

Co-creating and Advancing Knowledge on Professional Activism Engagement and Education

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1 Introduction

This article presents a study that deepens and expands knowledge on professional activism (PA) engagement and education by involving activists themselves – politically committed professionals who advocate for the rights of people in situations of vulnerability with whom they work. Through focus group discussions that encouraged reflection on prior research, this study advances understanding of the dimensions potentially contributing to explaining PA (dis)engagement and the spaces, processes, and needs of PA education, considering formal, non-formal, and informal settings.

The interest in studying this political dimension of the work carried out by professionals in the educational, social, and community fields arises from the theoretical conception of intervention as intrinsically political and a potentially critical and liberating educational practice. It also draws on the vision of the professional as both educator and learner, engaging in dialogical exchange, critical construction, and mutual commitment (Freire, 1979; hooks, 1994; Ledwith, 2011; Martín-Baró, 1986).

In this regard, we also emphasise that studying the processes of education and engagement implicated in this professional activist stance and practice contributes to its social impact: knowing how to be and act as a professional activist can more fully contribute to addressing (and resolving) the problems they deal with.

Additionally, another key motivation of this study was the recognition of the importance of returning and discussing the research findings with the participants, ensuring their agreement and fostering their active involvement in the research process (Amado, 2014; Lather, 1986; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lietz & Zayas, 2010). This

concern is grounded in valuing intersubjectivity, the legitimacy and potential of multiple voices, the connection between theory and practice in the construction of knowledge, the fostering of researcher-participant co-learning, and in questioning the power relations in research/knowledge production (Amado, 2014; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lather, 1986, 2017; Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Accordingly, this study was developed based on practices that reinforce its participatory, interactive, and democratic nature.

2 Background

2.1 PA engagement

In addition to the growing literature that values and encourages the professional political involvement in response to social injustice (e.g., Greenslade et al., 2015; Herbert & Levin, 1996; Jansson et al., 2016; Kozan & Blustein, 2018; Lustig-Gants & Weiss-Gal, 2015), there are also many guidelines of professional representative institutions (e.g. professional associations/orders), or government bodies, which encourage such engagement, namely in their professional codes of ethics (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2025; International Federation of Social Workers, 2023; National Association of Social Workers, 2025; American Medical Association, 2025). These guidelines encourage professionals' engagement in political action, such as legislative or policy change, or in advocating for its implementation, in the best interest of people in situations of vulnerability and in the pursuit of social justice.

However, a gap appears to persist between PA encouragement and implementation (Pawar, 2019), evidenced by the continued prioritisation of micro-level intervention approaches, even when sensitive to issues of social injustice, to the detriment of mobilisation for systemic and structural change. This tendency hinders professionals' involvement in the political processes that underlie the injustices and suffering experienced by the people they work with (Goodman et al., 2004; Jansson et al., 2017; Vera & Speight, 2003).

Grieger and Ponterotto (1998) already argued that advocacy and activism are among the most potentially controversial and public actions in confronting injustice. Professionals can understand these actions differently, ranging from relatively safe tasks to high-risk ones, depending on their sense of personal and professional security within the workplace or community. This is why they also pose a challenge to professionals who, by publicly taking on this ethical commitment, risk provoking the discontent or even anger of those in positions of greater power, such as their institutional leaders, as well as distrust and resistance from coworkers, thereby jeopardising their professional credibility or even their jobs.

A discomfort and risk that seem to be unavoidable in the struggle for social justice, and about which Freire (1997) said:

“I do not have to hide my fears. However, what I cannot allow is for my fear to immobilise me. If I am sure of my political dream, with tactics that may perhaps reduce the risks I face, I must carry on with the struggle. Hence the need to command my fear, to educate my fear, from which my courage is finally born.” (p.39)

In this sense, while research shows that some professionals and organisations view these activist functions as being separate from their responsibilities, training, and professional purposes, it also reveals that there are professionals who, despite possible adversities, take on this role with a strong commitment. They may do so because they view their engagement in the sociopolitical arena as “a just and noble cause, supported by the ethos of the profession” (Melton, 2018, p. 83), even if this needs to be carried out in more covert ways (Greenslade et al., 2015), independently, and without professional resources or guidance (Greenslade et al., 2015; Toporek, Lewis & Crethar, 2009).

According to Greenslade et al. (2015), the literature has established that, particularly when faced with organisational and professional conflicts, professionals are confronted with three possible responses: to remain and deal with the situation, to leave, or to remain and resist. Even though the barriers professionals face in this process often outweigh the motivations and incentives (Kozan & Blustein, 2018), there are always professionals who remain and resist – a response that has been far less explored in research (Greenslade et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, the work context and professionals’ experiences can also play a crucial role in fostering PA learning and the construction of a PA identity, enhancing professionals’ capacities to overcome the obstacles they may encounter in its practical implementation (Costa, Vaz & Menezes, 2021b; Costa, 2023).

In this regard, MacDonnell and Buck-McFadyen (2016) also offer a counterpoint to the dominant view of professionals’ political inertia, suggesting that they do, in fact, engage in PA and in broader forms of activism, but often in highly contextualised and invisible ways, even to the professionals themselves. This invisibility is shaped by social and structural power dynamics that marginalise, shape, or even prevent certain forms of activism, particularly when carried out by women, racialised people, those from lower social classes, or in precarious employment situations.

2.2 Education for and in PA

In addition to affirming the importance of PA engagement and the need for favourable conditions to promote it, the literature has particularly problematised the preparation of professionals to act politically within their work contexts. It highlights gaps in formal education programs, as well as the need to strengthen and consolidate this dimension in the training of professionals (Domanski, 1998; Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Heinowitz, 2012; Marszalek et al., 2017; Melo et al., 2017; Serrano-García & Lugo-Hernández, 2016; Vera & Speight, 2003).

