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# Changing identities to change the world: Identity motives in lifestyle politics and its link to collective action<sup>1</sup>

*Running head:* Changing identities to change the world

## Abstract

In this article, we assume an interdisciplinary approach to the study of why and how people transpose political considerations to their lifestyles. Our aims are threefold: to understand the meanings and perceptions of people engaged in lifestyle politics and collective action; to examine the motives guiding individual change; and to explore the linkage processes between lifestyle politics and collective action. Identity Process Theory is considered as a lens to examine the processes and the motives of identity via a thematic analysis of 22 interviews. This study combined interviews with people seeking social change through their lifestyles with interviews with members of action groups and social movements.

We found that each participant's identity is guided by identity motives such as distinctiveness, continuity and psychological coherence. Besides, lifestyle politics is evaluated as an effective way to bring about social change, depending on the individual experience of perceived power to bring about change through collective action. Overall, lifestyle politics states the way in which the participants decided to live, to construct their identities, and to represent their beliefs about the right thing to do. Lifestyle politics complements collective action, as a strategy to increase the potential of bringing about social change. The implications of this research are discussed in relation to the importance of understanding the processes of identity and lifestyle change in the context of social, environmental, and political change.

*Key-words:* identity motives; lifestyle politics; collective action

## Introduction

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Social change has been a foundational concern of the social science for decades, including social and political psychology. Nevertheless, understanding the factors and patterns leading to social change, as well the adaptation process for individuals facing these changes, remain crucial questions that need to be explored (de la Sablonnière, Bourgeois, & Najih, 2013). Within the field of psychology, an impressive work has been developed on the explanation of collective action as the preferred path to claim the rights of a group and bring about changes (Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Some people, often called activists, are very committed to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change through intentional collective action, particularly mass demonstrations and protests. In addition, there are those people who seek to foster social change through their everyday practices (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012). In this regard, several authors have stressed the need to conceptualize social movements and political participation beyond collective action (e.g., Haenfler, et al., 2012; Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003; van Deth, 2014). These voices have proposed that classical theories on political participation are not enough to explain a broad set of behaviors focusing on political action, that combine both individual change/individual behavior and willingness to enact social transformation and change, such as lifestyle politics (Bennet, 2012; Haenfler et al., 2012; de Moor, 2016; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Central to the concept of lifestyle politics is the idea that people code their political considerations through their personal lifestyle values and practices (Bennett, 1998; 2006; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Thus, everyday life choices, such as what to eat and how to dress, become politicized (Micheletti & Stolle, 2011; de Moor, 2016).

In this politicization process that blurs the lines between the public and the private (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), identity appears to be central in explaining lifestyle choices and their

role in society (Bennett, 1998; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Haenfler et al., 2012). However, so far, relatively little is known about the motives underpinning identity construction and maintenance in lifestyle politics as well the politicization processes behind it. In addition, there is no evidence of the processes linking lifestyle politics and collective action (Haenfler et al., 2012). These issues have not yet been studied comprehensively in the context of political participation studies and have been even less studied from a socio-psychological perspective.

This paper aims to explore the motives, the meanings, and the processes involved in individual and lifestyle change, showing how participants construct and maintain their identities within lifestyle politics and collective action. By taking an interdisciplinary approach oriented by studies on political science, sociology and psychology, we begin by conceptualizing lifestyle politics and its connection with others forms of political participation (e.g. Dixon, 2014; Haenfler et al., 2012; de Moor, 2016; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). We then move to briefly reviewing socio-psychological perspectives on collective action (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Smith, Thomas, & McGarty 2015; Turner-Zwinkels, van Zomeren & Postmes, 2016) by establishing links with lifestyle politics. Finally, we shortly examine the Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 1986, 2011, 2014), which is considered here as a lens to analyze identity motives in lifestyle politics and its link to collective action.

This study is therefore related to identity construction and the politicization processes in lifestyle politics; it is based on in-depth interviews with members committed to lifestyle politics and/or collective action. The question, in this paper, is not if lifestyle is or is not an effective site for significant or dramatic social change. Rather, this study aims to

understand the following questions. How do people perceive their everyday choices? What are the motives guiding their lifestyle change and collective action? And which processes link lifestyle politics to collective action?

### *Political participation and lifestyle politics*

A vast and growing body of scientific literature across various disciplines is conceptualizing political participation beyond voting behavior or collective action. These voices recognize the existence of non-political activities that are used to express political views, and political targets rather than the government or the political system (e.g., Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003; van Deth, 2014). Lifestyle politics, defined as the “whole cultural formation around individuals’ use of everyday choices as a legitimate site of political expression” (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 6), has emerged as a concept to address some of these forms of political participation. Simultaneously, this follows the calls by environmentalists to reject consumerist lifestyles, and to choose less impactful practices of consumption and production (Trainer, 2010).

In this regard, some studies consider voluntary simplicity – downshifting or just simple living – as a voluntarily anti-consumerist way of life that opposes the high consumption lifestyles prevalent in current consumer societies (Alexander, 2011). Others have shown that many people are making consumer choices, among producers and products, based on justice, fairness, and ethical and moral values (Micheletti, 2003; Stolle, Hooghe & Micheletti, 2005). In the same line, food-related behaviors, such as buying organic or preferring local products, have been considered as mediums through which people engage with the world and mechanisms to promote social change (Luetchford, 2014; Naji, 2014).

