has come gently and started when I was already a mature person, so I think it’s under control, very conscious and coherent. I don’t feel like I’m losing anything, doing something against myself, or fighting in any way.” (ACT21)

Similarly, despite explaining that their activism had negatively impacted their studies and ability to use educational opportunities, ACT7 stated: “I feel like it’s been quite an active choice throughout.” It is important to mention that even among participants adopting this goal system, there was some variation in the extent to which activism took precedence over other goals. Critically, political-goal-dominant systems were exclusively identified among activists and were typically coined by a strong commitment to the cause.

III: The Political Goal Subordination System: “I wouldn’t say that these [political issues] are my goals”

This goal structure emerged among both non-activists and ex-activists when political goals held relatively lower priority compared to other life goals, making it easier to resolve activism-related goal conflicts through prioritization. For example, NACT26 reflected on how she prioritized family, friendships, and work, while regarding political interests as important but less personal, external concerns. Similarly, an ex-activist explained how she disengaged to prioritize her professional goals: “I wanted to do something more direct so that’s why I [got involved in an activism] (...) but then I needed to finish my PhD, and I was like if I do a lot of things, I’ll never manage to focus” (NACT17).

In sum, while non-activists or former activists often dealt with goal conflicts by placing lower priority on their political interests (i.e., adopting a goal system coined by political goal subordination), most activists remained dedicated to these goals and employed alternative strategies by either prioritizing their political goals or balancing them with their other life goals.

IV: Ex-Activists’ Fluctuating Goal Systems

Unexpectedly, we identified a subgroup of ex-activists among our non-activists—individuals who were previously engaged in activism but are no longer active. In this group, we identified two main changes in their goal systems when they switched to disengaging.

The All or Nothing Approach — For the vast majority of ex-activists, we found an “all or nothing approach,” meaning that they perceived engagement to be only worth it if they could fully focus on their activism. Otherwise, they would rather disengage and find meaning elsewhere:

“(...) So I decided that for 10 years I would act for the benefit of the community and nothing else mattered to me. (...) Well, and the last two years ... I will say frankly I was already tired. (...) So a little bit like that I pulled through with the rest of my strength. (...) But I’m trying to completely reverse the proportions at the moment: 90% focus on myself and family, friends. And the world has to cope a little without me.” (NACT34)

Some participants, such as NACT34, purposefully pre-planned the time that they would dedicate to activism to stay mentally stable. Others had to disengage entirely (e.g., NACT12) or temporarily (e.g., ACT2) to restore their health, given that activism was experienced as highly demanding. Another ex-activist (NACT34) who experienced stark conflicts with their partner, after spending several years on high-intensity and time-intensive activism resigned from their social engagement to prioritize his relationship instead.

Between Long-Term Frustration and Short-Term Gratification — Others explained their disengagement through a shift in the time frame they regarded as acceptable for seeing results for what they wanted to achieve. Originally, NACT17 was highly engaged, yet during the pandemic, activism turned into discussions without any active actions, resulting in her drop-out. After the pandemic, she was no longer willing to choose activism because she had experienced that results were only visible in the long-run, whereas when engaging in sports, results were more immediate and thus more gratifying: “Activism is more long term in a way and I can see the [immediate results of] the training (...) if I go or don’t go.”

Similarly, NACT22 highlighted the effort-reward imbalance caused by the elected authorities’ unsupportiveness of their climate activism, making any visibility of results in the foreseeable future unlikely: “In short, a lot of commitment, little results.”

General Discussion

The starting point for the present research was the observation that although many people view political issues as important, only few take action. Drawing on goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Kruglanski, Chernikova, et al., 2015), we proposed that examining the full network of goals through a bottom-up approach might help explain

the differences between those who are politically engaged and those who are not. Based on 40 interviews with both activists, non-activists, and former activists, we thus examined (1) the relationships between political and other goals and (2) the goal structures among participants engaging in varying levels of political activism.

Relationships Between Political and Non-Political Goals

In terms of goal relations, we identified complex interactions between political engagement and other life domains, such as work, education, social relationships, health, and self-development, as well as basic psychological needs like agency (Bandura, 1982) and stimulation (Zuckerman et al., 1972). On the one hand, these domains often created significant conflicts, potentially leading to negative outcomes like burnout or withdrawal from important relationships. On the other hand, the same domains were sometimes seen as crucial facilitators of activist involvement. In some cases, political engagement was viewed as a means to fulfill other personal goals (e.g., friendships, self-actualization).

