

Pro-Environmental Organizational Activities, Participation, and Life Events: A Narrative Inquiry of South Kalimantan Environmental Activists

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ABSTRACT

People tend to become actively involved in environmental organizations to respond to environmental problems. These activists have a specific motivation to join the organization and to behave pro-environmentally. This study aims to explain the form of environmental activities, the reasons for participation in the organization, and the previous life events that motivated the active involvement in pro-environmental behavior. This qualitative research study used a narrative inquiry approach in which semi-structured interviews were conducted on seven environmental activists aged 15–55 years from South Kalimantan to explore their experiences and to focus on their life events. Verbatim data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques by NVivo for coding and themes. Results showed two categories of environmental activities: (1) altruistic through campaigns and community empowerment; and (2) biospheric through handling food and environmental problems. Reasons to participate in the organization found three themes: (1) environmental reasons (natural sustainability, greening, and cleanliness); (2) personal reasons (to gain organizational experience and pleasure); (3) social reasons (influence of others and social interaction). For previous life events, activists were motivated to carry out pro-environmental activities because of positive life events or experiences influenced by interactions with others, such as social life and environmental experience related activities outside the respondent's current place of living. This study contributes to the explanation of a previous positive life event related to the environment as an initial motivation to engage in the environmental organization. Practitioners can consider creating a positive life event motivating an individual to become involved in environmental action.

Keywords: *environmental activist, life event, pro-environmental behavior, South Kalimantan.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans and their environment are interrelated and inseparable elements. Today, people are increasingly aware that all their activities also affect their environment. The recently increasing environmental damage motivates people to

promote environmentally friendly behaviors, one of which is an active involvement in environmental-based organizations. Even in South Kalimantan, Indonesia, participation in civil society includes active involvement in

environmental organizations, especially those related to the exploitation of natural resources on a massive scale that has so many negative impacts on the environment. Kalimantan, as the third largest island in the world, is the focus of special concerns because of environmental problems. Activists from Kalimantan, especially in South Kalimantan, are actively responding to this situation. For example, South Kalimantan activists have supported the “Save Meratus” initiative to save the Meratus Mountains from use by coal mining and oil palm plantations (Morse, 2019). Environmental activists are often vitally involved in collective environments with people who share a similar ideology on environmental protection (Lee, Kim, Kim & Choi, 2014).

Activism is a form of environmental action. Fung and Adams (2017) determined activism as a function of pro-environmental behavior. *Pro-environmental behavior* has been defined as “individual behaviors contributing to environmental sustainability (such as limiting energy consumption, avoiding waste, recycling, and environmental activism)” (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012, p. 160). These behaviors may be public or private (Ones et al., 2015). Alternatively, *pro-environmental behavior* is also defined as a behavior that minimizes harm to the environment or provides advantages to the environment (Steg et al., 2013).

Many factors contribute to one's decision to participate as an environmental activist. Lubell (2002) stated that a higher level of perception of environmental threats could increase involvement in environmental activism. Marquart-Pyatt (2012) analyzed data from 16 countries and found three factors that have a

significant impact on the participation of environmental activism: *education of activists, awareness of environmental consequences, and personal attitude*. Stern (2000) summarized specific values, such as *self-transcendent* or *altruistic values*, that are related to pro-environmental concerns and behavior. Another potentially important issue is whether *biospheric values* explain the basis of activists' support for nature conservation, which is different from altruistic values (helping others) (Stern, 2000).

Social factors also affect environmental activism behavior because in activism, one is surrounded by people with similar thoughts. Fung and Adams (2017) argued that environmental knowledge and concerns expose these people to each other, especially as members of environmental organizations. In addition to being influenced by social factors, Gifford and Nilsson (2014) stated that *personal factors* are also associated with environmental concerns and response to environmental problems. Fung and Adams (2017) found that personal experience is the most intuitive factor that has motivated persons to act and have concern about the environment. An individual's life history as a basis of experience shapes perceptions, behavior, likes and dislikes, and decision-making process related to environmental issues among environmental activists (Fung & Adams, 2017). In two studies among college students, Li and Chen (2015) found that natural experience, life principles, and life experience contributed to environmental action. Life experiences, both positive and negative, and the access to natural places, family experiences, and positive media experiences will shape

certain life decisions and behavior. Moreover, the experience of vacations and excursions in natural settings could motivate young people to participate in activism (Corcoran, 1999; Fung & Adams, 2017). Furthermore, previous experiences in daily life related to nature may shape changes in environmental behavior (Chawla & Cushing, 2007), such as positive experiences of nature, observation of the destruction of valued or cherished places, the experience of reading a book outdoors, and participation in environmental organizations.