This emphasis on the importance of preparing professionals who work with people in situations of vulnerability for political practice has been highlighted in various fields, particularly psychology (Goodman et al., 2004; Heinowitz et al., 2012; Kozan & Blustein, 2018; Serrano-García & Lugo-Hernández, 2016; Vera & Speight, 2003), social work (Herbert & Levin, 1996; Jansson et al., 2017), education (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002; Montañaño et al., 2002; Picower, 2012), and nursing (MacDonnell & Buck-McFadyen, 2016; Melo et al., 2017). It reflects an expectation that such preparation will foster professionals' political know-how (awareness, knowledge, and skills) and promote their engagement in PA, as well as the commitment to the goal of advancing social justice (Heinowitz et al., 2012; Herbert & Levin, 1996; MacDonnell & Buck-McFadyen, 2016).

Additionally, the literature has shown that the lack of investment in these professionals' political training contributes to maintaining obstacles to their engagement in PA, such as a lack of political awareness or perceived competence in discussing political issues, reinforcing the need to generalise and strengthen this knowledge (Heinowitz et al., 2012; Jansson et al., 2017; Melo et al., 2017).

On the other hand, critical perspectives on adult education within the scope of activism engagement have highlighted the importance of moving beyond the confines of formal education contexts (through institutional course offerings and attendance). They emphasise the need to recognise the relevance of incidental or spontaneous learning ("as people live, work, and act socially"), informal learning ("where people naturally and socially teach and learn from each other in workplaces, families, community organisations, and social action"), and non-formal learning (structured and systematic, taking place in a set of social contexts) within emancipatory social and political struggles (Foley, 1999, p. 7).

These perspectives stress the importance of adopting a broad understanding of education and learning, highlighting the intellectual and educational nature of activism (Choudry, 2015; Foley, 1999) and the contribution it can make to enriching, expanding, and challenging dominant understandings of education, learning, and

knowledge production, particularly regarding how and where these processes occur (Choudry, 2015).

They underline that by exposing and challenging the contradictions and failures of structures and systems that (re)produce inequality and injustice, PA requires mobilising a set of guiding principles, practices, and strategies, which presuppose critical historical perspectives (including self-criticism), but which are also based on ideas emerging from current struggles (Choudry, 2015). It therefore involves processes of conscientisation, politicisation and specialisation, which result above all from social (critical) learning, situated in practice, and which, considering the mutually constitutive nature of thought and action, requires time and opportunities for discussion and reflection (Choudry, 2015, 2020; Foley, 1999; Montaña et al., 2002). Thus, the learning and knowledge production that result from engaging in the practical and theoretical tasks of activism also incorporate a significant identity change or definition, which is co-constructed (Drew, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Montaña et al., 2002; Ollis, 2008, 2010). A comprehensive and expansive learning and transformation that changes and shapes activists' epistemologies, identities, practices and political philosophies (Curnow et al., 2019).

This conscientizing and politicising trajectory contributes to the continuity of this path, fostering a sustained commitment to activism in a continuous cycle of learning in/and action (Choudry, 2015, 2020; Foley, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ollis, 2010).

2.3 Empirical insights informing the discussion

As this study builds on empirical insights from previous research, we first briefly present the main findings shared and discussed with the participating professional activists. This previous research was conducted in Portugal and followed a mixed-methods approach. It began with interviews with 12 professional activists, allowing the exploration of the PA meanings, learning processes and outcomes (Costa, Vaz & Menezes, 2021a, Costa et al., 2021b), which paved the way to a broader analysis of PA repertoire and engagement predictors, through an online survey with a sample of 338 professionals working with PSV (Costa, Vaz & Menezes, 2023, 2025).

The qualitative findings portrayed PA as a praxis grounded on a sense of (in)justice that motivates professionals to defend those they work with through interventions guided by and aspiring toward a utopian ideal of transformation (Costa et al., 2021a). These results also reveal that their PA know-how stems from their political socialisation and (activist) professional experience (Costa et al., 2021b), giving rise to or strengthening learning outcomes such as 'critical, social, and political consciousness', 'sense of (in)justice and empathy', and 'know-how to speak out'.

A first analysis of the subsequent quantitative research revealed a typology of PA practices: 'collective PA', involving group collaboration and mobilisation (e.g., public meetings, demonstrations); 'individual PA', concerning singularity in political action (e.g., information sharing and discussion by publishing articles or opinion pieces); 'specialised PA', that is more technical-scientific, formal or institutional (e.g., conference presentations, contact with policy makers); and 'radical PA', which is more alternative and bold, less conventional and riskier (e.g., occupations, illegal interventions) (Costa et al., 2023).

A second-phase analysis identified potential predictors for each type of PA, suggesting the influence of personal and psychological factors, particularly emotional and attitudinal, as well as social and contextual elements (Costa et al., 2025).

In sum, and highlighting key results, this study has shown that a strong identification with PA (seeing oneself as a social justice advocate) allied with a greater social and contextual enablement for PA (e.g., the profession's positioning about PA, political socialisation and experience, social and political context), leads to an increased involvement with all types of PA.

Also, the more the organisation where professionals work encourages PA engagement and the more they perceive themselves as capable of promoting social justice, the more they will engage in collective PA (group-based public political actions) and specialised PA (formal and requiring expertise).

Additionally, the results reveal that acting more radically may trigger less support from co-workers, ultimately due to differing conceptions about PA as a professional role. Moreover, the more years of work these professionals have, the more they tend to engage in specialised and radical PA, possibly favoured by their greater experience, knowledge, and stable employment conditions.

Finally, they reveal a tendency for greater male involvement in individual actions when experiencing emotions of revolt – a finding that underscores the need for further research on the gender-emotion relationship in this dynamic.

It is also important to emphasise that the role of training and emotions (particularly positive ones) loses prominence, despite initially showing predictive potential in preliminary analyses.

