Personal and biographical consequences of social movements are 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. At stake is not the impact of movements as a whole, but the effect of individual involvement in movement activities on the life course of participants, especially—not exclusively—those who are strongly involved, as well as on aggregate-level life-course patterns. Thus defined, personal and biographical consequences of social movements exclude a number of related but distinct phenomena. First, since we speak of personal and biographical consequences, it excludes all kinds of movement effects that do not bear upon the individual life of participants in movement activities. Social movements have consequences on different areas of human affairs (political, cultural, social) and are located at different levels of analysis (micro, meso, macro). Researchers have tended to focus quite narrowly on the political impact of movements, both for theoretical and methodological reasons. Even more narrowly, policy and legislative effects form the bulk of existing work (see Giugni 1998 for a review; see further chapter 20 in this volume and Burstein 1999). Moreover, and related to this analytic focus, scholars have primarily studied the intended consequences of protest activities. Yet, as Tilly (1999: 270) among others has underscored, we must consider seriously “the possibility that the major effects of social movements will have little or nothing to do with the public claims their leaders make.” In spite of recent efforts in this direction (Deng 1997), the unintended consequences of movement actions remain an understudied aspect of this field. Individual or life-course effects of social movement activities certainly belong to this category.
Second, since we speak of personal and biographical consequences, the above definition excludes other aspects of social movements related to the individual and the life course. A fair amount of work on social movements and contentious politics since the 1970s has dealt with the microsociological question of individual participation in social movements, in particular by stressing the social-structural factors that account for activism, that is, social networks (e.g., Snow et al. 1980; Rosenthal et al. 1985; McAdam 1986, 1988; Fernandez and McAdam 1988; McAdam et al. 1988; Gould 1993, 1995; Kriesi 1993; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; McCarthy 1996; Kim and Bearman 1997). A lower but nevertheless significant number of studies have stressed the attitudinal or psychological determinants of activism (e.g., Hardin 1982; Opp 1989; Chong 1991; Macy 1991; Sandler 1992) as well as, closer to our present focus, the role of “biographical availability” (e.g., McAdam 1986; Willfong and McAdam 1991; Passy and Giugni 2000). Finally, some scholars have attempted to combine both perspectives within a more integrated approach (e.g., Klandermans 1984, 1997; Marwell and Oliver 1993; Passy 1998; Passy and Giugni 2001). In the face of so many works focusing on the factors that account for individual participation in and recruitment to social movements (see further the contributions to Part IV of this volume), the literature on the consequences of activism and participation on the personal lives of participants is little more than a marginal part of this field of study.

The analysis of the personal and biographical consequences of social movements lies at the crossroad of two major fields in the social sciences: (1) studies of life course and the life cycle (see Hareven 1994 for a review), and (2) work on processes of political socialization and participation (see Milbrath 1981 and Johnston Conover 1991 for reviews). A recent essay by Goldstone and McAdam (2001) helps us to locate our subject matter within the more specific context of scholarly work on the demographic and personal dimensions of contentious politics. They provide a map of the literature on demography, life course, and contention in an attempt to redress what they see as two major lacunae in this literature: (1) the lack of a sustained demographic/life-course perspective on contention in favor of a piecemeal approach to the topic, and (2) a general asymmetry whereby “most work by social movement scholars is pitched at the micronevel and concerned with life-course outcomes, while students of revolutions reverse the two emphases, focusing on the macrodeterminants of contention” (Goldstone and McAdam 2001: 196-7).

Table 21.1 shows the conceptual map laid out by Goldstone and McAdam. It distinguishes between four discrete literatures in the study of demography, life course, and contention. These literatures differ according to their thematic focus (movement emergence/development or decline/outcomes) and according to their analytic focus (macro- or micronevels of analysis). A first set of studies has looked at the origin of contention from a macrosociological point of view, for example by inquiring about the impact of demographic pressures for the emergence of contention, after the relationship between land pressures and peasant rebellion, or about the role of migration processes to account for the rise of ethnic competition. A second set of studies, following a microsociological perspective, has looked at the biographical availability or other life-course factors that facilitate or prevent movement activism. A third kind of work, concerned with the demographic and life-course dimensions of social movements, less common than the other three, has analyzed contention as a force for aggregate change in life-course patterns. As I
Table 21.1  Silence and voice in the study of demography, life course, and contention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro</th>
<th>Emergence/development</th>
<th>Decline/outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demographic pressures and the emergence of contention</td>
<td>Contention as a force for aggregate change in life-course patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Land pressure and peasant rebellion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Migration and the rise of ethnic competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro</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)
(Copyright: Cambridge University Press, 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211)

will argue in more detail below, this macrolevel analysis represents a particularly promising avenue for grasping the long-term impact of social movements on contemporary society. Finally, a fourth specific literature geared at the microlevel of analysis has focused on the biographical consequences of individual activism. The important point for our present purpose is that we should distinguish clearly between two different types of demographic impact (third column of the table): the biographical consequences of individual activism and the aggregate-level change in life-course patterns (see further McAdam 1999). While the former concerns the microlevel effects of sustained participation in social movements, the latter deals with the broader, macrolevel consequences of social movements. Needless to say, the broader perspective potentially has more to say about social change.

