How Activist Dilemmas Lead to Internal Fragmentation Within Environmental Movements: the Role of Dyadic Harm and Urgency.

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Abstract

Environmental activist movements often face internal disagreements that can escalate into internal fragmentation, threatening their cohesion and long-term impact. Disagreements may concern group strategies or core values, which can be perceived as moral violations and lead to the perception that other group members are intentionally perpetuating harm. This study examines how perceived dyadic harm, whether value-based or strategy-based, and perceived urgency interact to influence internal fragmentation. Based on psychological theories of moralization and collective action, we predict that value-based harm will lead to greater internal fragmentation, particularly under conditions of low urgency. In a 2×2 experimental design ($N =$ 245), participants read a fictional scenario involving group disagreement and reported their schismatic intentions. While the ANOVA revealed no significant effects, both types of perceived harm were strongly correlated with internal fragmentation; urgency did not show such a link. These findings suggest that the perception of harm itself can lead activists to internal fragmentation, regardless of the type of harm they are experiencing. However, as the results were primarily non-significant, this study offers limited support for the hypothesis that was tested, suggesting that the relationship between dyadic harm, urgency, and internal fragmentation may be more complex than expected. Further research is needed to clarify the psychological mechanisms involved in internal group conflict within environmental movements.

Keywords: activist dilemmas, internal fragmentation, dyadic harm, moralisation, urgency.

How Activist Dilemmas Lead to Internal Fragmentation Within Environmental

Movements: the Role of Dyadic Harm and Urgency.

Why do environmental activist groups fracture into smaller factions? This is a scientifically but also societally relevant question. Indeed, environmental activism has recently experienced a surge in public engagement and mainstream attention, particularly since the rise of Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement in 2018 (BBC News, 2024). Her group has garnered the support of scientists, youth, and the broader public, thereby expanding the reach of environmental movements (Jung et al., 2020).

This growth, however, did not come without complications. Indeed, scholars have long criticized the Scandinavian approach to climate issues, arguing that these are typically analyzed as a compartmentalized problem, rather than one linked to broader societal issues (i.e., poverty, colonialism, racism) (Magnusdottir & Kronsell, 2015; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2013). The pattern for environmental activism in other Western countries emerged from discourses about human rights and social justice, with environmental activist groups partnering up with racial justice movements in the US (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). As FFF expanded its reach, this specific difference in whether environmentalism is observed through an intersectional lens has also translated into group tensions and eventual division, with many members of FFF moving to more radical groups, such as Extinction Rebellion or Just Stop Oil (Marquardt, 2020).

However, what are the reasons for this internal fragmentation? To illustrate a particular type of tension growing within environmental movements more generally, the British Green Party has opposed a project involving the mass installation of solar panels, as it was considered a potential harm to local livelihoods (Chivers, 2023). At the same time, other members of the party

supported the initiative. Although it seems conceivable that such disagreements might cause activist groups to break apart, surprisingly little is known about this. We observed two dimensions in which internal fragmentation typically occurs: the perceived urgency of the climate emergency and the type of harm inflicted by group members (both on broader movement goals and on shared moral commitments). Indeed, the splits we just examined rely on whether activists view the crisis as an immediate emergency or a protracted negotiation strategy. For instance, the British Green Party dispute highlights tensions over perceived harm to local livelihoods versus system-level benefits (Chivers, 2023).

Therefore, in this thesis, we investigate whether the perceived *urgency* of an issue related to climate justice and the perception of *dyadic harm* (to values or strategy) contribute to internal fragmentation in such groups. We predict that when the perception of *dyadic harm* concerns the *values* of the group, and the *urgency* is low, there will be higher levels of internal fragmentation within activist groups, due to the greater moralization and identity threat (D'Amore et al., 2021; Sani, 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002). This is especially relevant because the communication of such factors may help put the issue on the agenda, but it risks splitting the movement internally. It is essential to understand these mechanisms, as they can explain the reasons behind the fractures within activist groups and provide insight into how collective action can be sustained in the current political climate. Through an experimental design focused on the Dutch climate action context, this study seeks to clarify why a group holds together or splits apart.

Theoretical Foundations: Activists' Dilemma and Moralisation

When activist groups face internal tensions about how to achieve their shared goals most effectively, this is typically referred to as an "activist dilemma." Such dilemmas concern a

trade-off between different visions of collective welfare (Feinberg et al., 2020). Unlike classic social dilemmas, where the trade-off is between self-interest and collective interest (Dawes, 1980), these dilemmas involve a trade-off between different visions of collective welfare. The manifestation of such activist dilemmas typically regards disagreements over *values* (e.g., moral priorities, the group's core identity; see Agostini & Van Zomeren, 2021) and *strategies* (e.g., peaceful or disruptive collective action; see Shuman et al., 2024). More specifically, moderates often promote individual behavioural change through self-efficacy-based initiatives directed to the general population (Geiger et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2024), while radicals call for systemic disruption through collective action targeting institutions and elites (Sloot et al., 2018; Vuong et al., 2024). In this case, the trade-off reflects different worldviews: moderates believe that everyone shares responsibility for environmental protection and favors institutional negotiations, whereas radicals argue that a small elite is responsible for most of the harm and that disruption is necessary to be heard. When activists feel ignored, unheard, or frustrated, they are more likely to radicalize, leading to a decreased tolerance for different approaches (Louis et al., 2021; Tausch et al., 2011).

As the urgency around climate change discourse intensifies, such differences within an activist group risk becoming moralized, transforming tactical disagreements into perceived identity threats (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). This moralization process makes compromise within group members more difficult, especially when each side views its approach as the most ethical or authentic expression of the group's mission (Pauls et al., 2022; Bliuc et al., 2024). Research suggests that when perceived harm is interpreted as a violation of core group values (*dyadic moral harm*; D'Amore et al., 2021), members may view others within the group as morally deviant, potentially triggering internal divisions (Sani, 2005; Skitka et al., 2021). Thus, when

activist dilemmas escalate into such tensions, groups may experience schisms, leading to the formation of splinter factions.