In addition, veganism and vegetarianism are being defined as examples of lifestyle politics, as most of these people choose to not eat and use animal products based on political, ethical, or moral values (Micheletti & Stolle, 2011; de Moor, 2016). However, there are many variations in the levels of commitment and in the profiles of the people mentioned above, and all those lifestyle choices may or may not be political, depending on the motivations for such behaviors. Until now, the lack of attention on lifestyle politics in the research field has led to a superficial analysis of the factors motivating lifestyles politics, the role of lifestyle in social change (Stolle, & Micheletti, 2013), and its link with collective action (Haenfler et al., 2012).

#### *Socio-psychological dimensions in lifestyle politics*

Mainly based upon the work on collective action studies, socio-psychological dimensions are recognized as significant to understanding political participation, particularly collective action. In particular, the role of collective identity (as a group's characteristic) on collective action has been largely analyzed in the two last decades. From this perspective, an identity becomes politicized when group members intentionally and consciously engage in a power struggle in a societal context (Simon, & Klandermans, 2001; Klandermans, 2014). These classical approaches to collective action do not seem to say much about the process of how identities become politicized in collective action (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2016). Besides, they appear to reject the idea of the politicization of identities through individualized actions such as political consumerism or vegetarianism (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013) and they say little about how new collective identities are created in the first place (Smith et al., 2015). Concerned with the foundational moment of social movements, Smith and

colleagues (2015) proposed that new shared social identities can develop and promote collective action when people encounter a conflict between perceptions of “the way things are” (descriptive norms) and the way things could/should be (injunctive norms). Thus, when people think about and criticize existing social structures or social groups, collective action may emerge because “this act of speaking out helps to create new social movements that can act to transform the original social structure” (Smith et al., 2015, p. 545). However, considering that social structures may also constrain individuals through both, pre-existing institutions and the situational constraints imposed by other actors (Howard, 1994), criticizing social structures may or may not lead to collective action, depending on whether people find validation when sharing and expressing their own values, ideas, and opinions (Smith et al., 2015). Thus, if people do not find social validation, individual identity change can still occur but coordinated efforts towards social change might be unlikely.

When investigating expressions of politics in everyday life, researchers have suggested that lifestyle politics “do things other than effect sweeping social change: it performs identity and it builds culture” (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 50). Overall, everyday choices indicate a site for the constitution of identity (Portwood-Stacer, 2013) and those choices must reflect political integrity and authenticity (Haenfler et al., 2012). These studies have suggested that, in lifestyle politics, people decide to have an active role in the construction of their own identities.

Based on the centrality that identity and change seem to assume in lifestyle politics and collective action, the theoretical approach to the analysis of identity used in this paper is derived from the IPT (Breakwell, 1986; 2011; 2014). IPT proposes that the person has

agency in creating identity, and can renovate, replace, revise, and remove elements of identity if he or she wishes (Breakwell, 2014; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000). Identity is viewed as a holistic, dynamic, multifaceted, and complex phenomenon (Breakwell, 1986; 2011; 2014); its structure is conceptualized in terms of its content and value/affect (Breakwell, 2014; Jaspal, 2014). This structure is regulated by two dynamic identity processes: accommodation/assimilation and evaluation (Breakwell, 1986; 2011; 2014). Furthermore, IPT argues that these two identity processes are guided in their operations by four motivational principles that define desirable states for the structure of identity: *continuity* across time and situation, *distinctiveness* from others, *efficacy* or a feeling of confidence and control of one's life, and feelings of *self-esteem*, personal worth or social value (Breakwell, 2014). More recently, some studies have suggested an expansion of these identity motives. For example, Vignoles (2011) proposed two additional identity motives: *belonging*, which refers to the need to maintain feelings of closeness to and acceptance by other people, and *meaning*, which denotes to the need to find significance and purpose in one's existence. Others have found evidence for a psychological coherence principle, to represent the need for perceived compatibility and coherence between interconnected identities in their self-concept (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Taking into account that not all the identity motives assume the same centrality in identity (Breakwell, 1986; 2011; 2014), we expect that the efficacy motive may have a central role in explaining why people decide to choose, complement or switch from individualized forms of political action to collective ones. The literature on collective action suggested that perceived efficacy may predict collective action (e.g. Lubell, Zahran, & Vedlitz, 2007; van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2011). Likewise, Portwood-Stacer (2013) found



that people practicing lifestyle politics tend to see individualized tactics and strategies as accepted and effective solutions to collective problems. Kenis and Mathijs (2012) found that some environmental activists focus on lifestyle changes because they felt that they do not have the power to engage in collective actions, even if those are the ones they consider really necessary to effectively bring about change in social structures.

Thus, considering that identity motives are tendencies toward certain identity states, which guide the processes of identity construction (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006; Vignoles, 2011), identity motives may be guiding the process of identity change, construction and maintenance in lifestyle politics and collective action. We argue that everyday choices that constitute lifestyle politics are expressions of a person's identity, guided by principles, which may define desirable states for the structure of identity. Based on IPT's argument that the dichotomy between personal and social identity is a temporal artifact (Timotijevic, & Breakwell, 2000), we seek to understand the politicization processes and identity changes in lifestyle politics and collective action behind this distinction. However, to comprehend lifestyle politics and its link to collective action, it is also crucial to understand how people perceive and evaluate their power to influence others and social structures (Howard, 1994; Kenis & Mathijs, 2012).

