

Psycho-social precipitants to protest: A social identity perspective

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Abstract

Protest is a phenomenon marked by discomfort, disapproval, disagreement and dissent, and triggered due to the awareness and recognition of injustice, grievance and shared sense of belongingness to a group, particularly disadvantaged. Emotions and values also play their role in individual's preparedness for and actual participation in protest. These precipitating factors are responsible for prompting, motivating and sustaining any protest action. Though there are various theoretical approaches to explain protest and social movement such as break down theories, resource mobilization theories, political opportunity approaches, and cultural theories, the scope of present paper is to discuss the psycho-social factors such as injustice, grievance, identity, emotions from social identity theoretical position reviewing some of the existing literature.

Keywords: protest, social identity, emotion, injustice

Introduction

At many junctures of time in the history the act of rebellion against the regime has taken place. This phenomenon in the earlier period was known as act of rebellion, uprising, mutiny, and revolt. In present times it is labeled as activism, movement, collective action, and people's struggle or resistance. The common elements in the understanding and dynamics of these phenomena though occurring at different periods of time is the intention and conviction of registering protest by dissenting and saying 'no' to suppression, injustice, and humiliation.

The phenomena of protest are being witnessed globally in the form of unrest, violent disturbance, marches, demonstrations, strike, occupation etc. Tahrir square, Tunisian revolutions, Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street are some recent events worldwide. In the Indian context, we can witness anti-corruption movement, Nirbhaya protest, Anti land acquisition bill agitation, students protest, farmers protest and environmental protest and so on and so forth. The reason of (re)occurrence of protest episodes and its longevity can be situated in the larger socio-political context which is influenced and/or characterized by the present global economic trends, environmental issues, democratic concerns, human rights awareness and peace appreciation.

Academic disciplines such as sociology, political science, anthropology and psychology attempt to understand and explain protest from various vantage points. The discipline of social psychology tries to explain protest taking into consideration certain meso and micro level variables and constructs such as social context, culture, identity, emotion, motivation, and grievance.

In this paper, social-psychological explanation of protest participation and its dynamics in relation to factors such as injustice, identity, emotion, and values from the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) [32] will be discussed.

Conceptualizing Protest

The term protest has its roots in the Latin word *protestari* which means to assert publically. The Cambridge dictionary gives the meaning of the word protest as 'a strong complaint expressing disagreement, disapproval, or opposition' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary Online, 2008).

Protest may be seen as an act of negation and denial. The act at the same time is an act of affirmation and conviction to preserve certain rights, values and dignity. Protest is triggered by the violation or infringement over rights, space, entitlements and value. Protest has been given legitimate space in the form of political opposition and constitutional right to dissent in democratic countries.

Several authors have attempted to conceptualize the term 'protest', having slight overlaps with the terms social movement and collective action. Certain common themes in the definitions include some kind of intentional action to express grievance and promote change (e.g. Wright *et al.*, 1990; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998) [41, 27]. Researchers have broadened the definition of collective action and protest to include behaviors enacted by individuals on behalf of a group other than their own. Men, for example, may engage in collective action to combat sexism against women (e.g., Wiley, Srinivasan, Finke, Firnhaber, & Shilinsky, 2013) [40] and members of majority racial groups may engage in collective action to fight discrimination against racial minorities (van Zomeren, Postmes, Spears, & Bettache, 2011) [39]. Likewise, occupiers engaged in collective action on behalf of various disadvantaged groups (Kilkenny, 2013) [11].

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) [31-32] offers a framework to understand collective action and protest. The theory proposes that it

is individuals' perceptions of socio-structural characteristics that determine their identification with the group, and any threat to the identity leads individuals to take participation in social change strategies (Kawakami & Dion, 1995; Mummendey *et al.*, 1999; Wright *et al.*, 1990) ^[9, 23, 41]. First, group members should perceive the boundary between their (low-status) group and the comparison (high-status) group to be impermeable, such that they cannot join the high-status group and improve their individual position (Ellemers, 1993) ^[5]. Second, the group's low-status position should be perceived as illegitimate or undeserved (e.g., Mummendey *et al.*, 1999) ^[23]. This means that people should be able to imagine alternatives to the status quo (Tajfel, 1978) ^[31]. And third, the inequality should be perceived as unstable, reflecting a sense of agency that the social structure can be changed (e.g., Wright *et al.*, 1990) ^[41].