However, we know little about how this works psychologically, and what the precise role of perceived urgency and harm is in the process. Some pointers come from work suggesting that new subgroups often emerge as attempts to restore the group's "true identity" (Sani, 2005) or assert ideological consistency (Saunders, 2016). While such fragmentation can energize subsets of activists, it also tends to reduce public support and weaken the movement's collective influence (Feinberg et al., 2017; Stott & Drury, 2000). Indeed, radical flanks might alienate potential supporters and fellow activists (Jost & Hunyady, 2013; Feinberg et al., 2020). Nevertheless, these internal tensions remain underexplored in the literature.

While existing research has examined ideological splits in activist movements (Sani, 2005), there is a lack of focus on *how* internal disagreements are perceived as moral violations, specifically when those concern strategy over value-based conflicts. Indeed, collective action can be observed through a strategic approach (Jasper, 2004), but evidence remains limited to this day. Therefore, this study addresses that gap by investigating how activists experience perceived dyadic harm (rooted in either values or strategy) and how this, in combination with perceived urgency, predicts the likelihood of internal fragmentation. Specifically, we predict that we will find higher levels of internal fragmentation in value-based dyadic harm, but only when perceived urgency is low.

Perceived Dyadic Harm: a Catalyst for Moral Conflict

Perceived dyadic harm, defined as the perceived intentional harm committed by a perpetrator against a vulnerable party (D'Amore et al., 2021), may contribute to internal

fragmentation within activist groups. Building on previous work, we distinguish between strategy-based and value-based dyadic harm. While research suggests that tensions can easily escalate when individuals perceive *value-based* dyadic harm (D'Amore et al., 2021), the activists' dilemma highlights that most groups tend to dissociate themselves from others due to differing strategic agendas (Feinberg et al., 2020). Currently, however, research has not yet investigated whether activists also moralize their *strategy*.

Dyadic harm frames disagreements as intentional and unfair acts of harm by a perpetrator against an innocent victim, triggering strong moral emotions such as disgust or outrage (D'Amore et al., 2021). Most research applies the perception of dyadic harm to intergroup settings, such as activists versus corporations or politicians, where strong moral convictions justify confrontation (Pauls et al., 2022). Similar perceptions of harm might emerge within activist groups when a member views another's behaviour as violating shared norms or harming the group's mission (Sarı et al., 2024). In this context, harm can be perceived as either a value violation (e.g., compromising moral purity) or a strategic betrayal (e.g., undermining a group's planned action). These moralized perceptions may lead to internal othering, emotional distancing, and ultimately, fragmentation (Pauls et al., 2022; Feinberg et al., 2017).

Psychologically, this may not be surprising. Moral values are often described as the glue that binds activist identities and motivates action (Bouman et al., 2021). Violations of such values can trigger outrage, increase willingness to engage in protest, and reduce tolerance for compromise (Zaal et al., 2011; Skitka et al., 2021). When these violations occur within the group, activists may experience what Feinberg and Willer (2015) call a "moral empathy gap", namely, a failure to understand opposing perspectives, even from fellow activist members. This may lead to internal rifts and exclusion of those seen as morally subversive. When a member

violates these shared moral commitments (Skitka et al., 2021), this could be seen as an existential threat to the group (van Zomeren et al., 2024).

While research has shown that activist groups tend to split when members perceive a betrayal of core group values (Sani, 2005), strategic disagreements can also be divisive, especially when urgency is high (Capstick, 2013; Hoffman, 2009). Indeed, values are frequently moralized, whereas strategy has traditionally been treated as a more pragmatic domain. However, emerging research suggests that strategies, too, can become moralized. In particular, this can happen when disruptive tactics are viewed as harming unrelated parties or the group's public image (Feinberg et al., 2017; Schein & Gray, 2018). For example, activists may condemn extreme protest not because of its goal, but because of the method's perceived immorality or reputational cost (Feinberg et al., 2017). This study aims to address this gap by examining how activists respond to value-based versus strategy-based violations, both framed as dyadic harm, and how these responses differ under varying levels of perceived urgency. Both values and strategy can be central to group identity (Jasper, 2004). When either is intentionally violated, it can trigger the very same moral-protective mechanisms that are well-documented in research on collective action (D'Amore et al., 2021). In this study, we suggest that value-based dyadic harm can lead to greater internal fragmentation than strategy-based harm, due to the fact that values are more central to the identity and therefore more moralized, but only when perceived urgency is low.

Perceived Urgency: a Buffer or Amplifier of Moral Disagreement

Similar to perceived dyadic harm, urgency is a subjective perception that shapes how activists evaluate disagreement and decide what is acceptable or not within their group. When

disagreements are seen through the lens of urgency, both value-based and strategy-based harm may be moralized more intensely by fueling internal criticism, or even group splits. Previous research showed that moral outrage serves as a catalyst, fueling a sense of urgency that moves collective action (Green et al., 2023). However, when urgency is high, it could serve as a unifier, as the immediacy of the issue might leave room for strategic ambiguities (Skitka & Mullen, 2002). In contrast, low-urgency conditions may allow for internal scrutiny and could therefore escalate tension (Suter & Hertwig, 2011). This implies that when the perceived threat is less immediate, activists have more cognitive and emotional space to focus on internal disagreement, hence potentially increasing the risk of fragmentation as group members become more critical of one another.

