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# How activists build power: passive beneficiary involvement and empowerment in the platform of those affected by mortgages

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**ABSTRACT**
Scholars often point to the importance of network ties and biographical characteristics for political participation. These approaches emphasize the features that increase individuals' likelihood to participate rather than organizational efforts to foster engagement. This article advances a strategic, relational, and dynamic view of mobilization approaching this process from the perspective of empowerment. While organizations need to operate within the structural conditions they face, their members also strategize to make the most of their capacity to mobilize new recruits and empower their bases. One year of engaged participant observation and 71 semi-structured interviews with members of the Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages, the biggest housing organization in Spain, serve to illustrate these dynamics. An empowerment approach to mobilization encourages scholars to focus both on the characteristics of individuals that explain their mobilization, as well as the organizational strategies to achieve this objective.

## Introduction

How do Social Movement Organizations mobilize heavily aggrieved and disempowered constituencies? Scholars have long studied the micro-dynamics of recruitment and participation in social movements, emphasizing the importance of structural availability – being connected to social networks that facilitate access to information about mobilization

opportunities (Barkan *et al.* 1993; Snow *et al.* 1980) – and biographical availability – the absence of responsibilities that limit one's capacity to dedicate time to activism (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; McAdam 1986), as well as frame resonance (Snow *et al.* 1986). However, some scholars have noted that these studies have tended to focus on the dynamics that take place until recruitment, while paying less attention to its aftermath (Corrigall-Brown 2011).

Mobilization efforts do not finish at recruitment, as it is common that new recruits join an organization hoping to find somebody that will assist them in solving their problems through non-public means. Factors such as shame, low perceptions of self-efficacy and not having the skills to contribute to the activities of the group may hinder newcomers' capacity to actively confront their grievances, despite agreeing with the overall goal of the movement, being already part of some organizational networks and having freed some of their time to participate. These factors may lead some movement members to behave as passive beneficiaries, instead of activists ready to contribute to their own and each other's struggles.

This paper focuses on the organizational strategies to foster engagement after recruitment, approaching mobilization from the perspective of empowerment. Empowerment is 'a social-action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice' (Wallerstein 1992, 198). I argue that an empowerment approach to mobilization encourages scholars to focus both on the characteristics of individuals that explain their mobilization, as well as the organizational strategies to achieve this objective.

The case of the Spanish Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages (Plataforma de Afectadas por la Hipoteca - PAH) is a revealing example of the constrains that newcomers face for mobilizing, even after being already part of some social movement networks, and how organizational dynamics empower their members to take ownership of their struggle and contribute to the collective goals of the movement. PAH was created in 2009 to organize those who were facing eviction following the burst of the Spanish housing bubble in 2008. Despite the precarious situation of those facing foreclosure procedures, PAH has managed to empower and mobilize its members to block thousands of evictions, change several housing laws in Spain and gather 1,5 million signatures in the biggest official petition in Spanish history (Martínez 2019).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I engage with the previous work on the micro-dynamics of mobilization and argue how an empowerment perspective allows us to study mobilization beyond recruitment, providing a more dynamic understanding of the process. Second, I elaborate on how activists strategize to mobilize new recruits and their members. Third, I elaborate on the dual process of empowerment. Fourth, I show the empirical relevance of approaching mobilization from the perspective of empowerment with the case of PAH. Finally, I conclude by discussing the implications of the paper and how it contributes to developing a strategic, relational and dynamic perspective of mobilization.

## The micro-dynamics of mobilization

Scholars have long studied the micro-dynamics of mobilization, highlighting the importance of frames, networks and biographical characteristics. Klandermans and Oegema (1987) identify four steps in the process of mobilization. First, one needs to agree with the goals and tactics of the movement. In this phase, the framing strategy of a movement is key, as its message needs to resonate with public opinion and those who are affected by the grievance (Snow *et al.* 1986). Second, one needs to be aware of the existence of activism opportunities. The most common venue through which people are exposed to mobilization attempts are personal networks, mass media and the internet (Diani and McAdam 2003). The third step is to become motivated to take part in the movement. Early rationalist approaches to collective action reduced motivation to common interests and cost/benefit calculations (Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Olson 1965), while later work has highlighted the importance of emotions and collective identities in this process (Goodwin *et al.* 2001; Jasper 2018; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Finally, one needs to translate motivation into action overcoming the barriers to participation. Some scholars have pointed out that biographical factors such as age (Verba *et al.* 1995), gender (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006), and family circumstances (*Ibid.*) may act as impediments to engagement.

Despite these important contributions, I identify two areas where additional work is needed. First, academics have studied extensively the process of mobilization from the perspective of recruitment to organizations, but less attention has been paid to the challenges to mobilization that newcomers (and more experienced members) face after joining a group, as well as the organizational efforts to foster

engagement (but see studies on selective incentives and free-riding in the context of collective action Heckathorn 1993; Oliver 1980; Walsh and Warland 1983). As Corrigall-Brown (2011) argues, despite scholars having highlighted that engagement in social movements has at least three phases – recruitment, sustained participation and disengagement (see Klandermans 1997), most research has focused on the first stage of initial engagement.

Second, studies that focus on engagement after recruitment tend to pay attention to individuals' characteristics rather than the organizational strategies to foster engagement. Explanations of individuals' mobilization have relied on their membership to organizations and their network centrality (Barkan *et al.* 1993; Snow *et al.* 1980), or on whether they go through life-periods when they can allocate time, energy and/or money to activism (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; McAdam 1986). These approaches present mobilization as a process in which organizations depend largely on external, microstructural factors, leaving little room to their capacity to strategize and interact with their environment to influence engagement.

