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Anna-Britt Coe & Linda Sandberg

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Gender beliefs as a dimension of tactical choice: the ‘Take Back the Night’ march in Sweden

Anna-Britt Coe a and Linda Sandberg b

a Sociology Department, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; b Umeå Center for Gender Studies, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Two main explanations of tactical choice among social movements are repertoires of contention and characteristics of collective actors. Feminist theorizing suggests another dimension of tactical choice: the role of gender beliefs. This paper examines the relationship between these three explanations by drawing on a qualitative study that explored how activist groups in Sweden selected the ‘Take Back the Night’ (TBTN) march as a tactic. Begun in the 1970s, the TBTN march has been performed around the world, usually on central city streets at nighttime, to protest gender violence in spaces presumed to be gender neutral and safe for women. Our findings resulted in three themes that captured how activist groups selected it as a tactic: a routine performance in publicly visible urban settings, alignment with preferred forms of feminist organizing, and refusal of normalized fear and violence in the seemingly safe city. Each theme corresponded to one of the three explanations and shed light on a different dimension of tactical choice. We propose three heuristic tools for identifying these dimensions: making claims, enacting claims and reclaiming spaces. The different dimensions relate to distinct conceptions of power: centralized authority, movement agency and gender power relations respectively.

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Gender beliefs; feminism; organizational forms; repertoires of contention; tactics

All social movements make decisions regarding which tactics to adopt and explaining these choices is a central concern in social movement research. Explanations are organized broadly in two categories. Some focus on external structural conditions, such as repertoires of contention, and presume that collective actors choose tactics rationally in order to maximize scarce resources in the face of state actors with far greater resources (Larsson, 2013; Tarrow, 1993a; Tilly, 1986). Other explanations focus on internal cultural conditions, such as characteristics of collective actors, and assume that collective actors prefer certain tactics that allow them to express and support their group identity and status (Doherty & Hayes, 2019; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Staggenborg, 1988; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2007).

Despite robust developments in explaining tactical choice (e.g. for reviews, see Doherty & Hayes, 2019; Larsson, 2013; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2007), this research engages only marginally with feminist theorizing of gender (for exceptions see the work of Verta...
Taylor and colleagues. Among other things, feminist theorizing show how gender operates as a primary code for organizing social relations (Ridgeway, 2006). In any social interaction, humans immediately categorize selves and others according to gender without being aware of our interpretations, making gender a form of shared cultural knowledge used to coordinate joint action (Ridgeway, 2009). Our actions are always ‘framed before we know it’ by cultural beliefs about gender, as Ridgeway (2009) explains. This suggests that another dimension of tactical choice among social movements is not captured by the two explanations above, namely the role of gender beliefs.

The ‘Take Back the Night’ (TBTN) march offers a highly relevant case through which to examine how gender beliefs shape tactical choice in relation to the other two explanations above. Begun in the 1970s, the TBTN march has been performed around the world, usually on central city streets at nighttime, to protest gender violence in spaces presumed to be gender neutral and safe for women. At the same time, the decision to adopt the TBTN march could well fit the other two explanations. Though not necessarily mutually exclusive, these three explanations emphasize different dimensions of tactical choice associated with distinct conceptions of power: centralized authority, movement agency and gender power relations respectively. Despite that the TBTN march offers a relevant case for examining these three explanations, surprisingly few previous studies examine the TBTN march (e.g. Kretschmer & Barber, 2016; Mackay, 2014; Reger, 2014) and none from the lens of tactical choice.

This paper aims to do this by drawing upon a qualitative study that explored how activist groups in Sweden selected the TBTN march as a tactic. First, we present the three explanations of tactical choice in-depth followed by a description of our qualitative study. Next, we present the three themes resulting from our analysis, demonstrating how each theme corresponds to one of the three explanations and shedding light on a different dimension of tactical choice. As a heuristic tool, we discuss these dimensions as making claims, enacting claims and reclaiming space respectively. Lastly, we discussion how these different dimensions of tactical choice relate to one another as they reflect distinct conceptions of power.

Explaining tactical choices among social movements

During the last four decades, social movement scholars have developed explanations of tactical choice that fall into two broad categories and differ according to their conceptions of power. In repertoires of contention, the main explanation from the first category, power is understood as operating through structures that exist outside of collective actors and are concentrated in centralized authority, such as governments and corporations (Doherty & Hayes, 2019; Larsson, 2013; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2007). A repertoire of contention is the set of strategic performances or tactics for making claims upon adversaries available to collective actors in a given historical and cultural context (Tarrow, 1993a; Tilly, 1986). Tactical repertoires have three basic elements: contestation, intentionality, and the construction of collective identity (Taylor, Rupp, & Gamson, 2004). According to Tilly, (1986), macro-historical factors shape repertoires: the modern repertoire emerged with the development of industrial capitalism and nation states, which entailed the concentration of institutional power in urban centers,
the expansion of institutional power to wider geographic reach, and the innovation of technologies, such as print media.