### **The present study**

Consistent with the renewed debates on political participation, several recent research studies have sought to consider the role of alternative routes to social change that go beyond collective action (Haenfler et al., 2012). Starting from this approach, the meanings, motives, and processes involved in lifestyle politics and collective action are the targets in

this study. The first goal is to analyze the meanings in lifestyle politics living for those who are involved in it in order to define ‘participation’ and ‘political’ (van Deth, 2014). The second goal is to understand the motives guiding individual change in lifestyle politics and collective action, considering IPT as a lens (Breakwell, 1986, 2011, 2014). The third goal is to understand the identity process of politicization involved in lifestyle politics, in particular, how collective action relates to the individualized forms of political participation that exist in lifestyle politics. A link between different modes of participation has been previously suggested (Pattie et al., 2003). However, there is a need to research the extent to which people engage in lifestyle movements instead of, in addition to, or in the context of, manifestly political movements (Haenfler et al., 2012). In this regard, the environment, food, and consumption are viewed as privileged mediums through which people engage with the world and as places where it is possible to cover several modes of political action (Naji, 2014; Luetchford, 2014).

## **Method**

### *Participants and procedure*

This study involved semi-structured interviews as the main data source.

Purposive/theoretical sampling combined with a snowballing approach were used (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Two criteria guided the sample recruitment. Some participants were selected because of their involvement in lifestyle politics as conceptualized by Haenfler and colleagues (2012). Other participants were selected as activists; they were objectively defined as members of social movements or action groups related to environmental issues (van Zomeren, 2015). The first four participants were deliberately selected on the basis of

the researchers' judgments about who would be the most useful (Bloor & Wood, 2006) to understand alternative lifestyles related to food, consumption, and the environment, and the link to collective action.

The first participant was selected because the researcher knew she was involved in an organic food network and the second one because he was vegan. The third participant was living in a rural location as an organic farmer. Finally, the fourth participation was involved in social movements and environmental groups' actions. The following interviewees were then selected through the use of snowball sampling, which involved the researcher asking each respondent to suggest other potential respondents (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Seven participants became interviewees as voluntary simplifiers, i.e. people who were reducing their material possessions for social and environmental reasons. Seven interviewees were vegans, i.e. people eliminating animal products from their diets to minimize suffering and/or environmental destruction. Finally, eight participants were interviewed because of their activism in local food networks and/or environmental climate action groups. There was a balanced sample in terms of sex, educational level, and age. The total sample consisted of 22 people, 12 men and 10 women, and the ages ranged from 25 to 55 (the average age was 40). Table 1 reports participants demographic characteristics, the criteria for participating in the study, and some of their experiences of collective action.

[Insert table 1 about here]

The interviewer used an interview guide script but oriented the questions towards participants' responses. The main interview questions on which this study was centered

were: “how did you become interested in these issues (food/consumption/environment)?”; “in what way did that event/situation change you as a person or your way of living?”; “to what extent are you engaged in groups/social movements?”; and “would you say that your behavior is political?”

The interviews were mostly conducted in public places (usually a café or a public garden), between May and July in 2016. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the native language of the participants. Informed consent was verbally obtained from all participants. The interviews ranged in duration from 54 to 99 minutes (average of 64 minutes). All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed orthographically. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all names and identifying pieces of information about the participants have been removed or changed. Interview quotations presented here were translated from Portuguese to English after data codification in Nvivo software.

### *Data analysis*

The data analysis method used was thematic analysis, as it allows the researcher to systematically identify and organize the data, offering insights into patterns of meaning/themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). An inductive approach was privileged; most of the derived codes and themes were data-based. However, a deductive approach was also considered, as the analysis drew on theoretical constructs such as lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013; de Moor, 2016) and identity motives (Breakwell, 1986; 2010; 2011; 2014; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Vignoles, 2011). The coding was based on the Big Q approach, so it was a fluid, flexible, organic and evolving process (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The first author conducted the initial coding, however, both co-authors actively

contributed to the process of data analysis. Results were organized in themes; each theme aimed to represent a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data specifically relevant to our research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

### **Analysis**

Two complementary themes, each one with its own sub-themes, will be reported in this paper. Theme 1, *“it didn’t change my life, it’s my life”: identity construction in lifestyle politics*, outlines the ways the participants actually change their behavior and how this relates to identity motives and identity change, construction and maintenance. Theme 2, *“my personal life is only an extension”: political meaning and politicization*, focuses on the place that individual action assumes, its relationship with collective action, and the paths of identity politicization.

#### ***“It didn’t change my life, it’s my life”: identity construction in lifestyle politics***

As others have found, lifestyle politics entails a broad set of behaviors that combine individual change with a willingness to achieve social change (Haenfler et al., 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). In accordance with this, in the present study, individual change was materialized through lifestyle as a necessary path to follow in order to achieve social change. In the following section, we illustrate the type of behaviors involved in lifestyle politics and the main drivers for those changes.

