Biographical consequences of activism

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Abstract

Social and political movements have a wide range of effects. The biographical consequences of social movements are one of them. They can be defined as effects on the life-course of individuals who have participated in movement activities, effects that are at least in part due to involvement in those activities (see McAdam 1989; Goldstone & McAdam 2001; Giugni 2004 for reviews). Other types of effects include political and cultural outcomes. Political consequences are those effects of movement activities that alter in some way the movements' political environment. Policy outcomes, a special category of political outcomes consisting of changes in legislation or other policy measures induced by social movements, are among the most often studied. Cultural outcomes are those effects of movement activities that alter in some way the movements' cultural environment. They are perhaps the most difficult to study empirically as they are not easily identified, they depend on a wide range of other actors and events, and often they make themselves felt only in the long run. In addition, one can also imagine the existence of that which [...]
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MARCO GIUGNI

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

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The study of the biographical consequences of activism crosses two major fields of investigation: (1) studies of life-course and the life-cycle and (2) work on processes of political socialization and participation. Focusing more specifically on scholarly work on the demographic and personal dimensions of contentious politics, Goldstone and McAdam (2001) have mapped the literature on demography, life-course, and contention, allowing us to better define our subject matter. They distinguish between four bodies of literature in this field depending on whether they thematically focus on movement emergence/development or decline/outcomes and whether they analytically focus on the macro or micro levels of analysis (see Table 1): (1) studies looking at the origin of contention from a macrosociological point of view; (2) studies looking at the biographical availability or other life-course factors that facilitate or prevent movement activism following a microsociological perspective; (3) studies analyzing contention as a force for aggregate change in life-course patterns at the macro level of analysis; and (4) studies focusing on the biographical consequences of individual activism at the micro level of analysis. Concerning our subject matter, this typology tells us that we should pay attention to two main types of consequences of activism: (1) the biographical consequences of individual activism and (2) the aggregate-level change in life-course patterns (see further McAdam 1999). While the former concerns the micro-level effects of sustained participation in social movements, the latter deals with the broader, macro-level consequences of activism.

THE STATE OF RESEARCH

Works on the biographical consequences of individual activism are much less numerous than the now quite substantial body of studies of the political and, more specifically, policy outcomes of social movements. In addition, a great deal of these studies have dealt with former activists of movements of the New Left in the United States, including participants in the civil rights movement (see Table 2). Works on Europe and on other movements are relatively scarce.

In general, these follow-up studies of New Left activists quite consistently point to a strong and durable impact on the political
and personal lives of activists. Specifically, on the one hand, they show that former activists had continued to espouse leftist political attitudes (e.g., Demerath, Marwell, & Aiken 1971; Fendrich & Tarleau 1973; Whalen & Flacks 1980; Marwell, Aiken, & Demerath 1987; McAdam 1989), had continued to define themselves as “liberal” or “radical” in political orientation (e.g., Fendrich & Tarleau 1973), and had remained active in contemporary movements or other forms of political activity (e.g., Fendrich & Krauss 1978; Jennings & Niemi 1981; Fendrich & Lovoy 1988; McAdam 1989). On the other hand, they show that former activists had been concentrated in teaching or other “helping” professions (e.g., Fendrich 1974; McAdam 1989), had lower incomes than their age peers, were more likely than their age peers to have divorced, married later, or remained single (e.g., McAdam 1988, 1989), and were more likely than their age peers to have experienced an episodic or nontraditional work history (e.g., McAdam 1988, 1989).

The biographical consequences of involvement in movements other than those of the New Left wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s are less numerous. Furthermore, they do not form such a consistent and easily recognizable body of literature. Yet they have not been completely ignored. For example, just to mention a few, Klatch (1999) has studied the longstanding biographical consequences of both leftist and rightist movement participants; Taylor and Raeburn (1995) have looked at the career consequences of high-risk activism by lesbian, gay, and bisexual sociologists; Whittier (1995) has shown in her study of the radical women’s movement in Columbus, Ohio, that social movements may alter their social context, leading successive generations of participants to develop new perspectives; and Nagel (1995), in her study of the American Indian movement, has argued that Indian activism in the 1960s and 1970s led to an increased tendency of Indians to self-identify as such.