Building on these works, this paper contributes to these debates by highlighting how organizations strategize to empower their members to participate in the movement's activities. An empowerment approach to mobilization encourages scholars to focus both on the characteristics of individuals that explain their mobilization, as well as the organizational strategies to achieve this objective. Furthermore, empowerment conceptualizes mobilization as a process where individuals may access distinct activities in different periods during their activism involvement.

## Mobilization strategies in social movement organizations

In their efforts to mobilize participants, social leaders face a series of barriers. Lack of structural availability (Snow *et al.* 1980) is generally the first obstacle. Activists try to make the most of their movement's mobilization potential through mobilization attempts that go beyond organizational and personal ties (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Personal networks, mass media, poster hanging, direct mails and social media are some of the most common venues for this (Diani 2000; Klandermans and Oegema 1987).

Low 'biographical availability', limited capacity to dedicate time and energy to activism because of alternative commitments such as family and work obligations (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; McAdam 1986), is

another important factor. Organizations can contribute to facilitating people's responsibilities outside their political engagement, freeing some of their time and energy for organizational activities. For instance, as Nepstad (2004) explains, members of the Ploughshare movement liberate some of their time and energy by sharing parenting responsibilities. This action also lowers the perils associated with high-risk activism, as jointly raising children assures that they will be cared for in case their biological parents go to prison.

I suggest that besides structural and biographical availability, studies take into account *personal availability*. I define personal availability as the degree that emotional, self-identity, and knowledge constraints pose barriers to participation in some or all movement activities. Previous studies have shown that certain emotions (Amabile *et al.* 2005), perceptions of self-efficacy (Maddux 2013), and skills (Leiponen 2005) are associated with change-oriented behavior. Furthermore, these concepts are central to activists mobilizing efforts (Gecas 2000; Gould 2009; Han 2014). Capturing these notions under the umbrella of personal availability highlights the relational and multidirectional development of these concepts and how they interact with other mechanisms of mobilization and empowerment.

Furthermore, I argue that organizations have the greatest impact on members' personal availability. People's emotions, self-perceptions, and skills are more malleable than microstructural and biographical characteristics. Studies show that, during the process of mobilization, activists evolve in their ideology, identities, and emotions in key ways that influence their participation and transform them even beyond their mobilization (Giugni 2016; McAdam 1989).

In relation to emotions, activists and organizational dynamics have the capacity to influence the ways of feeling of other members and their own. Flam (2005) discusses that, before mobilizing, aggrieved collectives need to go through a process of emotional liberation, overcoming the affects that immobilize them and developing new ways of feeling that encourage dissent. Emotional management is also key during the day to day running of organizations, as activists deal with internal conflicts, setbacks in their goals, and personal issues (Effler 2010). Indeed, taking PAH's example, some authors have argued that 'emotional micromobilization' is key to understand activists persistence, even after members have solved the problems that originally led them to join the organization (Ancelovici and Badimon 2021).

Regarding self-perceptions, organizational dynamics can encourage members to improve how they see themselves (Taylor 1996). Activists engage in identity work aimed at encouraging politicized identities (see Simon and Klandermans 2001) conducive to participation. For instance, Viterna (2013) shows how the identities of women who joined the FMLN guerrillas during El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992) were transformed depending on the roles they occupied and the networks they interacted with, influencing the kind of tasks they subsequently took over in the collective. Moreover, focusing on PAH, Emperador Badimon (2022, 10) makes the case for the importance of fostering 'multiple, partial and flexible identities' under the common umbrella of housing insecurity for the inclusion and mobilization of members from diverse backgrounds. Finally, it is common that organizations have schemes to build knowledge and skills among their bases (Han 2014; Han *et al.* 2021). Formal education and civic skills facilitate participation in politics (Verba *et al.* 1995). Members with more education and skills tend to participate more frequently (Oliver 1984), be more committed to their organization (Baggetta *et al.* 2013), take over new roles, including leadership positions (Han 2014), and be better able to adapt to new contexts and strategies (Han *et al.* 2021) than their counterparts.

### Passive beneficiary engagement

As I argue in this paper, taking personal availability into account helps to understand the process through which members evolve from being passive beneficiaries – who join a social movement organization looking for somebody to solve their problems – to becoming empowered activists who take ownership of their struggle, contribute to confronting each others' grievances, and to achieving the goals of the group.

As I show in the sections below, passive beneficiaries are generally structurally available, as they have already joined an organization, accessing some of the movement networks. They are also biographically available, as they have already freed some of their time to attend organizational activities, as well as structurally available, as they. However, they are personally unavailable because the emotions they experience, their perceptions of low self-efficacy, and their lack of knowledge about how to behave in the new setting prevent them from taking action. Despite these challenges, through organizational activities and rituals aimed at empowering members, passive beneficiaries may be encouraged to become more engaged and contribute to the collective.

## The dual process of empowerment

Community organizers have long implemented strategies to empower individuals and communities, placing particular emphasis on building skills. For instance, Alinsky's seminal intellectual and community organizing work saw empowering individuals and communities is key for long-lasting social change (Alinsky 1989). Building on Alinsky's work, Stall and Stoecker (1998) have argued for what they refer to as a 'women-centered model', focused on 'organizing relationships to build community'. For these authors, the goal of the organizing process is, precisely, empowerment, which they define as 'a developmental process that includes building skills through repetitive cycles of action and reflection that evoke new skills and understandings, and in turn provoke new and more effective actions' (Stall and Stoecker 1998, 741).