#### ***Reconfiguration of everyday practices***

Lifestyle politics entails a conscious process of the reconfiguration of everyday life (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). In this study, two interrelated dimensions illustrate the major changes on participants' behaviors. Firstly, most participants mentioned attempts to have jobs that represent their values (e.g. vegetarian or raw food chefs, eco-dry firms, organic producers, yoga teachers, etc.). Secondly, this way of living seems to be possible because participants tend to live with few materials possessions, as they actively expressed. Table 2 lists the most common behaviors identified by participants as central to their lifestyles (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Interestingly, these behaviors were reported by most participants, regardless of whether they were recruited as vegans, voluntary simplifiers, or activists. Besides, these behaviors become central to the participants' identities, as some responders actually expressed: "I would say that, somehow, it eventually influences almost everything in my life. It is like a drive, (...). I mean: it includes a whole spectrum of thoughts, options and choices" (I19). Identity seems to be actively constructed by each one of them and the behaviors (e.g. eating organic, not eating meat, avoiding buying, etc.) are used to express their own identities.

#### *Distinctiveness, continuity and coherence*

In this study, all the behaviors reported by participants appear to represent, primarily, a desire to distinguish themselves from the consumerist society, as they do not recognize themselves as a part of it. Respondents commonly expressed a deep concern with current societies, mainly with the Western-style way of living. Neo-liberalism (I21) and capitalism (I8) are seen as responsible for climate change, for destroying nature, natural resources, and

ecosystems. These economic systems are considered to be responsible for creating social inequalities and global injustices: “I believe that 18% of the population uses 80% of the resources (...) meanwhile, the rest of the people in the planet are being exploited and suffering innumerable social and economic inequalities” (I18). I10’s comments were in line with this and reinforced the dimension of global social justice, as he noted that capitalism causes social inequalities in society and is responsible for perpetuating class inequality: “we live in a hierarchical society where there are some people that have the power and then there are those that have no power”. Other participants go further and suggest that environmental destruction is the result of the imposition of humans as a superior species, above nature and all the other species: “of our (human) race as supreme race” (I17). In the context of attributing responsibilities for planetary destruction, consumption patterns are strongly criticized by all participants, as they are seen as the drivers of most of the anthropogenic climate change. In this aspect, participants expressed the feeling that there is a constant call and active encouragement to consume: “I don’t remember having seen a single campaign which said to reduce consumption! That is completely against our economic mode, in a very radical way!” (I21). Current societies are then reported as individualistic and materialistic; there is an active call to replace these values with solidarity, compassion, tolerance, respect by diversity, and cooperation between people. Besides, there is an explicit desire to be distinguished from other “engaged” people, namely those who are seen currently as activists, who often protest and demonstrate but whose lives are not consistent with their behaviors:

I believe it should start with changing habits so my own practices are in accordance with my beliefs (...). Sometimes I get very frustrated with other activists, because I can see that their practices are not promoting what they stand for. (I1)

Simultaneously, as I1 explains, the processes of individual change seem to be continuous and constructed over a lifetime:

So, everything has been very slow, but I would say that it didn't change my life, it's my life, it defines my life, I am transforming myself, I am living my experiences, the people I know, all that comes from this.

This construction process is always guided by the idea of continuity, as is expressed by I18:

"It has been a process, a process that can be compared to a puzzle, a set of pieces that has fit together. Besides, this is a process that is not yet finished, it is in constant development".

I18 also commented: "I believe being vegetarian is such a pivotal value in my life, in my own existence, that it probably is something that will be part of the rest of my life". These quotations suggest that the need for distinctiveness is followed by the need for the changes to be continuous and significant over time, despite significant life changes (Vignoles, 2011).

Simultaneously, the need for coherence was also a common discourse in this study.

Participants actively decided to change their lifestyles, arguing that the way one decides to live should represent his/her values and beliefs. I18 said that "my main motivation is personal, it's related to this coherence that I intend to achieve (...) I feel that the path I'm looking for is to be the most coherent possible". Although most participants consider



coherence as a personal imposition/personal motive, for some there is a social need for coherence, which is imposed by others as a way to legitimize or justify their actions. For instance, I15 said:

Sometimes is just a question of coherence, for example let's think about bullfights. Imagine we were at a protest against bullfights and someone said to us "ok, you are here now but when you leave you will go eat a nice steak" (...) in fact, I cannot fight bullfight if I eat meat. The reason to be vegan and just eat organic and refuse OGM, etc., it gives freedom to my own political action (...). My fight is coherent with my habits.

Furthermore, there is a common feeling that what they do is the right thing to do according to their values. Many have stressed this aspect. For example, I13 commented that "this is something that I'm discovering, but it is something that when I do it, I really feel that it is the right thing to do" (I13). For others, expressing coherence is also a path to feeling self-pride and self-esteem, as expressed in I7 words:

This thing I have, my sense of life, for me the real sense of life is this: to contribute with something. I mean it is something that is related to my own values... There are so many things that I am not able to be coherent with, and if I can be with this I will be. So, for me it is a reason to be proud of myself, because it is a thing where I can be coherent with what I stand for. (I7)

#### *Efficacy and control of one's life*

The actions involved in lifestyles were perceived as effective to promote social change, and

simultaneously as a path to individual empowerment. Regarding their effectiveness on social change, one participant argued that after so many years of transition, she thinks that her behavior now has an impact: “I understand that my daily life has an impact, it’s not a big impact, I know, but I think it has some. I don’t consume, I don’t go to supermarkets, I am not giving my money to those people” (I1). Lifestyle behaviors are compared to more conventional forms of political participation, such as voting and protesting: “when I go voting, I just have the right to one vote. When I go to the supermarket, when I decide not to go to bullfights, I’m voting, boycotting is voting” (I12).