Still, most if not all of these studies are zoomed in on strongly committed movement participants (i.e., activists) or at least those who strongly identify with a movement and its cause or objectives. Some scholars, however, have inquired into the individual-level effects of involvement in social movements by not-so-committed participants. For example, Sherkat and Blocker (1997) have used panel survey data to show that ordinary involvement in antiwar and student protests of the late 1960s had both a short-term and a long-term impact on the lives of participants. Specifically, demonstrators held more liberal political orientations and were more aligned with liberal parties and actions, they selected occupations in the “new class,” were more educated, held less traditional religious orientations and were less attached to religious organizations, married later, and were less likely to have children than nonparticipants. In a similar fashion, McAdam and collaborators (Wilhelm 1998; McAdam 1999; Van Dyke, McAdam, & Wilhelm 2000) have inquired into the biographical consequences of participation in social movements by means of a randomized national survey of US residents born between 1943 and 1964. What they found is largely consistent with the

Table 1  Silence and voice in the study of demography, life-course, and contention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Emergence/development</th>
<th>Decline/outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Macro</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic pressures</td>
<td>Land pressure and</td>
<td>Contention as a force for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>peasant rebellion</td>
<td>aggregate change in life-course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Migration and the rise of ethnic competition</td>
<td>patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Micro</strong></td>
<td>“Biographical availability” or other life-course factors mediating entrance into activism</td>
<td>Biographical consequences of individual activism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Goldstone and McAdam (2001)
Table 2  Major follow-up studies of movement activists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigator(s)</th>
<th>Year of participation</th>
<th>Year of sample</th>
<th>Activists in Control before and after data?</th>
<th>Control group?</th>
<th>Before and after data?</th>
<th>Selected resulting publications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Demerath et al. 1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marwell, Aiken, and Demerath</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>McAdam, 1987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from McAdam (1989: 747)

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This table was originally adapted from DeMartini (1983: 198).

Fendrich’s 1977 article is based on comparative data on 28 white and 72 black activists.

Fendrich’s 1993 book summarizes the overall thrust of his work on this topic.

results of the follow-up studies of New Left activism mentioned earlier. Specifically, they found movement participants to be more likely to have been divorced, to have been married later, to have cohabited outside of marriage, and to have experienced an extended period of unemployment since completing their education, and conversely, less likely to have had children and to have ever married (see further Goldstone & McAdam 2001). Thus, they observed a strong biographical impact of movement participation. More broadly, they concluded that there is a close relationship between people’s political experiences and orientations during the 1960s and 1970s and their subsequent life-course choices.

These studies have shifted the focus of the analysis from a small group of strongly committed activists to the biographical consequences of more “routine,” low-risk forms of participation, making it possible to generalize the findings beyond the quite peculiar groups of activists included in the follow-up studies of New Left activists and also showing that people who have been involved in social movements in less committed forms carry the consequences of that involvement throughout their lives. In addition, they allow us to examine the broader implications of participation in social movements for the population at large and the aggregate patterns of life-course events, therefore providing more insights into the processes of political, cultural, and social change.

This is, for example, the thrust of the research by McAdam and collaborators (Wilhelm 1998; McAdam 1999; Van Dyke, McAdam, & Wilhelm 2000). They have looked at the aggregate-level change in life-course patterns due to involvement in social movements. Specifically, this research argues that participation in the movements of the 1960s is partly responsible for the broader cultural shift associated with people born during the period of the so-called “baby boom” after the end of World War II. McAdam (1999; see further Goldstone & McAdam 2001) suggests a three-stage process to explain the link between the movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the changes in life-course patterns associated with the baby boom cohorts. In the first stage, activists in the political and countercultural movements of the period rejected normal life-course trajectories in favor of newer alternatives (e.g., cohabitation, childlessness, and an episodic work track). In the second stage, these alternatives to traditional patterns became embedded in a number of geographic and subcultural locations (most notably college campuses and self-consciously countercultural neighborhoods) that were the principal centers of the “1960s experience” and of New Left activism, thus leading upper-middle-class suburbs to embody the new alternatives through socialization processes. Finally, in the third stage, these alternative life-course patterns spread to increasingly heterogeneous strata of young Americans through processes of diffusion and adaptation, and were largely stripped of their original political or countercultural content to be experienced simply as new life-course norms. Thus, in this perspective, the involvement of the few in social movements has much broader consequences on society at large.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

