Recruitment

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Social movements have long been an important basis of political participation in democracies and have achieved major political, social, and cultural changes. Although the influence of social movements depends largely on their ability to recruit members, it is by no means obvious why people choose to participate in them.

This question has been termed "the free rider problem." As Mancur Olson's (1965) analysis indicates, people have limited time and energy and must choose to spend these resources in ways that most benefit themselves. Individuals join social movements because they believe that the movement's goals, if implemented, would yield significant benefits to themselves and/or to the attainment of values they cherish. Although these benefits motivate participation, there is an additional problem. If a movement has few participants, people desiring these benefits might believe that the movement could not succeed unless they joined the movement. Thus, joining the movement might represent a rational investment of their time, energy, and, often, money. However, if a movement already has a large number of participants, then it is unlikely that one more person's joining the movement would increase its chances of success. In that case, why would additional people join? If the movement is successful, they, along with the participants, would enjoy the fruits of this success; they would have gained all the benefits of participation without spending their own scarce resources of time and energy. In that case, they could use these resources to gain other benefits for themselves, while "free riding" on the efforts of those already participating.

One possible response to this free rider problem is that people who join social movements do not rationally calculate the costs and benefits of their joining. Analyses of social movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indeed assumed that social movements were not rational enterprises and that those who joined them were, in fact, acting on the basis of irrational impulses. The most prominent proponent of this view, Gustave Le Bon (1897), a French theorist, said that people joined movements because they succumbed to crowd emotions and lost their ability to resist unconscious instincts. This general belief informed views of social movements well into the twentieth century, as these views stressed that movements represented an emotional and relatively unorganized response to a breakdown in social norms and social organization. Individuals were said to be attracted to movements because they were lonely and alienated because of weak social ties and hence sought in movements a sense of belonging they otherwise lacked.

This nonrational model of social movements has since fallen into disfavor. Social movements are now viewed as rational enterprises in pursuit of many kinds of political, social, and cultural changes, and their members are viewed as rational individuals favoring such changes. However, the success of recent efforts to demonstrate the rationality of social movement participants has re-emphasized the importance of addressing the free rider problem: if these people are rational, why do they participate at all? The contemporary literature on social movement recruitment and participation tries to answer this question.

Its dominant response derives from analogous work in complex and voluntary organizations, including labor unions. Organizations generally offer several types of resources to motivate recruitment and higher levels of participation after recruitment. These include (1) *coercion*; (2) *utilitarian incentives* such as paid income in work organizations and discounts for various goods and services in voluntary organizations; (3) *normative* (or *purposive*)

incentives that appeal to the values, concerns, and ideologies of individuals and, in social movements, lead people to identify with a movement's goals and to believe that the movement is capable of achieving its goals; and (4) *social* (or *solidary*) *incentives* that make participation socially rewarding in terms of friendships and other personal contacts. Because social movement organizations (SMOs), like other voluntary organizations, typically lack the first two types of incentives, they must rely heavily on the latter two types to induce people to join them and to motivate higher levels of participation after joining. In these respects, normative and social incentives act as *selective incentives* to induce self-interested people to devote time and energy to participation rather than to other potentially rewarding activities. An additional category of *organizational incentives* that lead people to feel a sense of belonging to the movement is also thought to be important for levels of post-recruitment participation.

In contrast to many types of voluntary organizations, normative incentives in social movements depend heavily on the movement's (or its SMO's) political ideologies and beliefs. These cognitions include the movement's grievances, goals, and strategies for change. Individuals whose own ideologies and beliefs are congruent with those of the movement are more likely to join it. In addition to these movement-specific ideologies, more general cognitions may also influence decisions to join. These include a liberal vs. conservative belief system, a feeling of political efficacy, and religious ideologies. Movements and organizations that are liberal tend to attract liberal individuals, while those that are conservative tend to attract conservative individuals. People who feel politically efficacious, that is, who believe that citizen participation generally, and their own particularly, can make a difference, are more likely to join than those who are politically alienated. Social movements and SMOs with a religious basis for their activities attract members whose religious beliefs coincide with those of the movement or SMO.