The central characteristic of the modern repertoire is modularity, a standardized format that is adjustable to diverse issues and circumstances (Tarrow, 1993a). With modularity, collective actors do not have to reinvent tactics every time they mobilize because they can adopt tactics used previously by other groups and adapt them to their goals and settings. Modular tactics are publicly visible, such as strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, marches and demonstrations (Tarrow, 1993a; Tilly, 1986). Additional characteristics of the modern repertoire are that tactics can be used by different movements and groups (autonomous), tailored to various localities (national/transnational), and disseminated without face-to-face contact (mass media combined with literate populations) (Tarrow, 1993a; Tilly, 1986). The routinization and institutionalization of tactics makes them understandable forms of communication to both participants and observers, as Doherty and Hayes (2019, p. 272) explain: ‘collective actors choose tactical forms on the basis that they already know how to perform them.’ (emphasis in original).

In characteristics of collective actors, the main explanation from the second category, power is understood as operating through the interpretations created by collective actors (Doherty & Hayes, 2019; Larsson, 2013; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2007). According to Larsson (2013, p. 867), tactical choice from this perspective is ‘a process of gathering, interpreting, and evaluating information within dynamic, uncertain and often-contradictory contexts’. Studies show how collective actors choose tactics that convey and strengthen their types of organizational forms and cultural schemas. Direct action in particular is tied to decentralized and horizontal organizations and cultures of participatory democracy (Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Staggenborg, 1988). These are legacies from feminist movements during the 1960s (Freeman, 1975) as well as another world (alter-activism) movements since the 1990s (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Juris and Pleyers (2009) found distinctive features among young adults’ global alter-activism that combined creative direct action with network based organizational forms, and a commitment to lived experiences, collaborative processes, and global connectedness. In the United Kingdom, Doherty, Plows, and Wall (2003) demonstrated the link between direct action tactics and a commitment to a broad range of issues, a recognition of diverse forms of oppression, principles of independence and self-reliance, and organizations based on affective relationships. Staggenborg (1988) found similar results among the radical wing of the US abortion rights movement in the 1980s.

Additionally, separatist tactics are tied to feminist organizational forms and cultural schemas (Taylor & Rupp, 1993). A feminist tradition of all-women marches in the European and North American context was forged with the suffragist parades of the early 1900s (McCammon, 2003; Turner, 1913). Along with communicating to external audiences, separatist tactics have been central to building internal feminist communities. In Latin America, feminist movements have held women-only regional conferences since the 1980s to construct a continuous platform for debating key issues and developing new strategies (Alvarez et al., 2002). Feminist movements in the United States have organized women-only consciousness-raising groups, conferences and music festivals as means for community-building (Ferree & Mueller, 2007; Staggenborg, Eder, & Sudderth, 1993–1994; Taylor & Rupp, 1993).

A third aspect of tactical choice not captured by either explanation above is the role of gender beliefs. Despite structural changes such as the expansion of women’s
participation in education, paid employment and electoral politics, gender inequalities persist in most societies, even affluent societies such as Sweden. Feminist theories of gender provide diverse explanations of this phenomenon, yet most presume that gender power is not simply held by a particular group in society, that is men. Instead, gender is a constitutive element of social relations functioning across multiple dimensions and fields to differentiate the sexes and position men above women (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Scott, 1986; Taylor, 1999). Ridgeway and colleagues propose the concept of gender beliefs to locate how humans draw upon cultural beliefs about gender to define self and other in all social interactions to coordinate joint action (Ridgeway, 2006, 2009; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

Hegemonic gender beliefs are simplified, abstract categories that imply universality but typically reflect ‘the experiences and understandings of gender by dominant groups in society’ (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 150), which in the Swedish context, are white, middle class, heterosexual men and women. The salience and impact of hegemonic gender beliefs varies as these intersect with different societal fields, for example work, school, family. However, in public places and with unfamiliar persons, hegemonic gender beliefs become go-to rules (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 150). The presumption of gender neutrality in modern institutions masks the re-creation of gender differences in social interactions, thereby making inequalities difficult to recognize, let alone change (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). At the same time, alternative gender beliefs develop among like-minded subgroups in society, for example, feminists and racialized groups.

Feminist theorizing suggests that gender beliefs shape tactical choices among all social movements, even those that do not aim to challenge gender inequalities. In these cases, it is most likely that collective actors draw upon hegemonic gender beliefs. For example, Kolárová’s (2009) study of the alter-globalization movement in Prague and Genoa found that violent tactics were coded as confrontational, masculine and higher status while non-violent tactics were coded as non-confrontational, feminine and lesser status. Organizers used gender stereotypical colors to distinguish the two, with black signaling the former and pink the latter. These stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity in turn affected whether men or women actually participated in them respectively, with more men in the former and more women in the latter. Finally, these gender stereotypes were adopted and emphasized on the movement’s digital media (Kolárová 2009).