These empirical insights raised new questions and highlighted the need for and relevance of furthering knowledge about PA engagement and education, thereby forming the basis for the study presented in this article.

3 Method

We conducted a qualitative study using focus group discussions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) with a group of professional activists, to encourage participant interaction and facilitate the sharing of detailed and elaborated accounts of the topic under study (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018).

3.1 Participants

Thirteen professional activists participated in this study. As mentioned, these are individuals who work with people in situations of vulnerability in educational, social, and community contexts in Portugal, who are recognised for their political engagement within their work. Nine self-identified as women, three as men, and one as non-binary. Twelve are white, and one is a Black woman, aged 28 to 67. They primarily work in urban contexts, in Porto and Lisbon, with one participant working in Viseu, an inland city.

Their professional backgrounds include Psychology, Social work, Education, Public policy, Chemistry, Psychiatry, Law, and Languages, Literatures, and Culture. The intervention contexts are diverse, encompassing non-governmental organisations, schools, universities, government and healthcare institutions; and referring to areas as gender, social justice, harm reduction, health (education, access to), screening (e.g., HIV, HCV), prisons, poverty and social exclusion, drug policies, people who use drugs, people experiencing homelessness, intersectionality, trans people, sexology, inclusive education, discrimination, human rights, citizenship and participation. Finally, regarding professional positions/functions, this group includes: leaders of organisations, services, schools, projects and teams, project technicians, researchers, secondary-school teachers and university lecturers, trainers, consultants, advisers, activists, community mediators, psychologists, social workers and one psychiatrist/hospital doctor. When mentioned in the section '4 Findings', each participant is identified using a two-letter code to ensure anonymity.

3.2 Data Collection

Three focus group discussions were conducted, two with five participants and one with three. Participants were identified through personal and professional contacts, together with recommendations from other participants and professionals in the field, using a snowball sampling strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Participants were contacted and invited in person, as well as via email and social media.

The focus groups were conducted online, at the participants' decision, allowing for broader national coverage. Each session was facilitated by the first author, with support from another researcher. A discussion guide structured the sessions, including an initial reading of an informed consent form and a request for confirmation of participation (sent via email).

The discussions started with a brief presentation of the research problem, the study objectives, and the key empirical findings from previous research (see section '2.3 *Empirical insights informing the discussion*'). This introduction served as a starting point for group discussion, during which participants were encouraged to ask questions at any time or seek clarification at the end of the presentation. The goal was to foster the exchange of opinions, reflections, doubts, and suggestions, particularly through collective discussion of the findings based on their activist work and knowledge of this professional role. Specific questions were also posed to help guide the conversation and clarify particular aspects (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lietz & Zayas, 2010).

The sessions were audio- and video-recorded with participants' consent and fully transcribed. Although the authors did not transcribe them, the first author verified their accuracy by checking them against the recordings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3 Data Analysis

Given the purpose of this study, the data collected from the focus groups were analysed to explore participants' reflections, opinions, and contributions regarding the previous research findings, expanding and adding depth to them. Thus, this was developed through a deductive-inductive, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019), guided by previous theoretical and empirical assumptions, while remaining open to identifying new themes that assumed particular relevance in this study.

The analysis of the testimonies enabled the identification, interpretation, and description of thematic patterns and interrelationships within the participants' narratives, which were considered relevant to the fulfilment of the study's objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019). This analysis was developed manually by the first author and then revised by all authors.

4 Findings

The findings presented in this article contribute to problematising and further advancing the understanding of PA engagement and education. While participants corroborate most of the findings from previous research, they also expanded the

discussion by proposing novel and complementary interpretative paths, raising new themes and suggesting future research questions, thereby enriching and complexifying the conceptualisation of the subject.

I really like what you presented. (...) a kind of feeling that people are reading something they had already thought about, but could not quite put into words (...). That is more or less the feeling. (P.E., 47 years old, woman, project manager/trainer)

(...) The first sense is this sense of familiarity (...). There are several elements in this framework that I recognise and identify with, and I would say that I see them reflected in my own career, in my work, and in my life experience. (T.A., 64 years old, man, teacher/school leader)

Their contributions are reflected in eight themes identified in the participants' narratives, which are portrayed in the following thematic map (Figure 1). To structure the analysis, these themes were organised under two overarching domains: *'Dimensions shaping PA engagement and repertoire'*, comprising six themes related to individual (personal and psychological), social, and contextual dimensions; and *'Spaces of PA education and identity building'*, comprising two themes related to how professional activist knowledge (being and doing) is, and can be, learned and connected to practice.

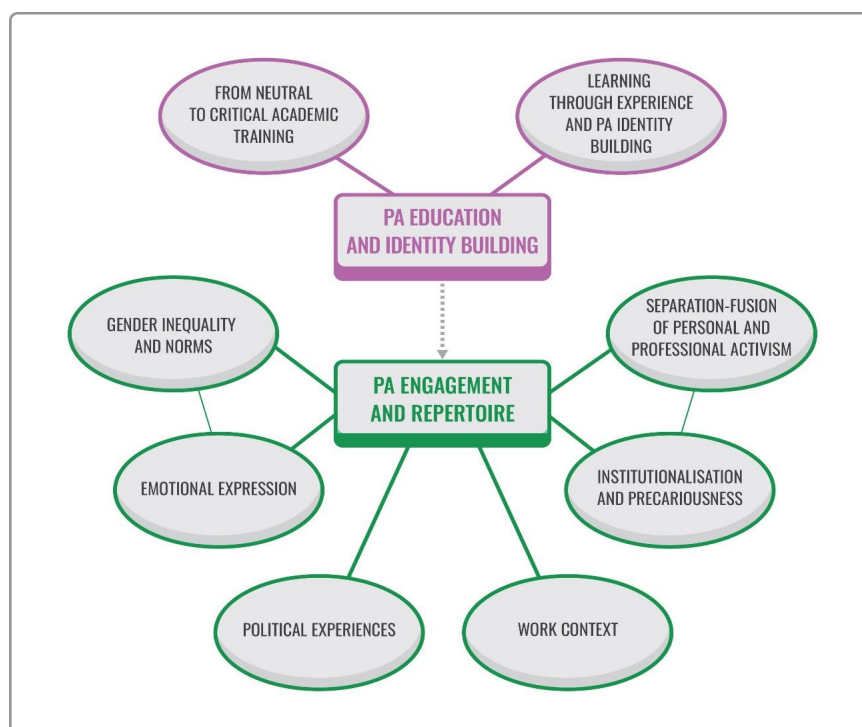


Figure 1. Thematic map.

