

Social Movements: A summary of what works

Charles Dobson

What affects the success of social movements? What do the civil liberties, feminist, environmental, gay rights, anti-nuke, gun control, don't drink and drive, and living wage movements have in common? Since the 1960's a small number of sociologists has been conducting research, trying to this question. Research-based theory on social movements complements the limited, often personal, perspective of activists and organizers because it looks at larger numbers of people, longer periods of time, and major shifts in popular attitudes.

At the time of this writing, little of this work has made its way out of universities. The following is an attempt to present in simple language the resource mobilization perspective of social movements. It summarizes and updates Doug McAdam's, John D. McCarthy's, and Mayer Zald's detailed review article, *Social Movements*, published in the *Handbook of Sociology*, edited by Neil Smelser. Their empirical approach is distinct from the heavily theoretical approach to social movements linked to European intellectuals like Jurgen Habermas, which focuses on symbolic production and cultural conflict.

The authors identify three factors critical to social movements: political opportunity, organizational capacity, and framing ability. They look at social movements as politics by other means, often the only means open to relatively powerless challenging groups. They argue for the constancy of discontent and emphasize the variability of resources in accounting for the emergence and development of insurgency. A reliable model of social change, they say, must be able to account for both micro and macro phenomena, and be able to explain not only the emergence but the maintenance and development of social movement organizations. In more detail, here is what works for social movements.

Favorable pre-conditions

Individual psychology not so important

Early work on social movements assumed that activism could be explained by examining the psychological motivations of individuals. A popular theory was that activism came from a perceived gap between what a person felt he or she was entitled to and what he or she actually received. Research shows that individual predispositions are at best insufficient to account for participation in collective action.

Prosperity

Prosperity affords the resources necessary for social movements. Other things being equal the most deprived seem unable to sustain more than momentary insurgency. Money also makes a difference to local, short term initiatives. Wealthy neighborhoods are much better than poor neighbourhoods at getting concessions and services from local government.

Physical concentration

Bringing people into close proximity in cities, factories, and university campuses increases the potential for social movement activity. The civil rights movement followed the mass migration of blacks from dispersed rural settlements to concentrated urban centres in the US South. Short-lived examples of physical concentration also foment social change. Conferences, for instance, often energize participants to pursue progressive change. Sports events, carnivals and rallies have less predictable outcomes.

Level of prior grassroots organization

Already existing church groups, clubs, special interest organizations, teams and recreational groups, community groups, PTAs, veterans and educational organizations support the development of social movements. The early stages of mobilization are difficult if most people lead purely private lives, and grassroots groups have few members. Robert Putnam's work in Italy shows how broad public participation and a healthy collection of grassroots groups could expedite regional government initiatives.

The absence of cross-cutting solidarities

It is easier for a movement to grow in a population that is isolated or has weak ties to other groups in society. The feminist movement initially encountered a good deal of resistance from married women in the US, women who had a wide variety of social, and economic ties to men.

Suddenly imposed grievances, dramatic spotlighting

Dramatic, highly publicized, unexpected events can lead to public outrage and major shifts in public attitudes. Huge oil spills, nuclear accidents, revelations of serious government misconduct, official violence against dissenters, or the sudden loss of employment serve to foment social movement.

Solidarity instead of free-riding

Many sociologists have argued that social movements are hampered by the tendency for people to do a quick cost-benefit analysis of their participation. The rational person will conclude the easiest course is to become a free rider since they will obtain the benefits of social action whether they participate or not.

To address free rider absenteeism, smart activists emphasize solidarity, personal relationships, and the importance of individual commitment for success. Established organizations with paid organizers are much better equipped to address the free-rider issue. See also *Grassroots Wilt 9: the Catch 22 of Collective Action*.

Individual inducements

Prior contact with a movement member

Research shows the strongest inducement to activism is prior contact with a movement member. For instance, new recruits to peace movements are typically people who are already associated with members of peace groups.

Membership in many organizations

Another correlate of individual activism is the number of organizations a person belongs to. Because of the difficulty of recruiting isolated individuals most organizers do focus their attention on organizations.

Prior activism

People who have been previously involved in some form of collective action in their past are more likely to be involved collective action in the future. Having learned the role of activist, its easier to adopt the role again. The longer one spends in the role of activist, the more integral it becomes to one's identity.