My review deals exclusively with the third column of table 21.1. I consider studies both of the biographical consequences of activism and work on the aggregate-level change in life-course patterns that has a wide impact on society. However, since the former represents the bulk of work in this subfield of the social movement’s literature, I pay special attention to it. The main part of the chapter is formed by the next four sections. In the next section, I review a number of studies that have focused on activists involved in protest activities – often high-risk activities – within the New Left. I then report on work that has dealt with less risky activities and less committed participants. The still sporadic work on aggregate-level change in life-course patterns is discussed in the following section. Finally, I mention certain methodological problems shared by most of the existing studies of the personal and biographical consequences of activism.

**FOLLOW-up STUDIES OF NEW LEFT ACTIVISTS**

The cycle of contention of the 1960s inspired a number of systematic follow-up studies of people who were involved in protest activities during that period. In line with the main ideological orientation of that period, all these studies have examined
former activists in movements of the New Left. Many of them, furthermore, have looked at participants in the US civil rights movement, both because this is one of the major social movements of that period and because some of the researchers were themselves involved in this movement. If work on the policy consequences of social movements yields ambivalent findings (see Giugni 1998), these follow-up studies of New Left activists provide a more consistent picture of the biographical impact of participation on movement activities: in general, they all point to a strong and durable impact on the personal lives of activists. Table 21.2, which adapts a table presented in McAdam’s (1989) article on the biographical consequences of activism, offers a schematic overview of the follow-up studies of movement activists. With the help of this table, I first review the main existing works (including the principal resulting publications) in chronological order and then summarize their main findings.

James Fendrich is among those who have inquired most thoroughly into the personal consequences of movement participation. He studied a sample of 100 activists involved in the civil rights movement in Tallahassee, Florida, in the early 1960s. The data were gathered in 1971, and included 72 black and 28 white activists. Although some of the published materials focus on the subsample of white activists (Fendrich and Tarleau 1973; Fendrich 1974), this is a methodological advantage of Fendrich’s study, as thus he was able to compare the two groups (Fendrich 1977). Another advantage of his approach as compared to other work lies in the fact that he returned to 85 of his subjects at a later stage, in 1986, in order to assess the impact of their involvement in the long run (Fendrich and Lovoy 1988; Fendrich 1993).2

If Fendrich is one of the most prominent students of the personal and biographical consequences of social movements, the first major follow-up study of New Left activists was done by Jay Demerath, Gerald Marwell, and Michael Aiken. In 1969, they interviewed 40 of the 223 volunteers they had surveyed four years earlier before and after the latter took part in a voter registration effort sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Demerath et al. 1971). Much later, and similarly to the approach followed by Fendrich, they again surveyed 145 of the volunteers in order to gauge the long-term effects of their participation (Marwell et al. 1987).

One of the most thorough and methodologically sound follow-up studies of New Left activists was conducted by Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi in 1973, when they surveyed 216 former activists (Jennings and Niemi 1981). Unlike other works, their study concerned subjects whose involvement in movement activities varied greatly. In addition, previous involvement spanned a longer time frame, namely, an 8-year period. This double feature gives their study a clear methodological advantage as compared to most of the other studies reviewed here.

This is certainly true for the study conducted by Alberta Nassi and Stephen Abramowitz, which, in chronological order, is the next major piece of research. In 1977, these researchers surveyed 30 activists who, ten years earlier, got involved in demonstrations in Berkeley, California (Nassi and Abramowitz 1979; Abramowitz and Nassi 1981). Not only is the period of involvement in this case much shorter (as it is limited to participating in a series of episodes of contention), but the number of subjects in the sample was significantly lower than in Jennings and Niemi’s work.

