

Volition and Belongingness: Social Movements, Volition, Self-Esteem, and the Need to Belong

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Social movements require many individual people to hook their individual selves up to a broad movement that may or may not eventually bring pragmatic, tangible benefits. How does this happen? What happens to the self in the process of belonging to a social movement? How does the social movement need to accommodate the idiosyncrasies and demands of individual selfhood? This chapter examines some current work in understanding the self and applies it to these basic questions about social movements.

What Is the Self?

Psychologists have studied the self for decades. Their biggest emphasis has, however, been on cognitive structures and processes: self-concept, self-schema, self-awareness, self-esteem, and the like. The cognitive representations are indeed an important aspect of the self, but they are probably not the only aspect. This chapter focuses on the two other main aspects of self.

The first of these is the interpersonal self. The self originates in social relationships, insofar as a baby begins to act and learn about itself in the context of its family and caregiver relationships. As the child grows to adulthood, it continues to define itself and be defined by its connections to other people. The self is thus fundamentally and inevitably a member of social groups, from dyads to nations. The self is a tool for forming and maintaining relationships with other people. Selves are developed and shaped so as to help connect the person to other people, as well as to society's institutions.

The other neglected aspect of selfhood is the executive function. This is the part of self that makes choices and decisions, takes responsibility,

actively initiates action, and exerts self-control. The frequent effort to exert control is one of the most important functions of the self, and selves are developed and shaped by the demands of exerting control.

Taken together, these three aspects of self form a comprehensive basis that can be used to integrate most or perhaps all of what social psychology researchers have found about the self (see Baumeister 1998). First, the self consists of a cognitive structure based on reflexive consciousness, in which awareness turns around on its source and constructs a meaningful representation of one's own person. Second, the self encompasses a member of relationships and a holder of social roles, and thus the self is defined by its social and interpersonal connections. Third, the self actively makes choices, directs action, assumes responsibility, and alters and controls its own responses.

The Interpersonal Self and the Need to Belong

The fundamentally social nature of human beings makes the interpersonal function of selfhood essential. It seems reasonable to assume that people are driven by a basic motivation to form and maintain social bonds. Indeed, most theories of personality have proposed that people have some sort of innate drive to have social connections or relationships. A literature review by Baumeister and Leary (1995) concluded that people are universally characterized by a "need to belong," which requires two things for satisfaction. First, the person must have an ongoing series of pleasant (or neutral) interactions with the same other person or small set of people. Second, these interactions must occur within the context of an ongoing relationship characterized by mutual caring and concern.

Group competition is one corollary of the need to belong that may be quite relevant to social movements. When one's rivals or opponents are organized into a group, it becomes imperative to be part of a group oneself, insofar as individuals would generally be at a steep disadvantage when competing against groups for scarce resources. Consistent with this view, there are signs that competition enhances the tendency to form groups (Hoyle, Pinkley, and Insko 1989).

Self-esteem is also relevant. Leary and his colleagues have proposed that self-esteem serves as a *sociometer*, that is, an internal measure of one's belongingness (Leary et al., 1995; Leary and Baumeister in press). High self-esteem indicates that one has strong appeal to others (i.e., one is competent, likeable, attractive, and moral) and is likely to be sought out by them to participate in groups and relationships. Low self-esteem is associated with a greater perceived likelihood of being excluded or rejected. Such

enough, self-esteem does seem to rise and fall with actual events of social inclusion or rejection (Leary et al. 1995). Across many studies, there is a fairly substantial negative correlation between self-esteem and social anxiety (averaging about -0.50 ; see Leary and Kowalski 1995).

Implications for Social Movements

These basic views of human selfhood and the need to belong offer a basis for several theoretical propositions about social movements.