Emotional tension

People are more likely to act collectively when responding to strong emotions. Community organizers typically try to identify an emotional issue that will motivate people to participate. The Chinese students who drove the democracy movement in China were spurred by a roller coaster of strong emotions. It started with grief, and anger over the murder of Hu Yaobang, the sympathetic general secretary of the Communist Party; continued with a heroic hunger strike accompanied by vows of self-sacrifice; and ended with fear and hopeful exhilaration brought on by the risky defiance of martial law, and the blockading of entrances to the city.

Moving music

Music that is often central to a social movement also relies on emotion. Music speaks to the emotions better than pictures or words. It stirs people up. Historians frequently mention the importance of Tom Paine's pamphlets to the American Revolution, too often overlooking his reworking of popular folk tunes. For more on the influence of music see *Music and Social Movements* by Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison.

Availability

Life circumstances permit or constrain participation by affecting availability. People with full time jobs, marriage and family responsibilities are less likely to participate in social movement activity. Autonomous individuals with few personal responsibilities such as college students and single professionals are much more likely participants.

The Ingredients of Micro-mobilization**Kindling in small groups**

The basic building block of social movements is the small informal group connected to a loose network. Sometimes this "micro-mobilization context" is a group of friends, sometimes a group of coworkers, sometimes a subgroup within a larger group like a church or a union. A well-known example is the four Greensboro A&T students who precipitated the 60's black sit in movement after "bull-sessions" in one another's dorm rooms. Margaret Mead was quite right: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Familiar members

Micro-mobilization contexts act as the staging ground for movements. Three resources affect the emergence of a movement: members, leaders, and an existing communications network. Research shows that new members appear along established lines of interaction. New members tend to know people who are already members. The more a person is integrated into an activist community, the more readily he or she will be willing to take part in protest activities.

A co-optable communications network

The pattern, speed and spread of a movement depends on an existing co-optable communications network. The women's liberation movement was able to make rapid progress in the 1960's (when it had previously failed to do so) because of the prior arrival of just such a network. Overall, the greater the number and diversity of people actively participating in an network the more likely it will support a mobilization effort.

The network may be informal and invisible, like those described in detail in Emanuel Rosen's book, *The Anatomy of Buzz*. Rosen sees networks as useful for flogging products; activists see them as useful for spreading ideas. Activists could learn something from books on social networks, viral marketing, and the spread of epidemics. Because social movements seem to spread like other innovations, activists might also learn something from the literature on technical and cultural diffusion, and the role of early adopters.

Capable leaders

Smart, honest, committed leaders are invaluable to a social movement. The literature on activism emphasizes the importance of leaders in generating a movement, and the importance of creating new leaders to keep it rolling. Particularly important is the articulate and charismatic leader who can elegantly articulate everyone's concerns, and inspire an emotional response.

A Mobilizing frame

Corporations and elites, aided by corporate media, preserve the status quo by linking problems to individual shortcomings. They blame the victim, promoting the demobilizing view that lung cancer results from consumer choice, unemployment from laziness, and family breakup from selfishness. A movement can build quickly inside a homogenous, highly interactive group when people question the blame-the-victim frame, and begin to see a problem deriving from not from flawed individuals, but from flawed public policy.

Erving Goffman originated the term "frame" to refer to an interpretive scheme that people use to simplify and make sense of some aspect of the world. When a mobilizing frame becomes widely shared, the chances of collective action increase markedly.

Frame alignment

Frame alignment describes what happens in small informal groups that promote social change. Movement supporters attempt to recruit bystanders by providing examples and rationales that support a mobilizing frame and legitimize the movement. If the examples and rationale are convincing, bystanders will adjust their view of issues and events to fit the new mobilizing frame.

Most frame alignment comes from social movement organizations as they try to bring in new people and fend off counter-movement attacks. Frame alignment comes in varieties sociologists have named frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension and frame transformation. According to David Snow and others, frame extension occurs when a social movement organization extends "the boundaries of its primary framework so as to encompass interests or points of view that are incidental to its primary objectives but of considerable salience to potential adherents. In effect, the movement is attempting to enlarge its adherent pool by portraying its objectives or activities as attending to and being congruent with the values and interests of potential adherents."

Optimistic expectations

Any given individual is more likely to participate in a project if he or she:

- Expects a large number of people to participate

- Expects his/her participation will contribute to success

- Expects success if many people participate.

The relentless enthusiasm of a good organizer will inspire enthusiasm and optimism in others, even in the worst circumstances.