These comments suggest that consumerist choices are perceived as having a bigger impact – or at least an equal impact – than other forms of political participation. I5 stressed that the impact of these actions is enormous in bringing about social change: “the system is made of consumers as well, by each and all of us, and with our shopping choices we can shape all that is around us” (I5).

Lifestyle politics seem to lead to the idea of feeling confident and in control of one’s life. This idea is expressed by I1, who made the following comment: “I felt that I didn’t have much power to transform many things, but I could change myself, I could stop eating meat, I could consume less and so on. So, I have decided to start from there”. I5 added that, once people discover they have the power to free themselves from the habits and rhythms imposed by the economic system, they will be free and will discover that they have the power to socially transform their own lives. For her, lifestyle politics are connected to freedom and are inevitably related to food sovereignty:

I connect food with consumption habits in that way, being free in terms of food. I believe we can set ourselves free from other habits that contribute to the

reinforcement of the system (...). I thought I had to grow my own food to be freer from the impositions of the system, to be freer to adopt certain forms of living in society, and then I was sure I had to guarantee my own food sovereignty.

I2 also argues that, once people recognize their social constraints, they can start to live a different life: “there is a social pressure and social constraint that make you live an automatic life in a world that is programmed to reproduce patterns and norms that are only convenient to the system itself” (I2).

All these quotations illustrate how people obtain a sense of control over their lives and gain a sense of freedom from social constraints through lifestyle politics. Simultaneously, for some participants, this is associated with the idea that individual action can actually lead to social change.

#### ***“My personal life is only an extension”: Political meaning and politicization***

As previously suggested, the fact that the concept of lifestyle politics is being considered as a path for regulating identity motives does not mean that there is a rejection of collective approaches to social change. In the following section, the analysis focuses on how lifestyle assumes a political meaning, its relationship with collective action, and the different paths of politicization.

#### ***Agendas of social change***

Many participants suggested that identity change is necessary for social change, but for some it needs to be combined with collective efforts. This view is in accordance with the

idea that lifestyle is a way to demonstrate to others, through example, that it is possible to live in alternative ways. The desire to influence others was expressed by almost all the participants. As commented by I5, identity change is only a starting point: “we need to start from somewhere and I think it is contagious, a person gives an example that it is possible to do something, that spreads and motivates others”. For I3 and others, the impact of individual action on others can be massive: “the things you do at a personal level influence all world, and when you do that with your fellows, the impact is even bigger” (I3). Besides, participants show an urgency to influence others: “we need to reach people” (I6) and “spread the message to the biggest number of people possible” (I20). Any moment or given situation is an opportunity to influence others: “I believe everyone has this power: the power to influence others, the ones with whom you are” (I15).

Under this idea that others need to be inspired and influenced by the ways participants are living their own lives, participants seem to have developed their own sense of meaning and purpose. For example, I8 sees his role in the world as an inspiration to others: “I think that my role in society is creating moments to increase sustainability and awareness in people’s lives, and also facilitate awareness power”. I9 directly verbalized that: “I am merely a person showing to society my way of living, so others can be inspired and live in a more authentic way”.

In this willingness to influence others and make others change their own behavior, participants’ ordinary everyday decisions as citizens acquire a political meaning and purpose. Lifestyles become political actions (e.g. Micheletti, 20013; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), expressing both identity motives and a willingness for social change. Several participants placed strong emphasis on the relationship between their personal and political

lives: “I like to define everything I do as politics. I never joined a political party, I don’t want to, and I don’t need it (...)” (I8). Although some participants refuse to name themselves as “activists” and prefer to see themselves “acting in more active and transformative way” (I5), many interviewees considered themselves as being involved in “true activism” (I16) either through lifestyle or collective action. Despite considering lifestyle as a form of activism or political participation, most participants actually felt the need to go beyond their lifestyles and be involved in social movements and collective action: “I didn’t want to stay in my private sphere, limiting my actions to my food behavior, being vegan. So, I decided that I want to do more, to spread, to communicate information to other people” (I20).

#### *Functions of collective action*

Besides the influence on others through their own example, participants actually appear to be engaged and actively participating in group actions and social movements. Indeed, several participants referred to several experiences of attending protests and demonstrations; some actually reported being involved in more than one organization or group action. Some of the experiences mentioned by participants include active membership in political parties, engagement in environmental social movements, local food networks, and animal rights organizations (see Table 1).

Collective action is seen as complementary to lifestyle politics; it is a path for social interaction. Regarding its former function, experiences of joining groups are seen as necessary to fully spread the seeds of change within others:

With the perspective that we need to join efforts to achieve much more, of course I

can achieve small things individually, but if I have a group I can achieve much more. The best is to act in several fronts (I16).

