Activists Against Hunger: Membership Characteristics of a National Social Movement Organization

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This article presents results of the first study of the contemporary antihunger movement. We compare the membership characteristics of one its largest organizations, Bread for the World (BFW), with data on the general population of the United States drawn from the 1985 General Social Survey. When compared with the general population, BFW members are, among other things, unusually well educated, religious, politically liberal and efficacious, and active in church-related and political organizations. The differences in religious and political belief and organizational involvement persist even when BFW members are compared with their equally well educated counterparts in the general population. Our findings thus elucidate certain ideological and organizational bases for membership in BFW. We discuss the implications of the findings for issues in the contemporary study of social movements and for BFW's prospects in the political arena.

KEY WORDS: social movements; hunger; voluntary organizations; activism; religion and politics.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of the membership characteristics of social movements is important for several reasons. First and perhaps most significant, it permits testing of competing theories of movement origins and activist recruitment (Jenkins, 1983; McAdam et al., 1988). It also permits estimations of the
degree to which activists' backgrounds represent those of the wider public. To the extent that activists are so representative, movement legitimacy is enhanced. Finally, the characteristics of activists influence the degree to which indigenous resources suffice for movement success (Barkan, 1979; Jenkins, 1979). As a result, the study of membership characteristics has long been an important aspect of social movement scholarship (Bell, 1964; Flacks, 1967; Heberle, 1951; Lipset and Raab, 1970; Orum and Orum, 1968; Pinard et al., 1969; Scaminaci and Dunlap, 1986; Walsh and Warland, 1983).

To enhance understanding of these issues, studies of the membership characteristics of various movements continue to be needed. This article focuses on Bread for the World (BFW), a predominant organization in the antihunger movement that was one of the important social change efforts of the 1980s. We draw on data from a survey of BFW's national membership, and compare these data with results from a national survey of the American public.

Two issues are relevant to the study of recruitment into social movements: (1) What are the social and ideological bases from which recruits into social movements are drawn? (2) What are the micromobilization factors that lead some people within these bases to join movements while others do not? (McAdam et al., 1988) Until recently, recruitment studies have focused on the first issue by examining the characteristics of political activists. In so doing, they have drawn upon a rich tradition within political sociology and political science of studies of the social and ideological bases of party membership and party support (Linz, 1959; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967).

These recruitment studies have provided valuable insights about the kinds of people drawn into activism and the origins of social movements. For example, evidence that participants in the 1960s civil rights protests and urban riots were enmeshed in social institutions and networks (Caplan and Paige, 1968; Oberschall, 1971; Orum, 1972) challenged mass society views of activism as involving atomized individuals alienated from society (Kornhauser, 1959). Similarly, evidence that 1960s student activists had liberal or radical parents (Flacks, 1967; Keniston, 1968) refuted dismissals of their activism as adolescent rebellion.

Despite the value of such studies, they can only partially explain recruitment because few people in a movement's membership base ever participate in movement activities (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987; Walsh and Warland, 1983). This fact has prompted increased attention to the micromobilization factors that facilitate participation (McAdam, 1986, 1988; Snow et al., 1980). A comprehensive study of recruitment must thus focus both on the social and ideological bases of movement participation and on these micromobilization factors. Such a study would start with data on a