The sample was even smaller in the well-known study by Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks, which included only 11 subjects. These were student radicals who
were arrested in relation to the burning of a bank in Santa Barbara, California, in 1970. The researchers interviewed these activists ten years later to assess the long-term impact of their involvement in that event (Whalen and Flacks 1980, 1984, 1989). The last follow-up study of New Left activists I would like to mention in my brief review was conducted by Doug McAdam. In 1983 and 1984, this author collected

Table 21.2 Major follow-up studies of movement activists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigator(s)</th>
<th>Year of participation</th>
<th>Year of follow-up</th>
<th>Activists in sample</th>
<th>Control group?</th>
<th>Before and after data?</th>
<th>Selected resulting publications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demerath et al.</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Demerath et al. 1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fendrich and Lovoy</td>
<td>1960–3</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Fendrich 1993b; Fendrich and Lovoy 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennings and Niemi</td>
<td>1964–72</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Jennings and Niemi 1981; Jennings 1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marwell et al.</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Marwell et al. 1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McAdam</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>1983–84</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>McAdam 1988, 1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nassi and Abramowitz</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>15/30c</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Abramowitz and Nassi 1981; Nassi and Abramowitz 1979</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a*Fendrich's 1977 article is based on comparative data on 28 white and 72 black activists.  
*b*Fendrich's 1993 book summarizes the overall thrust of his work on this topic.  
*c*Nassi and Abramowitz (1979) relied on 15 subjects; Abramowitz and Nassi (1981), on 30.  

*Source:* Adapted from McAdam (1989: 747).  
(Copyright: American Sociological Association, 1307 New York Avenue NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005-4701)
data on 212 participants in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer project in order to assess both the short-term and long-term political and personal consequences of movement participation (McAdam 1988, 1989). An important feature of McAdam's study lies in the comparison he was able to make with 118 "no-shows," that is, individuals who applied, were accepted, but did not take part in the project. As I will argue in more detail below, this gave him a crucial methodological advantage as compared to other work, as thus he had at his disposal a control group (but see the studies by Fendrich and Lovoy 1988, and Jennings and Niemi 1981).

What do these follow-up studies of New Left activists tell us about the personal and biographical consequences of participation in social movements? As McAdam (1999; see further Goldstone and McAdam 2001) has stressed in his own review, and as I mentioned earlier, taken together, they point to a powerful and enduring impact of participation in movement activities on the biographies of participants. Specifically, activism had a strong effect both on the political and personal lives of the subjects. On the political side, former activists (1) had continued to espouse leftist political attitudes (e.g., Demerath et al. 1971; Fendrich and Tarleau 1973; Whalen and Flacks 1980; Marwell et al. 1987, 1989); (2) had continued to define themselves as "liberal" or "radical" in political orientation (e.g., Fendrich and Tarleau 1973); and (3) had remained active in contemporary movements or other forms of political activity (e.g., Fendrich and Krauss 1978; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Fendrich and Lovoy 1988; McAdam 1989). On the personal side, former activists (1) had been concentrated in teaching or other "helping" professions (e.g., Maidenberg and Mayer 1970; Fendrich 1974; McAdam 1989); (2) had lower incomes than their age peers; (3) were more likely than their age peers to have divorced, married later, or remained single (e.g., McAdam 1988, 1989); and (4) were more likely than their age peers to have experienced an episodic or nontraditional work history (e.g., McAdam 1988, 1989).

In sum, participation in social movement activities appears to have profoundly affected the biographies of former activists and to have left a strong imprint on their personal lives. However, the subjects of the studies reviewed above are in many respects quite peculiar. On the one hand, they were all involved in New Left movements, in particular in the US civil rights movement. On the other hand, most of them belonged to the core activists of these movements and hence were strongly committed to their cause. The question remains open whether similar results would be found for other types of movements (for example, right-wing movements) or less strongly committed participants. Concerning movements, very little work has been done so far. A significant example is Klatch's (1999) study of longstanding personal and biographical consequences of people "on the left" and people "on the right" of the political spectrum. Yet, work on the New Left still dominates the existing literature. Concerning participants, some efforts have recently been made to redress the present bias toward the impact of activities that imply a strong commitment. I address this issue next.

**BEYOND NEW LEFT ACTIVISM**

Existing work on the personal and biographical consequences of social movements has focused mainly on a specific type of movement participants, namely, activists,
those who strongly identify with a movement and its cause or objectives, and who devote considerable time and energy to movement activities, including engagement in high-risk activism. Other researchers, in addition to those mentioned earlier, have examined the consequences of being involved in risky or at least costly political activities. Involvement in “identity politics” is a case in point. For example, Taylor and Raeburn (1995) have looked at the career consequences of high-risk activism by lesbian, gay, and bisexual sociologists. Following a broader perspective, Whittier (1995) has shown in her study of the radical women’s movement in Colombus, Ohio, that social movements may alter their social context, leading successive generations of participants to develop new perspectives. Looking at another kind of movement, Nagel (1995) has also addressed the impact of identity-based activism. In her study of the Native American Movement, she argues that Native American activism in the 1960s and 1970s led to an increased tendency of Native Americans to self-identify as such. Thus the apparent demographic trend of an increase in Native Americans can be partly explained by the increase in ethnic pride associated with the movement.