To date, however, feminist theorizing has mainly captured how gender beliefs shape tactical choices among social movements that explicitly aim to challenge gender inequalities. Here, collective actors appear to take into account both hegemonic and alternative gender beliefs. Taylor and Van Willigen (1996) show how self-help groups for women with post-partum depression and breast cancer adopted tactics that contested socially constructed categories of maleness and femaleness. Their study found that these movements disrupted traditional gender practices through personalized political resistance, deconstructed the gender hierarchy implicit in social institutions by challenging the lay/expert dichotomy, and dismantled structures based on gender differences by making caring a collective project. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2004) found that Drag shows in Key West, Florida – including the lyrics, comedy and masquerade – were used to propose a radical fluidity of sexual and gender categories, and thereby challenge power relations upholding binary gender systems. In contrast, Cook and Hasmath (2014), drawing upon Judith Butler’s heterosexual matrix,
found that the online tactics of local Slutwalk groups were unable to collectively disrupt gender and sexuality categories due to the repeated enactment of the slut discourse.

Feminist theorizing and previous studies suggest that collective actors adopt tactics that involve ‘behaving in ways that highlight particular conceptualizations of gender’ (Einwohner, Hollander, & Olson, 2000, p. 686), regardless of whether they have challenging gender inequalities as a goal or not. That is, they select tactics according to whether or not these forge alternative gender beliefs and/or sustain hegemonic gender beliefs (Ridgeway, 2009). Gender beliefs can be understood as a more specified institutional schema, and Polletta (2008, p. 86) argues that such schemas ‘helps to get at the processes by which culture sets the terms of tactical choice.’ Nonetheless, for many social movements, challenging gender (and other) inequalities is not just a goal to strive for but also an explicit action strategy, as Doherty and Hayes (2019, p. 281) write: ‘A central achievement of many social movements is to make us see the social and political world in a different way, to reveal as constructed what is considered “natural”.’

To summarize, our theoretical framework brings together three explanations for why collective actors select certain tactics: repertoires of contention, characteristics of collective actors and gender beliefs. While these three explanations might overlap, they serve to direct attention to different dimensions of tactical choice. These different dimensions in turn are associated with distinct conceptions of power, namely, centralized authority, movement agency and gender power relations respectively.

**Materials and methods**

Although the materials for this study did not come exclusively from digital sources, the decision to examine the TBTN march emerged from a mapping of online activism around safe public space in Sweden, inspired by Carrie Rentscheler’s (2014) work on digital anti-rape activism in the United States. Using the mapping results, we identified cases of which to conduct in-depth studies (Coe, 2018). The Facebook sites of the TBTN march caught our attention because they offered a case of locality-oriented and feminist-identified mobilization that combined online (Facebook) with offline actions (the march). We used a constructivist approach to study how the activist groups organizing the TBTN march selected it as a tactic (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). We refer to these groups alternatively as organizing groups and activist groups in the remainder of this text. We treated online meanings and actions as an extension of, rather than separate from, offline ones (Morrow, Hawkins, & Kern, 2015).

First, observations were made of the public Facebook sites for the TBTN march in the four cities where it was held – Eskilstuna, Malmö, Stockholm and Uppsala – for the years 2014–2016. For each city, a set of organizing groups created its own separate Facebook site for the march, which means that these were not coordinated nationally. For each site, we observed the TBTN invitation under ‘About’, the poster and slogan for the march in the profile photo and all of the posts. We analyzed this material directly online and on Word documents into which we had copied the materials. Each Facebook site was a total length of between three and 10 pages of a Microsoft Word document, and most posts were from organizing groups, with little input from the general public (i.e. potential march participants) even when it was open for comments. Analysis of these materials suggested that neither organizing groups nor the general public emphasized digital spaces as a principal
site for the march. We therefore decided to focus on the march in one city to collect subsequent data, including offline.

We concentrated on the march in the city of Malmö because activist groups had organized the TBTN march annually there for several years. It was also relevant given the attack of at least one participant in 2014 by neo-Nazi activists after the march, which raised media attention. Empirical materials were collected between 2016 and 2017. This began with AC conducting participant observation of the TBTN march in Malmö on March 5th, 2016 and documenting this in a Word document. This was not her first time participating in a TBTN march, having done so in the late 1980s in Washington, DC, which allowed her to observe similarities and differences across time and place.