These findings illustrate that there is no single pattern or inevitable connection between political engagement and non-political life goals. For instance, while activism can sometimes detract from a deeper commitment to personal relationships, it can also facilitate the formation of new and meaningful connections. Our research also demonstrates that having commitments to both political and non-political goals does not necessarily lead to disengagement from activism. In line with goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002), individuals who are able to integrate their political goals with other life pursuits may maintain or even enhance their political engagement. Future research could explore how people create such integrative links or identify the constraints that affect specific forms of political action.

Interestingly, experiencing goal conflicts does not necessarily result in reduced engagement. Our findings suggest that the variations in responses to these conflicts may be linked to the strategies individuals use to manage them. While both activists and non-activists encounter goal conflicts, activists might be more equipped or motivated to reconcile them due to their specific coping strategies. Moreover, the impact of goal conflicts on engagement may differ between activists and non-activists as a result of differences in the perceived costs and benefits (i.e., collective, social, and reward motives) of such engagement (see Klandermans, 1984). Indeed, as stated throughout, many activists experienced conflicts in some areas of life (e.g., work), but rewards in other areas (e.g., approval by social relations; an expectation that their engagement impacts their cause positively), whereas non-activists only highlighted the costs of engaging, rendering them to be higher than the benefits.

However, we observed that individuals facing excessive goal conflicts were more likely to eventually disengage from activism. Indeed, cognitive dissonance created by constant goal conflict may ultimately lead to burnout, often resulting from an unsustainable commitment and significant sacrifices for the activist movement (Chen & Gorski, 2015). This makes ex-activists a particularly intriguing group for further examination. Understanding how activists navigate these conflicts over time and at what point they lead to disengagement (Wrosch et al., 2003) could provide additional insights into this phenomenon. More broadly, including individuals with diverse patterns of activism—such as activists, non-activists, and ex-activists—can offer valuable insights into both the factors that differentiate these groups and those they share.

Can Goal Structures Explain Different Levels of Engagement?

As a second goal of the study, we aimed to identify the structures that emerged from the narrated relationships between political and non-political goals among interviewees with different levels of political engagement. Our research revealed at least four distinct goal structures. In an extreme goal structure, activism dominated all other goals and became the central driving force in individuals' lives, in line with the theoretical model of political extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2017). In an integrated goal structure, activism was both supported by and supportive of non-political goals, albeit not without conflicts. It indicates that purely harmonious relationships within a goal system (Vallerand, 2010) are, in fact, rare. The third structure, observed among non-activists and ex-activists, was characterized by political goals being either absent or completely subordinated to and disconnected from other goals. Finally, ex-activists displayed a fluctuating goal structure coined by weighing short vs. long-term results and the perception that their engagement was only worth it if they committed themselves fully.

Cross-Country Differences

While our study observed limited cultural differences in activism between Polish and Norwegian participants, one notable distinction was the prevalence of multi-issue activism among Polish participants. This difference could be attributed to higher levels of dissatisfaction with the Polish government, whereas Norwegians generally express greater support for their political system (OECD, 2023). Since our study focused on leftist activists, Polish participants may have perceived a higher need to engage across multiple causes at the time of data collection than Norwegian participants, who live in one of the world's most liberal countries (World Population Review, 2025), and benefit from many of the rights typically championed by the left (e.g., workers rights; ITUC, 2024). Additionally, time conflicts between working and activism were particularly pronounced for Poles, likely due to higher average working hours (Yanatma, 2023). Future research may benefit from quantitatively comparing the role of social conflicts underlying political apathy in countries such as Poland versus Norway, where political polarization and associated social consequences differ greatly (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Furthermore, testing the transferability of our findings to other sociopolitical contexts and conservative activists could be a valuable future direction.

Future Directions and Limitations

More broadly, our findings highlight the potential of applying motivational theories to the study of political engagement. Except for a few notable exceptions (e.g., Klandermans, 1984), theories of goals and motivation have seldomly been used to examine political goals. This presents a significant opportunity for further research to enhance our understanding of how political goals are formed and how they affect activists' commitment over time (Jasko, 2023).