Joining, Leaving, and Belonging

People will join movements as a way of satisfying the need to belong. Research has confirmed the importance of belongingness to participation in such groups and movements. Cable (1992) analyzed participation in a women's social movement organization and found that initial recruitment occurs through social networks. McAdam (e.g., 1982) has compiled considerable evidence that people move into social movements, and sometimes out of them as well, on the basis of social ties. The two main paths by which social movements form both rely on such interpersonal connections. One is that a preexisting group of people becomes radicalized as a result of social or circumstantial changes, and so the group takes on a new character as being a social movement, with many or most members now serving as activists. The other is progressive recruitment of individuals into the incipient movement, and here, too, the candidates for joining are often identified and recruited on the basis of preexisting social connections or relationships to other people who have already joined the movement.

Support for the two-path theory can be found in research by Cable, Walsh, and Warland (1988). These researchers studied involvement in protest movements following the Three Mile Island accident. In two communities, alliances based on shared grievances were constructed, and in two larger communities, existing networks were utilized.

Sometimes the quest for belongingness and support is clearly the major factor. Barnett and MacDonald (1986) found that people who joined the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood were more interested in affiliating with other people who chose to remain childless, presumably in order to bolster their confidence in their own decision, rather than to pursue the goal of reducing societal pressures to have children.

Social Conditions

Belongingness theory also makes predictions about the kind of circumstances in which a new social movement can most effectively gain

adherents. If people do indeed have a need to belong, then society will be stable and successful only if it enables the vast majority of people to satisfy this need—that is, society has to provide people with a stable, confident network of social relationships. Any event that disrupts these social networks, leaving large numbers of people relatively unattached, will provide a fertile recruiting ground for a new social movement.

Such events may facilitate social movements by making available a reservoir of people who are available to join groups or movements. Another type of event may give rise to a social movement in a quite different fashion. As already noted, some movements begin when an entire community is mobilized into political activism. An event that dramatizes a grievance or need of a particular community may result in the formation of a social movement, insofar as the members of the community begin to work together to secure their rights or other goals. In such a case, the preexisting structure of social bonds facilitates the group, and indeed any individual who is reluctant to become involved in the movement may feel subtle or even overt pressure to join in the work. The structure of social bonds thus forms a useful resource for pulling a significant number of people into the movement.

Charismatic Leaders

Many social movements have highly charismatic leaders. A charismatic leader may appeal particularly to people whose motivation to join the movement is to satisfy a deficit in belongingness. After all, if the motivation is simply to help bring about some social change or to identify with some ideological belief, then it matters little whether the movement is led by a flamboyant and charming figure, or a quiet administrator, or even a committee. In contrast, if the motivation is to achieve a sense of personal connection, then the vivid figure of the charismatic leader is centrally important, because the new recruit can feel that he or she is forming a personal attachment to an important, attractive, powerful individual.

The appeal of charismatic leaders has been linked to self-concept issues by Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993). These authors noted that many charismatic leaders perform actions that engage self-related motivations of their followers, such as maintaining self-esteem, and these motivations help keep people involved in the organization.

The advantages held by a single charismatic leader for satisfying members' belongingness needs may explain the eventual failures of some attempts to run social movements with committees. The most famous such committee in history is probably the Committee for Public Safety that

presided over the French Revolution. It is perhaps not surprising that this brief phase of committee rule was followed by the rise of one of the most charismatic figures in history, Napoleon. In our own century, the Russian Revolution was likewise initially led by a group, but gradually it was replaced by the charismatic rule of Lenin and then Stalin. Stalin's charisma is perplexing, both because of the horrific internal violence he directed and because of his rather reclusive lifestyle, but it is undeniable.

Individual Differences

Social groups and movements may appeal to people in different ways depending on the structure of the particular self. Personality traits linked to belongingness (such as attachment style) can dictate how the individual views and experiences participation in the movement.

The most interesting category from the perspective of attachment theory is the people who can be classified as avoidant, that is, people who find intimacy uncomfortable and who feel claustrophobic distress when they start to get too close to other people (Hazan and Shaver 1994). Despite this tendency to avoid intimate attachments, these people are presumably still guided by the basic human need to belong. The result is a thorny problem of how to manage social life so as to satisfy the need to belong without getting too close to other people.

