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Collective Action and Heroic Self-Distinction

Julia Elad-Strenger
Political Studies, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

Synonyms

Collective action; Existential theory; Social identity

Definition

From an existential perspective, engaging in collective action is a particularly effective means to gain a sense of symbolic immortality, as it integrates the need for heroic self-distinction on the one hand and the need for inclusion in a collective meaning system on the other.

Social movements, from the civil rights movement and early feminist struggles to contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, have been widely recognized as constituting an important tool for citizens' political expression and engagement, and as a potential vehicle for social and political change, both locally and globally.

Nevertheless, collective action is of course not a unitary phenomenon and can assume many forms. It ranges from normative acts such as starting a petition or engaging in peaceful demonstration to non-normative acts, such as civil disobedience, rallying, and hunger strikes (Corning and Myers 2002; Tausch et al. 2011; Wright et al. 1990). It can assume non-violent forms, such as non-violent protests and boycotts, or violent forms such as sabotage and terrorist acts (Chenoweth et al. 2011; Shuman et al. 2021; Thomas and Louis 2014). Despite this variety, all forms of collective action share one common feature: they all represent actions which are aimed at promoting *group-based* goals (Corning and Myers 2002; van Zomeren et al., 2008; Wright et al. 1990), even if they are carried out by solo actors (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014). Whether their goals are local or global, social or political, or focused on promoting a change in policy versus a change in public opinion, collective action is aimed at promoting causes which are shared by a community or society, regardless of the eventual success of activists in achieving them.

In past decades, social scientists have generated excellent theory and research on motivations for participation in collective action. Although the personal benefits and payoffs of collective action have been widely acknowledged by the collective action literature, most motivational models focus on individuals' group-based experiences and social identity concerns as key determinants of their willingness to act on the group's behalf, deeming personal identity concerns as a separate, or even competing, motivational path for collective action. Inspired by the existential school of

thought, this chapter conceptualizes participation in collective action as an act that allows individuals to satisfy needs associated with both personal and group identities as complementary, rather than competing, motivators.

The Social Identity Perspective on Collective Action

Consistent with the conceptualization of collective action as a fundamentally group-oriented phenomenon, many models exploring individuals' motivations for collective action, particularly from the psychological perspective, identify the key role individuals' social identity plays in underlying their willingness to engage in collective action (e.g., Drury and Reicher 1999; Simon and Klandermans 2001; Tausch et al. 2011; van Zomeren et al. 2008). This perspective rests to a large extent on the social identity tradition, which includes social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner et al. 1987). According to this tradition, personal identity is associated with concerns for the unique and positive image of the individual in relation to other individuals, whereas social or group identity is associated with concerns for the positive image, status, and interests of the group in relation to other groups. Thus, from a social identity perspective, individuals' self-definition as group members (i.e., social identity) should be more salient than their self-definition as individuals (i.e., personal identity) if they are to be motivated to act for the attainment of group-based goals.

Despite this focus of motivational models for collective action on group-based experiences and social identity concerns, collective action research has widely acknowledged the fact that it also entails personal payoffs and satisfies personal needs. For example, collective action has been shown to increase individuals' personal sense of well-being, satisfy their need for belongingness and friendship, help them gain social approval, provide them with opportunities to acquire new skills and knowledge, facilitate public value expression, and even provide sheer entertainment

via the involvement in group activities (e.g., Finkel and Muller 1998; Finkel and Opp 1991; Harré 2007; Klandermans 1984; Leach et al. 2010; Omoto et al. 2010; Whiteley et al. 1994). Nevertheless, personal identity concerns and goal identity concerns are usually seen as separate, if not competing, motivations for collective action. Early sociological research suggests that individuals' decision to engage in collective action naturally entails a social dilemma, wherein individual interests and group interests are at odds (Olson 1971). According to the social identity tradition, in-group identification in fact represents a "depersonalized" form of self-perception (Turner et al. 1987), such that the salience of personal identity concerns may in some cases undermine people's willingness to engage in collective action. More integrative theories suggest that personal interests and social identity concerns represent separate motives, pathways, or motivational trajectories for collective action (Klandermans 1984; Simon et al. 1998; Stürmer and Simon 2004), or such that apply to different people depending on their level of group identification (Louis et al. 2004; van Zomeren and Spears 2009; van Zomeren 2013).