This idea of acting across many fronts is also expressed by I10, who added that political consumerism is just one of the things that can be used to promote social change: “I keep thinking that you can vote (as well as consume), but voting is just one thing that you do in a democratic society”. Collective action also seems to act as a means of constructing and regulating social interactions. For example, I1 explained that in her case, social relationships fostered collective action: “I believe it was a kind of socialization process (...) I think it goes from friend to friend, it was like that with my process” (I1).

Others see collective action as an effective arena for interacting with people who share the same interests. I19, for instance, mentioned that he very often attends protests and demonstrations, with the motivation of socializing with others: “being at a demonstration is not enough for me, I use that opportunity to interact with people, to understand people’s stories, and to create connections/networks”. Moreover, he sees protests and demonstrations as opportunities to “motivate ourselves through other people, with peers, those who are with us in that protest action”. The development of friendships and social networks is clearly stressed as a motivation to become engaged in social movements; the social movement itself is a place to make friends and find social support, as stressed by many: “to get self-motivated and also socialize with people whom I identify with” (I5).

#### *No single route for politicization*

The other aspect that is worth mentioning is the inexistence of a single path to either

lifestyle politics or collective action. Indeed, some participants started to change aspects of their private lives before becoming involved in groups or social movements. Instead, others have started to change their individual behaviors after being involved in collective actions. In one way or another, the large majority of participants recognize a political purpose in their behaviors; this tends to combine lifestyle politics with collective action over their lifetimes.

I10, for example, became aware of animal exploitation in 1998 through a newspaper article, where the focus was on how vegan people reject any kind of animal exploitation. He decided to go vegan; for at least two years, he was only focusing on his own individual behavior. He then became actively involved for many years in several environmental and human rights movements, which he combined with his alternative lifestyle. For five years, he lived in an eco-village. At the time of the interview, he had left the village and was starting his own company to create an “eco-dry toilet”. He expressed some skepticism about the power of lifestyle politics in order to justify the need to be involved in collective action and social movements. When asked to elaborate, the answer was that both, individual and collective action, were just a “matter of strategy to achieve something. There is no modification of the end goal”. From this participant’s example, it was very clear that somehow the political meaning of an action is beyond the differentiation between a collective action and a lifestyle:

For me, what does not make any sense is that dichotomy: that one thing is the organization, the militancy, and the other is my personal life. This does not make any sense. My personal life is an extension, or the foundation, or my militancy is expressed in my daily life, it is also what I stand for. (I10)

Besides, I10 and others see a clear relationship between their private lives and the political implications of their lifestyle. I21 comments: “what people do, where they do it, what they eat...all that are political choices nowadays, or at least they have political consequences”.

In other cases, collective action seems to promote lifestyle change. For example, a few years ago, I5 decided to become an organic farmer and live a simpler life after being engaged in several political protests and demonstrations. However, this does not mean that she is not also involved in contentious politics. This participant actually continued to engage in protests and demonstrations even though lifestyle politics had become her priority. As she explained:

I want to change everything in my life (...) I thought that if I wanted to change something in society I needed to start to think about food and environment. I thought I had to act more broadly than going to protests and demonstrate, and here I am. (I5)

These participants' experiences reveal that lifestyle politics and collective action represent two faces of the same coin: a full engagement with social change. I10 and I5 do not represent singular cases in our study. In fact, an analysis of each one of the 22 participants' trajectories reveals that several of them tend to combine both levels of action across their lifetime.

## **Discussion**



At the core of this paper is the idea that identities can actively change, be constructed, and become politicized. Under these assumptions, our aims were threefold: to understand the meanings and perceptions of people engaged in lifestyle politics and collective action; to examine the motives guiding their individual change; and to explore the linkage processes between lifestyle politics and collective action. The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that agendas of social change are embedded in everyday choices (Dobernig & Stagl, 2015) and that individual change is guided by the willingness to pursue social transformation and change. In this regard, alternative lifestyles have emerged as a form of expressing the direction toward which society should change. These findings are consistent with recent research suggesting that, for some new social movements (and their members), social and cultural change are the main targets (van Dyke, Soule, & Taylor, 2004). The idea that recent forms of political action tend to be less centered on state institutions than most other kinds of political action has previously been found in several studies on lifestyle politics (Bennett, 2006). Consumption behavior, independently of whether participants were recruited as vegans, voluntary simplifiers or activists, assumes a huge centrality in lifestyle politics and becomes the means of making political statements on labor exploitation, human rights, animal rights, environmental issues, and bad business practices (Bennett, 2006).

In this study, the process of identity change seems to be initiated when participants have experienced disagreement with the way society works and have decided to change it in order to regulate their identities. We argue that identity change is renovated in lifestyle politics and, in most cases, alternative lifestyles emerge as a path to minimize the conflict between injunctive and descriptive norms. Following Smith and colleagues' (2015) model,

we propose that lifestyle politics can facilitate the development of new politicized collective identities and promote collective action.

