Recruiting High-risk Activists: Exploring the Roles of Structural and Cultural Factors

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Abstract
What motivates activists to leave the security of their country and the comforts of home to risk their lives on someone else’s behalf? This paper summarizes the current literature on how individuals get involved in transnational social movements, including those that require them to put their lives on the line. I begin by outlining structural explanations for participation and specifically discuss how prior contacts and biographical availability draw new recruits into activism. Then, I discuss cultural explanations, which emphasize meaning-making and collective identities in the recruitment process. Finally, I outline scholarly attempts to bridge structural and cultural explanations as well as offer recommendations for future research.

Introduction

Tear gas was stinging Rick’s eyes as he stood with a gun pressed up against his chest. He had placed himself between an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian school teacher. The soldiers were tear-gassing the school and not letting the children out. Children and teachers were screaming, dust and gas filled the air, and his life was in danger. Rick struggled to remain calm. He was angry at the soldier and pleaded with him to let the children leave. His mind raced, trying to think of something, anything creative to fix the situation. His cell phone rang. Amidst the clamor, he put the phone to his ear. “Hello, this is Rick,” he yelled. The voice on the other end was that of his friend, George. George had taught Rick in the ways of non-violence. This man exemplified love and peace more so than anyone Rick had ever known. Suddenly, everything George had taught him came rushing back. He looked at the soldier again, and this time saw, not an enemy, but a human being. Rick held out the phone to the soldier. “It’s your Mom,” he said, “She wants to know what you are doing right now.” The soldier retorted, “That is not my Mom!” Rick insisted, and again the soldier denied it. He was agitated. Rick said, “Ok, well, if it were your Mom, what would you tell her you were doing right now?” The soldier lowered his gun and told the troops to let the children go home.

Rick is a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). Listening to him tell stories about his experience working in conflict zones around the world elicited the question: what motivates activists to leave the security of their country and the comforts of home to risk their own lives to struggle on someone else’s behalf? Transnational activism involves activists traveling to another geographic location (typically in the global South) to work with local populations in their collective struggles. These activists typically are tied to networks or organizations in their country of origin but have an identity that is not geographically bound (Tarrow 2005). This paper summarizes the current literature on how individuals get involved in transnational social movements, including those that require them to put their lives on the line. I begin by outlining structural explanations for participation and specifically discuss how prior contacts and biographical availability draw new recruits into activism. Then, I discuss...
cultural explanations, which emphasize the role of meaning-making and collective identities in the recruitment process. Finally, I outline scholarly attempts to bridge structural and cultural explanations as well as offer recommendations for future research.

**Structural explanations of recruitment**

Consistent with the broader literature on social movements, questions regarding movement recruitment have held a prominent place in the study of high-risk activism. Proponents of structural or network perspectives broke from the “personological” (Zukier 1982) theorists who relied exclusively on one’s attitudinal affinity with the goals of the movement to explain participation. Conversely, structural/network theorists posited that even if one does not have an ideological leaning, their contacts with individuals or organizations can push them into or pull them out of participation in a movement. Thus, structural/network theorists explain movement recruitment by examining one’s prior contacts, biographical availability, and repression.

Who did Rick know within CPT before he joined? Was he free from personal constraints associated with work or family? Personal ties, or relationships with one or more movement adherent(s), can induce an individual to join. For example, several CPT activists told me that they joined the movement because their spouses had been active participants for years. Organizational ties are instrumental in movement recruitment either when the organization actually becomes a movement, as was the case when several abolitionists groups joined together and became the women’s rights movement, or when there are organizations from which entire blocs of participants are recruited into an existing movement (Oberschall 1973; McAdam 1986). Personal and organizational ties can be at play simultaneously.

Personal ties can be especially effective when they are embedded in organizational networks. A network of dense personal ties insulates activists empowering them to act despite the risks. For example, personal ties between individuals in the movement to overthrow Pinochet in Chile strengthened the movement on the micro level by providing individual participants with a sense of support and trust. The fact that these personal relationships “were embedded within the broader institutional networks” of the Church and transnational NGOs strengthened the movement as well. These institutions provided the material resources, space, and communication networks necessary to reach a large pool of potential recruits. This legitimacy and support strengthened the movement on the macro level (Loveman 1998: 498).

While it is clear that prior ties play an important role in recruiting participants, they may not be essential. Individuals without prior ties participate in transnational movements as well. McAdam and Paulsen (1993) attribute participation without ties to an individual’s biographical availability or “the absence of personal constraints that might increase the costs and risks of movement participation, such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities” (70). The Freedom Summer Project, which was a voter registration campaign organized by civil rights organizations in the South, was launched in Mississippi in 1964 to register as many African Americans as possible. Participants were young, mostly White, college-aged students from the North. Of those applicants who were accepted, both those who participated and those who withdrew were equally “available.”