While focusing on a specific type of political activism is not a weakness in itself and, in a way, is even a reasonable methodological choice, it certainly limits the possibility for generalizing the findings, especially if the number of subjects is small, like in some of the works reviewed above. A number of more recent studies, using survey data, have tried to avoid this pitfall by looking at the personal consequences of more “routine,” low-risk forms of participation. For example, Sherkat and Blocker (1997) have analyzed data from the Youth–Parent Socialization Panel Study to inquire into the political and personal consequences of participation in antiwar and student protests of the late 1960s. They found that ordinary involvement in these movements had an impact on the lives of those who had participated. Comparing participants with people who were not involved in those protests, they could show that demonstrators differed from nonactivists both shortly after their movement experiences and some ten years later, when they were in their mid-30s. Specifically, they found former protesters held more liberal political orientations and were more aligned with liberal parties and actions, selected occupations in the “new class,” were more educated, held less religious orientations and were less attached to religious organizations, married later, and finally, were less likely to have children.

Similarly, research conducted by McAdam and a number of collaborators aims to go beyond a specific focus on strongly committed activists to provide a broader perspective on the personal and biographical consequences of participation in social movements (McAdam 1999; see further McAdam et al. 1998; Wilhelm 1998; Van Dyke et al. 2000). The main goal of this study is “to assess the relationship between people’s ‘political experiences and orientations’ during the 1960s and 1970s and their subsequent life-course choices” (McAdam 1999: 122). Recognizing that students of contentious politics have rarely inquired systematically into the unintended and long-term impact of movements, to focus instead on short-term political effects, McAdam and his colleagues have conducted a random national survey of US residents born between 1943 and 1964 to study the impact of movement participation in America, both on the lives of those who participated in those struggles and on the structure of the American society at the end of the 1990s. Similar to what Sherkat and Blocker (1997) have found, and consistent with the results of follow-
up studies of New Left activists, their research shows among other things that movement participants are 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, were less likely to have had children and to have married (see further Goldstone and McAdam 2001). In short, people who have been involved in social movement activities, even at a low level of commitment, carry the consequences of that involvement throughout their life.

Unlike the follow-up studies of New Left activists reviewed above, which relied on relatively small to very small samples of individuals, these more recent studies make use of large-scale survey data. In doing so, the authors were able to show that the personal and biographical consequences of participation in social movements are not limited to the most committed activists who are involved in high-risk actions, but also affect the lives of people who participate in more “routine,” lower-level activities. Of course, this is not to say that the use of survey data is exempt from certain methodological limitations. The data created by McAdam and collaborators, just to mention one major study, indeed present some important flaws. For example, as they are ready to admit (see McAdam 1999), the response rate of 53 percent is only marginally acceptable by usual social-science standards and raises questions concerning the sample’s representativeness. This is obviously a major handicap for research that arguably has among its aims to go beyond the limited possibility for generalization offered by the small samples used in earlier work. Similarly, the comparison of their sample with the overall distributions of certain social characteristics among the general population is sometimes problematic. For example, the share of women and whites in the sample is larger than in the US population at large. The overestimation of certain characteristics is even greater with regard to education. Their findings should thus be weighed in the light of these discrepancies. Yet, as compared to earlier work, these more recent studies move us a step forward toward a better understanding of the personal and biographical consequences of participation in social movements. This leads me to discuss the issue of the broader social and cultural significance of movement participation and the role of social movements as a force for aggregate change in life-course patterns.

**Social Movements and Aggregate-Level Change**

The follow-up studies on former activists as well as other work on life-course changes resulting from sustained participation in social movements, although interesting in themselves, have little to say about contemporary society as a whole. This is especially true to the extent that researchers have most of the time examined a particular type of activist usually involved in high-risk activities. Work that has looked at more “routine,” lower-level forms of involvement in social movements partly avoids this limitation. Nevertheless, the question remains open whether these findings have broader implications for the population at large and the aggregate patterns of life-course events. Work on aggregate-level change in life-course patterns is much more informative about processes of political, cultural, and social change.

The recent study conducted by McAdam and his colleagues mentioned earlier (McAdam et al. 1998; Wilhelm 1998; McAdam 1999; Van Dyke et al. 2000) tries
to transcend the individual-level consequences of activism to embrace a broader perspective that provides insights into the role of contention for social change. I briefly touched upon the first part of their study in the previous section. Here I would like to say a bit more about its second part, that concerned with aggregate-level changes in the life course, the most important one with respect to the relationship between social movements and cultural change.