We then re-examined the Facebook site for the Malmö TBTN march, identified the four organizing groups and observed each group’s public website. We contacted each of the four organizing groups by e-mail to request an interview with leading members; three groups responded. Qualitative interviews were conducted on Skype with a total of five representatives from three organizing groups. Interviews covered four topics: Rationale: how did the activist group become involved in the TBTN march, why did they choose to organize the march, and how did the march related to their collective goals and strategies; Significance: what did the TBTN march mean to the activist group and how did the activist group perceive the problem of women’s safety in urban public spaces; Broader Context: how did the activist group view the city government’s measures to improve women’s safety in urban public spaces and the public debate on this issue; and Change Efforts: how did the activist groups see the march as contributing to their ongoing change efforts. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min and were transcribed verbatim. Lastly, in February 2017, we held a follow-up discussion with one of the activist groups in which seven members participated where we shared our preliminary analysis, received their feedback, and asked outstanding questions. This lasted 75 min and notes were written up in a Word document.

The six steps of thematic analysis were used to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved our interaction with the data and our interpretation of multiple understandings therein. First, each author worked separately to familiarize ourselves with the data, generate initial codes and develop potential themes. We then met to discuss our separate codes and integrate these under common themes, after which we returned to the material to organize all relevant data within potential themes. Finally, we reviewed the themes, defined and named them. We developed three themes presented below in the results section. We have not used the names of informants or organizations in order to protect their identity. Instead, we identify informants as follows: Sararah, member of activist group 1; Linn and Agnes, members of activist group 2; and Julia and Klara, members of activist group 3. Additional pseudonyms are used for participants in the follow-up discussion with activist group 1.

**How activist groups selected the TBTN march as a tactic**

Three themes captured how activist groups selected the TBTN march as a tactic: a routine performance in publicly visible urban settings, alignment with preferred forms of feminist organizing, and refusal of normalized fear and violence in the seemingly safe city. We present the three themes below demonstrating how each corresponds to one of the three explanations and sheds light on a different dimension of tactical choice: making claims, enacting claims and reclaiming space respectively.
Making claims: a routine performance in publicly visible urban settings

This theme depicted how activist groups interpreted the TBTN march as a tactic to be performed routinely in publicly visible urban settings. Our observations of Facebook sites indicated that the march was held deliberately on an annual basis, usually around March 8th or International Women’s Day. Moreover, it was held in the central streets of large, urban areas: Stockholm, Malmö and Uppsala, cities with over 200,000 inhabitants, and Eskilstuna, a city with over 100,000 inhabitants. We obtained no evidence of its enactment in smaller cities or towns. In Malmö in 2016, the march began with a rally at a central square, followed by a 2-h-long procession throughout the city’s main business district, and concluded back at the same square for a final rally. This format was similar to descriptions of the march in other cities in Sweden on the Facebook sites as well as elsewhere and in previous decades (e.g. Fithian, 1981; Taylor & Rupp, 1993).

Meanwhile, all of the Facebook sites for the TBTN march in Sweden were used in a very restricted manner and not at all for actual protest. Activist groups in Malmö confirmed online observations. Sarah (Activist group 1) stated: “Take Back the Night” does not occur on Facebook. We spread information on Facebook but it is not there that the struggle takes place, not on Facebook’. This finding contrasted with previous studies that demonstrated how Slutwalk groups used digital protests to supplement offline performances (Cook & Hasmath, 2014) and alter-activism used digital practices as innovative strategies (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Juris & Pleyers, 2009). Activist groups chose the TBTN march for its urban, offline performance, that is, because it forms part of the modern repertoire of contention (Tilly, 1986). Their deliberate choice fulfills one of three main features of tactical repertoires identified by Taylor et al. (2004): intentionality, or strategic decision-making in the selection and deployment of tactics.

In addition, the march in Malmö 2016 incorporated aspects of direct action, also part of the modern repertoire of contention (Tilly, 1986). First, the initial rally began without any previous sign until suddenly the nearly empty square filled with 200 participants in a matter of minutes. Second, the entire march combined fun in the form of socializing and dancing with condemnation conveyed through speeches and chants. When the initial rally got underway, dance music blasted out of loud speakers from a sound system on the back of a truck. The festive energy continued throughout the march merging with angry political chants like ‘Tonight, we take back not only the night, not only the streets, but the whole world’. These aspects of direct action were similar to those identified by Doherty et al.’s (2003) study of the use of direct action in the United Kingdom, who wrote (669): ‘There is a carnivalesque emphasis on symbol, theatre, and humour.’ Activist groups did not see the festive atmosphere of the march as dampening its confrontational edge. Suzanne (Activist group 1) explained in our follow-up meeting that anger and fun go to together: ‘The expression of anger is often linked to masculinity as hard and aggression but feminist work on anger shows that it can be expressed in different ways, including by transforming normative feminine behavior.’