From the perspective of mobilization strategies deployed in the context of social movements, empowerment can be conceptualized as increasing the structural, biographical and personal availability of individuals and communities. Organizations foster participation reaching potential recruits beyond their networks, coordinating some of their alternative commitments and building skills and knowledge that are useful for joining in their activities. They also encourage their members to reflect on their actions and perceive themselves as competent and efficacious, as well as to experience activating emotions.

I argue that the process of empowerment takes place on two levels. First, at the individual level, people may make conscious efforts to gain control over their affairs and help the organization advance its goals. For instance, individuals can learn new skills by themselves or engage in 'emotion work' to suppress immobilizing emotions such as shame and fear (Goodwin and Pfaff 2003).

Second, at the organizational level, organizations can also contribute to the empowerment of their members. Some rituals and dynamics have an empowering effect on individuals, who develop activating emotions, positive self-concepts and learn new skills. In the case of PAH, other research has already pointed the importance of these dynamics for the mobilization of their members. For instance, Di Feliciantonio (2017) shows how dismantling the 'neoliberal model of 'personal responsibilization'' (p. 40) contributes to tackling emotions such as self-blame and moving away from identities related to failure and isolation and opening the possibility to other identifications with the community (pp. 48-49). Similarly, García-Lamarca (2017) highlights how the

knowledge and skills that PAH members build 'from below' contribute to their development as political subjects.

I identify three ways through which organizations foster the empowerment of their members: a system of incremental engagement, the communal celebration of individual and collective successes, and organizational education. First, many organizations have a system of incremental engagement, which facilitates that their members engage in new tasks. Members need activism opportunities that are accessible to their level of availability. These activities must involve an amount of time and effort that members are ready to invest, require skills that members have or are able to learn, and foster positive interactions with other organizational peers. Because newcomers face additional barriers to participate in social movements (Verhulst and Walgrave 2009), activism opportunities that consist of activities that people have done in the past may represent a milestone for their involvement at early stages of their activist careers. These initial activities may consist in introducing themselves to the rest of the group during a meeting or helping to clean the assembly space. Organizations may also increase the accessibility of some tasks. For instance, they may provide templates that ease members' formal interactions with incumbents, such as requesting a debt cancelation from a bank or a legal aid lawyer from the court. Already during these first involvements, members are exposed to ideological socialization, experience activating emotions and build ties with other peers, which encourage them to continue their engagement.

Second, as part of the process of incremental engagement, the appreciation of members' contributions as well as the celebration of individual and collective achievements is key for empowerment. People's perceptions of self-efficacy increase when their contributions are recognized by their peers. Moreover, the celebration of success encourages members to perceive themselves as well as the collective as efficacious actors who are able to advance their goals. Perceptions of success are also subject to members' availability. Achieving the same tasks may be perceived as something mundane for an experienced member and a great progress of a more novice one. Hence, organizations often celebrate seemingly smaller objectives that, nevertheless, may represent milestones for their members.

Finally, organizations may also expand their members' knowledge and skills needed to contribute to their activities. Trainings and informal coaching among activists during actions are common ways to build skills. In addition to the increased efficacy brought by the new knowledge,

members feel that their contributions are important because the organization dedicates resources to increase their impact, increasing their perceptions of self-efficacy and generating positive emotions towards the group and the cause. Furthermore, knowledge and skills allow members to be available for more complex tasks. This personal evolution contributes to the empowerment of the organization and other members, as it liberates accessible tasks for other newcomers to take over, letting them continue in their process of empowerment.

The process of empowerment is not linear (Christens 2019). Members may struggle with some facets of the process, experience burnout (Gorski *et al.* 2019) and disengage partly or totally from the group. Also, other alternative commitments may appear in their lives, leaving them less or no time for politics (Hirschman 1977). There are also instances when organizational schemes may empower individuals in a different course than the one originally expected, not have an effect, or disempower their members.

An empowerment approach to mobilization highlights that this process is relational, strategic, and dynamic. It is relational because empowerment takes place through interactions among members and organizational rituals. It is strategic because it depends on the individual and organizational efforts and tactics to foster engagement. Finally, it is dynamic because it underscores that mobilization and empowerment are not steady but, rather, take place at different paces, while there may be periods of advancement, steadiness and setbacks.

## Methodology

This research involved one year of engaged participant observation and 71 semi-structured interviews. Fieldwork took place in Barcelona between June 2017 and June 2018, eight years after PAH was created. The delay since the creation of the organization allows for a full understanding of the process of empowerment and its impact on individuals. I interviewed experienced members and recalled with them their origins and evolution in the organization. Additionally, newcomers came to PAH's assemblies almost every week, allowing me to compare their current experiences with the life-stories of more veteran activists. The triangulation of experienced members' recollections, interviews with newcomers and my observations during fieldwork allowed me to identify processes and strategies of empowerment that take place across

the organization while reducing the chances that the research conclusions would be misled by potential recall bias from seasoned members.

Contact with the organization was made through common acquaintances with part of PAH's leadership. After two weeks attending the two weekly assemblies of the organization in Barcelona, I introduced myself during a meeting. In order to assure that members were aware of my position as researcher, I was mindful to share that information during all introductions. During the period of study, I participated in PAH Barcelona's weekly collective counseling and coordination assemblies, several eviction blockades each week, tens of bank protests, seven meetings with local administrations, six negotiations with bank clerks, and the occupation of a building to rehouse evicted members. Additionally, in March 2018, I went to the European Parliament with members from different locations in Spain on a two-day trip organized to gather international support for a bill they presented at the Spanish Parliament.