There are pointers in the literature suggesting that internal fragmentation may be intensified by perceived urgency. Indeed, depending on how pressing a cause seems, members are more likely to moralize disagreement and respond emotionally (Kutlaca et al., 2020). This finding aligns with research suggesting that situational urgency accelerates decision-making, amplifies emotional arousal, and shifts reasoning toward intuitive and goal-driven responses (Suter & Hertwig, 2011). Previous literature has indicated that, within collective action contexts, perceiving high urgency may push members to moralize conflict, viewing dissent as a betrayal of the group's mission (van Zomeren et al., 2024; Pauls et al., 2022). Nevertheless, such pressure might also lead activists to become more tolerant of disruptive or norm-violating tactics if these can still yield tangible results for the group's cause or the protection of morals. This is known as the "dark side of moral conviction" (Skitka & Mullen, 2002), where people pursuing a morally mandated goal may disregard usual procedures and overlook moral ambiguities to act quickly and decisively. In other words, we argue that under high moral urgency, there is a greater

tolerance for norm-violating actions aimed at defending core objectives, and hence less risk of schisms along this dimension.

On the other hand, low urgency may prompt stricter scrutiny, as group members have more time to refine strategies and minimize harm. Research shows that moral convictions can justify non-normative action or extreme tactics (Pauls et al., 2022; Skitka & Mullen, 2002). The space for reflection that is allowed during low-urgency conditions can indeed lead to heightened sensitivity to internal disagreements, especially when moral convictions are involved (Feinberg et al., 2020). As a result, low urgency can create the ideal condition for value-based harm to trigger internal fragmentation. The rationale behind this is that when people do not feel time pressure, they reflect more and scrutinize details, considering a wider range of perspectives. In short, under low urgency, deliberation is encouraged over quick action (Suter & Hertwig, 2011).

Once there has been space for scrutinized behavior, members are likely to moralize disagreements, especially if those touch on core values of the activist group. In activist groups, values are not merely personal preferences, but are integral to the group's identity (Sani, 2005; Stitka et al., 2021). Therefore, if the actions of a group member are not aligned with group values, this is not simply wrong; it is *morally deviant*. This is when the perception of value-based dyadic harm arises (D'Amore et al., 2021). Once a disagreement is moralized, compromise becomes more difficult, as moral convictions can lead to cognitive rigidity and emotional distance, which in turn may result in factionalism or group schisms (Pauls et al., 2022; Skitka & Mullen, 2002). Building on this rationale, we hypothesize that value-based harm will lead to higher internal fragmentation than strategy-based harm, especially when urgency is low, as activists have more time to moralize other members' behaviour.

The Current Study

Our literature review suggests that internal fragmentation in activist groups may arise from perceived violations of shared values and clashing strategic goals (Sani, 2005; D'Amore, 2021; Jasper, 2004). These factors do not operate in a vacuum: perceived urgency may amplify emotional responses to internal disagreements, accelerate decision-making, and shift tolerance for harming (Suter & Hertwig, 2011). However, the dimension in which these factors interact remains underexplored. Therefore, this study investigates whether perceived dyadic harm (value-based vs. strategy-based) and perceived urgency (high vs. low) influence internal fragmentation within environmental groups.

The specific research question guiding this study was: Do perceived dyadic harm and urgency affect internal fragmentation in environmental groups, and does urgency moderate the relationship between dyadic harm and fragmentation? A moderation hypothesis was formulated for this study: the effect of dyadic harm on internal fragmentation will be moderated by perceived urgency, such that value-based harm will lead to greater internal fragmentation than strategy-based harm only under low urgency conditions, whereas under high urgency conditions we expect this difference to be less salient or absent, due to time constraints and unifying pressure. We examined this in the context of a fictional but realistic scenario involving internal disagreement within a Dutch environmental activist group, where members debated how to respond to a controversial policy related to wildlife reintroduction. This setting enabled us to examine how activists perceive different forms of internal harm and urgency in a concrete, emotionally salient context.

Method

Design and Participants

This study utilized a 2 x 2 between-participants experimental design. The first independent variable was perceived dyadic harm (strategy-based vs. value-based), and the second independent (moderator) variable was perceived urgency (high vs. low). The primary dependent variable was internal fragmentation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. Each condition had an equal number of participants.

A total of 245 participants were recruited for this study. A sample of 45 people was recruited through an email invitation directed to environmental activist groups, while another sample of 200 participants was recruited through Prolific. All participants recruited through Prolific were residents of the Netherlands. At the same time, the participants from the general sample also came from other countries located in Europe (Italy, Austria, Romania, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Spain). According to a pre-screening set up prior on the Prolific platform, all participants had moderate-to-high concern about climate issues (scoring at least 3 out of 5 on Prolific's "concern for climate issues" item).

The sample consisted of 47.8% men, 49.4% women, and 2.9% individuals who identified as non-binary or third gender. Age distribution was as follows: 18-24 years (23.3%), 25-34 years (46.5%), 35-48 years (21.6%), and 49 years or older accounted for the remaining 8,6%; $M = 2.18$, $SD = 0.95$, with age bands coded numerically, as participants were only requested to indicate their age group. Although the initial target was environmental activists only, the sample was expanded due to recruitment challenges; ultimately, 56 Prolific participants and 45 participants from the original sample reported involvement in environmental activism, with a total of 101 activists ($M = 0.41$, $SD = 0.49$).

To estimate the required sample size, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996) with power *(1 - β)* set at 0.90, a Type I error rate of $\alpha = 0.05$, and a medium effect size (*f* = 0.25), indicating a required sample of 171. With 245 participants, a post-hoc power analysis confirmed 97% power for detecting the specified effects.