4.1 Dimensions shaping PA engagement and repertoire

4.1.1 Gender inequality and norms

Gender inequality was highlighted, corroborating previous findings under discussion, particularly the heavy workload experienced by women as professional activists, their greater vulnerability to the obstacles and risks inherent to PA, and the additional effort required to be heard, valued, and considered trustworthy. Participants contribute to the discussion by highlighting the cultural weight and gender roles, the issues of place of speech and “space for speech” and debate, family organisation, and the unequal distribution of tasks, as well as the consequent reduced availability, opportunity, and capacity of women to participate politically.

In general, it is men who take the lead in various matters, and, therefore, it is natural that they are also at the forefront of activism and are more visible (...) they are also more trained to... they feel more at ease to defend causes. (R.E., 67 years old, woman, psychiatrist/hospital assistant)

(...) Men have much more confidence in occupying public spaces, while women are expected to show some reserve. (N.S., 36 years old, man, NGO leader and project technician/researcher)

The fact that women still have a second and a third shift after their regular shift has something to do with the availability we have to be activists. (B.O., 46 years old, woman, social service manager/researcher)

Still on this topic, participants emphasised the need for men working in this field to reflect more deeply on inequality, considering both their role in reproducing it and the importance of moving beyond being sensitive to being actively committed to combating inequality, which requires giving up privileges. At the same time, gender was also seen as a catalyst for professional activist engagement, particularly for women and LGBTQIA+ people, through personal identification with the cause.

Even in spaces where we have men who identify as men, as allies in these issues, even these figures do not so easily give up their male privilege. It is not just about being sensitive; it is about taking up the cause of equality between men and women. They have to realise that this is an active exercise. It is not just a principle; it is a choice of conduct in the smallest things, including not being the first to speak. (P.E., 47 years old, woman, project manager/trainer)

4.1.2 Emotional expression: strategy, management and gender

Despite attributing importance to emotions of revolt and positive emotions, emotions of revolt seem to prevail in the discourse of the participants, which they consider can lead to expressions (e.g., crying) or actions that are more immediate, less reflective or more explosive and which tend to discredit or be less effective. They therefore stress, above all, the importance of having a strategy in mind, of trying to manage these emotions, possibly also mobilising positive ones, in order not only to be alert to the problems faced by the people they work with (or release emotions), but also (and above all) to find solutions to them. It is also proposed that the lack of this reflection and more impulsive action may lead to a lack of self-efficacy, particularly in individual and radical activism.

(...) It is useful to feel angry, upset, dissatisfied with the things that happen, but then to reflect on it and think, 'OK, but how am I going to digest this and convey it in a way that will bring about change?' (...) I think that sometimes anger does not work in certain contexts (...) I think that, on some occasions, it has backfired on me. (R.S., 43 years old, man, psychologist/advisor)

In addition, a relationship between emotions of anger, gender and sexual orientation was also highlighted, from the perspective that certain expressions of anger (e.g., banging on the table, speaking louder) are less accepted in women and LGBTQIA+ people than in cisgender heterosexual men, influencing the way these people are heard and considered. This reflection indicates that the latter can more easily express emotions of revolt, because they are more likely to be heard and acknowledged. It also helps to understand the prevalence of emotions of revolt and the male gender in individual activism engagement, possibly giving them greater confidence to act individually.¹ One of the participants also points out that this reference is particularly made in relation to white men.

I have no doubt that if I were a man... a white man, wearing a tie, saying precisely what I was saying, and possibly with the same tone... I would win in most situations. (A.R., 41 years old, woman, project technician/psychologist)

I think that when a straight man slams his fist on the table, it is fine (...) If I do it, maybe I am probably "being hysterical". I think there is a bit of that bias: 'There he goes again'. (R.S., 43 years old, man, psychologist/advisor)

¹ References to "LGBTQIA+ people" and "cisgender heterosexual men" reflect participants' accounts of perceived social expectations and assumptions, and do not indicate participants' self-identification.

4.1.3 Political experiences: the inspiring Carnation Revolution

Participants reflect on the influence that significant political events may have on how different generations become politicised, position themselves, and engage in politics – an aspect particularly related to the dimension of social and contextual enablement for PA, considered in previous research. They specifically emphasise the importance of Portuguese democratic history and the impact of April 25, 1974, on the symbolic and practical involvement of these professionals in activism. These historical, social, and political processes also facilitate understanding of the tradition of a more welfare-oriented intervention in the country, helping to explain the diversity of perspectives on the ethical-professional role in working with people in situations of vulnerability. This issue of social justice and this vision of a fairer society (...) is very much institutionalised in Portuguese society after April 25, in this Portuguese democratic experience (...) we all worked towards building a fairer society, which was, in fact, the first version of the Constitution (...) Portuguese democracy was moving towards socialism (...), and I think that this is still very much present in the life of our organisations and in many of our personal beliefs. (T.A., 64 years old, man, teacher/school leader)

Additionally, participants highlight the importance of further exploring how this dimension affects engagement in the various types of PA. From their perspective, generational differences in significant political experiences will lead to a diverse propensity for PA engagement, shaping how they become politicised, position themselves, and engage in politics.