Here it is important to discuss in brief the relative deprivation theory (Runciman, 1966; Gurr 1970; Crosby 1982) ^[27, 3]. The theory proposes two kinds of deprivation: egoistic and fraternal. When individual compares personal position with members of out-group, the perceived deprivation is known as egoistic. When individual compares the position and status as being members of a particular group or on behalf of the group with the other group, the perceived deprivation is known as fraternal. Therefore, we can say that personal deprivation is egoistic and group deprivation is fraternal. Research suggests that fraternal deprivation is particularly important for engagement in protest (Major, 1994; Martin, 1986) ^[17, 19]. Individual experiencing both personal deprivation and group deprivation are highly motivated to participate in protest (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2010) ^[34]. The social identity theory coupled with relative deprivation theory can best explain why people protest.

What leads to Protest

Over the past few decades, social psychologists have attempted to explore the dynamics of individual participation in political protest movements and collective action. These motives range from the 'rational' view of individuals that proposes that an analysis of the perceived costs and benefits is what encourages protest participation (e.g. Klandermans, 1984) ^[12] to the importance of collective identity (Klandermans, Kriesi, & Tarrow, 1988) ^[13] as a motivator in protest participation. Later, emotions (e.g. group based anger) and the view of the individual as a "passionate" economist became dominant. Klandermans *et al.* (2002) ^[15] has noted that people's concerns about social and economic issues do not always translate into collective action. A different combination of factors may come together to motivate participation depending upon the context.

Injustice provokes protest

Injustice is perceived and experienced when the individual or the group members become aware and conscious of the fact that their entitlements are denied to them. When they perceive such denial of rights as illegitimate, they tend to raise voice against the violation

of rights. The sense of injustice is evoked when there is an encroachment into one's space, rights, and values.

The sense of injustice experienced is not merely at the individual level; and may be experienced at the group level as well. That is to say, individuals with a high level of identification with the in-group may feel aggrieved by the injustice meted out to their group members. This understanding is also reflected in Runciman's (1966) ^[27] idea of fraternal deprivation. There is empirical support for the idea that feelings of fraternal or group deprivation or disadvantage may lead to collective action (e.g. Dube & Guimond, 1986) ^[2]. Group members' awareness and consciousness of grievance and injustice may lead to them uniting to fight against the injustice. A similar idea is proposed by Smith *et al.* (2015) ^[29] who have described how a normative conflict (discrepancy between a descriptive norm and injunctive norm) creates a sense of grievance and injustice in an individual and motivates them to communicate this grievance with group members which may lead to the formation of new groups for protest and a possibility of social action for change.

Identity creates solidarity

Identity is the sense and evaluation of 'who one is' in terms of one's uniqueness or idiosyncrasy. Social identity is the evaluation of shared similarities or commonalities of members belonging to a group. Social identity is about the shared characteristic features that define a group vis-à-vis individuals. In the social context individuals carry the identity of being members to more than one group at the same time, e.g. someone is Indian, female, north Indian, and also businessman at the same time. It is pertinent to note that individuals bear multiple identities i.e. being the member of various groups at one time. According to Self-categorization theory (Turner *et al.*, 1986) ^[33], which one of the individual's multiple identities becomes salient depends on the situation or context. This means the individual attaches more value to one of his/her group membership or identity than the other depending on the social context. Group membership gives an individual a sense of extension to his/her being leading to sense of collective identity. The identification with other members of the group creates a bonding and solidarity which prompts the group members to think that they share the same fate. Therefore, any predicament that the group is confronted with makes the members feel concerned and these members may act in direction to rescue the group. Scholars (e.g. Reicher, 1984; Klandermans & de Weerd, 2000; Simon *et al.*, 1998) ^[25, 14, 28] have long been interested in exploring the role of collective identity in protest behavior. From this vantage point, the social identity theory explains the phenomena of protest in the context, in which groups co-exist, cooperate, collaborate and confront. When the members of an in-group perceive the denial of legitimate rights in comparison to/due to some other out-group, members are likely to participate in protest to uplift and achieve a better status for their group.

In the context of the Italian water movement, Mazzoni *et al.*'s (2015) ^[20] study confirmed that movement identification predicts intended activism and that it is predicted by right violation, participative- and group-

efficacy beliefs. Their model emphasizes perceived violation of a principle (i.e., the right to water) as a specific psychological process underlying moral motivation and its relationship with movement identification.