The research by McAdam and his collaborators points to the role of the turbulence of the 1960s in shaping aggregate-level changes in the life course. The point of departure is represented by the cultural shift associated with the people born during the period of the so-called “baby boom” after the end of World War II, a shift that can be observed among other things in deviations from the normal life-course sequence (Rindfuss et al. 1987) or in the transformation from a materialist to a postmaterialist value system (Inglehart 1977). The question, then, is how to explain these deviations and shift.

We know Inglehart’s (1977, 1990) answer to this question. He points to the role of economic growth and development of the welfare state after World War II in producing a “silent revolution” that, through socialization processes, has transformed the core values of Western societies. According to his well-known thesis, postwar cohorts in Western Europe have different value priorities from older cohorts, because people born during that historical phase grew up under far more secure formative conditions. While the cohorts that had experienced the two world wars and the Great Depression gave priority to economic and physical security, a growing proportion of the younger cohorts privilege self-expression and the quality of life. Thus, in this perspective, postwar prosperity would have contributed to spreading postmaterialist values. Since fundamental value change takes place as younger birth cohorts replace older ones in the adult population of a society, this long period of growing economic and physical security led to a substantial difference in the value priorities of older (mainly materialist) and younger (mainly postmaterialist) groups, who have been shaped by different experiences in their formative years. Following this reasoning, the deviations from life-course norms may be seen as a result – indeed, an indicator – of this fundamental value shift.

A different answer to the question of what accounts for the changes in the organization of the life course was provided by Easterlin (1980; see further Pampel and Peters 1995; Macunovich 1997). His explanation stresses economic and demographic factors. According to him, the deviations from the normal life course observed among the baby boomers depend to a large extent on the size and sequence of the baby boom cohorts. The early baby boomers took advantage of unprecedented occupational opportunities created by a rapidly expanding economy and the relatively small size of the Depression and World War II cohorts. This, in turn, led them to conform to the normative path of getting into adulthood. In contrast, the younger baby boomers faced an increasingly stagnant economy and intense competition on the labor market, which prevented them from finding full-time employment. This delayed their entrance into other adult roles.

Easterlin’s explanation came under explicit attack by McAdam (1999; see further Goldstone and McAdam 2001). Criticizing the incompleteness and demographic determinism of Easterlin’s account, he argues for a greater role of the broader
political, cultural, and social dynamics of the period in question. He suggests that “the effects of cohort size were mediated by the values and the political and cultural experiences of the baby boomer” (McAdam 1999: 136). 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, he hypothesizes a three-stage process “by which the broad social movement dynamics of the period came to reshape the normative contours of the life-course” (McAdam 1999: 138). In the first stage, activists in the political and countercultural movements of the period (whose value system, as Inglehart would argue, leaned strongly toward postmaterialism) rejected normal life-course trajectories in favor of newer alternatives. Life-course deviations such as cohabitation, childlessness, and an episodic work track were consciously chosen as alternatives to traditional patterns. In the second stage, these alternatives became embedded in a number of geographic and subcultural locations that were the principal centers of the “1960s experience” and of New Left activism, above all college campuses and self-consciously countercultural neighborhoods. Thus, upper-middle-class suburbs gradually came to embody the new alternatives through socialization processes. Finally, in the third stage, these alternative life-course patterns became available to increasingly heterogeneous strata of young Americans through processes of diffusion and adaptation. At the same time, these alternatives were largely stripped of their original political or countercultural content to be experienced as simply new life-course norms.

McAdam has thus proposed a model of demographic diffusion in which new lifestyle patterns spread with each passing cohort (joining Inglehart on this point). Again, the findings of his team’s research must be read in the light of the methodological problems mentioned above concerning the representativeness of their sample. In addition, one might question the kind of variables used in their analysis as well as the relationship established between prior activism and demographic outcomes. For example, while Inglehart (1977, 1990) looked at a general shift in value orientations among European populations, McAdam and his colleagues focus on a limited number of variables, such as the age at marriage or the age of birth of the first child. While the diminished impact of prior activism and the greater effect of some mediating factors (such as attendance at an “activist college” and church attendance) on these measures of demographic change over subsequent cohorts shows that these behavioral patterns became stripped from their original embeddedness in participation in movement activities, this remains at best a very limited empirical measure of demographic outcomes of social movements. In spite of this necessary caution, the important point from the perspective of the analysis of the personal and biographical consequences of social movements is that this approach contributes to the sociological literature on the demographic significance of broader historical events and process (e.g., Elder 1974; Buchman 1989; Elder and Caspi 1990), but at the same time stresses the role of the political and cultural movements of the 1960s in this process. In so doing, it suggests an impact of these movements that goes well beyond the individual life histories of those who took part in the struggles to affect the entire structure of American society. It remains to determine whether one would find similar processes and mechanisms in other social and cultural contexts, and hence whether these findings can be generalized beyond the specific case of the US. The challenge, both theoretical and methodological, for other researchers is launched.
Methodological Issues