From a methodological point of view, students of social movements and political activism have employed a variety of approaches to account for the biographical consequences of activism. At the most general level, however, it is worth recalling the suggestion made some years ago by Charles Tilly to deal with the explanatory problems inherent in the study of all kinds of movement effects. According to him, only one repose will work:

1. to formulate clear theories of the causal process by which social movements produce their effects; 2. to limit the investigation to the effects made plausible by those theories; 3. to work upstream by identifying instances of the effects, then seeing whether the hypothesized causal chain was actually operating; 4. to work downstream by identifying instances of the causal chain in operation, then seeing whether and how
its hypothesized effects occurred; (5) to work mid-stream by examining whether the internal links of the causal chain operated as the theory requires; and (6) to rule out, to the extent possible, competing explanations of the effects. (Tilly 1999: 170)

The latter aspect has often been the Achilles’ tendon of research on the biographical consequences of activism. More specifically, as already pointed out by McAdam (1989, 1999) in reviewing work in this field (see further Giugni 2004), in particular the early follow-up studies of New Left activists have suffered from one or more of a number of methodological problems. Some of them pertain to timing and the cause–effect nexus. Firstly and most importantly, most of the studies reviewed above lack so-called “before/after” data on activists (but see the studies by Demerath, Marwell, & Aiken 1971; Jennings & Niemi 1981; Marwell, Aiken, & Demerath 1987; McAdam 1988). The latter refer to information retrieved before people get involved in social movement activities as well as after such an involvement. In the absence of a research design that allows for obtaining data both before and after involvement, one needs to rely on retrospective data and make inferences based on individual recollections, which is obviously problematic from a methodological point of view. Secondly, most of the studies focus on the 1960s cycle of contention, that is, a particular period characterized by strong social movement mobilization. Such a specific focus makes it difficult to disentangle individual effects of participation in social movements from the characteristics of the period examined and prevents empirical generalizations. Thirdly, studies on New Left activists have often suffered from too short a time span separating activism from its consequences (but see the studies by Marwell, Aiken, & Demerath 1987; Fendrich & Lovoy 1988; McAdam 1999). If such a time span is not long enough, one cannot determine whether activism has had a durable influence on the activists’ life-course. Fourthly, a related weakness consists in having measured prior activism at a single point in time instead of repeated measures. The absence of such repeated observations weakens the explanation as one does not know whether activism had lasted for a fairly long period or was short-lived and the subjects were defined as activists only at the time the research was conducted. A panel design would be an important, although costly, improvement in this regard.

Further methodological shortcomings of work on New Left activists, in part related to the ones just mentioned, concern sampling and the generalization of empirical findings. Firstly and most importantly, most of these studies suffer from a lack of representativeness of the sample as subjects were often drawn from non-representative samples of the population. Not only do they deal only with people belonging to the New Left, but most works have focused on activists who are most strongly involved. In both cases, of course, generalizations are, to say the least, difficult, if not impossible. The use of survey data avoids this problem. Secondly, researchers often did not include a control group made up of people who did not participate in movement activities (but see the studies by Fendrich 1974, 1977; Jennings & Niemi 1981; Fendrich & Lovoy 1988; and McAdam 1988, 1989). This is an important shortcoming. A control group of nonactivists provide the research with a baseline against which one can assess the impact of activism. Without such a baseline, any conclusion about the biographical consequences of activism would be difficult to make and potentially spurious. Thirdly, most works have studied only a small number of subjects (but see the study by McAdam 1999). While not a problem in itself, this prevents the researcher from being able to generalize the findings beyond the subjects examined. Again, survey data can be of much help here. Fourthly, often subjects were drawn from narrow geographical areas, sometimes from a single city. Generalizations become obviously difficult in this case. Selecting the subjects from wider areas or from more than one area would certainly improve the generalizability of results.
SEE ALSO: Generational and cohort analysis; High and low risk/cost activism; Life history research and social movements; Outcomes, cultural; Outcomes, political; Participation in social movements; Political generation; Political socialization and social movements; Spillover, social movement.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


