CHAPTER 5

Individuals in Movements

A Social Psychology of Contention

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INTRODUCTION

Social psychology is interested in how social context influences individuals’ behavior. The prototypical social psychological question related to collective action is that of why some individuals participate in social movements while others do not, or for that matter, why some individuals decide to quit while others stay involved. The social psychological answer to these questions is given in terms of typical psychological processes such as identity, cognition, motivation, and emotion. People—social psychologists never tire of asserting—live in a perceived world. They respond to the world as they perceive and interpret it, and if we want to understand their cognitions, motivations, and emotions we need to know their perceptions and interpretations. Hence, social psychology focuses on subjective variables and takes the individual as its unit of analysis.

Taking the individual as the unit of analysis has important methodological implications. If one wants to explain individual behavior, one needs to collect data at the individual level: attitudes, beliefs, opinions, motives, affect and emotions, intended and actual behavior, and so on. Face-to-face interviews, survey questionnaires (paper and pencil or online), experiments, and registration and observation of individual behavior are the typical devices applied in social psychological research. Whatever the method employed, the point of the matter is that answers, measures, and observations must be unequivocally attributable to one and the same individual. This is important because the fundamental methodological principle in social psychological research is the coincidence of two observations in one individual. Such methodological individualism is not to say that people do not interact or identify with groups. Obviously, people are group members and do interact. In fact, group identification and interaction within groups is among the key factors in any social psychological explanation. It only is a consequence of an approach that takes the individual as the unit of analysis.

Taking the individual as the unit of analysis has important epistemological implications as well. It implies, inter alia, that questions that take a unit of analysis other than the individual (e.g., a movement, a group, a region, or a country) require disciplines other than social psychology to formulate an answer to that question. Hence, social psychology should fare fine in
explaining why individual members of a society participate or fail to participate in a movement once it has emerged, but is not very helpful in explaining why social movements emerge or decline in a society or at a specific point in time. How individual decisions and choices accumulate and result in a more or less successful movement is the subject of other disciplines. The rise and fall of social movements and their impact on politics are topics that take the movement as the unit of analysis. Sociology, political science, and history are better suited for such analyses. Similarly, social psychology should be able to explain why individuals identify with a group, and why strong group identification reinforces someone’s willingness to take part in protest on behalf of that group. However, sociology and especially anthropology are better suited for a study of the collective identity of a group, where the group is the unit of analysis. Finally—to give a last example—social psychology is good in analyzing why specific beliefs and attitudes foster participation in a movement, but the question of how such beliefs and attitudes are distributed in a society is a study topic that social geography and sociology are better equipped for.

Taking the individual as the unit of analysis alludes to the limits of structural explanations. Unless all individuals who are in the same structural position display identical behavior, a shared position can never provide sufficient explanation of individual behavior, and even if people do display identical behavior, the motivational background and the accompanying emotions may still be different. Indeed, this is exactly what a social psychology of protest is about—trying to understand why people who are seemingly in the same situation respond so different. Why do some feel ashamed of their situation, while others take pride in it? Why are some aggrieved, while others are not? Why do some define their situation as unjust, while others do not? Why do some feel powerless, while others feel strong? Why are some angry, while others are afraid? These are the kinds of questions social psychology students of movement participation seek to answer.

Before we move along, a remark must be made about the assumptions regarding individual behavior that underlie social movement studies. Although anthropology, sociology, political sciences, history, and social geography usually do their analyses at levels different than that of the individual, they do build their reasoning on assumptions about individual behavior. These assumptions are not necessarily in sync with state-of-the-art social psychological insights. This is not to say that every social scientist must become a social psychologist first, but it is to say that it is worth the effort to specify the social psychological assumptions that underlie the analyses and to see whether they fit into what social psychologists know these days about individual behavior.

About this Chapter

The principal part of this chapter consists of a discussion of social psychology of movement participation. The first section deals with four fundamental social psychological processes as they are employed in the context of social movement participation: social identity, social cognition, emotions, and motivation. Identity, cognition, emotion, and motivation are presented as the processes at the individual level that link collective identity and collective action. We elaborate on each of these constructs, discuss how they are employed in the study of social movement participation, and describe exemplary studies that take them as their explanatory focus. Thereafter we deal with the phenomenon of social movement participation. We discuss such matters as what we mean by movement participation; movement participation within the broader spectrum of the dynamics of contention; short-term versus