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Activism – Radicalization – Protest: An Introduction to a Special Section

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Collective action is a topic that is highly relevant to the socio-political dynamics of the contemporary world. First, given the complexity of global problems and the social interdependencies that underlie them, solving those problems simply requires collective action. Problems caused by climate change (Fritsche, Barth, Jugert, Masson, & Reese, 2018), economic inequalities (Piff, Kraus, & Keltner, 2018), or mass migration (Cann, 2016) cannot be solved without changing public opinion, inducing new social norms, and mobilizing collective actions for the sake of change. However, despite its social importance, it seems that only a few people engage in collective action on a regular basis. A recent poll conducted by PEW (Wike & Castillo, 2018) in many countries around the world confirmed that the majority the public can be characterized as disengaged and detached from politics. For instance, while most people declared that they took part in voting, much fewer people reported participating in volunteer organizations (27%), posting comments on political issues online (17%), participating in an organized protest (14%), or donating money to a social or political organization (12%). Understanding what motivates such behaviors or, on the contrary, what stops people from engaging in them, could have important practical implications for individuals who try to mobilize support for political movements and causes.



Moreover, while, in most cases, it is indeed a minority of citizens who are politically active, there have been certain moments in history when the world experienced a sudden surge in collective action. The protests of 1968, the Arab Spring, and a recent wave of protests in the United States and around the world are just a few examples demonstrating that under certain circumstances large groups of people can be more easily mobilized to engage in actions for collective causes. Identifying the conditions that drive such mobilization is crucial for both the development of predictive theoretical models as well as for understanding their implications for social practice. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of tactics employed in collective action. Social movements use a wide array of methods and tools for fighting for their causes, some of which are peaceful while others are more violent. Given that terrorism is repeatedly identified as one of the top priorities for policymakers (Gramlich, 2018), it is of great importance to identify drivers of peaceful vs. violent collective action.

The goal of the special section was to bring together papers that precisely address these questions. What motivates actions on behalf of a collective cause? What influences the choice between violent vs. peaceful means for that goal? What are individual and situational predictors of political engagement? Six papers collected in this special section address different aspects of collective action. Despite the diversity of topics, methods, and samples, it is possible to identify certain underlying themes that connect them.

One of these recurring themes concerns the *needs* that give rise to collective action, a problem that has fascinated researchers for a long time. Following Gurr's (1970) question of "why men rebel", research has focused on the motivating role of injustice (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), relative deprivation (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012), and frustrations of collective and individual goals. Results of this research demonstrated that when people feel they are unfairly treated they are more likely to engage in collective action in order to restore the position they feel they deserve. Results also showed that when people perceive important values to be threatened they are more likely to act in defense of those values (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). Four of the papers collected in this special section address similar questions. First, extending the research on political frustrations, these papers suggest that engagement in collective action might stem from goals and motivations that are, on the surface, unrelated to the cause. For example, Renström, Bäck, and Knapton (2018, this issue) focused on the role of the need to belong in shaping collective action tendencies. Specifically, they explored if priming rejection could lead to an increase in normative behaviors related to political engagement. The results showed that when people with a high need to belong were primed with social rejection they showed the highest levels of conformity to the perceived norms of political engagement. These findings highlight the role of individual differences in responding to situationally induced threats. This is also in line with research showing that individuals who engaged in lone acts of terrorism were more likely to be socially isolated, divorced, separated, or widowed compared to a general population (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014). More generally, it suggests that frustration of basic human needs may underlie a willingness to engage in collective action.

A similar argument was made by Kruglanski (2018, this issue), whose paper outlines a general theoretical framework of violent extremism. This paper proposes motivational imbalance as a source of radical engagement in a cause. Specifically, within this approach, extreme goal commitment is more likely to occur when one need (e.g., to belong, to understand, to feel competent) gains dominance over other needs. When alternative needs are suppressed, people consider even extreme means to satisfy the need in question. While this phenomenon is not limited to political extremism, when the dominant need is the need for personal significance, the desire to matter and to be respected, violent political extremism may follow. Importantly, while the source of the quest for significance can stem from political grievances and injustices, it can be also caused by sources unrelated to the political realm such as rejection, failure, or personal humiliation.

The paper by Jaśkiewicz and Besta (2018, this issue) also focuses on motivational underpinnings of collective action. In three studies the authors showed that attachment to one's place (e.g., neighborhood, city) is a positive predictor of engagement in collective action on behalf of the local community. This is particularly true when the sense of belonging and place attachment is a result of active search and discovery. In contrast, when place attachment is just passively inherited it is not related to collective action. These studies are important because understanding the relationship between different types of bonds with the city and urban collective action might help in mobilizing people for local issues (Harvey, 2013). Interestingly, surveys show that voters trust local news outlets more than they trust national news (Graham, 2017) and they evaluate local government more positively than politicians acting on the national level (McCarthy, 2018). Research by Jaśkiewicz and Besta might suggest that framing global problems in local terms might mobilize more collective action, particularly among people who feel attached to their place.