Studies have confirmed that life events are an important influence on pro-environmental behavior (Corcoran, 1999; Chawla & Cushing, 2007; Fung & Adams, 2017; Li & Chen, 2015), but they did not

clarify exactly how life events shape it. In terms of mental health, negative emotions caused by life events can be transformed into positive emotions through cognitive reconstructing (O'Connor, 2003). This whole process involves “meaning-making” (O'Connor, 2003; Park & George, 2013).

Based on this theoretical and empirical background, this study addressed this main research question: How do life events explain pro-environmental behavior through meaning-making among environmental activists? This study seeks to discover the form of activities, the reasons for participation in environmental organizations, and the previous life events that motivate environmental activists to become actively involved in pro-environmental behavior.

2. METHODS

2.1. Data and Respondents

This study uses a qualitative research design with a narrative inquiry approach. A qualitative inquiry is used for a small sample but can capture greater detail of the phenomena (Patton, 2015). The narrative inquiry or narrative approach is one of the five traditional qualitative approaches (Butina, 2015). Hoshmand (2005) explained that narrative inquiry investigates narratives of human experience or produce a narrative form of data. Butina (2015) defined *narrative inquiry* as a method to collect narrative or stories from a person or small group. The approach of narrative inquiry was chosen because the collected data were life history experiences or stories of the activists, specifically the history of why they joined environmental organizations.

For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted on seven respondents from South Kalimantan to explore their experiences and to focus on their life events. Respondents were aged 15–55 years; they were chosen across different age ranges to investigate the possibility of differences in life events that may be experienced across the life span. (Recruitment procedures are described in the next section.) Of the seven respondents, four were female and three were male; although the number of respondents of each sex differed slightly, Shadiqi et al. (2013) found no difference in pro-environmental behavior between female and male activists. The environmental groups with which the respondents were affiliated are as follows: Laskar Hijau Community (three activists), Go Green Clean Community (two activists), and the International

Association of Students in Agricultural and Related Sciences (two activists).

2.2. Procedure

First, a preliminary study was conducted on several environmental communities in South Kalimantan using a survey, and three such communities gave permission to become research respondents. The final respondents were selected through purposive sampling as follows. In the initial process, the specific criteria of respondents were determined—they must be active members and have 1 year of membership. Next, the online questionnaire was distributed, which consisted of demographic questions and questions on their previous life experience; an open-ended question was asked regarding the reason for their engagement in the organization. Lastly, potential informants were chosen. To ensure ethics

2.3. Interview Topics

The research team proposed three main topics for the interviews:

- (1) *Organizational activities*: activities undertaken by respondents as members of groups or organizations related to the environment
- (2) *Reasons to participate in the organization*: motivational factors, life background, and personal interests
- (3) *Previous life events*, both positive and negative: personal experiences that underlie the involvement in pro-environmental activities

The specific interview questions were then designed based on these three topics. An example of an interview question on organizational activities was, "Tell us a

Table 1 further details the respondents' characteristics.

in research, all respondents gave informed consent before starting the interview process, and the researchers respected the participants' confidentiality and privacy data. Instead of the participant's true name, a code name is reported in the Results section. The interview guidelines were designed based on pro-environmental behavior. The interviews also probed participants about their experiences and life events. Interviews were conducted in-person on different days for each respondent, with an average duration of 20–40 min. The interview was recorded using a voice recorder. After the recording, the research team wrote the interview responses verbatim for each respondent. Then, the verbatim data were analyzed using NVivo 11 software.

brief description of the activities carried out by the community or organization" A sample question on the second topic (reason for participating) was, "What encouraged you to participate in these activities?" A sample interview statement for the last topic (life events) was, "Tell us one event that you've experienced in your life that might become one of the strong reasons to join the community or specifically in certain activities in the community. The event could have happened during childhood or in another life experience." Although these interview guidelines were created, semi-structured interview techniques were used to ensure the flexibility to explore respondents' answers in accordance with the main questions of this study.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

No.	Initial	Age	Sex	Organization/Community Name	Position in the Organization/Community
1.	VS	55	Female	Go Green and Clean <i>Community</i>	Member board
2.	S	53	Male	Go Green and Clean <i>Community</i>	Chairman
3.	NS	21	Female	<i>International Association of Students in Agricultural and Related Science (IAAS)</i>	Member board
4.	MI	20	Male	<i>International Association of Students in Agricultural and Related Science (IAAS)</i>	Member board
5.	ACR	17	Female	Laskar Hijau <i>Community</i>	Vice chairman
6.	NK	15	Female	Laskar Hijau <i>Community</i>	Treasurer
7	IF	21	Male	Laskar Hijau <i>Community</i>	Advisor

IAAS, International Association of Students in Agricultural and Related Sciences.