Movement maintenance

The need for social movement organizations

Micro-mobilization spurs collective action, but informal groups of friends, ad-hoc committees, or loose associations of activists are not sufficient to develop or maintain a movement. This requires what are called social movement organizations or SMOs. Typically these “command posts of the movement” have an office, staff, volunteers and a board of directors

Role of the SMO

A social movement organization needs to carve out a niche for itself in the larger environment of other organizations pursuing similar objectives. As well, it must develop productive relationships with media, funders, the media and government. Most important, each SMO must figure out a way to routinize a flow of people and money to support the “cause”. SMOs that demand the least from members will be the most successful in obtaining members and money. One common variation—the professional SMO—purports to speak for a large constituency, but consists of a small paid staff connected through direct mail to a membership of people who are little more than donors.

Radical Flank Effects

Research on SMOs pursuing relatively similar goals shows the presence of extremist groups leads to greater support for moderate groups. Funders increase their support to moderate groups as a way of undercutting radical groups. Moreover the presence of more extreme groups alters the definition of middle, making former radicals seem merely progressive. To secure their place, the new moderates have to denounce the actions of their extremist counterparts as irresponsible, immoral, and counterproductive. The most astute will quietly encourage “responsible extremism” at the same time.

Government control through regulation, intimidation and cooptation

The modern state usually defends elite interests and resists social movements. It does so through tax policies; laws affecting boycott, strikes and blockades; strategic withholding of funds; denial of non-profit charity status; police intimidation; and various forms of cooptation.

The use of force is a dicey issue for government. In the short run systematic, sustained, moderate force works. But if it goes on too long or becomes extreme, the use of force can generate a backlash against government and a boost for the movement. Because a violent response to a peaceful protest generates great sympathy from the media and the general public, peaceful provocation has become a standard tactic of activists. But

protest organizers always face the problem of trying to control a small number of violent participants. If they fail, the media will portray this minority as representative of all protesters, making a violent response seem justified.

In modern democracies, government control often amounts to cooptation or absorption. This can take the form of providing funds to potentially problematic groups, and hiring activist leaders or appointing them to boards. It can also take the form of what is called “symbolic reassurance” whereby governments set up a special hearings, commissions, or agencies to address a particular concern or grievance.

Government facilitation

Governments are not always on the other side. They will assist SMOs pursuing objectives in synch with their own, sometimes creating programs, conferences, and special funding to bolster the membership and credibility of their favorite SMO. When fears of public or corporate backlash stall progressive policy changes, they will support advocacy groups as a means of building public support. In Canada, the Non-smokers Rights Coalition received millions from the Federal government to publicly lobby for laws requiring cigarette packages carry large text warnings and gruesome photos showing the damage caused by smoking. In effect, the feds paid to be openly lobbied in the media, then responded when the public began to see the need for government action.

SMOs often try to exploit circumstances where different levels of government (federal, provincial/state, municipal), or different departments within the same government, wind up on different sides of the same issue. In the American civil rights movement, federal laws and lawsuits, clamped down on southern sheriffs and voting registrars. In one important move, US president Eisenhower called out the National Guard to constrain Arkansas Governor Faubus in the Little Rock school desegregation crisis.

Occasionally groups can use the courts to advance a social movement. Juries can impede authority by nullifying formal law. Juries nullified the laws prohibiting abortion by repeatedly delivering not guilty verdicts for doctors who performed abortions.

Court proceedings or semi-judicial hearings may also be able to capture media attention that will develop public support for movement goals. Still, a judicial route usually costs a lot of time and money even with a public interest advocate willing to take the case pro-bono. As a rule of thumb, the courts are good at preventing injustice, and poor at furthering progress.

Consciousness maintaining

The broad adoption of a mobilizing frame and recognition of the value of individual contribution to collective action may be sufficient to generate collective action but not enough to maintain it. The demise of radical

feminism in the US first after the civil war, and then after passage of the suffrage amendment shows how tenuous political consciousness can be. To succeed a movement must generate support from authorities, sympathy from bystanders and, most important, continue to be seen as legitimate and effective by movement members. This inevitably means an ongoing struggle with movement opponents to frame events and issues in a way that supports the movement.

Most SMOs use the media advocacy to maintain a movement momentum (see section *10 Media Advocacy*). Ideally a SMO will be able to create an ongoing theatrical performance with the public as a mass audience. This is much easier to achieve if the drama focuses on changes to the way people lead their lives rather than changes to institutions.