Different generations end up having different significant events, which then condition how they observe, how they understand life in general, or how they position themselves in the world, including the world of work (...) and possibly [their] demands and ways of doing politics. (E.S., 38 years old, woman, NGO leader and technician/researcher)

In my generation, which was greatly influenced by April 25 and the revolutionary process it initiated, collective processes are essential to us. (...) I find it very difficult to say 'I', I say 'we' very easily (...) and I see many young people who are equally eager for justice and common construction, etc., but who talk a lot about 'I'. (T.A., 64 years old, man, teacher/school leader)

4.1.4 Work context: perceived opportunities for PA

Reinforcing the findings from previous research, the participants also highlight the central role of organisational culture and environment, as well as support from both

the organisation and coworkers, in discouraging PA and shaping perceptions of opportunities and possibilities for engagement.

We need time to dedicate ourselves, we need to have energy (...), so all support is important, both organisational and from colleagues, from people in our immediate family context. I think they are all important for professional activism to become a reality. (I.S., 42 years old, woman, team coordinator)

Discussing these findings broadens the debate by incorporating new elements that deepen our understanding of these processes. Firstly, regarding the relationship with the work context, the participants highlighted the prevalence of obstacles to PA in public administration, compared to NGOs. On the other hand, in more activist-oriented organisations, they emphasise the lack of support from other organisations or services, which creates barriers to their work.

All of this is very difficult in public administration, that is, being an activist in a civil society organisation is much easier because of the support and peer relationships (...). There is an underlying fear surrounding this issue of participation (...). People are completely desensitised to the issue of others, and, therefore, we do what we have been doing for years; there is no questioning of the procedure, and the procedure systematically puts others in a position of greater vulnerability (...). It is very, very difficult to be an activist. (...) On the other hand, I am absolutely certain that it is important to be an activist every day. (...) What I feel is that, sometimes, civil society groups are already way ahead, apparently with fewer resources, but with a stronger voice. (B.O., 46 years old, woman, social services manager/researcher)

We sometimes face many barriers (...) [when] coordinating with other more entrenched services (...), which is to fit people into services, when it is the services that have to adapt to people. (S.L., 28 years old, woman, social worker)

Moreover, a debate emerged around the possibilities for activist professionals to participate in the decision-making processes of the organisations in which they work. Views ranged from the position that management bodies should be more open to allowing activists to influence their agenda, to the perspective that activist professionals should not expect to reshape the organisation according to their vision and priorities. This discussion also gave rise to a proposal for categorising or formally recognising PA as a profession in its own right.

(...) Some organisations (...) realise that this is all complex and that you need to know how to play with everyone involved in the process. Other organisations are a little more decisive about what they want for themselves

and, therefore, less open to proposals for change (...). We have had experience (...) of people who find it difficult to understand that the place where they have agreed to work (...) is not their backyard. (I.A., 44 years old, non-binary, community health technician/advisor)

(...) I think we are talking about a structural problem here, which is the lack of categorisation of professional activism (...) because it always seems that in order to do activism, which is actually what you are an expert in, you have to go around doing other things that are the normal organisational parameters for success (D.O., 30 years old, woman, activist/community mediator)

4.1.5 Institutionalisation and precariousness: domesticating and hindering PA

Still within the reflection on contextual aspects, the discussion has given rise to more systemic considerations, namely regarding the impact of the institutionalisation and financial dependence of organisations on the activist mobilisation of professionals.

Fundamentally, questions arise about: the lack of time for activism; the appropriation of struggles (concepts, ideas, ideals) by organisations, considering that, on the one hand, this brings visibility to causes, but on the other, it also functions as a mechanism for controlling and domesticating them; and also the orientation and control of the action and narrative of organisations by the system (i.e., the way society functions, the state, governments, political decision-making bodies, institutional functioning, and funding programs). Most participants who addressed the issue did so from the perspective that this system tends toward the appropriation, domestication, and instrumentalisation of organisations and, in turn, of the professionals' activist practices.

Nowadays, organisations suffer significantly from the ill of institutionalisation. That is, organisations absorb concepts and then take ownership of them, trying to implement them in order to integrate them into the system. This obviously has a positive side, as it allows these ideas to enter the structure and reach a wider audience. However, in some ways, it is also a form of control over the idea, the ideals, and what should be fought for (...). Moreover, we can think about how money then comes to control this, that is, today we have European projects that are for certain types of causes, and that is what dictates (...) this is a way for the system to try to control what narrative comes next and what it wants to happen. (N.S., 36 years old, man, NGO leader and project technician/researcher)

Participants also highlight the impact of precariousness in the sector and in PA engagement, emphasising that this mainly affects younger generations, women, and professionals working in inland regions. Notably, regarding the geographical factor,

they point out that professionals working in the country's interior experience more precarious working conditions and have more limited access to funding resources – a set of factors that inhibit engagement with PA, as well as the continuity of this commitment.

I do not know where I will be in a few years, because the instability, precariousness, and short-term funding do not allow me to work in a place where I can envision myself as an activist. (S.A., 30 years old, woman, social worker/community centre coordinator and technician)

(...) smaller contexts, where resources also tend to be scarcer, require levels of commitment to sustainability that sometimes completely suffocate the possibility of activism (...) If it is true that there are organisations in large urban centres that turn into mere service providers (...) it is far from urban centres that this happens to a greater percentage of organisations, perhaps also because there are fewer organisations there. (I.A., 44 years old, non-binary, community health technician/advisor)

4.1.6 Separation-fusion of personal and professional activism: mental health and work conditions

Perspectives of dialogue, or even overlap, between personal and professional activism stood out, as well as the primacy of professional activism over personal activism, alongside issues of precariousness and poor working conditions. Additionally, attention is drawn to the emotional exhaustion, fatigue, and guilt arising from these processes, which reveal the impact of this work on the mental health of professionals.