I already hinted at some methodological shortcomings of existing works in the previous discussion. Here I would like to address them in a more systematic fashion. As far as the follow-up studies of movement activists reviewed above are concerned, we can do so by taking another look at table 21.2 (see further McAdam 1999). Generally speaking, these studies share two kinds of methodological problems: one related to timing and the cause-effect nexus, the other to sampling and the generalization of empirical findings.

Concerning timing, four main problems can be mentioned that make the attribution of causality from empirical data problematic or at least more difficult. This, indeed, is an issue too often overlooked in social science in general, not only in the study of the biographical consequences of activism. The first and perhaps most important problem lies in the lack of “before/after” data on activists (Pierce and Converse 1990). Researchers have often inferred the effects of movement participation from information gathered “after the fact.” Among the studies of New Left activists reviewed above, this important methodological tool has been used by Demerath et al. (1971), Jennings and Niemi (1981), Marwell et al. (1987), and McAdam (1988, 1989). In the absence of measures taken both before and after involvement, the researcher must rely entirely on retrospective data (i.e., data collected by looking backward in time), an approach that raises a number of methodological problems. Retrospective data are especially problematic and potentially biased when they rely on people’s recollection of previous attitudes or opinions. This bias can be reduced, although not eliminated entirely, by focusing on behavioral rather than attitudinal data, that is, by looking at the subjects’ recollection of previous events and actual behaviors. Yet, without a measure of the dependent variable prior to involvement in movement activities, one cannot draw any firm conclusion about the real impact of activism on life course.

The three other methodological shortcomings related to timing are less crucial, but they nevertheless weaken the findings and explanations proposed. One problem is that most work was carried out during a period of turmoil during which non-institutional mobilization and participation in social movements were particularly strong. This focus on the 1960s cycle of contention makes it hard to determine to what extent the life-course characteristics observed in follow-up interviews are due to individual involvement in political activities rather than being a product of the special era that forms the background of the research. In addition, such a narrower focus prevents one from drawing empirical generalizations, an issue I address in more detail below.

Another problem can derive from the time span separating activism from its consequences. A sufficient amount of time should have elapsed between activism and follow-up investigation in order to be able to determine the extent to which the former has had a durable influence on life course. Not all the studies mentioned above fulfill this criterion. Notable exceptions are provided by Fendrich and Lovoy (1988), Marwell et al. (1987), and McAdam (1988). Fendrich re-interviewed his subjects 15 years after his first study and nearly a quarter of a century after their involvement in civil rights activities. Marwell and colleagues in 1965 not only conducted the first major study of the impact of participation in social
movements, but returned to the field about 20 years later to assess the longer-term effects of participation. McAdam made his study of former applicants to the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer nearly 20 years after the fact. In both cases, the research design yields stronger findings about the long-term consequences of activism.

A final problem, related to the previous point, is that prior activism has often been measured at a single point in time. In other words, we do not know whether the subjects had been activists for a fairly long period or whether their commitment was rather short-lived and they were defined as activists only at the time the research was conducted. This issue has been discussed in some research on conversion to and participation in religious movements (e.g., Snow and Phillips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984), but research that does not take it into account is weaker. It is not a major problem, but repeated measures of the consequences of activism would strengthen the explanation, as it would provide information on the relationship between the duration of activism and its long-term consequences on the lives of the people involved. Of course, a panel design, which allows the researcher to follow the same subjects over time, is the best methodological choice in this case. However, such a design is costly, and one is usually forced to use the existing national panel studies (where they exist), which do not necessarily include the research questions interesting from the point of view of the analysis of the personal and biographical consequences of participation in social movements.