Many authors have combined identity and injustice as variables explaining protest participation (e.g. Blader, 2007; Kelly & Berlinger, 1995) ^[1, 10]. Mannarini, Roccato, Fedi and Rovere (2009) ^[18] tried to identify factors enhancing the decision of individuals to become activists in the LULU movement. Results suggested that in the LULU conflict, sense of injustice and collective identity were important explanatory variable among the six factors that are likely to predict protest behaviors. The other four being: collective efficacy, community involvement, the perception of being surrounded by a majority who is against the unwanted installation, and place attachment. van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears (2008) ^[36] also proposed an integrative social identity model of collective action (SIMCA) that incorporates three socio-psychological perspectives that focus on subjective injustice, identity, and efficacy as key predictors of collective action. SIMCA proposes that social identity is central to collective action because it directly motivates collective action and simultaneously bridges the injustice and efficacy explanations of collective action (p. 505).

Emotions are the adhesive

No human enterprise is without emotions, whether it's personal or social or political actions including protest. Human beings are essentially emotional beings. An array of emotions ranging from anger to despair, crying to shouting by the participants can be witnessed in protest demonstrations.

According to social identity theory, the group members not only compare their group status with other referent group at the cognitive level but this comparison is a source of engendering various emotions. Individuals feel positive emotions for their own group members and are likely to feel negative emotions for the members of adversary out-group. It is also suggested by the theory that individuals value positively to the membership of group as they derive self-esteem from their group. Emotions may play such a prominent role for the group members that even in the apprehension of dire consequences and opportunity of group exit for better personal or social status; they chose to remain with their own group. Such are the adhesive power of emotions for individuals in the group context.

Sturmer and Simon (2009) ^[30] compared two established psychological pathways to social movement participation (calculation of costs and benefits of participation, and group identification) with a third – anger about collective injustices. Their experimental data, in line with van Zomeren *et al.*'s (2004) ^[38] assumption, shows that that group-based anger may indeed exert a unique or direct effect on group members' willingness to participate in social movement activities but unlike cost–benefit calculation and group identification, is a relatively weak predictor of collective action participation when there are other less costly means to reduce this emotion.

Values give the conviction

Values guide the course of individual's life. A group membership imbues individuals with certain values that the group celebrates and will not sacrifice in any condition as they are considered not only non-negotiable but sacrosanct also. Values provide the norms of conduct and social action to group members. Values are the torch-light in the dark times of perplexity and uncertainty for a group. It is widely observed that the violation of a particular group's norms or values trigger strong protest by the group members in its defense. Values act as the basis of judgment for group members about what is worthwhile to protect for the existence of the group and its members.

Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and van Dijk (2009) ^[35] differentiate between the instrumental and ideological pathways to protest participation. Within the ideological pathway, the role of beliefs, values, and ideologies in motivating protest participation has recently received attention (Hornsey *et al.*, 2006; Jasper, 2007; Klandermans, 2004) ^[6, 8, 16]. According to Rokeach (1973) ^[26] violated values are “worth challenging, protesting, and arguing about” (p. 13). Violation of one's values instigates members to express their views and protest participation is one way to do so.

Apart from these other variables such as efficacy, social embeddedness, and certain context specific factors are also responsible to trigger and maintain the processes of protest. Authors have directed attention to variables such as moral conviction (van Zomeren & Spears, 2009) ^[37], ideology (van Stekelenburg *et al.*, 2009) ^[35], perceived pervasiveness of inequality (Iyer & Ryan, 2009) ^[7], in-group norms (Postmes & Smith, 2009) ^[24], opinion-based groups (McGarty *et al.*, 2009) ^[21], as well as empowerment and positive emotion (Drury & Reicher, 2009) ^[4] that play roles in protest participation.

Concluding comments

It is evident that protest as an individual or social action is a historically continuous phenomenon. Social psychological enquiry into this form of collective action is relatively a recent event. The various forms of grievances are ubiquitous in any society which creates a sense of injustice in the aggrieved that may lead them to the path of protest. It is identified that the phenomenon of protest is determined by various psycho-social factors such as identity, emotion and values. The perception of denial of entitlement at individual or group level is at the root of any protest. However, it is difficult to conclude which variables or factors play more prominent role in determining the preparedness and the actual participation to protest. Mostly researches have been conducted taking into account all these variable, still further attempts are required to explore which variable are more salient and play more prominent roles in specific situations. It is also imperative to identify specific contextual variables to be considered and incorporated into the integrated models as protest takes place in a complex socio-political context. Moreover, the comparative studies across cultures are needed to identify the specificity and generalizability of factors playing role in protest participation.

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