These “new” identities seem to be primarily striving for distinctiveness (Breakwell, 1986; 1992; 2001; 2014), which is here considered as a key driver to all the processes of identity change in lifestyle politics. This argument is based on three aspects. Firstly, lifestyles represent a desire for distinctiveness from the consumerist society, in which participants do not recognize themselves. Secondly, in some cases participants felt the need to move away from groups because they began to be unable to identify with them in terms of their ways of living and values. Thirdly, participants seem to distinguish themselves from other kinds of activists that usually do not make use of their lifestyles as a form of expression of their political actions. Simultaneously, lifestyle politics is constructed based on the idea of continuity. In fact, expressions of lifestyle politics emerged as ongoing processes not yet finished, still in construction, yet central to participants. The idea that participants’ identities are continuous over time, despite significant life changes (Breakwell, 1986; Vignoles, 2011), was reported by many participants; this appears to be associated to the recognition that lifestyles are continuously in construction. However, transversal to all ongoing everyday processes of identity construction, in which participants create a way of being and living to represent their own values and beliefs, is a constant search for a sense of psychological coherence (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Although related to the continuity motive, the sense of psychological coherence seems to have emerged here as a need for compatibility and coherence between the different constituent elements of identity (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). In this study, participants felt the need to put their values (e.g. non-materialism, anti-capitalism, anti-speciesism, etc.) into action. They actively struggle, not

necessarily to maintain a sense of continuity, but rather to reconcile the incoherencies within their identities.

Furthermore, the need for efficacy emerged, as expected, as a central identity motive. Some participants perceived that the effectiveness of collective action is strongly limited by the fact that many of the societal challenges that we are now facing (e.g. climate change, global economic crisis, etc.) are global problems calling for global solutions. As a result, changes in consumption and in ways of living are considered to be the most effective way to force corporations and drive political leaders towards social change. Participants feel that through their lifestyles they can actually have control, at least over their lives. In front of such global challenges, which can be seen as uncontrollable and out of person's control, the hope of exerting change in the long term emerges in lifestyle politics as justification for individualized forms of political action. However, in some cases perceiving lifestyle politics as an effective path to social change depends not only on the efficacy attributed to lifestyle politics and collective action, but also on the individual experience of perceived personal power to bring about social change. Thus, the focus on lifestyle rather than on collective action may be a result of feeling powerless (Kenis & Mathijs, 2012), and lifestyle politics emerge as a form of perceived power of change and influence.

On the one hand, collective action emerges as a complementary strategy to achieve social change, which people may use depending on their resources and motivations. Despite considering lifestyle as a form of activism, most participants actually felt the need to go beyond their lifestyles, and become involved in social movements and collective action. This means that lifestyle politics does not seem to be replacing other forms of collective action, but actually complementing them. Considering that most participants are committed

to lower levels of consumption and usually accept a lower income, they may actually have more time and freedom to pursue life goals, such as engagement in social/community projects and political participation (Alexander, 2011). On the other hand, collective action emerges as a way of regulating social relationships. Participants in this study expressed a willingness to initiate, regulate and maintain social relationships, for which they also use collective action (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Collective action is used as a way to satisfy the need to maintain feelings of closeness to, and acceptance by, other people (Vignoles, et al., 2006).

Finally, it should be stressed that the identification of social change as a need seems to be the starting point for lifestyle politics and leads to changes in identity. However, this does not mean that this is the end. Indeed, our analysis shows that participants can become politicized through different means. For example, identity change can also occur before any experiences of collective action. In such cases, what seems to happen is that the politicization process blurs the lines between the public and the private spheres (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), and between the collective and the individual. Furthermore, we have seen that both lifestyle change and involvement in collective action are impelled by the attribution of individual responsibilities and strong assumptions on what is right and what is wrong. This result is in accordance with recent research suggesting that politicized identities are, at least in terms of their content, moralized identities (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2016).

### **Conclusions**

Overall, three major contributions can be withdrawn from this study. Firstly, this research contributes to a growing body of literature that considers the multiple ways in which people

engage with politics, recognizing the place of lifestyle politics (e.g. Dixon, 2014; Haenfler et al., 2012; de Moor, 2016; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). It is based in an interdisciplinary approach that brings into political psychology a topic that has not been not sufficiently explored in the field. By understanding how people are experimenting with forms of micro-politics in everyday practices, political psychologists may help situate the role of individual and lifestyle change in a context of broader social, environmental and political change.

Based on our findings we argue that lifestyle politics is not replacing forms of collective action, but actually complementing them, as a rationalized strategy to increase the potential of bringing about social change.

Secondly, this study contributes to the literature on identity and political participation by exemplifying the place of identity motives in social action and change. As far as we know, there are no previous studies relating identity motives (IPT) either to lifestyle politics or to collective action. Our study suggests that the explanation of political participation can be particularly enhanced if we consider the role of identity motives and go beyond the personal-social identity distinction. By focusing on IPT, our study offers innovative contributes to both research field, lifestyle politics and collective action. We have shown that the construction of identities can be guided by principles of social change and lifestyle politics may be a way of regulating identities. In particular, lifestyle politics can be considered as form of regulation of the need for distinctiveness, sense of continuity and psychological coherence. Besides, lifestyle politics and collective action can help people obtain a sense of control and freedom from social constraints and structures.