Finally, regarding the role of motivational factors, de Lemus, Spears, Lupiáñez, Bukowski, and Moya (2018, this issue) explored the role of the need to hold a positive image of one's group for social resistance. They studied it in the context of gender inequalities, in which traditional roles constrain the life choices of women. In this context, the authors considered automatic ingroup bias as a way to resist the constraints. The first study showed that women who were exposed to stereotypical roles exhibited stronger ingroup bias. Study 2 extended this result by demonstrating the importance of gender role salience, as automatic ingroup bias was activated only when gender roles were salient. Moreover, those participants who showed more automatic ingroup bias after exposure to gender stereotypes, tended to persist more on typically male task. These studies extend past research by showing that underprivileged groups could contest their disadvantage not only on explicit measures (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992) but also implicitly. The lack of connection between implicit resistance and explicit collective action intentions indicate an important new avenue for future research as it calls for more studies on the relationship between those two levels of analysis.

The second theme, which emerged in three papers, concerns the role of *social context* for facilitating or hindering participation in collective action. Past research already

suggested the important role played by friends, family, and ingroups for political engagement. For example, having a friend already engaged in violent political action was found to predict personal involvement in illegal political behavior among adolescents (Dahl & van Zalk, 2014). Analyses of patterns of recruitment to Al-Qaeda (Sageman, 2004) and ISIS (Holman, 2016) similarly demonstrated that new fighters usually joined the terrorist organizations in groups of friends and under the influence of close others who had already been members of the organization. We can also observe a shift in collective action research toward building models of political engagement that do not only concentrate on self-concepts and identities of activists, but also include relations and social context (van Zomeren, 2015). Studies in this special section speak to this phenomenon.

In their study on youth political involvement, Zawadzka, Iwanowska, and Borchet (2018, this issue) focused on the relationship between teenage activism and the perceived activism of their parents. The authors found that teenagers with parents who were more engaged in activist behaviors were more involved in activism themselves and exhibited a more pronounced activist identity than teenagers with less politically active parents. Moreover, this study also examined the role of the media. Specifically, hedonic use of media was a negative predictor of youth activist behavior. Thus, this result adds to the literature on mass-media and youth behaviors by suggesting that social activism might be related to the way in which teenagers use media rather than their overall level of media use.

Another aspect of the relationship between social context and motivation to engage in collective action was demonstrated by Jaśkiewicz and Besta (2018, this issue). In addition to demonstrating the motivational aspect of place attachment described earlier, they showed that stronger place attachment was experienced by people who engaged in more frequent social interactions in their neighborhood. This result highlights the importance of being embedded in an immediate social context for facilitating social action. That is, opportunities for social interactions with neighbors could be a basis for self-expansion and this positive process may facilitate willingness to act on behalf of one's community.

A unique approach to the role of social context for collective action was taken by Rak, Kulesza, and Chrobot (2018, this issue). Their paper challenges the idea that it is leaders who are crucial in shaping the actions of groups. In a series of simulation studies, they explored what happens when people with different characteristics (i.e., attitudes, persuasiveness, supportiveness, immediacy) gather together and form a group. Their results suggest that recent developments in social media and Internet communication could decrease the importance of leaders but they may increase the role of followers in the speed with which new ideas spread. This article adds to the literature on collective action by suggesting that changes in the medium of communication could influence the way in which social mobilization occurs. Previous research on social media mobilization (e.g., Jost et al., 2018) suggests that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are important factors in shaping activists' engagement. For example, 40% of the surveyed protesters during Euromaidan declared that they were encouraged to join the antigovernment resistance by friends and family on Facebook. In line with that, Rak et al. suggest that the speed of social change

depends more on the followers than on the leaders. This seeming convergence between simulation studies and other correlational and experimental data could be investigated in the future in greater depth.

To sum up, while papers collected in this special section cover a wide variety of issues, causes, and samples, the focus on the goals that drive collective action and social context seems to unify them all. These articles provide important insights into the study of activism and radicalism. Still, important questions remain and future research could directly connect the topics and themes investigated in the separate papers in this section. What is the connection between resistance on the implicit level and explicit involvement in collective action? How do people choose various tactics to fight for a political cause? How do goals and needs that on the surface are unconnected to the cause translate into commitment to a political movement? How do local interactions and attachment to one's neighborhood or city translate into collective action on behalf of causes that transcend the local context? What insights could it give us into solving global challenges such as collective action for climate change? Can online social interactions stimulate community attachment that is less grounded in a specific geographical context but creates a more global identity? These are the questions that a theoretical framework describing collective action should address next. Ideally, such a framework would include phenomena from different levels of analyses covering the entire spectrum of causes that call for such action.

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