Avoidant people have various ways of addressing this problem. One common solution, apparently, is to cultivate a somewhat broad social circle, so one can interact with a number of people on a regular basis without getting too close to any one of them (Tidwell, Reis, and Shaver 1996). Such an approach would fit in quite well with participation in social movements. Participating in a social movement can help the avoidant person feel that he or she is part of a valuable, important group and can provide plenty of social interactions within a suitable framework of ongoing social connectedness. But no one has to get too close.

Differences in self-esteem may also be relevant. According to sociometer theory, people with high self-esteem normally enjoy the comfortable confidence that they will be included by others, whereas people with low self-esteem may fear that they could end up alone. The direct satisfaction of belongingness that a social movement can provide should therefore be more valuable to people with low self-esteem.

Some signs do link social movement participation with self-esteem. Certainly some organized social movements, such as the women's movement and the NAACP, have included raising group self-esteem as a central feature of their agenda. Ferree (1983) examined working-class women's

reactions to the women's movement and found that supporters of the movement emphasized self-esteem benefits of the movements.

This is not, of course, to suggest that people with high self-esteem will never join social movements. Still, they will be less likely than others to join merely for the sake of belonging. To a person with high self-esteem, joining a social movement may, in general, be a pragmatic decision based on whether participation in the movement is seen as likely to confer particular material benefits to the individual. The cost-benefit calculation, in other words, is likely to make a substantial difference as to whether the person finds the group worthwhile. In contrast, people with low self-esteem may be more readily recruited by many groups, regardless of specific pragmatic benefits. To the person with low self-esteem, being wanted and accepted by the group may be reason enough to join.

High self-esteem may be crucially helpful to the leaders and organizers of social movements. After all, founding a movement requires one to get other people to join. A person with low self-esteem may lack the confidence that other people will want to affiliate with him or her. In contrast, someone with high self-esteem is likely to expect that other people will want to accompany him or her in this work. People with high self-esteem may be more likely than others to be confident that the movement can actually accomplish its goals and change the system. They may also be less daunted by defeats and setbacks.

A final relevant set of differences concerns whether the person has recently experienced a loss of social ties. If significant relationships have been lost, the person should be more desirous of forming new ones, and joining a social movement may offer one method of accomplishing this. Divorce and marital separation, for example, entail the loss of a powerful and important social attachment. There is some evidence that postdivorce adjustment depends on getting involved in various social activities that promote the formation of new bonds (Berman and Turk 1981).

Elderly women often lose their social connections because their children grow up and move away and their husbands die before the woman. Cain (1988) found that many such women reported increased community involvement to cope with the social losses and with the resulting anxiety and low self-esteem.

Moving to a new locale may similarly disrupt social connections, particularly when most of one's social circle is left behind. One familiar prototype of that situation involves the young person who leaves home to attend a university, leaving family and friends behind. Many authors have noted the seeming adaptive value of having students get involved in various social

movements and groups. Weir and Okun (1989) presented questionnaire data showing a link between satisfaction with college and contact with organizations on campus, although clearly that correlation could be explained in multiple ways. Hood, Riahiinejad, and White (1986) found that involvement in campus groups was related to growth in confidence among college students over a four-year period. Such findings suggest that social participation builds self-esteem.

Volition and the Self's Executive Function

A vital but easily neglected aspect of selfhood is its executive function, which is also sometimes called the *agent* or *active principle*. The self makes choices and decisions, accepts responsibility for actions, and initiates responses, all of which are central activities of the executive function. The function is also responsible for altering the self's responses, such as inhibiting a response that would normally occur but that might prove under some circumstances to be maladaptive or undesirable.

Recent research in our own laboratory has begun to suggest that the executive function operates like a muscle or energy: it is a limited, renewable resource that is depleted after exertion. So far, it appears that all the vastly different activities of the executive function draw on the same limited resource. If this is correct, then what the self can accomplish through its own active intervention may generally be quite limited. Judicious management of this limited resource is thus essential to the self's effective operation.