As I have said, these four methodological weaknesses are all related to timing issues. In a way, they all concern the relationship between time and social change as well as the interpretation of longitudinal effects. In fact, causes of long-term changes are often difficult to disentangle, as at least three time-related processes can be at work. Briefly put, observed attitudinal or behavioral changes in life course may be attributed to aging, cohort, or period effects. This is a familiar distinction to demographers and life-span specialists (see Hardy 1997 for a discussion in the social sciences). Aging or life-cycle effects refers to changes in the subjects due to their maturation. In other words, these are shifts linked to the fact of “getting older” and thus being in different phases of life. For example, it could be argued that people become more conservative in their value orientations as they get older. Cohort or generational effects refer to changes within an age group of people who share a significant experience during a given period at about the same time in their lives. In other words, these are shifts linked to the year of birth. For example, according to Inglehart (1977, 1990), the generation that grew up in the postwar period benefited from a favorable social and economic environment to develop a postmaterialist value orientation. Finally, period effects refer to changes that can be observed across all age groups. In other words, these are shifts linked to a specific period or year and often to a specific event. For example, the accident that occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in 1986 might have produced an increase in the awareness toward and opposition against nuclear energy among European populations at large.

These three processes are interrelated, and although cohort effects are most directly linked to the personal and biographical consequences of social movements, it is nevertheless important to assess the role of each in order to reach an accurate understanding of the impact of activism on life course. Researchers must carefully examine the possibility that shifts in individual attitudes or behaviors result from getting older, from sharing with the other members of the same cohort a significant
experience at about the same time in life, or from living in a particular historical era. Again, a panel design is the most efficient—and perhaps only—way to really disentangle these three processes empirically.

Four further methodological problems, in part related to the ones just mentioned and concerning sampling, undermine many of the existing studies of New Left activists, in particular by limiting the possibilities for a generalization of their findings. The most general and important one concerns the representativeness of the sample used. As Goldstone and McAdam (2001) have pointed out, most of the follow-up studies of former movement activists reviewed above (including McAdam’s early study) share a major weakness: the subjects were drawn from nonrepresentative samples of the population. On the one hand, researchers have focused mainly on a specific type of activists, namely, New Left activists. Other protest sectors have not been subject to the same detailed scrutiny. A few researchers have begun to look at other movements, such as right-wing movements, but the existing literature remains heavily flawed in the direction of leftist activism. On the other hand, apart from a few exceptions, even within this specific group, most studies have looked only at those movement participants who are most strongly involved. This narrow focus has the great disadvantage of preventing one from generalizing the results to the whole social movement sector and makes generalizations even within the New Left quite problematic. As I said, recent work that has used survey data to create representative samples of the population is an important further step in this direction.

Another important problem stems from the lack of a control group made of people who did not participate in movement activities. Control groups were present in the studies by Fendrich, Fendrich and Lovoy, Jennings and Niemi (1981), and McAdam (1989). This is indeed a major weakness of certain follow-up studies of former activists. In the absence of a comparison of the subject under study with a nonactivist control group, one lacks a baseline against which to judge the impact of participation. In the worst case, the relationship between activism and attitudinal or behavioral changes observed in the group of activists may well be spurious, as nonactivists may display similar changes as well.

A third shortcoming lies in the small number of subjects. The number of activists in the samples used in the follow-up inquiries reviewed above range from a low 11 in Whalen and Flacks’s study to a high 330 in McAdam’s Freedom Summer study. Many studies involved fewer than 40 subjects. While this is not a problem in itself, especially if the aim of the research is theory building rather than theory testing, it is indeed a major obstacle to generalization. Again, the use of survey data provides a satisfactory answer to this problem, although the price to pay might be the loss of detail and “thick” analyses of the processes and mechanisms involved. Thus perhaps a combined quantitative and qualitative approach would serve the purpose best.

Finally, often researchers drew their subjects from narrow geographical areas. For example, Whalen and Flacks (1980) examined activists from a single city, Santa Barbara, which furthermore belongs to an atypical area as regards involvement in social movements and protest activities. In such cases, of course, generalizations become even more problematic. Here, if this is the aim and if one wants to keep the small-sample, more detailed approach, the subjects should be selected from different locations or at least from a larger area, although attention should be paid to the criteria for comparing different groups of activists.
In sum, many – although not all – existing studies of the impact of individual participation in social movements on the subsequent life choices and attitudes of former activists suffer from a number of methodological problems, above all, the use of nonrepresentative samples (a problem avoided by those who have analyzed survey data) and the lack of control comparisons (either cross-sectional, over time, or both) that allow researchers to check and possibly rule out plausible rival hypotheses. In order to avoid the problems linked to the lack of control comparisons, the ideal research design should have the following features: “before/after” measures of the dependent variable, experimental and control conditions, multiple groups for both experimental and control conditions, time sampling of the variables under study, and time-series of the “before/after” measures (Pettigrew 1996: ch. 3). Such an ideal design, of course, is extremely difficult to obtain, and is often possible only in quasi-experimental settings, in which the researcher keeps control over the timing and form of the independent variable. Yet researchers should aim to approximate it as much as possible. As can be seen in table 21.2, among the earlier studies of New Left activists, McAdam’s work on Freedom Summer is the one that gets closer to this ideal design. Together with Jennings and Niemi’s work, his is the only study of New Left activists that has a sufficiently large sample of activists, makes use of a control group, and has “before/after” data. In addition, McAdam has also examined his subjects well after they were involved in movement activities.