During the interviews, participants reported fluctuations in their political engagement over time, leading to various patterns in the relationship between their goals (e.g., disengagement vs. balancing across goals). Since these narratives were retrospective, a longitudinal study would be invaluable for examining the dynamics of goal commitment over time and clarifying causal relationships (see Vestergren et al., 2017). In particular, exploring the experiences of newly engaged or disengaged activists could yield insights into motivational trajectories at these important stages. Here, the potential of more narrative approaches may be promising in disentangling motivational mechanisms playing a role in (dis)engagement. Also, longitudinal studies could inform how introducing a new goal can reshape these goal structures and, in turn, influence political activism. Such studies could track activists as they embark on new romantic relationships, start families, or seize their initial job or career opportunities. On the flip side, political factors can also shape personal goal structures. For example, if a country were to suddenly criminalize same-sex relationships, it could intensify the connection between an individual's personal partnership goals and their activist objectives for those directly affected by such a ban.

Several noteworthy limitations warrant consideration. Firstly, our sample comprised exclusively left leaning activists, which offers a one-sided political perspective. More generally, our analysis primarily focused on the structural characteristics of goal systems rather than the specific content of those goals. At the same time, prior research has shown that different ideological goals are linked to distinct social values (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). While these findings are not inconsistent with our analysis, investigating the specific values that underlie political goals and using a broader range of social causes could help identify particular areas of goal conflict vs. facilitation. For example, it could be interesting to examine whether more conservative values are associated with greater trade-offs between activism and non-political goals in the domain of family commitments. While values are a category of goals (Schwartz, 2012) and share the same motivational properties discussed in this paper, their abstract nature and emphasis on content differences could offer a valuable theoretical extension of our approach.

Secondly, despite our recruitment efforts, we may not have adequately reached certain populations, such as activists with limited internet proficiency or those with disabilities, thereby potentially introducing selection biases. It is also important to note that, whereas the qualitative methodology provided rich insights into participants' goal structures, it relied on participants' meaning making and retrospective evaluation of life events. This approach has several limitations. For instance, in an effort to reduce cognitive dissonance, some participants may have sought to reconcile their

activist goals with other life goals. Similarly, some extreme goal structures may be socially undesirable to report, and therefore were not disclosed during the interviews. This constitutes a risk inherent in conducting qualitative studies.

Furthermore, the use of a qualitative study within a partly hypothetico-deductive framework ('small q' methodology; Braun & Clarke, 2025) may be subject to criticism. Nevertheless, testing hypotheses against naturalistic data may aid the theory-building process by preventing the imposition of perceptions and views characteristic of closed-ended self-report tools such as questionnaires. Importantly, reflective of our partly inductive approach, our study led to the identification of a novel goal structure—the ex-activist fluctuating structure of goals—thereby contributing not only to hypothesis verification but also to theoretical exploration and refinement.

Overall, our findings add nuance to research on goal systems theory by showing how changing relationships between political and other life goals shape patterns of engagement, disengagement, and re-engagement over time.

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Ethics Statement: All study procedures were approved by the Ethics Committees of Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University and University of Oslo. All persons gave their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. Appropriate handling of personal data in the Norwegian context was ensured through approval by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT; reference number 722744).

Preregistration: The study was preregistered: <https://osf.io/24sxxh> to increase transparency (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019).

Data Availability: The data collected during interviews is of a sensitive nature, and due to the problems involved in ensuring complete anonymity, we cannot provide public access to the dataset. We understand the importance of data sharing for scientific transparency and reproducibility; however, our utmost priority is to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the individuals involved.

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the following items:

- Preregistration (Grzymala-Moszczynska et al., 2022S)
- Additional information (Grzymala-Moszczynska et al., 2025S):
 - Recruitment questionnaire
 - Participant demographics
 - Analytical coding methodology
 - Table of participants' personal goals in their original form

Index of Supplementary Materials

Grzymala-Moszczynska, J., Coenen, A.-C., Jasko, K., Gore-Gorszewska, G., Kałwak, W., Kunst, J. R., & Obaidi, M. (2022S). *Qualitative inquiry into goal structures among activists and non-activists* [Preregistration]. OSF Registries. <https://osf.io/24sxxh>

Grzymala-Moszczynska, J., Coenen, A.-C., Gore-Gorszewska, G., Kunst, J. R., Kałwak, W., & Jasko, K. (2025S). *Supplementary materials to "The whole thing is a juggling act": Qualitative exploration of goal systems among activists and nonactivists* [Additional information]. PsychOpen GOLD. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.21387>

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