No personal identifiers (e.g., IP addresses, email addresses) were collected in line with ethical guidelines. Prolific IDs were used solely for compensation purposes (€ 1.50 per participant, or €9.00/hour) and were deleted directly after payment. All participants provided informed consent before participating and either renewed or withdrew consent after the debriefing. Participants who did not meet the pre-screening criteria, did not renew their consent, dropped out, or failed all attention checks were excluded from the analysis. Boxplots were used to check for outliers. A few mild outliers (<2.5%) were detected and inspected across all main variables, but no extreme outliers were identified and as a result all cases were retained in the final analyses.

Procedure

Eligible participants (residents of the Netherlands, fluent in English, scoring at least 3 out of 5 in the 'concern for climate issues' pre-screening scale on Prolific and environmental activists from the original sample) completed the study online via Qualtrics. Participants firstly read the information sheet, where they were told that they were participating in a study regarding decision-making on complex issues related to environmental activism. Subsequently, they read the consent form and were required to provide initial consent to take part in the study. Once participants had given consent, they were informed that they were about to read a scenario. Prior to reading the scenario, they were instructed to imagine being an environmental activist taking

part in a group discussion about an initiative the group had successfully brought to the

government. Specifically, the potential reintroduction of wolves in the Gelderland region was

discussed: the group had advocated for that initiative, but has also heard the concerns of the local

residents, who demand more structured compensation to preserve their livelihoods in the area.

After much debate, the group decides not to support the local residents and push for the

reintroduction of wolves as it is, causing a disagreement within the group and serious

consequences for the local residents. The scenario manipulated Perceived Urgency and Type of

Dyadic Harm through its wording (four total versions: high/low urgency x strategy-/value-based

dyadic harm; see Appendix 1 for full texts). Both Manipulation and comprehension checks were

embedded in the scenario.

Following the scenario, participants completed the perceived urgency scale, followed by

the perceived dyadic harm scale. Due to a programming error, participants then received either

the strategy-based or value-based version based on the condition they were in. Finally, they

completed the Internal Fragmentation Scale. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale.

After completing the study, participants were fully debriefed about the true study purpose and

provided with resource information. Given the use of deception, they were then asked to renew

or withdraw their consent.

Materials

Manipulation and Attention Checks

We used one item as a manipulation check for urgency, as the text set each scenario for

different levels of urgency. The item stated "Do you think the situation needs to be addressed

urgently?" (Yes/No). Furthermore, to check whether participants experienced the perception of

dyadic harm that we were intending to manipulate, we asked the question "Do you agree with the final decision?" (Yes/No).

Additionally, a few attention checks were embedded within the scales, to ensure that participants were carefully reading the questions carefully. The attention check was clearly signposted and instructed participants to select 'Disagree' on the Likert scale.

Measures

Perception of Urgency Scale. A 2-item scale developed specifically for this study was used to measure participants' perception of the urgency of the scenario they read (e.g., How urgent do you feel the problem is that the reintroduction of wolves in the Gelderland region will solve?; How urgent do you perceive the current ecological imbalance to be?). Responses were recorded on a -3 (Not urgent at all) to +3 scale (Extremely Urgent) Likert scale. The scale showed acceptable internal reliability ($r = .62$; $p < .001$).

Strategy-Based Dyadic Harm Scale. A 5-item scale developed from D'Amore and colleagues' Dyadic Harm Measure (2022) was used to measure participants' perception of harm perpetrated by in-group members towards the strategic goals of the activist group. Items include: 'I think that my group is directly responsible for harming our goals concerning sustainability and social justice through this decision.' (see Appendix 2 for the full list). Responses were recorded on a -3 (Strongly Disagree) to +3 (Strongly Agree) Likert scale. The scale showed acceptable internal reliability ($α = .77$).

Value-Based Dyadic Harm Scale. A 5-item scale developed from D'Amore and colleagues' Dyadic Harm Measure (2022) was used to test participants' perception of harm caused by group members' violation of core values related to environmental activism. Items

include: 'I think that my group is directly responsible for the harm caused to the rural community, who were forced to move outside of the area' or 'I feel that my group's decision compromises the core ethical principles of environmental activism which are meant to protect humans, wildlife and environment' (see Appendix 2 for the full list). Responses were recorded on a -3 (Strongly Disagree) to +3 (Strongly Agree) Likert scale, with good reliability (α = .81).

Internal Fragmentation Scale. A 9-item scale adapted from Sani (2005), and comprising two sub-scales, namely Identity Subversion (5 items, α = .90) and Schismatic Intentions (4 items, α = .93) was used to measure participants' intention to leave the group after the group's final decision. A principal component analysis revealed a two-component structure corresponding to the same sub-scales used by Sani (2005). The components accounted respectively for 61% and 14% of the variance. Responses were recorded on a -3 (Strongly Disagree) to +3 (Strongly Agree) Likert scale, with items including: 'The decision to prioritize wolf reintroduction without compensation for affected farmers has forced families to abandon their way of life, has subverted the true identity of the group.', 'I will have to abandon my environmental group because its decisions do not align with our goals.' (see Appendix 2 for full list).

Results

We first inspected the bivariate correlations between perceived dyadic harm, urgency and internal fragmentation. A strong and significant positive correlation was found between value-based dyadic harm and internal fragmentation (r = 0.61, p < .001), as well as between strategy-based dyadic harm and internal fragmentation (r = 0.59, p < .001). The correlation between internal fragmentation and perceived urgency was found to be non-significant (r = .05,

p = .484). This means that, across conditions, the more participants perceived harm, whether to values or strategies, the more they reported internal fragmentation within the group. However, how urgent they perceived the issues to be did not seem to influence their feelings of fragmentation across conditions.