2.4. Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach through NVivo software. Thematic analysis uses three steps (Glasser & Straus, 1967; Meier et al., 2008):

- (1) *Open coding*: the process of finding coding openly;
- (2) *Axial coding*: the process of reducing the number of coding into categories; and

- (3) *Selective coding*: the process of reducing categories into more specific themes.

For data quality and reliability, interviews were conducted with each respondents' significant others. Then, the results from the thematic analysis process were compared with the results from the interviews of the respondents' significant others.

3. RESULTS

On the interview on organizational activities, the open coding step found nine activities: (1) mutual cooperation, (2) environmental campaigns, (3) environmental cleanliness, (4) food security, (5) community development training, (6) greening, (7) volunteering, (8) food savings, and (9) creative economic business. The axial coding step led to the decision to create three categories of

environmental activities with the highest number of interview quotes: (1) campaigns, (2) community empowerments, and (3) activities related to food and environmental issues. At the selective coding step, the theme was simplified into altruistic and biospheric activities. **Table 2** shows the quotes of the interview verbatim for each theme.

Table 2. Quotes on Organizational Activities

Organizational Activities	Example Quote
1. Altruistic Activities	<p><i>"...we gathered people around; sometimes, the campaign can be through social media and also directly, for example, I ask you to finish your drink and leave no leftovers. Then there is also an "earth day" oration campaigning for the earth day celebration, a call to no littering, and if they're not littering, we exchange it for a glass of fresh milk, which is one example." (NS).</i></p> <p><i>"...we provide counseling at schools and in the surrounding community. Besides, we also provide training or people to recycle and reuse things, such as materials from newspapers, plastics, cartons, used bottles, and much more that we can still use." (VS).</i></p>
2. Biospheric Activities	<p><i>"...One of the activities described by IAAS is youth agriculture, which is the activity that I like the most, because we as young people do not only care about issues but also participate in solving problems and continue to work right away. For example, the theme yesterday was about food security and raising local food; so yesterday, we raised the theme of Nagara's Nut. So we are inviting people, volunteers, to find out how farmers work, how tiring it is to be a farmer, and to respect food by not wasting it. Yes, that's the way it is. Yes, it is just cool, so we meet with farmers directly, we gather with our fellow youths, and we continue to provide solutions for farmers." (NS)</i></p> <p><i>"...When I was the chairman of the neighborhood, I thought about the changes that I would bring, even if it was a small change. I wish this environment could be better. So, I first started by fixing the garbage problem. I provided each house with a trash bin in front and conducted a consultation with residents related to the garbage contribution. When I found out that there was a Green and Clean community, it turned out that the community focused on the environment, fixing the environment, processing fertilizer, and processing waste, where it's just as relevant as my personal goal." (S)</i></p>

IAAS, International Association of Students in Agricultural and Related Sciences.

On the interview topic on reasons to participate in the organization, the first step revealed eight codes: (1) organization, (2) mutual cooperation, (3) participation, (4) social interaction, (5) natural sustainability, (6) cleanliness, (7) pleasure, and (8) greening. The second step showed three categories: (1) environmental, (2)

personal, and (3) social reasons. The research team decided that these three categories were the final results of the selective coding process on participation. **Table 3** shows the quotes of the interview verbatim of each theme of the participation reasons.