Interviewees were approached through my interactions with them during fieldwork and snowballing. Out of the total 71 interviewees (see Table 1 in the Appendix for details about each interview regarding activists' location, sex, age, type of involvement and housing situation, as well as interview length), 18 were conscience constituents – seasoned activists who did not have housing problems, 41 were experienced beneficiary constituents – who joined the organization because they were facing the risk of eviction and had been involved in the group for several years, and 12 were newcomers – people who joined the organization at different times during my fieldwork and, hence, had been members less than one year prior to my talking to them. Despite the greater presence of activists from Barcelona, the selection of interviewees sought to include members of PAH groups across Spain in order to identify patterns and tactics of empowerment that were not only restricted to Barcelona or Catalonia-based groups. The decision to stop interviewing PAH members was reached when I detected the research had reached a point of theoretical saturation. By theoretical saturation I refer to the moment when 'no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 61), and after attempting to look for 'groups that stretch diversity of data as far as possible' (*Ibid.*), which in this case was based on geographical location, as well as dominant ideological and tactical position in the group (for an analysis of the ideological currents within PAH and their influence in tactical decisions, see Berglund 2020). With the exception of one interview in Barcelona where the interviewee requested to bring a newcomer, all

interviews were individual, recorded with a dictaphone, transcribed by the author, and analyzed using the software Atlas.ti.

At this point, it's important to clarify the scope of this study. The beneficiaries of PAH have been confronted with dire poverty, acute psychological and social issues, and the looming threat of homelessness. Unable to afford even the most basic necessities and subject to daily harassment by banks' debt collection departments, individuals are pushed to their limits. During the worst years on the financial crisis, many people went past those limits, taking their own lives. In Spain, activists for the right to housing have documented at least 43 suicides that can be directly linked to evictions (15Mpedia 2018). Studies in the United States have also linked increases in home foreclosures to greater suicide rates in a neighborhood (Houle and Light 2014). Under these circumstances, relations of care are fundamental for newcomers to even considering engaging with the group (Santos 2020). This paper aims to explore the successful empowerment mechanisms implemented by PAH, without making any causal claims that could be generalized to other groups or movements without an a priori analysis of their specific circumstances.

## The platform of those affected by mortgages: empowerment in the fight against evictions

PAH was created in February 2009 to face the early social consequences of the burst of the Spanish housing bubble. The Spanish economy relies heavily on its construction sector (Bielsa and Duarte 2011) and its housing model is a combination of high homeownership and indebtedness to access this option (Schwartz and Seabrooke 2008). When the bubble burst, many people lost their jobs, forcing them to default on their mortgages. Since the deed in lieu of foreclosure (i.e. the possibility to transfer the ownership of one's property to the lender and clear the totality of one's mortgage debt) is not a common clause in Spanish mortgage contracts and housing prices had substantially decreased after the burst of the housing bubble, the repossession of their home was often not enough to cancel their debt. In addition to homelessness, most defaulters saw that they faced a debt they would never be able to repay.

The social exclusion that originates from the combination of homelessness and debt is so acute that some authors referred to this situation as a 'civil death'(Gonick 2021, 100). A civil death entails social and psychological issues that limit one's availability to join any collective

endeavor to confront one's grievance. Individuals facing foreclosure procedures are more likely to report poorer health conditions (Vásquez-Vera *et al.* 2016), pay more visits to the hospital (Pollack *et al.* 2011), and feel depression and anxiety (Cagney *et al.* 2014). Moreover, studies have linked increases in home foreclosures in an area to higher suicide rates (Houle and Light 2014) and greater odds of child maltreatment in a household (Frioux *et al.* 2014).

As others have explained using the case of PAH (García-Lamarca 2022; Gonick 2021), mortgage indebtedness and default construct and destroy social ties. Impoverishment and economic troubles render social relationships more fragile to a point when individuals become isolated from society (Castel 2000). While other scholars have mapped the practices of community support among the urban poor (Desmond 2016), as several of my interviewees experienced themselves, the change of social status that mortgage default brings separates people from their previous networks, either because their acquaintances cut ties or because defaulters separate themselves.

> When you stop having dough, there are many things that you can't do. It's not only about going out for drinks, I am speaking about having a phone line. It's not that your friends stop calling you because you are never up for a beer, it's that they cannot even call you (Beneficiary constituent from PAH Seville, 3 May 2018).

Furthermore, default generates immobilizing emotions, and self-perceptions of inefficacy. The most prevalent feelings when one defaults and receives an eviction notice are fear, sadness and shock (Ramis-Pujol 2013). Additionally, as people trapped in their mortgages often endure unpleasant experiences, they develop learned helplessness (Seligman 1975). Their constant failures to find a solution to their problem lead them to internalize that they have no control over their lives and no capacity to redress their situation.

> The eviction is not the day they expulse you. It starts much earlier, it's all the things that push you down day by day. The eviction is that you can't buy new shoes when yours are broken; the eviction is when you have no money to buy food; the eviction is when the bank clerk insults you and you just shut up because you think that he is right and everything is your fault. (Beneficiary constituent from PAH Blanes, 23 May 2018).

These immobilizing emotions and perceptions of self-inefficacy are still present even after newcomers join PAH, discouraging them to make any contribution.

When newcomers behave as passive beneficiaries, they have already overcome their initial lack of biographical and structural availability. They have freed some of their time to participate in some organizational activities and are exposed to information about mobilization opportunities originating from organizational networks. Nevertheless, their lack of personal availability prevents them from participating.