Manipulation checks

We then performed manipulation checks. An independent t-test was conducted to explore whether the urgency manipulation effectively influenced participants' perception of urgency. The results showed a significant difference in the perceived urgency between the high urgency condition (*M* = 1.17, *SD* = 1.10) and the low urgency condition (*M* = 0.14, *SD* = 1.12), *t*(237.95) = 6.82, *p* < .001. Levene's test indicated unequal variances, so adjusted degrees of freedom were used. This means that this manipulation was successful, with stronger urgency perceived in the high compared to low urgency conditions.

To assess whether participants perceived harm as intended in the two dyadic harm conditions, and given that we did not assess the same scale in each condition, we decided to conduct one-sample t-tests comparing each scale mean score against the scale midpoint (0). This means we tested whether the relevant type of harm was psychologically relevant for the relevant conditions. For the strategic-based dyadic harm condition, participants indeed reported perceived harm significantly higher than the midpoint (*M* = 0.70, *SD* = 1.04), *t*(122) = 7.40, *p* < .001. The effect size was large, *d* =1.04. This means that participants exposed to the strategy-based harm condition indeed perceived the group's actions as significantly harmful to strategic goals, confirming to some extent the effectiveness of the manipulation.

For the value-based dyadic harm condition, the one-sample t-test showed a marginal trend above the midpoint ($M = 0.22$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(121) = 1.96$, $p = .052$. The effect size was small to medium, $d = 0.18$. Although this did not reach conventional significance, the result suggests that participants may have perceived a sufficient level of value-based harm, although less clearly or consistently than strategic harm, as supported by the smaller effect size.

Hypothesis testing

To test the main hypothesis, we ran a 2 (Perceived Urgency: High/Low) x 2 (Perceived Dyadic Harm: Strategy-/Value-Based) ANOVA to examine the effect of harm type and urgency on internal fragmentation. Levene's Test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met, $F(3, 241) = 2.12$; $p = 0.099$. The results revealed that the main effect of Harm Type was not significant, $F(1, 241) = 0.44$; $p = .51$. The main effect of Urgency Type was also not significant, $F(1, 241) = 2.09$; $p = .149$. Finally, the interaction between Urgency Type and Harm type is also not significant, $F(1, 241) = 1.42$; $p = .235$. This does not support our moderation hypothesis.

Figure 1 depicts the means across conditions, which, interestingly, descriptively might suggest an interaction pattern. To explore this trend further, we conducted a simple main effects analysis, to assess the effects of urgency within the value-based dyadic harm condition. Results showed that urgency approached significance, $F(1, 120) = 3.08$, $p = .082$, partial $\eta^2 = .025$. Although statistically non-significant, this pattern suggests that urgency may amplify the effects of value-based dyadic harm on internal fragmentation, specifically when *value-based harm* was paired with *high urgency*. This pattern, which should be interpreted with caution, may indicate a potential compounding effect of dyadic harm and urgency framing that warrants further investigation. This is inconsistent with our hypothesis but consistent with the idea that dyadic

harm itself, especially when moralized, constitutes a trigger for internal fragmentation, whereas urgency might weakly, or not at all, shape the effect under the conditions we tested.

Figure 1.

Mean levels of internal fragmentation across harm type and urgency conditions (N = 245).
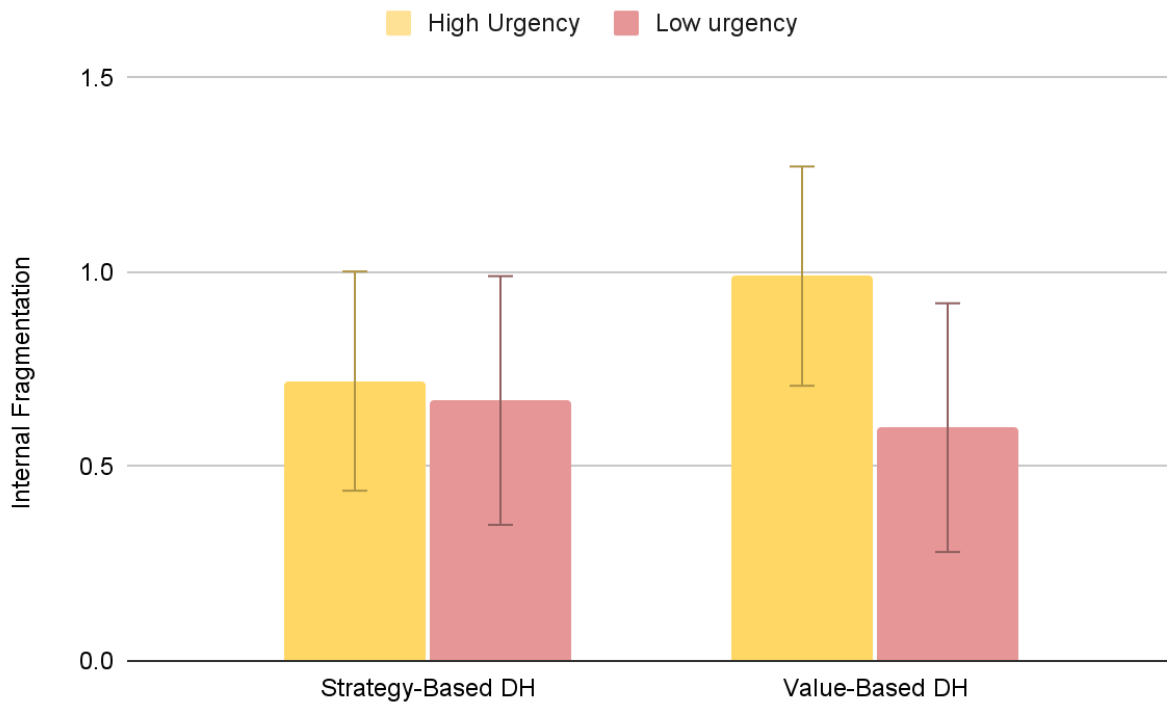
Error bars: 95% CI

Note. In the value-based/high urgency condition, participants reported the highest internal fragmentation ($M = 0.99$, $SD = 1.12$), followed by the strategy-based/high urgency condition ($M = 0.72$, $SD = 1.06$). The lowest score was found in the value-based/low urgency condition ($M = 0.60$, $SD = 1.34$) and the strategy-based/low urgency condition ($M = 0.67$, $SD = 1.11$).