While the lack of family and employment responsibilities seemed to make Freedom Summer applicants more available, other studies have led to contradictory findings. The Sanctuary movement, which opposes the US government’s classification of immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala as economic refugees who should be deported, offers another interesting example. Activists involved in the Sanctuary movement provide safe dwellings for individuals who cross the border to the United States. Research on the Sanctuary movement found that marital status did not prevent activists from engaging in high-risk actions, but rather...
there was a positive relationship between parental status and movement participation. In other words, being married and having kids did not prevent people from getting involved in the movement. Additionally, because the Catholic Church provided employment opportunities to activists, individuals could work full time and be active in the Sanctuary movement (Wiltfang and McAdam 1991).

Similarly, individuals engaged in the Nicaragua Exchange were able to overcome biographic unavailability. In the 1980s, more than 1500 North Americans went to Nicaragua in the midst of a civil war after learning that the US government was funding a militia, known as the Contras, to overthrow the existing government. Some North Americans, who became aware of this dynamic and the role their government was playing in the civil war, went to Nicaragua to bear witness to what was happening and to advocate for an end to US military aid. For example, an organization called the Nicaragua Exchange sent North Americans to harvest coffee and learn more about the region. Participants tended to have established careers but were able to “negotiate and overcome the barriers of non-availability” (Nepstad and Smith 1999). These individuals, for instance, were more skilled in raising funds, negotiating time off, and finding competent care takers for their children – all of which allowed them to participate in transnational activism.

In sum, there is not a consistent link between participation and biographical availability. One way to explore whether a consistent relationship between availability and participation exists is to measure how availability impacts the likelihood that one will sympathize with a movement, rather than their willingness to participate in it. Research in this vein shows that the effects are significant. Controlling for age, marital status, employment status, and the number/age of children, those who were more biographically available also were more likely to sympathize with a movement (Beyerlein and Hipp 2004).

Finally, repression by state authorities can increase participation in activism. Some scholars argue that an increase in state repression shrinks the opportunities available for activists to affect politics and, consequently, dampen mobilization (Schock 2005). However, the relationship between repression and mobilization is more complicated. While some scholars find that repression decreases dissent, others have discovered that dissent is highest when there is a moderate (not too high and not too low) level of repression. Scholars refer to this seemingly paradoxical relationship as “political jiu-jitsu.” The state loses the respect and authority of the citizenry after using violent oppression against non-violent resisters. In such cases, repression can serve as a catalyst for mobilization (Goldstone and Tilly 2001). Such a situation occurred in Poland and India, as well as numerous other cases, when violent repression increased civilian support of the resisters (Ackerman and DuVall 2000). This phenomenon has more recently been called “backfire” (Hess and Martin 2006). Like jiu-jitsu, backfire has the potential to increase mobilizing power when the audience perceives the repression as “unjust.” Individuals, who were once audience members, are mobilized to action by their outrage and subsequent desire to transform the situation. The way that individual activists respond to repression may be mediated by the activists’ “individual biographies” (i.e., if they are married and/or have children) and their “network memberships” (i.e., if their family is involved in the movement) (Viterna 2006). Responses to repression are also dependent on the organization’s ability to assign meaning to the repression in a way that calls sympathizers to action. This skill is one of the cultural explanations of recruitment discussed in the succeeding text.

Cultural explanations for recruitment

In an effort to gain a fuller understanding of how activists come to engage in activism, scholars explore the impact of cultural components of recruitment. Williams and Alexander (1994: 2)
define social movement culture as “the collection of ideas, symbols, meanings, and values that forms a movement’s self-identification.” Scholars who emphasize culture in movements have examined the role of identity, space, emotions, beliefs, meaning and many other factors. In this paper, I examine two aspects (meaning and collective identity) that are uniquely important to high-risk transnational activism.

Social movements assign meaning to political situations in a way that requires those who sympathize with the movement’s goals to act. Activists who operate in situations of intense conflict or high risk can transform repression into a tactical opportunity to recruit new members. The US Plowshares movement, a group that engages in high-risk direct action to protest nuclear proliferation, used prison and trials as opportunities for recruitment by using the media attention as a platform to explain the reason for the actions and the issues at stake for their movement (Nepstad 2004, 2008). Likewise, Bobby Sands, who led the hunger strikes in Ireland in 1981, felt that prison was the greatest opportunity to “mold young politically aware Republican activists” because the prison was the place where people discussed political issues (O’Hearn 2006: 313).