> When I turned up to PAH, I could just cry. I joined in July 2013 and I did not do anything until January 2014 or so. I was not capable, I just couldn't. I went to *mutual support*[1] and that helped me a lot because I was useless, I was not even a person, I was just a piece of flesh that spent the whole day crying and worried about how I would get out of this (Beneficiary constituent from PAH Barcelona, 21 July 2017).

Despite the initial situation of most members and potential recruits, PAH has shown an impressive capacity of recruitment and mobilization. Since its creation in Barcelona in 2009, it is now present in 254 locations throughout Spain (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca 2020), its members have prevented thousands of evictions and rehoused more than 2,500 people in occupied apartments owned by banks and investment funds (Martínez 2019). Moreover, in 2013, the organization presented in the Spanish Parliament the biggest official petition in Spanish history, gathering almost 1.5 million signatures (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca 2013). In the rest of the paper, I show how PAH's success lies in its capacity to empower individuals, making them more available to join its activities.

The reason why many newcomers are originally passively involved in PAH and struggle to contribute to the organization is often related to their personal availability: many are ashamed or fearful, do not identify as activists or do not have the skills to contribute to the activities of the group. Still, the successes of PAH in postponing evictions and the materials and information provided during assemblies aimed at supporting members in solving their housing problems encourage many newcomers to keep attending the meetings.

> I knew about PAH from a friend who also had mortgage problems, but I waited maybe a year to come. […] I saw their campaigns on TV, their green t-shirts and, I don't know, what would my family think if they saw me there? I didn't want my parents to think that instead of looking for a job I was in a protest with some strangers. […] It took me several weeks to enter an assembly, I would go to the address of the office, arrive at the door, stay

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[1]PAH Barcelona's psychotherapeutic weekly sessions, led by a professional therapist.

outside for a while and leave. I was super embarrassed (Beneficiary constituent from PAH Barcelona, 16 August 2017).

If approaching PAH is already a difficult decision for many, participating is even harder. Most newcomers may attend PAH's assemblies but stay silent. Shame, fear, and not knowing how to behave make them individually unavailable.

When I arrived and saw all those people … I expected something different, you know? 'Whenever you wish to talk, raise your hand' and I was like … 'really? Do I really need to talk about my problem in front of everyone?' I spent a long time without talking at the assembly but I met [a more experienced member] who had his mortgage with [a bank], just like me. He advised me individually a bit and he told me that I had to go to the [a bank] meetings where everyone struggling with that bank organized (Beneficiary constituent from PAH Barcelona, 30 August 2017).

It is common that more experienced members facilitate newcomer's first instances of participation. Those who chair the assembly or who happen to sit next to the new member play a particularly important role. When new arrivals struggle to say their first words and break down crying while trying to do so, the moderator comes closer and guides their intervention with questions aimed at helping them tell their story and those sitting next to them give strength with kind words and hugs. There are also instances when the moderator gently puts newcomers on the spot, asking them directly to intervene.

You arrive at the assembly for the first time, and you are scared, ashamed, you feel awful. I get it, I was there too. Not everyone dares to speak in front of more than a hundred people, it is not easy. When I see that somebody has come to the assembly several times and never speaks, I try to approach them privately and encourage them to talk. Other times, I may also gently put them on the spot during the assembly, so they feel a bit forced to speak (Beneficiary constituent from PAH Barcelona, 30 August 2017).

Most members remember their first intervention as a difficult moment but also as a liberation. For many, this first moment speaking at an assembly is the first time they speak about their mortgage problems in public.

[The day of my first intervention] I cried a lot but I explained everything. [Another member] whom I met the week before sat next to me and he asked for my speaking turn. Then, I explained my situation […] Once you finish you feel like you can breathe so much more air. I hadn't even told my closest friends that I could not pay my mortgage and taking it out of me felt

like I took such a great load off my back (Newcomer from PAH Barcelona, 2 July 2017).

The dissonance between the will of isolation and silence encouraged by the shame and fear newcomers experience in relation to their housing problems and the positive reactions they receive during their first intervention helps them to start overcoming some of the immobilizing emotions that were affecting their daily lives.

## Rituals of empowerment

Easily accessible contributions such as newcomers' first intervention during an assembly are crucial in their process of empowerment. Beyond being a space where newcomers realize that many others are going through their same situation (Di Feliciantonio 2017; Santos 2020) and an important locus of political subjectivation (García-Lamarca 2017), PAH assemblies are the space where newcomers' actively contribute to the dynamics of the organization for the first time. Once this happens, they start being exposed to different rituals of empowerment that contribute to their engagement. In the case of PAH, three dynamics are of particular importance. First, the organization has developed a process of incremental engagement that sets clear steps through which newcomers should go, encouraging involvement in individual and collective activities. Second, the culture of celebration and appreciation present in the organization generates activating emotions and positive self-concepts that increase the impact of those actions in the empowerment of PAH members. Third, PAH places great importance on building skills among its members, both through formal workshops and informal mentoring.

### Incremental engagement: from passive beneficiaries to empowered activists

Clear instructions and tasks accessible to the level of availability of each member facilitate individuals' increasing engagement. Once newcomers present their case to the assembly, they receive advice about how to redirect negotiations with their bank, postpone their eviction, and request social housing from public administrations. The first tasks consist in going to the social services to request a legal aid lawyer and signing up in the so-called emergency table, which is a register of people under precarious housing conditions and a prerequisite to opt for social housing. These two tasks only involve dealing with bureaucratic requirements

and PAH provides templates and support in filling them to assure that everyone achieves their goal. Nevertheless, these actions have a great impact on newcomers' perceptions of self-efficacy. Managing to complete these tasks shows new members that they have more control over their lives than they thought and that they have the capacity to accomplish some of their objectives.