The performance of the march sought to confront both abstract opponents, such as the State, as well as immediate spectators, in particular cisgender men. Confrontation was conveyed by excluding men from participating in the march, a characteristic of all the marches in Sweden, further echoing TBTN marches elsewhere and in previous decades (Fithian, 1981; Kretchmer and Barber, 2016; Taylor & Rupp, 1993). Confrontation was transmitted further by
making it difficult for spectators to discern the gender identity of participants and emphasizing that participants preferred not to be with men during the march. Julia (Activist group 3) described this: ‘People become very provoked in part because so many women and trans are doing their own thing, they are provoked that they cannot participate.’ While there was no direct threat from bystanders during the march of 2016, activist recounted how this had occurred during previous years, with the most extreme being the physical assault by Neo-Nazi activists in 2014. As a result, apart from organizers’ own security teams, police followed at the tail of the march throughout its performance. As Sarah (Activist group 1) shared, organizers see the police act as both control and protection: ‘I don’t think many participants feel protected by the police, but they are needed since we know we can be exposed to violence from Neo-Nazis.’ Activist groups chose the TBTN march for its confrontational performance, thereby fulfilling a second feature of tactical repertoires identified by Taylor et al. (2004): contestation.

Finally, in addition to its deliberative performance and transmission of confrontation, the TBTN march worked to strengthen participants’ identification with one another as a group. Informants explained that this group feeling came from taking over or occupying physical places at night that were otherwise seen as unwelcoming or unsafe, and from doing this through women and trans participants taking care of each other without men’s help or support. When we asked activists how they experienced the march, they responded that it was like a reward for all of their efforts, they felt encouraged and strengthened. Linn (Activist group 2) depicted this:

It is a very powerful feeling. I remember one of my first marches, there was a huge man that followed us, and he was drunk and screamed at us. And then, it was like the entire demonstration stopped and screamed at him. I stood up a little and saw this sea of people; it was such a powerful feeling to be a part of this mass.

Whereas Linn described a confrontational incident with a spectator, many onlookers actually cheered the march on in Malmö 2016, thereby reinforcing participants’ feeling of it as a reward. Activist groups selected the TBTN march for the group feeling it produced, thereby fulfilling the third main features of tactical repertoires: the construction of collective identity (Taylor et al., 2004).

This first theme showed how activist groups chose the TBTN march because it comprised the main features of tactical repertoires in general and of the modern repertoire of contention in particular. The march was a routine, visible public protest design for urban settings that could be adapted to different localities, repeated on a regular (annual) basis over time, adopted by different feminist groups, and easily disseminated through mass media (Tarrow, 1993a; Tilly., 1986). This theme fit the first explanation whereby collective actors select tactics from the modern repertoire of contention shaped by macro historical factors (Tarrow, 1993a; Tilly., 1986).

**Enacting claims: alignment with preferred forms of feminist organizing**

This theme depicted how activist groups interpreted the TBTN march as a tactic that aligned with their preferred forms of feminist organizing. Our observations of the Facebook sites found that the young anarcho-syndicalist feminist groups organized the TBTN march in all of Sweden’s major cities. These groups subscribed to horizontal organizing forms and participatory democracy. Operating outside parliamentary politics, these groups rejected
centralized authority and encouraged members to exercise their own power. The webpages and Facebook sites of activist groups in Malmö include statements such as 'take power over our lives and our future' and 'all people should have the power to decide over their own lives'. Previous studies show that feminist and alter-activism groups with horizontal organizing forms and participatory democracy prefer direct action tactics, such as those described under the previous theme in relation to the TBTN march (Freeman, 1975; Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Staggenborg, 1988).

The activist groups in Malmö show similar organizing forms and cultural schemas. They sought to intervene in the daily functioning of the city in order to address problems directly and create immediate change in practice rather than seek long-term reforms from centralized authority. According to the online material, anarcho-syndicalist feminist groups focused on issues of injustice in nearby social spaces, such as the streets, schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces, and in everyday life, as Linn (Activist group 2) described:

The autonomous Left is very focused on what is happening in everyday life, like when you are on your way home from the pub at night, when you are at work, so we try to work not only long-term. In that way, we try to confront the problem now where one is able to act independently.

The TBTN march matched this, as Agnes (Activist group 2) describes:

Something I like about 'Take Back the Night' is that it goes from theory to action directly, which is very cool to see, a mass of non-men that are out and have one another’s back. Concretely, I think it gives a direct result.

The TBTN march is the largest protest event these groups organize annually. Otherwise, these activist groups carry out small-scale tactics, such as feminist self-defense, an activist school and micro-level actions. This finding tied into previous studies of alter-activism movements that showed a committed to practices of self-reliance and autonomy, and worked on a range of issues (Doherty et al., 2003; Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Maeckelbergh, 2011).

As indicated by the quote above, the organizing groups in Malmö understood themselves as part of the autonomous Left movement in Sweden and they even spoke being part of the global justice movement. As such, they worked closely with other non-feminist groups on a regular basis because, as Sarah (Activist group 1) explained, 'it is needed simply, we are not that many and we are not that strong.' According to informants, participation in this broader social movement made Malmö safer for them as activists and for the city overall through its mobilization against racism/fascism and for social justice, including by countering Neo-Nazi groups. Collaborative processes and global connectedness were additional characteristics of the activist groups organizing the TBTN march in Malmö that liken the findings from previous studies of alter-activism movements (Juris & Pleyers, 2009).