(...) I get to Friday, and I am drained because every day we work with highly vulnerable populations and complicated issues (...), and I feel guilty if I do not go to the march or if I do not go to the protest, or if I am not posting and creating things on social media as an activist [on a personal level]. (...) I think it is also related to job insecurity and working conditions (...). It is challenging to balance these two sides when the work you do, in addition to being emotionally demanding, does not provide you with the right conditions. (S.A., 30 years old, woman, social worker/community centre coordinator and technician)

We need to have a creative and innovative capacity (...). We need to have energy, which then turns into exhaustion (...). There is a kind of toxicity inherent to activism. Like, how wonderful we all are, doing so much for others while ruining our own health (...). We end up in burnout, catching ourselves making mistakes that, if we were well, we probably would not make. (P.E., 47 years old, woman, project manager/trainer)

Expanding on this reflection, the issue of the fusion versus incompatibility of professional and personal activism also emerged, particularly in organisations more oriented towards activism. Paradoxically, there is reference to both a lack of support from the organisation for professionals' involvement in personal activism and to expectations of continuity of PA in personal life when it concerns causes related to their work.

I said I was going to join the international feminist strike (...) and I got a message from the organisation's management saying that in this organisation, activism is done every day through our work. Therefore, that strike day would be deducted from my pay (...). I got a scolding, being told that I am already paid to do activism every day and that it makes no sense for me to go on strike, because my activism is working. (A.R., 41 years old, woman, project technician/psychologist)

Highly activist organisations also have this issue, it is expected that that you will take part in certain things outside working hours (...) Since it is about gender equality, we always have to be there (...) There is [also] a kind of pressure from the collective for you to take a stand in a certain way, even if you are not entirely sure (...) You have to be constantly expressing a position, even when this spills over beyond your working hours. (E.S., 38 years old, woman, NGO leader and technician/researcher)

4.2 Spaces of PA education and identity building

4.2.1 From neutral to critical academic training

Although the findings of this study corroborate the perspective that knowing how to be and act as a professional activist derives primarily from political socialisation and (activist) work experience, the discussion of this issue generated important reflections on academic training. These contributions primarily focus on the prevalence in academic contexts of encouragement towards neutrality and individualised (vs. structural) intervention, as well as the view of professionalism as incompatible with political involvement. A perspective on the educational system as a non-disruptive structure is highlighted, reinforcing that the acquisition of activist practice is inevitably achieved through experience. On the other hand, although less predominant, there is also a reference to experiences that encourage critical thinking within academic contexts, particularly in certain areas of specialisation with a more critical approach and a closer connection to practice.

During my academic training (...), I felt that the focus was very individual and the stance... quite prejudiced towards some communities with which I

would later come to work, and also with this discourse of a certain professional neutrality (...) (R.S., 43 years old, man, psychologist/advisor)

The system itself will never be disruptive. Assuming that education, the educational system, is something that is part of the broader system, it will be impossible for the system itself to teach people to be disruptive (...). I think it can provide the foundations (...), but then the way we apply that is something learned outside institutions. (N.S., 36 years old, man, NGO leader and project technician/researcher)

We have been sold the idea that neutrality, being neutral, is what it means to be professional (...) I come from a field in Psychology where I feel I was very much taught to think critically about the system and in a less individualised way (...) I was taught mainly to question the world and to think from that perspective, on the other side of the social control device. However, we know from years and decades of social science research how they have been used to normalise or domesticate. (A.R., 41 years old, woman, project technician/psychologist)

When asked about the role and relevance of education in their engagement with activism, participants shared that higher education can and should foster critical thinking, political awareness, and raise professionals' sensitivity to the importance of adopting a transformative approach in their work, as well as equip them with practical tools. However, there is a transversal perspective that its implementation is learned essentially through practice.

Nothing we are taught is free from positioning, right? So, I do not doubt that yes, this has to be discussed when we are being trained as professionals (...) (A.R., 41 years old, woman, project technician/psychologist)

It makes sense to me that in the most diverse courses there should be a dimension of advocacy (...). Activism, I feel, is something that cannot be taught. (B.O., 46 years old, woman, social services manager/researcher)

I think yes, there should be training, perhaps not in the most conventional sense of the word, right? (...) Training, in the sense of empowerment, involves the development of our competences, which is immense and complex, in the context of what we are discussing here. (...) It could also mean equipping the professional activist with tools to be able to deal with [mental health, burnout]. (P.E., 47 years old, woman, project manager/trainer)

4.2.2 Learning through experience and PA identity building

Finally, participants agreed with previous empirical findings regarding the learning that arises from professional PA experience, reaffirming its educational potential and how it strengthens engagement with practice in the pursuit of building a more just society. What stands out is the transformative nature of these experiences, processes, and knowledges, in terms of how professionals understand the (their) world, how they see themselves and act within it, resulting in the (re)definition of their professional identity and practice.

As soon as I started having experience with professional activism, that was profoundly transformative and profoundly important for what happened in the following years. (I.A., 44 years old, non-binary, community health technician/advisor)

I think that my work lately has been much more connected to activism, being very different from what I first started doing, which was my role as a psychiatrist in the office, focused on treatments, classifications, and those kinds of things. Therefore, I also had to do some work in order to deconstruct a series of models I carried in my work as a psychiatrist, so I could support [the people I work with] and be the ally that I am. (R.E., 67 years old, woman, psychiatrist/hospital assistant)

This activism manifests itself in various ways throughout our professional journey and our lives. (S.L., 28 years old, woman, social worker)

The type of militancy or professional activism that I developed (...) was very much inspired by the places where I worked, and I was strongly socialised into it through the readings I did, people I met, things I attended, films I watched, and multiple sources. However, in some way, it is individual. It is like... a mirror of myself. I am not sure how to put it, but it mirrors my identity, and my identity mirrors it back, and they feed off each other. (E.S., 38 years old, woman, NGO leader and technician/ researcher)

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The involvement of professional activists in discussing previous empirical findings on PA engagement and education facilitated the co-creation and advancement of knowledge on the topic, generating new insights while also opening new avenues for research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lietz & Zayas, 2010).