Achieving objectives eases members' engagement in more complex and confrontational activities. Once newcomers have accomplished their first administrative tasks, their next step is to request their bank to turn their mortgage into a non-recursive debt and ask for a stamped copy of the request that acknowledges the reception of the communication. Similarly to the previous activity, templates and support are available to assure that requests cannot be denied based on formal reasons. However, differently from the prior bureaucratic processes, this action increases the level of confrontation. Members must now interact with the director of their bank office, with whom they already had negative encounters after their default. Even if bank clerks are legally obliged to sign and stamp a copy of any communication with their clients upon request, it is common they refrain from doing so. In these cases, members are advised to ask for an official complaint form. This action changes the roles in the relationship. While bank clerks used to be those initiating the claims and the affected person the recipient subject, this time it is the person trapped in her mortgage who demands something and the bank clerk who follows the instruction. This change of roles and the celebration of the milestone by other organizational members increase newcomers' feeling of agency.

> I was in the upper part of the local, where we had an office and I heard [a member] talking very excitedly and the whole assembly starts screaming *UUEEHH!* I went down and [the member] tells me 'Look! I still have goosebumps! I have gone to the bank office to request the deed in lieu of foreclosure, the director did not want to sign. I threatened to call the police and he finally signed!' It was only the signature on the document, not that she got the deed in lieu of foreclosure, and she was euphoric (Conscience constituent from PAH Barcelona, 16 June 2017).

Easily accessible activities facilitate newcomers' future engagement in more drastic tactics. By attempting to reach answers through regularized mechanisms but achieving no acceptable solutions, members rationalize the use of more contentious actions, such as bank protests and eviction blockades, on the premise that they have exhausted all other possible alternatives. This additional legitimacy encourages members to see

these actions as reasonable, facilitating the integration of the new beha-
viors with their identities.

In addition to the initiatives aimed at achieving individual objectives,
PAH offers newcomers accessible activism opportunities to contribute to
the collective. These contributions are activities that newcomers have
done before and that help the day-to-day progress of the organization.
For example, during the weekly coordination assembly, newcomers are
encouraged to volunteer to clean the office space. Other activities that
newcomers may not have done in the past but that are easily accessible
are keeping track of the speaking turns during assemblies and helping
to design banners for the next public action. Some accessible tasks con-
tribute to high-risk actions. For instance, during flat occupations to
rehouse evicted families, members cook for those dwellings until they
have access to utilities. Even if cooking at home is a low-risk, individual
activity, it contributes to the success of a high-risk collective campaign.
Differently from the previous activities that were of a more individual
nature, these involvements represent newcomers' first contributions to
collective goals.

Besides easily accessible activism opportunities, leaders can facilitate
members' engagement coordinating some of their alternative commit-
ments within the organization. For instance, PAH Barcelona's office has
a room called *ChikiPAH*, where children can play during assemblies. At
the beginning of any meeting, some members volunteer to care for the chil-
dren in the *ChikiPAH*, so parents can participate without worrying about
them. There have also been cases when the office has been open during a
demonstration, so children can stay and play while their parents march.
Other common activities that are coordinated within the organization
are after-school support groups. Even if these gatherings do not necessarily
take place at the same time as organizational activities, they contribute to
more positive in-house dynamics, as children have greater support to do
well at school and provide parents with time to dedicate to other activities.
While these types of settings have a direct effect, increasing parents'
capacity to overcome problems of biographical availability, they also con-
tribute to other facets of empowerment, fostering activating emotions and
strengthening identifications among members as they support each other
in very personal and central activities such as childcare.

### *Tiny but great victories: empowerment and collective celebration*

The external appreciation of contributions and the collective celebration
of achievements act as a confirmation of newcomers' perceptions of self-

efficacy, increasing their personal availability and encouraging them to take on more complex and contentious tasks. PAH uses the expression *tiny-great victories* to refer to a dynamic where no achievement is small if it represents an important step for somebody. This culture of celebration is encouraged during assemblies. All meetings start with a moment called *How Are We?* which is a time for anybody to share how they are and the personal victories they have achieved during the week. Furthermore, in some local groups, such as PAHC-Sabadell, there is a rule that anyone can interrupt the assembly at any time to share a victory. These interventions generate a collective reaction of celebration where members start screaming, singing, and hugging each other.

Rituals of celebration can turn mundane actions such as submitting a form into important milestones for members' lives. The mutual focus of attention, the celebration of accomplishments and the collective effervescence that is generated in the organization generate what Collins (2004) calls high emotional energy, a feeling of confidence and initiative that encourages members to keep interacting with each other and engage in more actions that replicate this emotion. PAH's members vividly remember the first time they spoke in the assembly or when they requested the deed in lieu of foreclosure at their bank office because of all the feelings and experiences associated with those moments.

### Empowerment through education

Organizational education facilitates members' empowerment. Learning can take place in venues specifically designed for this type of exchanges, such as workshops. Moreover, activists can learn skills through their participation in organizational activities.

PAH organizes trainings aimed at building skills that help activists to access certain engagements where knowledge may act as a barrier. Some workshops are about abilities related to low-risk activities such as using social media and knowing the organizational email rules. Others are more advanced, such as how to organize a public action and mediate with police. Some PAH groups even organize workshops about squatting, in which they provide the necessary practical and legal knowledge to engage in this type of activity.