Discussion

The present experiment investigated whether the interaction between different types of perceived dyadic harm (strategy-based vs. value-based) and levels of perceived urgency affected internal fragmentation within environmental activist groups. It was hypothesized that value-based dyadic harm would lead to higher levels of internal fragmentation, particularly in the context of low perceived urgency. However, the results did not provide statistical support for this moderation hypothesis. Instead, they offered two alternatives. First, correlational analysis suggested that both types of perceived harm were strongly related to internal fragmentation, but this was not the case for perceived urgency. This indicates that we identified one potential risk factor (perceived dyadic harm), but not another. And second, the ANOVA pattern suggested, descriptively, that participants in the high-urgency/value-based harm condition reported the highest levels of internal fragmentation.

In contrast, those in low-urgency/value-based harm condition reported the lowest. Although not statistically significant, these trends, further explored by a simple primary analysis, suggest that value-based dyadic harm and high urgency are potential key conditions for schisms to emerge. Moreover, the effect sizes were small (e.g., partial $\eta^2 = .009$ for the interaction), and the confidence intervals around the means showed substantial overlap. This suggests that the effects may be weak or inconsistent, rather than absent. While the study was sufficiently powered to detect medium effects, it may not have captured more subtle or context-dependent patterns in how perceived harm and urgency interact to influence internal fragmentation. Below we discuss the implications of our findings, the limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

Implications

The first implication of our findings is that the results are, to some extent, inconclusive. Yet, they offer interesting hints at the roles played by perceptions of urgency and dyadic harm. For one, a two-way ANOVA revealed no significant main effects of harm type or urgency on internal fragmentation, nor a significant interaction between the two. These findings suggest that, at the group level, neither the type of dyadic harm participants were exposed to nor the urgency of the situation significantly influenced participants' reported willingness to secede from their activist group. This result does not support the initial hypothesis and can be interpreted as if the two factors do not matter for internal fragmentation. Yet, inspection of the correlations suggested that, unlike perceived urgency, perceived harm was strongly related to internal fragmentation, both in terms of values and strategy. This suggests that particularly perceived harm is key to understanding internal fragmentation.

A second implication is that these factors can be manipulated psychologically. The check for perceived urgency provided direct evidence that the urgency manipulation was successful, as participants in the high-urgency condition rated the scenario as significantly more urgent than those in the low-urgency condition, with a large effect size. The checks for perceived harm provided more indirect evidence, as participants in the strategy-based condition perceived harm on that dimension more strongly than at the midpoint of the scale, whereas this was the case more weakly for participants in the value-based condition regarding the value-based harm scale. This relatively weaker perception of value-based harm compared to strategy-based harm was unexpected, considering that values are generally theorised as more central to group identity and more likely to be moralised (Sani, 2005; Skitka et al., 2021). This nevertheless suggests that in specific activist contexts, strategic decisions are just as morally loaded as values, especially

when they involve visible public actions (Jasper, 2004; Kretschmer, 2025). While the literature often treats values as the core of group identity and strategy as a secondary means to an end (Skitka et al., 2005; Van Zomeren et al., 2008), these findings indicate that strategy itself may be moralized, and violations of strategy may be perceived as an identity threat. This challenges the assumed hierarchy between values and strategy in models of activist conflict, assuming a more nuanced understanding of how both can function as moral boundaries within movements (Skitka et al., 2005; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Instead, the results suggest that strategic decisions may also be moralized to a comparable extent, particularly in contexts where reputation, tactics, and public impact are deeply intertwined with group identity (Jasper, 2004).

Third, our results highlight the importance of examining both structural and subjective dynamics in intragroup conflict. The strong correlation between perceived dyadic harm and internal fragmentation suggests that internal fragmentation may not be driven solely by disagreement, but by how that disagreement is moralized. If activists interpret strategic or value-based differences as intentional harm, this can undermine trust and cohesion. This aligns with previous findings arguing that once a behaviour is moralized, people identify a victim and an offender, intensifying polarization (Schein & Grey, 2018). Group unity can be preserved by fostering critical dialogue, clarifying intentions, and distinguishing between disagreement and betrayal.

Furthermore, according to our results, the key conditions for internal fragmentation may be the combination of perceiving high urgency and experiencing strong value-based harm. If this pattern were to be replicated, this would be in line with previous body of research suggesting that when activists perceive their core values as being threatened under pressure to act, they might be

more likely to view disagreements as betrayal and increasing the risk of fragmentation (Sani, 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Feinberg & Willer, 2015).