Thirdly, our research also contributes to the literature on identity politicization in two ways. On the one hand, most of the studies have focused on collective action without considering

the politicization of identities through individualized forms of political action. In this regard, our study indicates that lifestyle can also be a place for politicization and collective action. However, the concept of lifestyle politics has been accused of being insufficient to fundamentally transform society (Portwood-Stacer, 2013) and many have called for it to intersect with collective action. In this way, our study provides relevant indications on how lifestyle politics is, or can be, linked to collective action. However, despite showing that lifestyle politics intersect with collective action, this study does not give sufficient explanation on how this linkage process is initiated. Future research should focus on the role of social relationships, emotions, and moral convictions in making this link. To conclude, it is worth noting that we make all these arguments based on a small number of participants, and it is unclear if they apply to other activists or alternative lifestyles. However, the themes and ideas illustrated throughout the paper have shown strong convergence among participants. The title chosen for this paper demonstrates a consensual idea suggested by all participants: lifestyle politics entails changing identities to change the world. Lifestyle politics defines the way in which the participants have decided to live their lives; the processes of identity construction and individual change are crucial to comprehend lifestyle politics and collective action.

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Table 1  
Participant's characterization

ID	Criteria for participation	Age	Sex <sup>1</sup>	Education level	Profession	Examples of collective action
I1	Activist	35	F	Master	Accountant	Environmental organization Local and organic food network
I2	Voluntary simplifier	27	F	Bachelor	Project manager	Environmental organization* Homeless support group*
I3	Activist	30	M	Bachelor	Product designer	Environmental organization Organic food organization March against Monsanto Several experiences of protest and demonstration Solidarity economy network*
I4	Vegan	36	M	Ph.D.	Research Fellow	Animal rights organization*
I5	Voluntary simplifier	37	F	Bachelor	Farmer	Anti-austerity movement* Organic food network Political party Several experiences of protest and demonstration
I6	Activist	40	F	Bachelor	Trainer/educator	Transition Town initiative Food networks Critical mass (cycling)*
I7	Activist	30	F	Bachelor	Textiles reseller	Alternative education movement Environmental organization March Against Monsanto* Several experiences of protest and demonstration Solidarity economy network* Community garden*
I8	Activist	32	F	Master	Environmental organizer	Environmental organization Solidarity economy network*
I9	Voluntary simplifier	33	F	Bachelor	Yoga teacher	None
I10	Activist	38	M	Bachelor	Gardener and Entrepreneur	Environmental organization Organic food network Parents association Non-GMO organization* Intentional rural community*

I11	Voluntary simplifier	55	M	Ph.D.	Professor (unemployed)	Anti-austerity movement*
I12	Vegan	25	M	Bachelor	Criminologist	Transition Town initiative Animal rights organization Vegetarian organization Several experiences of protest and demonstration
I13	Voluntary simplifier	33	M	Secondary level	Chef	Intentional rural community*
I14	Voluntary simplifier	42	M	Secondary Level	Farmer	Political party Environmental organization
I15	Vegan	54	M	Master	Web design Teacher	Political party Animal organization Several participations in protests and demonstrations
I16	Vegan	52	F	Secondary Level	Office administrator	Animal rights organization Vegan Food organization
I17	Voluntary simplifier	42	F	Secondary Level	Audio-visual technician	Alternative education school* Community organization
I18	Activist	37	M	Bachelor	Tourist guide & chef	Environmental organization Local organization of “eco-tours” Non-GMO organization*
I19	Vegan	33	M	Bachelor	Engineer	Environmental organization* Animal rights organization Several experiences of protest and demonstration* Vegetarian food organization
I20	Vegan	33	M	Bachelor	Designer (unemployed)	Vegetarian food organization
I21	Activist	40	M	Ph.D.	Research fellow	Environmental organization
I22	Vegan	30	F	Bachelor	Nurse	Animal rights organization Vegetarian food organization

<sup>1</sup> F means Female; M means Male.

\*Past experiences

Table 2

## Examples of behaviors in lifestyle politics

Behaviors	Example quote
Reducing the need for money	If you have environmental concerns, and if your lifestyle goes in line with them, you start to use less money. (I7)
Voluntarily living with fewer things	I have reduced many things in my life: consumerism, buying things... I don't identify myself with that. (I14)
Sharing skills and products	At this time of my life, working in exchange for things rather than asking for money makes much sense to me. (I17)
Growing own food	As I started to live according to my beliefs and concerns, I have started to produce by myself the things I used to buy. (I5)
Reusing things and second-hand shopping	I don't remember the last time I decided to buy new clothes (...) if I need something I choose to buy in second-hand shops, or I recycle things from my mother. (I9)
Boycotting certain products	I do boycott brands, and for me boycotting is not just related to food. Rather, it is also something connected with human rights issues. (I4)
Refusing to consume meat and dairy and to use fur, leather, wool	I have stopped consuming milk (...) then, gradually, four months later I didn't eat anything with animal origin (I20).
Collective living	I started to visit eco-villages. Then, one year later, I have decided that I had to start living in an eco-village. (I13)
Practices of do it yourself	I do all the soaps, cosmetics, and everything else (...) I don't want to buy things, plastic packets and producing garbage. (I9)
Preferring local products	I believe that it makes complete sense to buy what is available close to the place where you live your life. (I1)
Preferring local shops and avoiding large commercial stores	In terms of vegetables, we are able to buy 90% what we need from a neighbor. (I2)
Boycotting corporations and companies	Now, I don't buy. I used to, but it's been almost two years since I don't buy anything from those kinds of companies. (I5)