As PAH proposes legislative changes in relation to housing policy and organizes actions in the street to gather support, it holds workshops to train members on the details of the bills and how to advocate for them. To amplify the reach of these initiatives, PAH has a system of training trainers. During PAH's 2017–2018 campaign to push for a new

housing law, a workshop about the bill was organized during its 2017 national assembly. In addition to learning about the details of the proposed legislation, those who attended the training received materials that enabled them to organize similar initiatives for their local groups. Those who wanted to hold a local training obtained support from local and national leaders to ensure the workshop was successful. The original training and subsequent ones encouraged members' commitment in two ways. First, the information that participants received during the training facilitated their contribution to the public awareness campaign. Second, those who attended the main event and organized others in their local groups increased their commitment by engaging in leadership roles. On both occasions, members became personally available to contribute to the organization in ways that were previously out of their reach.

Additionally, PAH builds skills among its members during its public actions through a system called *one does and another looks*. During the planning of any action, members are assigned roles. In an eviction blockade, there is a group in charge of blocking the entrance of the building with their bodies; another waits inside the flat with the family under risk of eviction; there is also somebody who negotiates with the judicial entourage. On top of these tasks, some members have the role of *looking*. The person in charge of negotiating the postponement of the eviction with the judicial entourage is accompanied by one or two people who will stand in silence and contemplate the arguments, expressions and reactions of the negotiator.

Education during organizational activities is often followed by a period of discussion to reflect about the takeaways of the action. If the eviction blockade is successful, and there are no more actions planned for the day, it is common that people gather for a coffee. Even if this is a casual gathering, the *doer* coaches the *lookers* amid the cheerful environment after the victory. Often, this happens as part of the celebration in a conversational way ('Did you see the reaction from the bank representative when I said this?', 'you really cracked it when you did that thing'). Other times, the conversation is more explanatory and formal. The *doer* goes through the negotiation, explaining what happened, how she reacted and other possible scenarios that are common. Yet on other occasions, it is the *lookers* who informally lead the coaching with their questions. Through this process, rank-and-file activists learn and are encouraged to take on leadership roles during public activities.

With the help of more experienced activists, who encourage less seasoned peers to get more involved, training during organizational activities encourages members to take on new roles in an almost unconscious way.

> Soon after I joined, [a leader] told me – 'come to negotiate with me', and I said – 'no, I don't know how to do this, and I am scared of doing it'. – 'Just come with me and listen, you don't need to speak'. And I started going with [the leader] and other people in charge of negotiations until I learned and started doing it myself (Beneficiary constituent from PAH Barcelona, 30 July 2017).

As *lookers* become used to being present in this type of settings, they start assuming a more active role in the actions. Furthermore, beyond learning the necessary skills to engage in more activities, being trained increases members' perceptions of self-efficacy. The fact that leaders invest their time and energy to train less experienced people shows newcomers that their contributions are valued. This perception gives *lookers* greater confidence that they can replicate the behavior they have observed and encourages them to take on new tasks.

These dynamics of empowerment increase the capacity of individuals, organizations and communities to gain control over their affairs. From the individual perspective, PAH has managed to turn thousands of passively involved individuals into organizational leaders. As an organization, PAH has now become one of the most respected voices in the debates around housing in Spain (D'Adda et al. 2022; Martínez 2019). Finally, it has provided those trapped in their mortgages with a loudspeaker to defend their rights. While the organization was created by six people who were not affected by the problem of mortgages (Santos 2020), beneficiary constituents are now part of its leadership and public faces. PAH's strategies have resulted in the empowerment of newcomers as well as experienced members, the organization itself and the community of people facing evictions.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued for the importance of empowerment to understand how individuals join and increase their engagement in social movements. An empowerment perspective of mobilization highlights that this

phenomenon is relational, strategic and dynamic. While previous studies have tended to focus on the characteristics that make individuals more likely to mobilize, this paper has placed emphasis on the interactions among members and the organizational rituals that foster engagement. Moreover, mobilization is a strategic and dynamic process where groups and individuals make plans, try to implement them, reflect about their successes and errors and constantly learn in the process. Through an emphasis on empowerment, it is possible to map individuals' evolution from being recruited to an organization to becoming active social movement members.

Focusing on the case of the Spanish Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages, this paper has argued that the process of empowerment takes place on the individual and organizational level. Members can make conscious efforts to overcome emotions such as shame and fear, as well as to learn relevant skills to take ownership of their struggle and contribute to the organizational and movement goals. Furthermore, by being exposed to rituals of empowerment during organizational activities, members experience activating emotions, increased perceptions of self-efficacy and gain new knowledge and skills.

Organizations foster the empowerment of their members in at least three ways. First, they may offer easily accessible activism opportunities to newcomers and plan for a process of incremental engagement where individuals can partake in a variety of activities, depending on their level of availability. Second, the celebration of individual and collective achievements activates mobilizing emotions and encourages members to perceive themselves and the collective as efficacious actors. Finally, organizational education contributes to members' empowerment by providing them with new knowledge and skills. Achieving the initial and easily accessible tasks, together with the appreciation that newcomers receive from their peers, and the new skills acquired in the process increases members' perceptions about their capacity to have control over their lives, encouraging individuals to feel empowered to take on more tasks.This paper contributes to advance a relational, strategic, and dynamic understanding of social movements. While organizations need to operate within the structural conditions they face, including the characteristics of their membership, activists interacts and strategize to foster recruitment and commitment. Moreover, empowerment emphasizes mobilization as a dynamic and continuous process. Organizational members go through different periods during their membership lifespans where they have different degrees of biographical, structural

and personal availability. Depending on their availability, activists can participate in different activities. A focus on empowerment sheds light on internal organizational dynamics that are key to understand mobilization and participation in public actions, which are often scholars' center of attention.