Moreover, being aimed at confronting, deepening, and expanding the knowledge acquired in the previous research, this study embodied the self-reflexive dimension of research, while also attempting to stimulate and document the impact of the research itself as a process that promotes participants' self-reflection on their experiences and on the world they live in, fostering (self-)knowledge and learning ('catalytic validity', Lather, 1986; 'ontological authenticity', Guba & Lincoln, 1989), as well as a greater understanding and appreciation of other participants' perspectives ('educative authenticity', Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Shannon & Hambacher, 2014).

Thus, in addition to showing the participants' agreement with the general conclusions presented for discussion, this study's findings constitute a substantial contribution to the problematisation of the topics and to advancing their interpretation and understanding.

The data analysis allowed the identification of eight themes, which, although interrelated, were grouped into two broad domains (Figure 1): the dimensions that shape PA engagement and repertoire, and the spaces of PA education and identity building.

About individual dimensions, the gender inequalities, norms, roles, stereotypes, social expectations, and relations of domination, also permeate this field, influencing not only the participants' levels of participation, but also their identities, practices and approaches, as well as the (perceived) impact of their PA (MacDonnell & Buck-McFadyen, 2016; Petrarca, 2016; Verba et al., 1995). It is considered that men hold a gender advantage in relation to PA, as they have easier access to the public sphere, greater capacity to participate, and greater ease in expressing emotions of revolt. Expressions that are less accepted in women and in LGBTQIA+ individuals, who are therefore compelled to anticipate strategies for managing their emotions in order to ensure the effectiveness of their activist action. These reflections help explain the [cisgender and heterosexual] male predominance in individual activism when experiencing emotions of revolt, identified in previous studies. A result still requiring further empirical investigation.

Concerning the social and contextual aspects, participants emphasise the impact that experiencing certain critical events can have on professionals' personal and professional development, on their discourse, and on their political mobilisation (Costa et al., 2021a, 2025; Kozan & Blustein, 2018; MacDonnell & Buck-McFadyen, 2016; Petrarca, 2016; Verba et al., 1995). In this regard, they highlight the impact of the lived or mediated experience of April 25, 1974, and the importance of developing research that deepens the understanding of how this dimension affects engagement with different types of PA, particularly across generations.

Moreover, corroborating the expectations of previous research and the literature, this study's findings reaffirm the central role of organisational culture, environment, and support from both organisation and co-workers, in terms of either encouraging or discouraging PA, and in shaping the auspices of agency or the perceived opportunity to participate. Consequently, this work context influences professionals' engagement with PA as well as their perception of social justice self-efficacy in such engagement (Costa et al., 2021a, 2025; Greenslade et al., 2015; Heinowitz et al., 2012; Jansson et al., 2016; Kozan & Blustein, 2018; Ritter, 2008).

They further develop this discussion by addressing the institutionalisation and precariousness that affect PA and highlighting the importance of these institutional and societal dimensions (Menezes, 2012) for understanding PA engagement and repertoire. These processes of assimilation and reconversion of the activist experience by the hegemonic political and economic market logic ultimately constrain professionals and their mobilisation in the struggle against social inequalities. Thus, this leads to a political absence that significantly harms the people in situations of vulnerability with whom these professionals work, while also undermining their professional identity (Domanski, 1998; Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Heinowitz et al., 2012).

At the same time, this study's findings affirm the relevance of considering the conditions of inequality, instability, and precariousness that professionals face and that hinder the pursuit of consistent engagement with PA, emphasising that these conditions mainly affect younger generations, women, and professionals working in inland regions – aspects meriting further investigation.

The findings also contribute to the theoretical discussion on the separation-fusion between personal and professional political life (van Deth, 2014, 2021; Verba et al., 1995). Despite the specificities inherent to personal activism (as citizen participation) and PA, the intersections between these forms of activism, evident in this study's findings, indicate the difficulty in distinguishing them as mutually exclusive forms of participation (Verba et al., 1995). This discussion also frames and opens up the possibility of deepening knowledge about aspects common to both, or that result precisely from this fusion, particularly regarding impacts on personal life (e.g., mental health) and professional careers (e.g., conflicts with the organisation versus professional recognition).

Regarding PA education, the empirical findings from previous research, discussed in this study, indicate that having specific training in PA, while not directly influencing engagement in PA, may nonetheless play a relevant role by promoting identification with PA and professionals' self-efficacy for activist action. This expectation is corroborated in the present study, with the findings highlighting the potential of higher education to promote awareness-raising and preparedness for PA. In this perspective, and in line with literature, strengthening professionals' political know-

how (awareness, knowledge, skills) may foster their alignment with this professional role and promote their confidence and motivation to act politically in their work (Costa et al., 2025; Goodman et al., 2004; Heinowitz et al., 2012; Jansson et al., 2017; Kozan & Blustein, 2018; MacDonnell & Buck-McFadyen, 2016; Melo et al., 2017; Serrano-García & Lugo-Hernández, 2016).

Moreover, this study findings further highlight the relevance of both approaches to PA education elaborated in the theoretical framework: the one arguing for investment in education for PA within initial and continuing professional training, in order to raise awareness and equipping professionals with tools to PA – Education for PA (Domanski, 1998; Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Heinowitz, 2012; Marszalek et al., 2017; Melo et al., 2017; Picower, 2012; Serrano-García & Lugo-Hernández, 2016; Vera & Speight, 2003); and the one advocating that PA education happens through practice, experientially, situated in emancipatory social and political struggles, often incidentally or spontaneously and informally – Education in PA (Choudry, 2015, 2020; Foley, 1999; Montaña, 2002; Ollis, 2010).

