

Shocked or Satiated? Violent Imagery Traumatizes Rather than Motivates Veteran Activists

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Research Advisory Committee member, Dr Corey Lee Wrenn, discusses the negative effect that violent imagery of non-human animal suffering can have on vegan activists.

Sociologists James Jasper and Jane Poulsen have argued that activists' deployment of emotionally triggering 'moral shocks' can stimulate recruitment for movements, particularly for those that are less successful in recruiting through social networks. Others have suggested that, more than a recruitment tool, these moral shocks are useful for sustaining activist motivation. I wondered, however, if activists might actually find that exposure to violent imagery in campaigning achieves the opposite. Perhaps it demotivates, instead?

In a study now published with *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*, I explore the tendency of activists to disengage from moral shocks as a means of managing difficult emotions such as compassion fatigue, burnout, and psychological distress. Although many respondents see the utility of moral shocks as an outreach tool, they carefully consider their own exposure to protect their emotional well-being and protest sustainability.

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I utilized email-based qualitative interviews with twenty-five newly recruited activists and established activists in the Western Nonhuman Animal Rights movement and found that established activists, by and large, actively avoided exposing themselves to moral shocks. Most activists reported feeling

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traumatized or otherwise demoralized from exposure, particularly for those who have been in the movement for five years or more. However, the debate as to whether or not moral shocks are effective tended to overshadow activists' decision to personally engage with them. I suspect this is because moral shocks are ubiquitous in Western Nonhuman Animal Rights efforts. Not only is it, in practice, difficult for activists to avoid them personally, but to eschew them in their activism runs counter to norms established by the movement, thus putting the onus on the activist to explain their defection.

Findings suggest the need for more research to ascertain the utility of moral shocks for mobilizing the public and effectively advocating for other animals. But they also suggest greater attention is needed for the emotional support of activists, particularly those who are in it for the long game. Repeated exposure to violent depictions of speciesism can lead to compassion fatigue and psychological suffering. While this is certainly harmful to activists themselves, it also constitutes a disadvantage for the movement more broadly, for if activists are feeling traumatized, helpless, and burnt out, they are not likely to be an effective force for social change.

Lastly, I argue that the heavy reliance on violent imagery in the Western Nonhuman Animal Rights movement reflects patriarchal ideologies and movement strategies. Violence is normalized as both the problem and solution to speciesism, activist exposure to speciesist violence is expected to trigger a macho savior response, and personal suffering in this "war" against speciesism is dismissed as irrelevant. I suggest that further investigation into softer feminist tactics that embrace compassion and inclusion could prove relevant for building a sustainable activist repertoire.

[Read the full article here.](#)

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