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## Notes on contributor

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**Table 1.** Summary of Interviewees.

| PAH local group | Type of involvement | Sex | Age group | Housing situation | Type of interview | Interview length (minutes) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Barcelona | Conscience constituent | F | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 81 |
| Barcelona | Conscience constituent | F | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 76 |
| Barcelona | Conscience constituent | F | < 30 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 103 |
| Barcelona | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 84 |
| Barcelona | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 125 |
| Barcelona | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 183 |
| Barcelona | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 64 |
| Barcelona | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 54 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | F | 60+ | Squatting | In person, Barcelona | 84 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | F | 50–60 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 71 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 43 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Stable - Debt cancellation | In person, Barcelona | 82 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | F | 30–40 | Stable - Social rent | In person, Barcelona | 93 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | F | 30–40 | Squatting | In person, Barcelona | 149 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | M | 60+ | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 47 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | M | 50–60 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 58 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | M | 40–50 | Stable - Social rent | In person, Barcelona | 66 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | M | 40–50 | Squatting | In person, Barcelona | 86 |
| Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | M | 30–40 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 69 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 72 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 48 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 41 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | F | 30–40 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 62 |

(*Continued*)

**Table 1.** Continued.

| PAH local group | Type of involvement | Sex | Age group | Housing situation | Type of interview | Interview length (minutes) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Barcelona | Newcomer | F | 30–40 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 57 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | F | 30–40 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 57 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | F | 30–40 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 55 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | M | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 48 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | M | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 26 |
| Barcelona | Newcomer | M | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Barcelona | 17 |
| Madrid | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Madrid | 68 |
| Madrid | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Madrid | 62 |
| Madrid | Beneficiary constituent | F | 60+ | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Madrid | 39 |
| Madrid | Beneficiary constituent | F | 50–60 | Stable - Social rent | In person, Madrid | 55 |
| Madrid | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Madrid | 60 |
| Madrid | Beneficiary constituent | M | 50–60 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Madrid | 83 |
| Madrid | Beneficiary constituent | M | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Madrid | 45 |
| Madrid | Beneficiary constituent | M | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Madrid | 28 |
| Sabadell | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 109 |
| Sabadell | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Sabadell | 87 |
| Sabadell | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Sabadell | 73 |
| Sabadell | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Sabadell | 68 |
| Sabadell | Beneficiary constituent | M | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Sabadell | 94 |
| Terrassa | Conscience constituent | M | 40–50 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Terrassa | 121 |
| Terrassa | Conscience constituent | M | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 138 |
| Terrassa | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Stable - Social rent | In person, Terrassa | 55 |
| Terrassa | Newcomer | M | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Terrassa | 41 |
| Valencia | Conscience constituent | M | 60+ | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Brussels | 137 |

(*Continued*)

**Table 1.** Continued.

| PAH local group | Type of involvement | Sex | Age group | Housing situation | Type of interview | Interview length (minutes) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valencia | Beneficiary constituent | F | 50–60 | Stable - Debt cancellation | Telephone | 32 |
| Valencia | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Stable - Social rent | Telephone | 66 |
| Valencia | Beneficiary constituent | M | 60+ | Stable - Social rent | Telephone | 79 |
| Sevilla | Beneficiary constituent | M | 50–60 | Facing foreclosure procedures | Telephone | 113 |
| Sevilla | Beneficiary constituent | M | 50–60 | Facing foreclosure procedures | Telephone | 42 |
| Sevilla | Beneficiary constituent | M | 50–60 | Stable - Social rent | Telephone | 38 |
| Manresa | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Manresa | 53 |
| Manresa | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Stable - Social rent | In person, Manresa | 42 |
| Blanes | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Facing foreclosure procedures | In person, Blanes | 77 |
| Blanes | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Stable - Social rent | In person, Blanes | 50 |
| Murcia | Conscience constituent | M | 60+ | Stable - No major housing problems | Telephone | 78 |
| Murcia | Conscience constituent | M | 60+ | Stable - No major housing problems | Telephone | 39 |
| Pontevedra | Beneficiary constituent | F | 30–40 | Stable - Debt cancellation | Telephone | 83 |
| Pontevedra | Beneficiary constituent | M | 40–50 | Stable - Social rent | Telephone | 63 |
| Bilbao | Beneficiary constituent | M | 60+ | Stable - Social rent | In person, Barcelona | 68 |
| Bilbao | Beneficiary constituent | M | 60+ | Stable - Social rent | In person, Barcelona | 65 |
| Pamplona | Beneficiary constituent | M | 50–60 | Stable - Social rent | In person, Brussels | 44 |
| Segovia | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Stable - Social rent | Telephone | 57 |
| Obra Social Barcelona | Conscience constituent | F | 30–40 | Stable - No major housing problems | In person, Barcelona | 74 |
| Obra Social Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | F | 50–60 | Squatting | In person, Barcelona | 75 |
| Obra Social Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | F | 40–50 | Squatting | In person, Barcelona | 64 |
| Obra Social Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | M | 40–50 | Squatting | In person, Barcelona | 176 |
| Obra Social Barcelona | Beneficiary constituent | M | 40–50 | Squatting | In person, Barcelona | 40 |
| Obra Social Barcelona | Newcomer | F | 30–40 | Squatting | In person, Barcelona | 59 |