Research Findings on Ego Depletion

To test the energy (strength) model of self-control, we conducted a series of studies in which subjects were typically asked to perform two consecutive but seemingly unrelated acts of self-control, in order to see whether performance on the second would be impaired by the depletion of resources resulting from the first. Thus, in one study (Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998), people were asked to regulate their emotional states (either increasing or decreasing their feelings) in response to an upsetting video, and afterward these people showed lower physical stamina on a handgrip endurance task, as compared with people who watched the same video but did not try to alter their emotions. In another study, people who tried to suppress forbidden thoughts later showed less persistence (than control subjects) in the face of failure on an anagram task.

Making choices and accepting responsibility also draw on this same energy resource (and produce similar impairments of self-control afterward;

Baumeister et al. 1998). In addition, depletion of the self's energy (through initial acts of self-control) made people more passive in their subsequent decision making: they were more likely to go along passively with the status quo rather than make an active choice to change things, even when things were not going well for them.

Two implications are relevant. First, the self uses the same energy resource to do many different things: regulate emotions, make decisions, take responsibility, suppress unwanted thoughts, persist in the face of failure, respond actively. Second, this resource is quite limited. A small exertion seems to deplete it.

Importance of Executive Function

Our findings suggest that volition is costly to the human self, in that it depletes a very scarce resource. To preserve this resource, therefore, it would be sensible and adaptive to let most of one's behavior be guided by habit, routine, external forces, and mindless or automatic responses to simple cues and guidelines.

Is it valuable enough to conserve? Even if only 5 percent of behavior involved volition, that 5 percent could have a widely disproportionate effect on the person's success or failure in life. As an analogy, consider steering wheels in cars. Most cars are probably driven straight ahead most of time, possibly even as much as 95 percent. Some might suggest that one could simply ignore the other 5 percent and build cars without steering wheels. Obviously such cars would be seriously deficient in their ability to reach most destinations. A car without a steering wheel is not 95 percent as good as a car with one, even if the steering wheel is only used 5 percent of the time.

Research has particularly confirmed the adaptive value of self-regulation (see Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice 1994 for review). Deficient self-regulation is implicated in a majority of the personal and social problems that face today's American society, including addiction, crime, violence, alcoholism, teen pregnancy, venereal disease, school dropout and failure, and the like. Meanwhile, longitudinal work by Mischel and his colleagues has confirmed that children who show better self-control (in a delay of gratification procedure) at age four were more successful socially and academically more than a decade later, as they moved into adult life (Mischel, Shoda, and Peake 1988; Shoda, Mischel, and Peake 1990).

Implications for Social Movements

Joining

One set of implications concerns the process of joining a social movement. The act of joining can be made either active or passive, and the appeal and

success of the group may differ depending on which it is (and on how those procedures fit circumstances).

If an act of volition is required to join a social movement, then social movements will only flourish when a reservoir of people exists who have *surplus volition*. The availability of such volition is thus one of the important resources that need to be mobilized for the sake of social movements, according to the resource mobilization theory of social movements (see McAdam 1982, chap. 2). The remarkable political activism of American women during the nineteenth century is an important example. As has often been discussed (e.g., Cott 1977; Margolis 1984), the industrial revolution took over many of women's traditional tasks, leaving them with far less to do. For example, innumerable female hours had been spent spinning cloth and weaving clothes, but the new industrial textile mills took over those jobs and produced clothes much more cheaply and efficiently than the home weaving could ever have done. Other tasks, such as processing food for storage and making candles, likewise shifted out of the home and into the factory. The broad result was the nineteenth century's "Woman Question," which was a question of what to do with women, because they no longer had to spend nearly every waking minute in productive work that was essential for the family's survival. For present purposes, the important aspect of this development was the unused surplus of volitional energy that nineteenth-century women (particularly of the middle classes) had. Joining social movements was a way for them to allow their underused selves some exercise.