Table 3. Quotes of Reasons to Participate in the Organization

The Reasons	Example Quote
1. Environmental	<i>"...the reason is more because of the negative things done to the</i>

Reasons	<p><i>environment. Examples include the Barabai area, where there has been the destruction of Mount Meratus, and in Kandangan, where there is an underground mining check. Actually, in my opinion, the environmental concept is a total concern from the heart.” (IF)</i></p> <p><i>“...yes, the reason is that cleanliness in the city of Banjarbaru is maintained. The goal is to green and keep everything clean.” (VS)</i></p> <p><i>“...yes, at that time, I was very excited because the point is, how I can make my environment clean and comfortable with no more garbage scattered out.” (S)</i></p>
2. Personal Reasons	<p><i>“...so, initially, I wanted to study the organization right after learning about IAAS. I was interested because it was an agricultural organization; so, there was a sense of interest, which was, indeed, our field as agriculture students.” (MI)</i></p> <p><i>“...yes, because I like it and I sincerely live it. The term is that I don't get anything in return, but because my heart sincerely goes through it, it feels good even though I get nothing from it. It's because of my initial intention, I felt happy.” (ACR)</i></p>
3. Social Reasons	<p><i>“...yes, I just want to. I want and like to join the GNC (Go Green and Clean organization) because I can gain many friends, we can fix the environment, clean the environment together, and do mutual cooperation. If there are any activities, then I will participate. Picking up trash, cleaning gutters, and whatever activities are done together with friends. It's so fun.” (VS)</i></p> <p><i>“...yes because we usually do it together, some are from GNC, some are from the army or police, some are from schools, community leaders, and other communities join together to clean up the environment.” (S)</i></p>

On the topic of previous life events, both positive and negative, the first step identified six codes: (1) skills training outside the region, (2) the life of farmers in their hometowns, (3) life experiences that opened their minds, (4) helping others, (5) helping parents, and (6) spiritual experiences. At the second step, the research team chose coding with the highest number of citations and looked at

the inter-coding linkages: training in environmental skills and open-mindedness. The final step of the thematic analysis of the life event topic decided the theme of positive experiences related to environmental activities. **Table 4** shows the quotes of the interview verbatim for each theme of previous life events.

Table 4. Quotes of Previous Life Events

Previous Life Events	Example Quote
1. Positive life events	<p>“...yes, in the past, I was mediocre, and I have never seen or made handicrafts like this. But after my internship in Surabaya, East Java, I saw and experienced it myself, and then there was a feeling of wanting to make handicrafts like this. I feel my mind was opened up. Before I went to Surabaya, I didn't think about it at all, but after that, I thought about why didn't I share this knowledge with other people and the community as well. And through GNC, I can participate in this kind of activities.” (VS)</p> <p>“I was inspired by my grandmother; she was very diligent. She said that she feels bad if she does nothing; so, if there's something that seems dirty, she will clean it. It makes me happy seeing my grandmother cleaning the house and I have been interested to help her.” (ACR)</p> <p>“It was the first time I cleaned my room, and my mother praised me for it, which made me very happy. Then, I also cleaned my grandmother's yard, and I was given food as a reward. So, every time I remembered that experience, I felt happy and felt motivated to clean the environment.” (NK)</p>
2. Negative life events	Not found in the interview results.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Organizational activities

4.1.1. Altruistic Values

The study findings show that the organizational activities that were held by the environmental activists could be grouped into the altruistic form through environmental campaigns (earth day campaign) and community empowerment (creative waste recycling training). Altruism was one of the pro-environmental value orientations (Stern, 2000). Altruistic concern can explain pro-environmental behavior (Helm et al., 2018). People tend to behave pro-environmentally through the costs and benefits judgment compared with other people if they have a social-altruistic value orientation (De Groot & Steg, 2008). Stern and Dietz (1994) believed that the basis of cost and benefits

could be applied for a group such as a community group or ethnic group. Specifically, for the environmental activists, the altruistic value can explain the pro-environmental behavior of activists based only their environmental concern (Lee et al., 2014).

4.1.2. Biospheric Values

The findings also explain that the organizational activities could be grouped into biospheric activities through handling food and environmental problems. Stern and Dietz (1994) defined a *biospheric value orientation* as “emerging in which people judge phenomena on the basis of costs or benefits to ecosystems or the biosphere (p. 70).” Stern and Dietz (1994) argued that biospheric values have a similar activation process as the altruistic

moral norms of the Schwartz values model. People activated personal norms through beliefs that the environmental condition harms other species or the ecosystem, and thus they would act pro-environmentally (Stern & Dietz, 1994). Biospheric values and activist identity were important to induce environmental action. When environmental activists have a biospheric concern, they will act to reduce food consumption and environmental problems. This finding supported those in the study by Van der Werff et al. (2013).