Indeed, conceptualizing personal needs and group-based needs as complementing or even interlinked motivations for collective action may seem reductionist for some, as it supposedly questions the sincerity of activists' concern for the common good. But the focus of social identity models for collective action on group-based experiences, goals, and interests as key motivations for collective action remains particularly perplexing in view of the high *personal* costs such actions often entail. Does the desire to satisfy personal needs indeed undermine, or come at the expense of, the desire to advance and protect the interests of the group? As I will propose in the next sections, the existential approach, and particularly Ernest Becker's seminal works, can inspire a more comprehensive perspective which conceptualizes participation in collective action as an action that allows individuals to satisfy needs associated with both personal and group identities as complementary, rather than competing, motivators of collective action.

Existentialism and the Pursuit of "Heroism"

Despite fundamental differences in their perspectives, one key intuition that brings together existential thinkers from Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger to Otto Rank and Norman Brown is that the quest for meaning is the core aspect and the fundamental drive of the human experience. In his seminal works, *The Denial of Death* (1973) and *Escape from Evil* (1975), cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker reformulated and synthesized some of the fundamental concepts of existential thought into an interdisciplinary perspective on the "problem of man," which focuses on the social and cultural implications of the quest for meaning. Becker's central premise is that the human psyche cannot truly endure the knowledge of human mortality, and that one of human civilization's fundamental psychological roles is to offer a sophisticated, symbolic defensive system designed to deny the inevitability of death (Becker 1973, 1975). To protect themselves from death awareness, human beings strive for a sense of "symbolic immortality": the sense that they and their actions stand out as timeless, meaningful, and unique (Becker 1973). Inspired by Otto Rank, Becker (1973) maintains that this universal need for self-distinction is primarily expressed in the human quest for "heroism": engaging in heroic acts, or pursuing personal "heroism projects," helps individuals realize their need to stand out and thus achieve a sense of symbolic immortality.

According to Becker, however, existential anxiety does not only give rise to the need for self-distinction, but also to the fear of isolation, which compels individuals to merge themselves in a greater whole, namely, to be embedded in a cultural meaning system that protects the individual from the anxiety inherent in the awareness to mortality. Although the need for inclusion and the need for self-distinction are supposedly at odds, Becker's theory suggests that they are in fact intrinsically intertwined, as the meaning systems within which we are embedded provide the context within which individuals' heroism projects can serve their existential function (Becker 1973). Leaving a personal mark on one's meaning system by advancing and protecting its values and interests allows the individual to stand out as heroic and unique, while at the same time preserving and promoting the anxiety-buffering function of the meaning system that satisfies her need for inclusion. To summarize, Becker makes the compelling case that the ultimate path to symbolic immortality is that which integrates the two seemingly opposing ontological motives of inclusion into a larger whole and of heroic self-distinction.

Collective Action as a Heroic Quest for Meaning and Significance

The tension between the pursuit of personal interests and that of group interests as motivators of collective action is akin to the tension between the need for self-distinction and the need for inclusion. According to Becker, however, these two seemingly contradictory needs are in fact intertwined, or can be effectively integrated, via individuals' "heroism projects" in the public sphere. Specifically, collective action allows individuals to stand out from others while simultaneously advancing, protecting, and bolstering the values prescribed by one's cultural meaning system, thus providing individuals with a rare shot at embarking on the kind of "heroism project" described by Becker (Elad-Strenger 2016). Whether it is executed by a group or by solo actors, political and social action always operates in the context of a group which participates, appreciates, or praises those who advance its worldview, values, or interests. By providing individuals with the cultural context in which they can pursue their heroism projects, the attainment of group-based interests complements, and even makes possible, the attainment of personal interests. Collective action, like any other heroism project, cannot be realized in a social or cultural vacuum (Elad-Strenger 2013).

