

Becoming an Activist:

Believers, Sympathizers, and Mobilization in the American Pro-Life Movement

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Abstract:

This is a life-history interview and ethnographic study of the pro-life movement in four U.S. metropolitan areas: Boston MA, Charleston SC, Minneapolis/St. Paul MN, and Oklahoma City OK. I model the process of becoming an activist to explain how some individuals become mobilized into the movement while demographically and attitudinally similar individuals do not. The central claim of this model is that coherent beliefs about abortion are not formed until late in the mobilization process, after an individual has already experienced some movement participation. Individuals are first drawn into movement action through social networks for motivations other than concern over abortion.

Beliefs about abortion are formed through pro-life participation and are extremely important to the overall movement. Differences in beliefs about strategy create a movement structure in which pro-life organizations and activists work in independent and mutually exclusive social movement streams. Differences in beliefs about why abortion is wrong cross-cut this structure and are the source of significant tension within the movement. Religious beliefs also play a role, although the relationship between religion and the movement is complex. Religion does not provide substantial institutional resources or direct recruitment opportunities for the movement, even though religious and movement practices are often closely intertwined. Moreover, a substantial minority of

pro-life activists have found a religious faith as a result of their social movement activism, rather than being drawn into activism as a result of pre-existing religious beliefs.