In addition to horizontal organizing forms and participatory democracy, the organizing groups of the TBTN march subscribed to separatism, and the march aligned with this preferred forms of feminist organizing. Even though individual participants in the TBTN march were not required to subscribe to separatism, the march itself did so according to the Facebook sites across Sweden. On the Malmö TBTN Facebook site for
2016, separatism was defined as ‘excluding patriarchy’s norms and sexism’s oppression. Separatism is inclusion’. Concretely, the Facebook sites indicated who was invited to participate in the TBTN march and who was not, namely cisgender men. In the city of Malmö, all three activist groups we interviewed identified as separatist. Klara (Activist group 3) provided a broad interpretation of what this meant:

Not all groups are separatist, but all groups are prepared to use separatism as a tool, even if they are not separatist in their own organization. We see separatism as a means through which, by excluding some, others are included who would not have been otherwise.

Activists groups used separatism as a tool to define their participation in the broader autonomous Left. Although the broader movement provided support for their activism, it was described as male dominated, which Kolárová (2009) also found in her study of the alter-globalization movement. Sarah (Activist group 1) explained: ‘It is a sexist culture where many men in the movement take up space (…).’ Separatism allowed activist groups to realize their collective potential without the barriers of sexism, as Julia (Activist group 3) described:

I have organized previously in a group that was not separatist and it was not that it did not work, because it was very good. But, I always felt obligated to direct energy and think about the feminist struggle in the group. And now I do not have to think about that, rather I can focus my energy on something else, and it feels more effective.

This same rationale for developing separatist organizational forms can be seen in the rationale for choosing the TBTN march as a separatist tactic:

Sometimes questions arise regarding why ‘Take Back the Night’ is a separatist event. We who organize the evening argue that there is a huge political value and power when those who are exposed to similar mechanisms of oppression build linkages and show solidarity with one another and together oppose such oppression. (The Malmö TBTN Facebook sites for 2015).

As a separatist action, the TBTN march formed part of a longstanding feminist heritage that the activist groups in our study sought to preserve. Indeed, informants suggested that there was an understanding among activist groups more broadly in Malmö – feminist and autonomous Left – that because the TBTN march was seen as a separatist action, it should be organized by groups that identified with separatism. Nonetheless, informants explained that the practical meaning of separatism was not static as it had been the subject of a debate a few years earlier and led to the inclusion of transgender and non-binary persons in the march.

Activist groups organizing the TBTN march in Sweden adopted separatism as a feminist organizing structure and cultural schema. Their use of separatism followed that described by Taylor and Rupp (1993, p. 43): as a strategy with temporal and spatial limitations. Taylor and Rupp (1993, p. 43) described this use of separatism in relation to the TBTN march in the United States: ‘women gain a liberating sense of power specifically from separating from men for the march, reclaiming the right to walk the streets a night with no vestiges of male “protection”’. Previous studies demonstrate that separatist tactics date back to the all-women occupation of government halls and parades for suffrage in the United Kingdom and the United States (McCammon, 2003; Turner, 1913). Separatist tactics have been shown to not only convey protest
but also build feminist communities and establish new discourses and practices (Alvarez et al., 2002; Staggenborg et al., 1993–1994; Taylor & Rupp, 1993). Our study found that even though separatism required drawing boundaries between who belonged in the TBTN march and who did not, its definition was not fixed as transgender and non-binary persons were included after a contentious debate. Thus, the separatist collective identity underpinning the TBTN march in Sweden is socially constructed rather than based on fixed notions of gender (Rupp & Taylor, 1999).

This second theme showed how activist groups chose the TBTN march because it corresponded to their organizational forms and cultural schemas. Organizational forms were decentralized and horizontal while cultural schemas consisted of participatory democracy; and both were informed by separatism (Freeman, 1970; Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Staggenborg, 1988; Taylor & Rupp, 1993). This theme fit the second explanation whereby collective actors select tactics according to their internal characteristics (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2007).

**Reclaiming spaces: refusal of normalized fear and violence in the seemingly safe city**

This theme depicted how activist groups interpreted the TBTN march as a tactic that refused normalized fear and violence in the seemingly safe city. According to Facebook sites, the TBTN marches in Sweden were used to discard the fear and violence experienced by women and trans especially in urban public spaces. The invitation on the Malmö TBTN Facebook site for 2014 disputed how women and trans were encouraged to avoid certain places and adopt certain behaviors in order to prevent victimization from violence. The invitation further questioned how women and trans were held responsible and made to feel guilty for life choices that put them at risk. The invitation ended with a refusal of victimhood: ‘we will not put up with it anymore; we will take it all back, the night, our lives because we are not to blame.’ This use of the TBTN march is not exclusive to Sweden in contemporary times, as Hubbard and Colosi (2015, p. 593) write, the TBTN march was ‘designed to challenge the patriarchal attitudes that produced the streets at night as essentially male spaces’.