While culture exists across all movements, religion seems to be an especially potent cultural means of transforming potentially devastating events into recruitment opportunities. Transnational social movements with a theological framework have successfully made suffering, even martyrdom, fruitful for their movement (Solle 1975). Peterson (1997) studied the Central American Solidarity movement, a movement that fostered solidarity between North Americans and those enduring civil conflict in Central America. This movement was driven in large part by the Catholic Church. When six Jesuit priests were killed in November 1989 in El Salvador, the FMLN’s Radio Venceremos, a religious radio station, compared their death to a tough flower, the izote, “that reproduces itself very quickly after being cut” because their deaths seemed to spur growth for the movement (Peterson 1997:144). The narratives of the martyrs, depicting them as holy, self-sacrificing individuals, inspired, rather than deterred others to join the movement.

An organization’s meaning making is more readily accepted when it is effectively tied to the identity of the movement participants. The Central America Solidarity Movement was able to use the language of martyrdom and resurrection because its participants shared a common Catholic identity for which the connotation of such language had powerful meaning. The development of a collective identity is crucial in the mobilization of any social movement (Morris 1984; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Calhoun 1995; Bernstein 2008). When examining recruitment to transnational activism, scholars highlight the role of collective identity. In these movements, activists are not drawn in by the lure of material gains for themselves, so perhaps it is the desire to gain an identity that motivates participation (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Our understanding of the concept of a collective identity is further challenged by transnational activism by the surge in international meetings of social movements (like the World Social Forums – WSF). These meetings bring together activists that have interests including peace, human rights, democracy, women’s rights, antiracism, and fair trade (della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco 1997). Rather than create a singular identity that encompasses all of these groups and interests, each movement seems to have an identity that tolerates differences (della Porta 2005). The collectivity that these groups share comes from a shared world vision. They may vary in terms of their race, gender, religion, class, and country of origin, but each movement represented at the WSF professes a “globalization from below,” meaning they desire a world in which those who have typically been marginalized and oppressed from the traditional top-down world economy have power to make decisions in a way that improves their standard of living (Falk 1997).
Some argue that identity serves to recruit new members because activists feel a sense of loyalty to those they know in the movement. This would reduce the notion of collective identity to a manifestation of prior ties. Teske (1997) argues that it is not about loyalty to another but about the longing to create a desirable self. Lichterman (1996) makes a similar argument explaining that activists often join a movement because they are seeking personal fulfillment. Scholars express skepticism over whether a group of activists motivated by personal fulfillment can sustain a collective identity (Wuthnow 1991; Taylor 1991, 1989; Bellah et al. 1985; MacIntyre 1981; Rieff 1966). They argue that personalism is characterized by an increased tendency toward individualism and is inherently in tension with “institutional or communal standards” (Lichterman 1996: 6). However, the quest for belonging can be a primary motivator for getting involved in a movement. To some extent, social movement organizations provide a ready-made identity, which individuals can assume with joining the group. One woman told me that she joined Christian Peacemaker Teams because she wanted to be friends with the people who were part of the organization. It was her desire to be part of a group of people that she thought were “cool” that first motivated her to work for peace in Israel/Palestine.4 Another way that identity influences recruitment is when an identity is developed through the process of participation. A deeper look into this manifestation of identity brings us to the synthetic approach.

Steps towards a synthetic model of recruitment

When scholars develop new theoretical approaches, there is a tendency to try to distinguish the new approach from the old and develop parsimonious explanations for behavior. Once we have two or more seemingly dichotomous theories, subsequent scholars work to synthesize them. Such is the case with structural and cultural explanations of recruitment to high-risk activism. Structural theorists have emphasized the importance of biographic availability, prior contact, broad organizational support, and repression as factors that contribute to mobilization. Cultural theorists have highlighted the impact of meaning and collective identity.

Several scholars have contributed to the development of a synthetic model of recruitment. McAdam (1986) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) offer an explanation for how network ties (structural) and the development of a new activist identity (cultural) work in a cyclical nature one reinforcing the other. Some activists are drawn into a movement, not through one organizational or personal contact, but through multiple contacts that occur as part of a cyclical process. For example, someone may be initially drawn into CPT through their participation in a Mennonite church (organizational tie), go on a 10-day delegation where they gain a more profound awareness of the issues at stake by listening to speakers and other activists resulting in “deepening ideological socialization” (McAdam 1986: 69). Upon participating in a movement for the first time, the activist has an opportunity to “[play] at being an activist” (McAdam 1986: 69–70). If the participant finds the new identity appealing, they may decide that that identity is an important part of who they want to be. Upon deciding this, they work to define themselves in a way that is consistent with this new role as an activist. Thus begins the construction of an activist identity and subsequent searches for more opportunities to live out this identity. As this process occurs over time, an individual may increase his/her commitment to the cause and engage in higher-risk activism (McAdam 1986).