In all these respects, a movement's set of ideologies is thought to be an important, necessary condition for recruiting members, but it is far from a sufficient condition. The reason for this is simple: many more people agree with a movement's goals and other ideologies than ever participate in the movement or help it in any other way. This recognition has led the contemporary social movement literature to stress the importance of social incentives. In this view, people join movements because they have pre-existing friendship and organizational ties that induce them to join. For example, agreeing to some friends' request to join them in a protest wins their appreciation, while declining their request may win their displeasure. In this respect, recruitment into social movements is no different from the many other activities in which social ties play an important role. Accordingly, a host of studies finds that individuals with pre-existing ties to movement members will be more likely to join a movement than those with fewer or no such ties. These ties appear to be especially important for recruitment into high-risk activism like the Freedom Rides in the US South that were a hallmark of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. By challenging the earlier, nonrational model's assumption that social movements attract lonely and alienated individuals, the emphasis in contemporary work on friendship and organizational networks reinforces the rationality of social movement participation.

Turning to postrecruitment participation, individuals who develop friendships after joining a movement or SMO tend to exhibit higher levels of participation than those with fewer or no such friendships. In this regard, SMOs with a national membership face particular problems because their members are geographically isolated and usually have little contact with each other or with the national organization. To deal with this situation, some national organizations have developed a "federated" structure involving many local chapters. Because these chapters enable interaction and friendships among members who live near each other, they enhance commitment to the organization

itself and promote higher levels of participation on its behalf.

Organizational incentives are the final type of resource offered by SMOs and are thought to be especially important for postrecruitment participation. These incentives take two forms, perceptions and communication. Members have various perceptions of their SMO. A first perception, *legitimacy*, involves members' willingness to trust SMO leaders and to support their decisions, even if the members might disagree with some of these decisions. Those with higher levels of perceived legitimacy are more likely to exhibit higher levels of postrecruitment participation. A second perception involves members' beliefs in the *effectiveness* of their SMO. Postrecruitment participation is generally higher among members who perceive stronger effectiveness. A final perception concerns members' *commitment*, including their sense of belonging, to their SMO and movement. Members who are more committed also exhibit higher levels of postrecruitment participation. *Communication* with SMO leaders and staff also matters. In particular, members who are contacted more often by their SMO's leaders and staff or otherwise communicate with them are also thought to exhibit higher levels of postrecruitment participation than members with less or no such communication.

Future work on recruitment should address at least three problems in the literature. The first problem concerns potential deficiencies in the studies of recruitment. An ideal study would be predictive and would study a random sample of adults, predicting which factors would lead some of them to join a particular social movement. Because only a small proportion of adults become members of any given social movement, such a study would need an extremely large sample to have any statistical validity and would be astronomically expensive. Because of this, studies of social movement recruitment are limited in scope. Some studies are retrospective, asking current participants why they initially chose to participate. Results from these studies depend upon the assumption that current participants can accurately remember and will accurately report why they started to participate, and these studies often have no adequate control group of nonparticipants. Other studies are predictive but only in a limited context: for example, they study who among a set of people in a particular locality who favor the goals of a social movement rally actually choose to participate in the rally. As these difficulties suggest, the recruitment literature would benefit from better designed studies, but, because of the nature of recruitment into social movements, such studies are difficult to devise.

A second problem in the recruitment literature concerns the many types of social movements. Many typologies of movements exist, but a common typology divides them, based on their goals, into political or social reform movements, religious movements, self-help movements, and cultural movements. Within each category there are many types of specific movements that have existed in many different nations and localities within nations and across many different decades and centuries. Although many studies of recruitment exist, they do not begin to match in number the sheer quantity of movements, and additional work on unstudied movements may shed new light on the dynamics of recruitment.

Finally, studies of recruitment obviously imply that one is being recruited into something. But what is this something? What does it mean to be a member of a social movement? If someone takes part in just one protest on behalf of a social movement, is that person a member of that movement? As this question suggests, people do not usually sign up for a movement in the way they sign up for many other activities. To compound this problem, some SMOs are organized in a very formal manner, with clear membership rolls and criteria for membership, while others are organized much more loosely, with unclear criteria for membership and only a loose understanding, if that, of who their members are. In the most informal SMOs, members may literally come and go, and it is not at all easy to identify their members. The lack of a clear understanding in movements and SMOs, and thus in

the recruitment literature, of what it means to be a member confounds efforts to achieve a comprehensive understanding of recruitment, however important such an understanding is for the study of social movements.

SEE ALSO: Commitment; Framing and social movements; Free rider problem; Ideology; Motivation and types of motives (instrumental, identity, ideological motives); Networks and social movements; Participation in social movements; Rational choice theory and social movements; Resource mobilization theory; Social movement organization (SMO); Strain and breakdown theories.

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