In their struggle for favorable public opinion, SMOs use various communications technologies to get their message out. They use the telephone to recruit potential members, reconnect to lapsed members, and generate action alerts through established telephone trees. They most often use direct mail to reinforce movement frames, acquire resources, and foment direct action. Because the effectiveness of direct mail fundraising improves dramatically with television exposure, many SMOs try to earn TV coverage. Maintaining consciousness on limited budget requires inventive communications. The most effective SMOs have top-notch communications professionals on staff.

On-going Frame alignment

Sociologists take pains to point out that frame alignment only works as an ongoing process. When confronted with a challenge, an SMO must diagnose the problem in a way that resonates with members and potential members, propose a plausible solution that could be accomplished by movement participation, and issue a call to arms that motivates action. A successful SMO must also work hard to maintain the saliency of supportive frames while attacking, debunking, and ridiculing counter frames. Defensive measures usually extend to polarized us-versus-them framing and may go further to framing opponents actions as corrupt, dishonest or evil. Loss of alignment is a constant threat in the presence of counter movements and the counter frames of opponents.

Frames from the news

Most people acquire their information and orientation to the world from the impersonal mass media. With it they acquire stock frames and frame-making ideologies. What they come to see as their own opinions for or against a social movement are actually news constructed. Right wing ideology is both news constructed and heavily promoted by the corporate owners of the mass media. It assumes that we suffer from too much government, too many taxes and too many controls of corporate enterprise. Any ideology, once adopted

by the mass media, will almost certainly turn around and infect the public that relies upon it for information. Only the most vigilant can resist this kind of consistent framing, story after story, day after day.

Oppositional frames from intellectual workers

Those who teach at universities and colleges generate frames and frame-making ideologies that counter established frames including those of the mass media. Thus universities and colleges often serve as incubators for progressive movements. Nevertheless many movements never make it beyond the university gates. They are frequently abandoned by students who graduate and enter a variety of milieus where counter-movement frames prevail.

Resource Maintenance

SMOs often face a dilemma when it comes to raising funds. If their membership is impoverished and they depend on their membership for funds, they will wind up spending an inordinate amount of time and energy on fundraising for very little return. If, on the other hand, they look to external elites, they will face funding uncertainties or strings attached. External support usually tames movements steering them towards the more conservative goals of elite funders. Nevertheless, most social movements eventually turn to elites—foundations, corporations, and rich philanthropists—for assistance in order to sustain themselves long enough to obtain substantial victories. Funding organizations rarely consider the problem of elites. One that does is the British Crossroads Fund where a board of both donors and activists makes decisions about grants.

Membership Maintenance

Besides attracting resources and new recruits, a movement must strive to maintain the energies and loyalties of existing members. Like an effective small group, an effective SMO will focus on frame alignment, trying its best to ensure a fit between members values and movement goals. It will also work for concrete action and visible victories, since people are drawn to a movement when they see it as a forum for action, and soon drop out if nothing happens.

SMOs goals and tactics

SMOs face an uphill battle simply surviving— let alone achieving substantive, political, social or economic change. They face a myriad of challenges with two potentially powerful weapons: engaging goals and effective tactics. But many organizations are weak on tactical thinking, and few pay sufficient attention to social movement research. Some organizations fail because they engage in violent or abusive action, which attracts media attention, but alienates supporters. This is what happened to Black Power groups in the 1960's. Others organizations, like the Sea Shepard Society,

succeed because they have found ways to legitimize violence in pursuit of their goals. On the question of goals, research shows the wisdom of maintaining a narrow focus, and a single goal. SMOs pursuing a single goal are far more successful than those pursuing many goals.

InFact is a remarkable example of how to succeed with a narrow focus. InFact started off with a single goal: End Nestle's campaign to market its infant formula to third world mothers in place of cheaper and healthier mother's milk. Once they succeeded they went after General Electric eventually forcing the huge conglomerate to divest itself of its profitable nuclear weapons division.

Further social movement research

This brief overview should not be seen as a guide to creating a successful social movement, but a baseline upon which to construct intelligent responses to the ever-changing landscape of movement politics.

Further research may answer such key questions such as:

- Can the ignition of a movement be carried out in organized fashion, or is it dependent on Fortuna?
- What are the best practices for small groups that have no resources?
- Under what conditions can successful framing overcome a lack of structural capacity?
- Should activists spend more time developing frames that fuse personal and collective identities?

The Citizen's Handbook: A Guide to Building Community in Vancouver
<http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook> August 2001