Activist groups in Malmö confirmed the choice of the TBTN march because it rejected normalized fear and violence in the seemingly safe city. Informants described how routine, subtle aggression in public spaces produced differences between what women and trans saw as possible to do or feel in the city compared to men, as Sarah (Activist group 1) conveyed:

I do not feel safe all the time and I think this applies to many people, even if we want to be [safe], (…) I almost never go out to normal clubs because these are very unsafe spaces, where I am exposed to sexist…for example, people say things or grab you, men who think they have the right to things that they do not, and this lack of safety limits me.

Agnes (Activist group 2) similarly described experiencing the city as unsafe ‘when men try to take over and deprive women of a given space, physical or psychological’.

Sarah and Agnes quotes, along with the text on Facebook sites, shed light on how gender beliefs shaped the choice of the TBTN march as a tactic (Ridgeway, 2009). Activist groups depicted hegemonic gender beliefs whereby women and trans were
expected to be constantly aware of their own actions, but men were permitted to act without concern for the implications for others. They referred to this as a persistent emotional aggression that included the expectation that women and trans feel afraid and be held responsible for their own (un)safety. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) suggest that hegemonic gender beliefs likely affect behavior in public spaces and with unfamiliar persons more directly than in other societal fields precisely because there are less clear social rules in these situations.

According to activist groups, emotional and sexual aggression in turn shaped women’s and trans’ actions in the city. For example, informants described always having a strategy of checking their surroundings and being on-guard, as Klara (Activist group 3) explained:

Because we hear from everyone how we should behave in public places and which places we should avoid, we change our own behavior when it comes to what can happen in these places and how the city is constructed.

Feminist research demonstrates the normalization of women’s fear in the city and it constraining effects as produced by gender power relations (Pain, 2000; Stanko, 1995; Valentine, 1989; Whitzman, 2007). Activist groups in Malmö further criticized the institutions created to protect citizens in public spaces, such as law enforcement and the legal system. Their critique intensified since a neo-Nazi activist physically attacked a TBTN participant after the Malmö march in 2014 and the court subsequently ruled that one of neo-Nazi activist was not guilty, while another was found guilty in 2016. Activist groups’ depictions captured a discrepancy between everyone’s right to the city, which was supposed to be gender neutral according to the law, and the impact of hegemonic gender beliefs that created actual inequalities in the city (Ridgeway, 2009; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). In Sweden, a prevailing gender equality discourse complicated this situation by constructing women as already on equal terms to men (Sandberg & Rönnblom, 2013).

Activist groups choose the TBTN march to refuse normalized fear and violence among women and trans but also among racialized groups in the seemingly safe city, including those experienced by men. The Malmö TBTN Facebook sites for 2014–2016 gave examples such as poor working conditions in the care sector, border closings to prevent immigration, and the exclusive blaming of racialized men for sexual harassments of women at public events. Malmö, which borders with Denmark, was the main point for refugees’ entry to Sweden in 2015. Informants highlighted how civil society organizations of diverse orientations and types join forces to help refugees and protest the government’s response. The TBTN march, by making city streets safe for one day, was part of creating an equal society in the end. As Sarah (Activist group 1) stated:

It is a shame that the march is needed but it also contributes to the broader change process as ‘a kick against the system’, telling politicians, Neo-Nazi activists, that ‘we are here’, even if they try to stop us, the march shows them that we can do this.

This third theme showed how activist groups choose the TBTN march because it refused the normalized fear and violence that women and trans experienced in everyday interactions in ostensibly safe urban public places. Activist groups emphasized the barriers to women’s and trans’ full participation due to hegemonic gender beliefs that categorized urban public spaces as masculine and rendered their bodies as ‘out of place’
in the city (Listerborn, 2015; Moran & Skeggs, 2004; Puwar, 2004). As ‘out of place’, women and trans in turn were expected to feel uncertain in urban spaces and adopt precautionary behaviors (Pain, 2000; Whitman, 2007). Activist groups further identified similar processes from racialized fear and violence affecting non-white immigrants. However, alternative gender beliefs can be enacted even in public spaces, as Koskela (1997) found among individual women in Finland who chose to walk ‘boldly’ in the city, even others considered them as ‘reckless’.

A similar situation occurred with the TBTN march when women and trans in large numbers occupied public streets at night and disrupted the norm of being ‘out of place’. By taking over space and being ‘in place’ in the city during the TBTN march, participants collectively enacted alternative gender beliefs not only for themselves but also for bystanders. Previous studies illustrate the similar enactment of alternative gender beliefs is tactics, such as the radical fluidity of sexual and gender categories proposed by Drag Shows (Taylor et al., 2004). Reger (2014, p. 58) contends that ‘TBTN marches, often women-only events, combine a message of personal and collective empowerment with the goal of placing blame for sexual assault on rape culture.’ This theme fit the third explanation whereby collective actors select tactics according to gender beliefs.