This existential view of activism as a heroic quest for symbolic immortality lends itself

especially well to explaining the motivations underlying participation in violent or radical forms of collective action: the riskier the action, the more it implies self-sacrifice for the group, and therefore holds the promise of symbolic immortality. Extant literature has provided evidence that existential threats, in the form of worldview threats (e.g., Elad-Strenger and Shahar 2018; Pyszczynski et al. 2003), threats to the existence of one's group (Canetti et al. 2017, 2018; Elad-Strenger et al. 2021), or reminders of one's own mortality (Solomon et al. 2015), are particularly strong predictors of individuals' willingness to engage in violence. Paradoxically, risking one's life to protect the group from threat, or to advance its interests, can be seen as holding the ultimate promise of symbolic immortality, as it represents the most extreme form possible of self-sacrifice to protect the group from threat (Kruglanski et al. 2009; Kruglanski and Orehek 2011). This is particularly true for activists who are inspired by religious ideologies that also promise them literal immortality, alongside symbolic immortality, via the afterlife beliefs they promote (e.g., Vail et al. 2010). Of course, some may see those who engage in violent collective action as "villains" rather than as "heroes." Or, to use the old cliché, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." However, insofar as the context for the activist's quest for symbolic immortality is provided by the group or community which sees her as a "hero," her actions will nonetheless constitute an effective heroism project.

Importantly, the conceptualization of collective action as a heroic quest for symbolic immortality by no means suggests that activists are acting not to improve society or to eliminate unjust systems, but simply to reduce their own existential anxiety. The human need to avoid existential insecurity and terror through heroic acts in the public sphere in no way contradicts their genuine interest in solving real social problems or act toward improving society. Quite to the contrary, the existential view of activism suggests that the seemingly "egotistical" motive of self-distinction is precisely that which makes group-based behaviors more likely and more rewarding, thus allowing for an integration of personal existential needs into a broader motivational theory of collective action.

Another important issue, of course, is that the desire to fulfill the need for self-distinction can be fulfilled by embarking on a variety of much "safer" public endeavors, such as making a significant contribution to science, literature, and art, or pursuing celebrity status in other domains, as Becker himself (1962) has noted. Any such action may grant the individual a heroic status of sort, by allowing her to live forever in the hearts and minds of later generations. However, by engaging in action that is explicitly aimed at promoting the group's interests and goals, the "hero" also strengthens her anxiety-buffering meaning system, provides guidance for what behaviors are most praised and remembered in the context of this meaning system, exemplifies how best to cope with challenges and threats to meaning. By providing motivational and inspiring stories about their heroic actions for the collective, activists may fulfill particularly important psychological needs for their communities (Allison and Goethals 2014).

Conclusion

The social identity perspective has made an invaluable contribution to activism research by emphasizing the key role of group identity, and individuals' group identity concerns, in mobilizing collective action participation. Inspired by the existential school of thought, this chapter suggests that rather than constituting a separate or even competing motivational path for collective action, personal identity concerns may in fact facilitate group identity concerns, as motivators of collective action participation. More specifically, in line with Becker's (1973, 1975) conceptualization of "symbolic immortality," this chapter suggests that acting to advance group-based goals and interests may provide individuals a particularly effective means to pursue their personal need for heroic self-distinction. By emphasizing the interdependence of the seemingly opposing ontological motives for self-distinction and social inclusion, the existential perspective provides

additional tools for understanding the motivations underlying such collectively beneficial, but often personally risky, actions.

Cross-References

▶ Costly Signaling Theory
▶ Psychoanalytic Approach to Heroism
▶ Universal Urge to Heroism

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