A similar path is evident in Munson’s (2008) paper. He found that the majority of participants in the pro-life movement participated in actions prior to solidifying a firm pro-life stance. Although there is some disagreement in the literature, we know that beliefs play some role in the mobilization process. Munson (2008: 15) wanted to discover “how and (especially) when” in the mobilization process they matter most (emphasis added). He found that the
mobilization process happens in a series of steps: “contact with the movement at a life turning point, initial activism, the development of pro-life beliefs, and finally, full movement participation” (15). While both models highlight participation as a means to solidify commitment, McAdam’s model necessitates some degree of cognitive alignment prior to initial participation while Munson does not. Donatella della Porta (1995) studied underground terrorist movements in Italy and Germany. She also found evidence of networks and a “precipitating” event in one’s initial participation in the high-risk movement (168).

Individuals often have multiple ties—meaning that while they are “tied” to a movement, they are simultaneously engaged in potentially conflicting relationships with other individuals and groups (McAdam and Paulsen 1993). Likewise, the self is composed of multiple and sometimes competing identities. One’s relationships with others help to create and reinforce identities, which are organized and ranked according to their centrality to an individual’s self-concept. Thus, in order for an individual to be recruited, there must be a tie to the organization and the absence of a competing tie. If a movement draws on an identity that is salient, meaning it is reinforced by preexisting relationships, the individual is likely to join (McAdam and Paulsen 1993). For example, someone like Rick needs to be connected to CPT through a tie that reinforces his own identity, but also lack a tie of equal or stronger salience that might discourage participation. Ties also differ in strength (Stryker, 2000). Organizational ties seem to be relatively weak and are usually responsible for transmitting information, while personal ties are more likely to be strong and exert social influence. Rick’s relationship with George, the man who taught him in the ways of non-violence, is an example of a strong personal tie that draws on Rick’s salient identity as a non-violent activist.

Two more recent studies, Viterna (2006) and Eddy (2011), provide synthetic models that challenge scholars to move beyond parsimonious explanations of recruitment to develop a more complex understanding of activists. Viterna (2006), for example, argues that while structural and cultural factors affect whether Salvadoran women join the guerrilla movement, the influence of each varied according to individual biography, her networks, and the specific political context. Eddy (2011) interviewed participants in three transnational accompaniment and/or civil resistance organizations and identified four pathways to participation in high-risk human rights work. Every pathway involved “academic influences,” which aided the activist in developing an identity that seemed to transcend geographic borders (223). Thus, he sees the influence of one’s individual biography on the creation of an identity consistent with movement goals (223). Both of these studies conclude that while factors explained by structural theories are important, we must consider the impact of factors that impact participants at the individual level.

Conclusions

Recruitment to high-risk transnational activism occurs through both structural and cultural paths. Structural theorists have developed explanations for recruitment that emphasize the role of prior ties and biographic availability. Cultural theorists have contributed to our understanding of recruitment by explaining how movements assign meaning and construct identities in a way that draws new participants into the movement. Recently, scholars have developed a synthetic approach to recruitment that assesses the relationship between ties (structural) and the development of identity (cultural). Rick was moved to participate in CPT in part due to both his organizational ties (membership in the Church of the Brethren) and personal ties (relationship with George). He was biographically available due to having grown children and a supportive spouse. However, Rick made a decision to alter his career path to make him more available to participate in peace activism, which clearly indicates that he possessed a level of agency not
accounted for in the above models. In moving the existing body of literature forward, it is my hope that scholars will examine the role of agency as a possible explanation for why those with similar structural and cultural factors at play make very different choices when it comes to participation in transnational high-risk activism.

Short Biography

Nancy Matteuzzi Bruni’s research interests lie at the intersection of sociology, political science, and religion. Bruni currently studies Social Movements in the Sociology Department of the University of Pittsburgh. Her current dissertation research examines the case of Christian Peacemaker Teams as an organization that is exploring how activists who work to combat global oppression – issues like poverty, violence, and political repression – risk overlooking the ways in which they contribute to inequalities in their own lives and in their work. Bruni is a teaching fellow and has taught courses in Social Movements, Peace Movements, Introduction to Sociology, Medical Sociology and Sociology of Health and Illness.

Notes

1 I heard Rick Polhamus tell this story for the first time in the Winter of 2009. He gave me permission to use it.
2 Risk refers to expected dangers, whether they are legal, social, physical, or financial of participating in a given type of activism (McAdam 1986). Risk occurs as a result of committing the action and is only partly in the activist’s control. It also depends on the reaction of others.
3 Phil Hart, personal phone interview, March 7, 2012.
4 Mary Yoder, personal interview, near Columbus, Ohio. July 23, 2012.

References

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Further Reading