Finally, the last implication is that not all fragmentation is inherently detrimental. Prior work has shown that activist schisms, such as the split between Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd, can yield better results by employing a dual strategy: combining mainstream advocacy with radical disruption (Simpson et al., 2022; Nagtzaam, 2022). Research related to radical flanks further reinforces that disruptive action can prove successful, as it allows the broader movement to profit from the generated public attention (Dasch et al., 2024; Grandy & Hiatt, 2024). From this perspective, fragmentation does not necessarily indicate a failure, but rather a strategic recalibration within the movement. While dyadic harm predicted schismatic intentions, some participants continued to express identification with the group, suggesting that distancing from specific actions does not necessarily signal abandonment of the cause.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study also presents several limitations that are worth attention. Firstly, a procedural design error resulted in the administration of the dyadic harm scale being presented in a split form, meaning that participants only completed either the *strategy-based* dyadic harm questionnaire or the *value-based* dyadic harm questionnaire, depending on the condition to which they were allocated. This has limited the ability to directly compare perceived harm levels across the two different harm types within participants, and thus evaluate the effectiveness of the manipulation. Nevertheless, the manipulations could be indirectly verified through internal comparison; however, for future research, a direct comparison would be preferable. Secondly, although the initial goal was to recruit a sample entirely composed of environmental activists,

this proved quite challenging in practice as the recruitment strategy did not work as initially expected. As a result, the sample was broadened to include individuals who expressed a deep interest in environmental issues, but they were not necessarily required to be activists. This adjustment may have compromised the ecological validity of the experimental scenario to some degree, as participants might have engaged less personally or critically with the task. In future research, it would be interesting to investigate whether an all-activist sample yields the same results as the present study.

Additionally, the scenario required participants to follow the group's decision-making process, which ultimately led to negative consequences, including the displacement of local livelihoods and livestock deaths. One of the dyadic harm items stated, "My group is directly responsible for the harm of the rural community and the killing of their livestock". This phrasing may have introduced an exaggerated sense of individual moral responsibility. In real-world settings, such decisions are typically made through collective deliberation, and responsibility is distributed among all participants. Participants tended to strongly disagree with this specific item, although it did not impact its overall reliability. This overemphasis on direct moral violation may have been perceived as too personal for participants, weakening the impact of the experimental manipulations. Further research should consider manipulations with stronger ecological validity and recruit more targeted samples to improve both internal and external validity.

Finally, the use of a hypothetical scenario to capture complex group processes allowed for experimental control; however, it does not account for the interactive aspects of fundamental group dynamics, such as leadership influence, ongoing dialogue, and emotional contagion. Future research could consider simulation-based methods to observe how activist groups

negotiate in real time. This would offer more insight about how schisms can emerge not just from perceptions but also from communication breakdowns and attempts at resolution.

Considering the outcomes of this study, we found that perceived dyadic harm predicts internal fragmentation, whereas perceived urgency does not, on its own. This raises the question: Which intra-group processes determine whether moralised disagreement can be contained or trigger a split? Specifically, future research could examine the interaction between dialogue norms, leadership style, and collective-repair practices in promoting either exit or reconciliation in response to moralized harm. Addressing these questions would move the field beyond identifying risk factors toward observing the protective mechanisms that sustain collective action.

Conclusion

This study intended to understand why environmental activist groups fragment despite sharing common climate goals. Our findings suggest that fragmentation is driven less by the type of disagreement and more by whether disagreements become moralized as intentional harm. The strong correlation between perceived harm and schismatic intention could signal that when activists interpret internal conflicts through a lens of moral violation, group cohesion erodes. The fact that urgency did not moderate this relationship suggests that time pressure alone cannot prevent or accelerate fragmentation when harm is perceived. These results extend existing frameworks of collective action by showing that the same moralizing processes that mobilize activists against external opponents can also turn inward. For environmental movements navigating increasing pressure and internal diversity, the practical implication is that sustainable collective action requires shared understanding alongside shared goals. Creating structured

spaces for disagreement and keeping tactics open to critical dialogue can help environmental

movements to keep group cohesion and prevent activist dilemmas from ultimately fracturing the

movements from within.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Note. Full script of the scenario, including instructions, manipulated text highlighted in different

colours, attention and manipulation checks.

Instructions
You are now about to begin the study.
You will now navigate a scenario.
Imagine you are inside the following situation:
Your group has successfully raised an issue that you have been advocating to a formal discussion with governmental representatives. Within the group, you are now discussing the last bits. You are evaluating the overall situation and debating with your fellow activists about which steps to take in the dialogue.
You will be asked to answer some questions to check your understanding of the scenarios.
Pink - *This text is present in all scenarios and remains unchanged.*
Green - *This text is related to perceived urgency and it changes according to the condition.*
Blue - *This text is related to perceived dyadic harm and it changes according to the condition.*
Strategy-based / High urgency scenarios
Your group has advocated for the reintroduction of wolves, an endangered wildlife species, in the Gelderland region (the Netherlands).

A government wildlife agency has taken your appeal to the competent organs, and the reintroduction of the wolves is now designed to be part of a broader effort to restore a balanced biosphere and control deer and wild boar overpopulation, which has led to widespread deforestation and ecosystem imbalances.

HIGH URGENCY Specifically, the unchecked deer and wild boar populations have led to an ecological crisis, where forests have been stripped bare, leading to erosion, habitat destruction, and collapsing food chains. In some areas, native plant species have nearly disappeared, and river contamination from disrupted soil is endangering aquatic ecosystems. This problem needs to be addressed urgently, and reintroducing the wolf will help to solve it.

LOW URGENCY

While deer and wild boar populations have increased beyond historical levels, their impact on the ecosystem has been gradual. Forest regeneration has slowed, with some areas experiencing localized soil erosion and shifts in plant diversity. Certain habitats are under strain, but many species have adapted to these changes, and water quality remains within acceptable limits despite some concerns about vegetation loss near riverbanks. Although this is not a problem that needs to be addressed urgently, reintroducing the wolf will help to solve it.

(Manipulation check) **Do you think the situation needs to be addressed urgently?**

A. Yes

B. No

Your group supports reintroducing wolves for their ecological benefits, but local farmers and ranchers fear even one attack could ruin their already struggling livelihoods.

They rely on small-scale, sustainable farming, using livestock for essentials like milk and cheese. Without protection or compensation, repeated losses could force them to leave their land and abandon their way of life, as well as seeing their sheep and hens getting killed. The government considered another area, but wealthier residents opposed it more strongly.