4.2. Reasons to participate in the organization

4.2.1. Environmental Reasons

The findings explain that most respondents are involved in environmental organizations because of reasons related to the environment. A large survey reported that most secondary school students in Germany identify childhood experiences of nature, the role of environmental educators, and experiences with an organization as a significant personal experience related to their environmental interest, concern, or action (Bögeholz, 2006). Furthermore, the literature regarding place attachment shows that natural attachment is a predictor of pro-environmental behavior and that individuals who feel attached to a location will act to protect and care for that place by actions related to natural sustainability, greening, and cleanliness (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

4.2.2. Personal Reasons

The findings explain that the reason most respondents are involved in environmental organizations is because of personal reasons—to gain organizational

experience and pleasure. The personal reasons include many factors, and Gillford and Nilsson (2014) mentioned two factors related to the findings in this study: personal experience and chosen activities. The respondents reported that they participate in environmental organizations and act pro-environmentally because they gain an important experience when interacting with members of other organizations during their activities. A sustainable behavior study in Mexico found a correlation between personal happiness and pro-ecological behavior (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2011). Related to the findings in this study, people who work in companies would behave environmentally based on the clarity of the organization's environmental goals (Rasid & Wahid, 2012). Therefore, personal reasons can influence the concern and engagement of environmental activists.

4.2.3. Social Reasons

Another finding shows that the reason most respondents are involved in environmental organizations is also because of social reasons—the influence of others and for social interaction. A research on environmentalists among college students found that the young activist was motivated by dynamic phenomena and not through a single factor; a sense of community influenced these phenomena and factors (Fung & Adams, 2017). The activists build a social circle to share their experience, knowledge, and principles toward environmental issues.

4.3. Previous life events

This study found that the activists were motivated to carry out pro-environmental activities because of positive life events or life experiences that were influenced by

interactions with others, such as social group life and environmental experiences related to activities outside the respondent's location. Wells and Lekies (2012) critically reviewed seven studies on environmental attitudes and behavior during childhood. They found that people express positive attitudes to nature and behave pro-environmentally, such as engaging in recycling behavior and supporting nature protection, when they spent their childhood in nature (Wells and Lekies, 2012). Chawla and Derr (2012) reviewed 39 publications regarding life experience; they concluded that experience in nature during childhood and youth connected with attitudes for valuing and caring for nature. Similar to the methods used in this study, Place (2016) investigated the life histories and the personal writings of five prominent environmentalists in the United States through a qualitative approach. Three essential experiences that formed their attitudes and behavior were exploring nature in childhood, learning from parents and grandparents to have concern for and appreciate nature, and reading books about natural history and adventure (Place, 2016). Fisher (2016) interviewed international youth climate activists to investigate the life process of committing to climate activism and found that the association between concern for nature and concern for social justice was an important aspect of the commitment process.

Among the interviews, no negative life events were reported as experienced by the respondents that motivated them to behave pro-environmentally. In contrast, among climate change writers, educators, and mitigation officers, Howell and Allen (2016) found that although some had

positive engagement with nature, other experiences were more common for them, such as direct contact with environmental problems and their social consequences.

Respondents made well-meaning about life events regarding positive experiences related to the environment. Previous life experiences from outside the geographic area where the respondents currently live and from their hometowns can explain their current pro-environmental behavior. Respondents opened their minds and feelings about the environment through their past behavior (Dean et al., 2012). This past behavior becomes stronger over time, explaining their participation in environmental behavior because of the existence of an identity as an environmental activist; this finding is in line with those of Van der Werff et al. (2014a, 2014b). The key point to this positive experience created deep personal meaning. This finding explains that the process of meaning-making needs to be considered to make people understand environmental conditions (Park & George, 2013). In this research, environmental activists successfully managed to interpret life events both cognitively and emotionally. The main results of this research confirm that being an activist and having a deep meaning based on previous life experiences are important to involve people in environmental behavior.

5. CONCLUSION

Most environmental activists participated in pro-environmental actions based on their biospheric concern for environmental sustainability. The role of positive life events provided initial motivation for the activists to be actively involved in the environmental

organization. Environmental activists interpreted previous life events regarding positive experiences related to the environment, and this experience was obtained outside the activists' current place of residence. The key points to making a deep meaning of the positive experience were an open mind and having feelings about the environment.

The limitation of this research is that the negative life events experienced by activists are not yet explained, which might be one of the factors that motivate

them to engage in pro-environmental behavior. Future research should consider this topic because a study by Chawla (1998) found that the respondents' attitudes and behaviors were not only influenced by positive life events but also by negative life experiences. In the Indonesian context, future research should investigate activists who are involved in natural hazards and should consider cultural and religious factors (Muluk et al., 2018).

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