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Politicized identity

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Politicization of identities is key to the dynamics of contention. Protest movements are built on politicized identities and they are populated by people with politicized identities. Politicization of identities is simultaneously a characteristic of collectivities *and* people. There exists a division of labor between students of politicization of identities. Sociologists tend to study politicization at the collective level on the supply side of contentious politics, while social psychologists typically focus on the individual level of politicization at the demand side of politics (cf. Klandermans 2004). The politicization of the supply side of protest refers to the characteristics of protest movements. Is it a movement people can identify with? Is the movement able to frame personal problems into political claims? The politicization of demand refers to the potential of protestors in a society. It relates to the problems people perceive in a society and whether people attach political meaning to these problems. In order to understand how the division of labor conceptually and empirically affects the study of this phenomenon, we will briefly elaborate on the concept of identity.

Identity is our understanding of who we are. Simon and colleagues (1998) succinctly describe identity as a place in society. A place is a metaphorical expression for any position on any socially relevant dimension such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, and so forth. A person has a personal identity and several social identities. *Personal identity* refers to self-definition in terms of personal attributes, whereas *social identity* refers to self-definition in terms of social category memberships (Tajfel & Turner 1979). *Collective identity* concerns cognitions shared by members of a single group (Taylor & Whittier

1992). Hence, collective identity is a group characteristic – group members' shared beliefs, destiny, and feelings – while social identity is a characteristic of a person – the idiosyncratic remake derived from these shared beliefs, destiny, and feelings. *Group identification* forms the link between collective and social identity. The stronger the group identification, the more the shared beliefs, destiny, and feelings comprised in the group's collective identity are incorporated in the individual's social identity. However, individuals do not incorporate the complete picture, but rather a selection of what a collective identity encompasses. These idiosyncratic remakes of collective beliefs at the individual level create a variety in the *content* of social identities. Indeed, not all Americans, Muslims, workers, women, or gays have identical social identities, yet they do feel American, Muslim, and so on. Importantly, identities vary in strength, and identifying more or less strongly with a group makes a real difference, especially in political contexts. The more people identify with others involved, the more they will incorporate shared destiny, shared emotions, and enhanced efficaciousness (see Simon et al. 1998; Yzerbyt et al. 2003; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears 2008). It is therefore the *strength* of group identification rather than group identification per se that influences group members' readiness to view themselves and act in terms of their group membership (Huddy 2001).

Salience of a collective identity does not necessarily make that identity politically relevant; collective identities must politicize to become the engine of collective action. Politicization of identities begins with the awareness of shared grievances for which an external enemy must be blamed. Next, claims for compensation must be leveled against this enemy. Unless appropriate compensation is granted, the power struggle continues. If in the course of this struggle the group seeks to win the support

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of third parties, such as more powerful authorities (e.g., the national government) or the general public, identities fully politicize (Simon & Klandermans 2001). Politicization of identities and the underlying power struggle unfold as a sequence of politicizing events that gradually transform the group's relationship to its social environment, whereby the tactical choices are again shaped by identity (Polletta 2009).

What distinguishes *politicized* collective identity from collective identity? First, raised consciousness: "the growing awareness of shared grievances and a clearer idea of who or what is responsible for those grievances reflect a distinct cognitive elaboration of one's worldview providing group members with a meaningful perspective on the social world and their place in it" (Simon & Klandermans 2001: 327). The second distinction is about the relation with other groups. A politicized identity provides antagonistic lenses through which the social world is interpreted. This intergroup polarization defines other groups in the social and political arena as "pro" or "con," thus as allies or opponents. The third distinction concerns the unique behavioral correlates of politicized collective identity, namely, politicized group members are more likely to engage in collective action directed at the government or the general public to force them to intervene or to take sides.

The theoretical division of labor reflects in the phenomena that are studied. Sociologists study collective identity by examining such phenomena as the group's symbols, rituals, beliefs, and the values its members share. Social psychologists study group identification by examining what it means to an individual to belong to the group and will thus implicitly or explicitly refer to the pride of being a member of the group, to the individual's beliefs, sentiments, and commitment to the group (Klandermans & Roggeband 2007; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2007; Van Doorn et al. forthcoming). Not surprisingly, the same division of labor can be found for politicized identities.

POLITICIZATION OF SUPPLY

Central to the sociological literature is the work of Taylor and Whittier (1992), who clarify both theoretically and empirically how strong bonds existing in social networks shape political actors. Within these networks individuals come to see themselves as part of a group when some shared characteristic becomes salient and is defined as important. As a result, *boundaries* are drawn between "a challenging and a dominant group" (1992: 175). These boundaries are not clear cut, stable, and objectively visible, but exist in the shared meaning attributed to group membership by group members. The second component is *consciousness*. Consciousness consists of both raising awareness of group membership and the realization of the group's position within society, in comparison to other groups. This position must be perceived as illegitimate or unjust to make group membership politically relevant. The third component is *negotiation*. Within and outside their networks, people negotiate in order to change symbolic meanings of daily life's thinking and acting – "the politicization of daily life" – and to free the group from dominant representations or to undermine the status quo in the power balance between groups in the larger system. Social movement organizations do their utmost to politicize an identity by framing personal grievances in political claims and by offering their supporters the opportunity to act upon these political claims. Hence, political and identity entrepreneurs use their power, resources, and creativity to pull a collectivity together and to turn grievances into claims. As a consequence, organized identities are more likely to mobilize than unorganized identities.

POLITICIZATION OF DEMAND

From a social psychological perspective, group identification is crucial to politicization of an identity. People who strongly identify with a social movement organization feel an "inner obligation" to participate on behalf of

the group (Stürmer et al. 2003). The more identities politicize, the more aggrieved and efficacious people feel and the more they participate in movements of change. Politicized identities are dual identities. González and Brown (2003) coined the term “dual identity” to point out that one individual can at the same time identify with two – competing – groups. For instance, workers going on strike can at the same time identify with the union and with the company. Two competing identities that are active at the same time cause “cross-pressure” (Oegema & Klandermans 1994). However, this does not mean that dual identification is detrimental to protest participation. On the contrary, workers who are loyal to the company are the ones who will make the effort of acting collectively against it – in a legal and peaceful way (Simon & Ruhs 2008; Simon & Grabow 2010). Simon and Ruhs (2008) showed that dual identification – with both an ethnic minority and the nation as a whole – spurred protest, a finding replicated and further specified by Klandermans, van der Toorn, and van Steklenburg (2008). They report that immigrants who display a dual identification tend to be more satisfied with their situation than those who do not display such identity, but *if* they are dissatisfied, they will be more likely to participate in protest. Recently, Langner (2010) developed a measure of politicized collective identity in terms of social identity *content* that assesses individual differences in the political meaning of an identity. The more group members attach political meaning to their identity, the more likely they will engage in protest.

Hence, sociologists study politicization at the collective level on the supply side of contentious politics, while social psychologists focus on the individual level at the demand side of politics. In reality, politicization of identities involves a mesh between individual and collective levels. We can learn from work that focuses on a single level, but neither is adequate by itself if we want to understand how politicization of identities translates into protest. Interdisciplinary work that treats politicization as the interplay between the two

levels – between collectivities actively “pulling” a collective identity together and people being “pushed” onto the streets as political meaning is attached to their identities – is needed. When people participate in protest staged by a social movement organization, this is the result of mobilization that successfully brought demand and supply together. In unraveling politicizing identities an interdisciplinary approach focusing on politicization processes of supply *and* demand might be helpful.

SEE ALSO: Collective identity; Demand and supply of protest; Dual identity; Identity politics; Political socialization and social movements.

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