Furthermore, they reveal that PA engagement, and the learning that arises from this experience, is envisaged by professional activists as a strong transformative process, a (re)construction of their professional self (identity and practice) (Choudry, 2015, 2020; Curnow et al., 2019; Ollis, 2008, 2010), which is not fixed and entails both objective and subjective transformations, influenced by a diversity of personal, social, and contextual dimensions. It is the outcome of a personal and professional trajectory situated within different contexts and life courses, involving past, present, and future (Fillieule, 2010, 2015; Wenger, 1998).

Finally, regarding the limitations of this study, we note that the group of participants could have been more heterogeneous, particularly in terms of geography and gender identity, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of the aspects under discussion. Notwithstanding, these findings make a significant contribution to advancing this field of research, enabling the analysis and understanding of professional activists perspectives on previous research findings concerning PA engagement and education, their experiences and subjectivities regarding this professional role, as well as their relationships and interactions with the multiple life, social, organisational, and macro-social contexts in which they are embedded, and how these relationships are expressed in the phenomenon under study.

Furthermore, this study generated new insights which enabled the identification of areas requiring further research, namely the relationship between PA and mental health (e.g., burnout), gender (norms/inequalities), and work context issues (geographical, organisational culture, employment (in)stability), as well as the need to explore further the PA education (dis)investment in formal, non-formal and informal education contexts, and its potential to mitigate the impact of the identified dimensions on professionals' PA engagement and repertoire.

Therefore, considering the growing relevance of PA in the face of contemporary educational and societal challenges, we hope these new insights contribute to further reflection on PA engagement and education in research and practice, thereby expanding this field of knowledge and action.

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Co-creating and Advancing Knowledge on Professional Activism Engagement and Education

Ana Luísa Costa, Henrique Vaz & Isabel Menezes

Abstract

This study advances knowledge on Professional Activism (PA) engagement and education by actively involving professional activists in a reflective dialogue with prior research findings. It deepens understanding of the dimensions that may contribute to PA (dis)engagement, as well as the spaces, processes, and needs associated with PA education across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. A qualitative research design was adopted, drawing on focus group discussions, and the data were analysed through a reflexive thematic analysis combining deductive and inductive approaches. By enabling participants to reflect on previous research, the findings contribute to problematising and further elaborating the conceptualisation of PA engagement and education, by introducing complementary interpretative perspectives, raising new themes and emerging questions for future research. Overall, this study led to the identification of eight themes, which, although interrelated, were grouped into two broad domains: the 'Dimensions shaping PA engagement and repertoire' and the 'Spaces of PA education and identity building'.

Keywords

Professional activism; social justice; qualitative research; reflexive thematic analysis; focus groups; adult education.

Co-création et développement des connaissances sur l'engagement et l'éducation à l'activisme professionnel

Ana Luísa Costa, Henrique Vaz & Isabel Menezes

Résumé

Cette étude contribue à faire progresser les connaissances sur l'engagement et l'éducation à l'activisme professionnel (AP) en impliquant activement des activistes professionnels dans un dialogue réflexif avec les résultats de recherches antérieures. Elle approfondit la compréhension des dimensions susceptibles de contribuer à l'(dés)engagement dans l'AP, ainsi que des espaces, processus et besoins associés à l'éducation à l'AP dans des contextes formels, non formels et informels. Une approche de recherche qualitative a été adoptée, fondée sur des discussions en groupes de discussion, et les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse

thématique réflexive combinant des approches déductives et inductives. En permettant aux participants de réfléchir aux recherches antérieures, les résultats contribuent à problématiser et à approfondir la conceptualisation de l'engagement et de l'éducation à l'AP, en introduisant des perspectives interprétatives complémentaires, en soulevant de nouveaux thèmes et en ouvrant des pistes de recherche futures. Dans l'ensemble, cette étude a permis d'identifier huit thèmes qui, bien qu'interreliés, ont été regroupés en deux grands domaines: les 'Dimensions façonnant l'engagement et le répertoire de l'AP' et les 'Espaces d'éducation à l'AP et de construction identitaire'.

Mots-clés

Activisme professionnel; justice sociale; recherche qualitative; analyse thématique réflexive; groupes de discussion; éducation des adultes

Co-creación y avance del conocimiento sobre la implicación y la educación en el activismo profesional

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Resumen

Este estudio contribuye a ampliar el conocimiento sobre la implicación y la educación en el Activismo Profesional (AP) mediante la participación activa de activistas profesionales en un diálogo reflexivo con hallazgos de investigaciones previas. Profundiza en la comprensión de las dimensiones que pueden contribuir al (des)compromiso con el AP, así como de los espacios, procesos y necesidades asociados con la educación para el AP en contextos formales, no formales e informales. Se adoptó un diseño de investigación cualitativa basado en discusiones en grupos focales, y los datos fueron analizados mediante un análisis temático reflexivo que combinó enfoques deductivos e inductivos. Al permitir que los participantes reflexionaran sobre investigaciones previas, los resultados contribuyen a problematizar y desarrollar la conceptualización de la implicación y la educación en el AP, introduciendo perspectivas interpretativas complementarias, planteando nuevos temas y abriendo preguntas emergentes para futuras investigaciones. En conjunto, este estudio permitió identificar ocho temas que, aunque interrelacionados, se agrupan en dos grandes ámbitos: las 'Dimensiones que configuran la implicación y el repertorio del AP' y los 'Espacios de educación en el AP y construcción identitaria'.

Palabras clave

Activismo profesional; justicia social; investigación cualitativa; análisis temático reflexivo; grupos focales; educación de adultos.