**Dimensions of tactical choice and conceptions of power**

Our analysis of the TBTN march in Sweden shows how the three explanations of tactical choice are not necessarily mutually exclusive but rather simultaneously clarify different dimensions of the choice of a single tactic. We propose three terms as heuristic tools to illustrate this: making claims, enacting claims and reclaiming spaces respectively. Though treated separately above, these dimensions relate to one another through their different conceptions of power. Whereas the first one conceives of power as concentrated in a centralized authority, the second one conceives of power as stemming from movement agency, and the third as gender relations dispersed across multiple dimensions and fields of society.

The first dimension focuses on the choice of tactics that make claims upon institutionalized power concentrated in urban areas, such as governments and corporations (Tilley, 1986). The TBTN march, as a routine, publicly visible performance in urban settings, offers a means to make claims upon authorities, both local and national, encompassing city planners, the justice system and law enforcement, even if this was not the main or exclusive motive behind the organizing groups in Sweden. The second dimension focuses on the choice of tactics that enact claims in the here and now through movement agency grounded in collective actors’ organizational forms and cultural schemas (Doherty & Hayes, 2019; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2007). The TBTN march, as it aligns with preferred forms of feminist organizing, provides a means to enact claims by practicing commitments to horizontal structures, participatory democracy and separatism, which was a primary motive behind the organizing groups in Sweden.

These two dimensions go hand-in-hand. Tarrow (1993b, p. 286) argues that tactics are not merely tools to make claims upon adversaries, but rather themselves ‘express the rights and privileges that protesters are demanding, and are diffused as general expressions of their claims and similar ones.’ He illustrates this with the lunch counter sit-ins
developed by the African American student movement in the southern US: ‘by sitting at lunch counters, African American college students were actually practicing the objective they sought’ (Tarrow, 1993b, p. 286), that is, they were enacting claims. There are important parallels between this case and the TBTN march shown above in our first two themes.

However, a crucial difference between these two cases exists. In the former case, explicit Separate-but-equal laws prohibited African-Americans from using services altogether or from using services in the same manner as white people, for example, through ‘whites only’ sections at lunch counters. Laws, combined with everyday practices made racial inequalities explicit and visible to uphold white people’s privilege and deny African-Americans’ rights. In contrast, with regard to women and trans in contemporary Sweden, there are no laws or policies disallowing them from using public spaces at all or in the same manner as men or cis-persons. The city is depicted in laws and policies as gender neutral. Instead, hegemonic gender beliefs affect social interactions in the city (Ridgeway, 2009) that construct the city as masculine and render non-masculine bodies as out-of-place (Moran & Skeggs, 2004; Puwar, 2004). These gender inequalities in contemporary urban public spaces are implicit and less visible. Similar processes have been detected with regard to racial inequalities (Burke, 2017; Listerborn, 2015; Pain, 2001).

A major dilemma becomes how to reject normalized fear and violence in seemingly safe urban public spaces without reinforcing hegemonic gender beliefs (Pain, 2000; Whitzman, 2007). If activist groups choose the TBTN march only to make claims upon centralized authority, it could risk depicting women and trans as vulnerable and requiring protection. Hubbard and Colosi (2015) found this in their study of feminist opposition to nighttime sexual entertainment in England and Wales. If activist groups choose the TBTN march only to enact claims through movement agency, it could risk limiting impact to those activist groups with the same organizational forms and cultural schemas.

Our study captured a third dimension to explain fully how activist groups in Sweden selected TBTN march as a tactic. This third dimension focuses on the choice of tactics that (re)claim spaces made unequal by gender power relations operating through gender beliefs – hegemonic and alternative. The TBTN march, as it refused normalized fear and violence in the seemingly safe city, offered a means to reclaim spaces by women and trans collectively participating in city streets at night unabashedly. However, the role of gender beliefs may also explain tactical choice among social movements that do not aim to challenge gender inequalities and that by reproducing gender inequalities continue to claim space on behalf of a male norm.

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Author Links

Author 1 Social Media Profiles: https://www.linkedin.com/in/anna-britt-coe-57332a3b/

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Notes on contributors

Anna-Britt Coe is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Umeå University. Her research focuses on two questions: how social movements, in particular feminist activist groups, influence society and policies, and how young adults practice politics, especially delinked from state-centered frameworks. Empirically, she examines both the meanings that activist groups assign to their collective action as well as the social processes and practices they develop in relation to these meanings. She has conducted research in Sweden and Latin America.

Linda Sandberg is a Senior Lecturer at Umeå Centre for Gender Studies, Umeå University, Sweden. In her research she focuses on spaces’ of gendered fear of violence, and the intersections of race and gender as well as planning for safety and security in urban environments from a gender perspective.

ORCID

Anna-Britt Coe http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1975-9060

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