

Who participates in movement



Who Participates in Activism? It is interesting to take a look at the types of people who become social activists, and what reasons they might have for becoming active in a social movement. Knowing these psychological factors can help protest movements recruit new members or increase the participation of current members. McAdam (1986) believes that people become activists because the group is available to join (structural theory). In other words, the fact that there is a group that aligns with a person's ideology is often enough reason to become an activist at some level on behalf of the group. McAdam disregards strict definitions of recruitment, movement, and activism, and instead focuses on the process of an individual's participation in activism.

Risk and cost assessment gives his theories a good base. Risks taken on the part of the activist cost him something (positive or negative cost). As an example, signing a petition is a low risk, low cost activity; organizing homeless people is a high risk, high cost activity. Individuals do a conscious or subconscious risk/cost assessment before they participate in activism activities. An individual may verbally support an idea yet not physically participate in higher cost activities such as rallies or writing letters to Congress. Individuals may choose to participate in higher risk/cost activities, if those risks/costs are acceptable to him. These individuals typically "(a) have a history of activism, (b) [are] deeply committed to the ideology and goals of the movement, (c) [are] integrated into activist networks, and (d) [are] relatively free of personal constraints that would make participation especially risky" (71).

By contrast, Polletta states that people join high risk/cost movements "because it is fun; because their sense of solidarity with people they know

who are already in the movement demands it; because if they don't, no one else will; because they are morally shocked and compelled by an injustice" (35). She refers to McAdam's works and expands on the "narrative" component of recruitment. Protesters and activists, whether their actions are believed to be spontaneous or are the result of long-standing commitment to the movement, tell a powerful story that inspires others to agree and perhaps join in.

Participating in protest and activism is a somewhat organic process from the individual's point of view; people are inspired when the movement's ideology rings true with their own ideology, and find themselves participating without really understanding how they got there. From a sociological perspective, an individual's actions can be explained by taking an objective look at the process of joining a protest movement. Synergy plays a large role: the energy exchange between individuals gives the whole group more power than the sum of its parts.

The leaders of protest movements can use the McAdams and Polletta discussions of recruitment motivation to increase the number of individuals participating in activism and to increase the risk-taking commitment of individuals. It is true that performing one small action will often lead to performing greater actions. (Salesmen use this strategy all the time when closing a sale.) It is also true that a movement's ideology must be close to an individual's ideology. The individual may use the protest experience to help shape his ideology, but the basic agreement must be in place.

Using spontaneity and synergy leads to a worthwhile effect and social change. By understanding the type of person who is likely to join a movement, his motivating factors and obstacles, and by telling a powerful

story, social activist movements can more easily recruit additional members and get a greater commitment from them.

References

McAdam, D. (Jul 1986). Recruitment to high-risk activism: the case of freedom summer. *The American Journal of Sociology* 92: 1, pp. 64-90.

Polletta, F. (2006). *It was like a fever: storytelling in protest and politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.