Public opinion is divided: city residents mostly support the plan, while rural communities resist it.

STRATEGY-BASED DYADIC HARM Your group must decide on one of these two strategies:

- Support the plan as it is, restoring nature faster but risking serious harm to farmers, which could create stronger opposition to conservation efforts in the future.

- Push for protections, helping farmers but setting a precedent that environmental goals must always make room for human interests, which could weaken future policies.

VALUE-BASED DYADIC HARM Your group is torn between two moral imperatives.

- Prioritise wolf reintroduction, restoring nature and correcting past harm. This reinforces the movement's commitment to environmental justice but risks treating rural concerns as secondary, potentially deepening divides and weakening trust in conservation efforts.

- Advocate for local protections, ensuring fairness and preventing direct harm to communities. This supports those most affected but risks undermining the idea that restoring ecosystems is a moral obligation, making conservation seem negotiable.

After much debate, the group decides the following: "We support the reintroduction of wolves, but will not push for adaptive measures for local farmers, citizens and livestock."

This decision was not unanimously supported within the group. Some members, particularly those advocating for environmental justice, argued that imposing ecological solutions without regard for local populations mirrored the very extractive policies they opposed in other contexts. However, the majority took a hardline stance, asserting that nature should not have to compromise for human interests and believes that rural communities should individually care for protecting their properties. Therefore, your group will not bring the farmers' perspective into

discussion in governmental settings and simply support the reintroduction of wolves as it is.

*STRATEGY-BASED DYADIC HARM*In the following months, the region of Gelderland sees a restoration of life quality factors and biospheric balance, reducing the ecological crisis. However, multiple farmers experience wolf attacks, losing sheep, hens and cows. Some families, unable to sustain their way of life, are forced to abandon their farms and leave their communities. The group faces severe backlash and gets boycotted in all major international social medias, and they are not consulted for governmental debate anymore.

VALUE-BASED DYADIC HARM In the following months, the region of Gelderland sees a restoration of life quality factors and biospheric balance, reducing the ecological crisis. However, multiple farmers experience wolf attacks, losing sheep, hens and cows. Some families, unable to sustain their way of life, are forced to abandon their farms and leave their communities. Those who cannot leave, started killing wolves illegally to protect their animals, fueling conflict between conservationists and locals. The community begins to fracture under the strain, while wealthier areas remain untouched by these consequences.

Do you agree with the final decision?

- Yes
- No

(Attention Check) **Based on the scenario, what is the governmental initiative that your group is discussing?**

A. The initiative concerns the reintroduction of wolves in the Gelderland region, in order to restore a balanced ecosystem mostly related by the deers and wild boar overpopulation.
B. The initiative concerns the reintroduction of wolves in the Gelderland region, in order to eradicate the presence of intensive livestock farming and greenhouses in the area.

Appendix 2
Full list of questionnaire stimuli.

Perceived Urgency

- How urgent do you feel the problem is that the reintroduction of wolves in the Gelderland region will solve?

  $r = .62$

- How urgent do you perceive the current ecological imbalance to be?

  $r = .62$

Strategy-Based Dyadic Harm

$\alpha = .77$

- I think that my group is directly responsible for harming our goals concerning sustainability and social justice through this decision.

  $r = .63$
- I believe that my group's decision undermines the work environmental activists have done in the past few years to promote social justice and a sustainable lifestyle.

  $r = .61$
- I feel that my group's decision intended to hurt our strategy for action planning which is mindful of all beings' circumstances and social justice.

  $r = .35$
- I think that my group made a decision that risks public trust in environmental activism, especially public support.

  $r = .58$
- In my view, my group's planned action will eventually lead to harming the successes achieved so far and our reputation as activists.

  $r = .60$

Value-Based Dyadic Harm

$\alpha = .81$

- I think that my group is directly responsible for the harm caused to the rural community, who were forced to move outside of the area.

  $r = .61$
- I believe that my group is directly responsible for the harm of the rural community and the killing of their livestocks.

  $r = .74$
- I feel that my group's decision compromises the core ethical principles of environmental activism which are meant to protect humans, wildlife and environment.

  $r = .51$
- I think that my group's planned action is intending to hurt a self-sufficient and otherwise harmless community.

  $r = .51$
- In my view, the killing of people, livestocks and wolves, as well as the dismantling of the community, is totally attributable to my group's planned action.

  $r = .62$

Internal Fragmentation

1. **Identity Subversion**

$\alpha = .90$

- By refusing to push for protective measures for rural farmers, environmental activists have contributed to the collapse of self-sustaining rural communities, contradicting their supposed commitment to sustainability and justice.

$r = .67$

- The decision to prioritize wolf reintroduction without compensation for affected farmers has forced families to abandon their way of life has subverted the true identity of the group.

$r = .65$

- My group ignored the suffering of rural populations, making their actions far from the true values of environmental activism.

$r = .75$

- By disregarding the long-term impact of wolf attacks on small-scale farmers, environmental activists in this scenario have aligned themselves with policies that harm vulnerable populations, contradicting the movement's historical values.

$r = .66$

- Environmental activists should not prioritize conservation at the expense of marginalized communities. My group's decision to ignore the struggles of rural farmers in this scenario shows a failure to uphold environmental activism's core ethical principles.

$r = .73$

2. **Schismatic Intentions**

$\alpha = .93$

- I will move to another environmental group because of the latest decisions of my current group.

$r = .79$

- Because of these decisions, I will not remain a member of my environmental group, but I will seek membership elsewhere.

$r = .77$

- Because of the issue with my group prioritizing the right causes of environmental activism, I will not remain in this group.

$r = .68$

- I will have to abandon my environmental group because its decisions do not align with our goals.

$r = .77$