In contrast, when current circumstances are so oppressive that people must use all their volitional resources to survive, social movements are less likely to find many converts. This does run contrary to the simple prediction that social movements will increase when times are bad (because people want to change the system). It does help explain, however, why the working poor may be less prone than either the middle class or the unemployed to join new social movements.

Consistent with this view, some evidence indicates that some protest movements paradoxically seem to gain force just when conditions have improved. In czarist Russia, the increase in terrorism and revolutionary movements coincided with an improvement in social and living conditions. The same is true of France before the revolution (Tocqueville 1955). In recent American history, it is generally accepted that the 1960s were the decade of maximal protest and other socially activist movements. Yet the 1960s were an era of economic boom. When the economy soured in the 1970s, the protest movements seem to have died off. Although these pat-

terns are undoubtedly the result of complex multicausation, they do fit the hypothesis that people will tend to join protest movements when times are sufficiently good that they have surplus volitional resources that are not needed for the basic economic and material demands of life.

Even today, some protest and activist social movements do not necessarily attract the people who stand to gain the most by them. Many inner cities suffer from severe problems of pollution and environmental degradation, yet African Americans are heavily underrepresented in environmental groups.

In short, this work suggests a key hypothesis about the more fertile, promising preconditions for a social movement: the availability of surplus volition. A movement may be best able to flourish when there is a reservoir of people who have the volitional energy to participate. People who are chronically depleted by keeping up with the demands of everyday life will be less likely to become involved in such a movement. Hence, ironically, sometimes the people who are worst off will not be the ones most likely to join a movement to seek change.

Meanwhile, social movements that actively recruit members may require quite different circumstances, because the individual can join passively, without making an active choice. People who are depleted may be most easily recruited into such groups, because they lack whatever volition would be required to say no.

The difference is far from trivial. Research by Fazio, Sherman, and Hui (1982) indicated that people are more strongly affected by active than by passive choices. Cioffi and Garner (1996) showed that people who made an active choice to volunteer ended up being much more helpful, in fact, than were people who passively consented.

Escape from Choice

A classic work by Erich Fromm entitled *Escape from Freedom* (1965) proposed that people are drawn to join certain groups because they want to be rid of the burden of freedom and the responsibilities and pressures that accompany it. Ego depletion theory can explain this appeal without proposing any pathological or maladaptive causes. Choice is draining, and no group that dictates behavior patterns (e.g., animal rights activists are encouraged to become vegetarians and avoid wearing leather) may appeal to people who want to conserve their limited resources.

Zealous adherence to the group may be facilitated by the freedom from other decisions and choices, insofar as adopting the party line or movement ethos can dictate how to make a broad variety of choices. Commitment to

a group may therefore appeal to people whose daily lives are marked by having to cope with pressures and demands (provided, of course, that these demands are not so extreme and all-encompassing that they preclude any other concerns).

Several findings reported by Freeman (1979) support this reasoning. In the early years of the National Organization for Women, for example, the organization had two separate branches: one consisting of women associated with governmental commissions on the status of women, and another formed by women who had been involved in the protest movements of the 1960s. The policymaker group had more power and prestige than the other women, but they were much less zealous than the women who lacked resources such as money and space. Likewise, evidence about voter registration drives in the South during the 1960s found that the people who had less personal money were more successful registering voters, possibly because of greater zeal.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on two of the self's most important functions. First, the self is a tool designed to help achieve social connection to other people. Second, the self is an executive agent that makes choices and exerts control. We have proposed that both these functions are relevant to social movements. To the extent that participation in social movements can help the self accomplish these functions, it will be able to attract and sustain the participation of many individual members.

It is noteworthy that these appeals may be largely independent of the actual, pragmatic agenda of the group or movement. We do not mean to imply that the goals or purposes of the group are irrelevant to participation. Undoubtedly they are relevant, and they help determine who joins which movement. Still, we propose that looking only at the group's goals or agenda can furnish an impoverished view of why people join and leave social movements. A significant part of the group's or movement's appeal may lie in how it addresses the needs of the individual self in regard to belongingness and volition.

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