**Summary and Prospective Look**

After having been long neglected, the study of the outcomes and consequences of social movements today seems to have found its way into the scholarly literature. However, most work still deals with the political and institutional outcomes of movement challenges, often measured through policy or legislative changes. Much less attention has been paid to unintended social or cultural effects related to activism, both at the micro- or macrolevel of analysis. To be sure, individual-level variables have indeed received much attention from students of social movements, but the main focus of the analysis here has been on recruitment to activism and the microsociological factors that account for participation in social movements and protest activities, rather than the personal and biographical consequences of participation.

Among the latter, we may distinguish between two types of effects: the biographical consequences that follow from individual involvement in social movements and the broader, aggregate-level change in life-course patterns. Existing work has focused mainly on the biographical impact of activism, but researchers have recently begun to look at the broader societal effects of movements. Findings quite consistently point to a strong and enduring impact of participation on the life course of activists. Similarly, more rare but equally important studies have shown activism to have a significant effect on the social and cultural patterns of contemporary Western society. Looking at other sociocultural and institutional domains, these studies represent a first step toward a more general and balanced understanding of the personal and biographical consequences, in a literature weighted in the direction of political activism and movements. More generally, these aggregate-level studies are important because they provide important insights into the relationship between social movements and processes of social change. In addition to addressing the
effects of movements on policy or other political variables, we would gain much knowledge about our societies by looking at the ways activism translate into broader processes of change.

In spite of their consistent – and therefore encouraging – findings, many of the studies reviewed in this chapter are undermined by a number of methodological shortcomings related to timing and sampling issues, which make it problematic to establish causal relationships and to generalize the empirical findings beyond the specific group under investigation. The most general and important of such weaknesses comes from the fact that former activists in follow-up studies were drawn from nonrepresentative sectors of the population. Other problems include the failure to collect “before/after” data on the activists, the lack of a control group of non-activists, and often too small a number of cases in the sample. While it would be quite difficult to have the perfect study, which would include sample representativeness, pre- and post-measures of the dependent variable, as well as control groups for comparisons, further work should aim to approach this ideal as far as possible.

The small sample and the representativeness problems are avoided in research that has analyzed survey data, especially that addressing the aggregate-level consequences of participation in social movements. In the end, however, while methodological improvements are both desirable and necessary, not only our knowledge of the personal effects of activism, but also our understanding of the consequences of social movements in general will gain much from nesting the microsociological study of the biographical impact of activism within a broader reflection about the causes of social and cultural change. In this regard, Goldstone and McAdam’s (2001) recent attempt to bring together a microfocus on the life course with a macrofocus on demographic change related to contentious politics provides a good example of the kind of intellectual endeavor we should aim at.

Notes

This chapter draws extensively from the work of Doug McAdam (1989, 1999; see further Goldstone and McAdam 2001), who has published previous useful reviews of work on the personal and biographical consequences of social movements.

1 I adapted this table by adding one more publication by Fendrich (1993), two more publications by Whalen and Flacks (1984, 1989), and two publications resulting from McAdam’s own study (1988, 1989). The table focuses on follow-up studies of movement activists and thus excludes work on aggregate-level effects of participation using survey data, which are reviewed in the next section.

2 Fendrich’s 1993 book, in fact, summarizes the overall thrust of his two-decades-long work on this topic.

3 High-risk activism can be defined as activism that implies danger to those involved, stemming either from the action itself (e.g., a hunger strike, trespassing a dangerous zone) or the reaction of other actors (e.g., strong repression by the policy, confrontaction with a countermovement). Of course, what constitutes risky or nonrisky activity is in part a matter or perspective and is thus subject to differential interpretation.

4 A number of authors have analyzed the role of a significant event experienced by cohorts in creating political generations (e.g., Mannheim 1952; Braungart 1971, 1984; DeMartini 1983). The concept of generation is close to – although distinct from – that of cohort. In
his influential work, Mannheim (1952) maintained that specific events decisively shape the political orientation of particular birth cohorts, giving rise to what he called a “political generation.” E.g., the 1960s cycle of contention would be among those events that would have influenced an entire generation (several cohorts, in a strict sense) throughout their lives.

References


