Communities Mobilizing to Help Themselves

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Community Mobilization

• Ordinary care-taking or maintenance activities
  – Picking up trash, monitoring crime, circulating newsletters, sports leagues for kids, parent-teacher associations, visiting/feeding the elderly, etc.

• Emergency Responses
  – First-aid for neighbors, rebuilding homes, protest events, letter writing campaigns, etc.
Dimensions of Mobilization

• Micro
  – Individual motivations, interests, grievances, needs, etc.
  – Sociologists usually ignore these

• Structural
  – Networks, organizations, political opportunities, resources, etc.
  – Sociologists and political scientists have traditionally focused on these

• Symbolic
  – Framing, collective efficacy, discursive opportunities, identities
  – Sociologists have recently focused on these

• Spatial
  – New topics for sociologists
I. Structural Conditions

• The focus is typically on social capital (Putnam, 1993)
  – Networks of civic engagement
  – Trust
  – Norms of reciprocity

• These are public goods that reside in the group or community not in individuals

• Networks can be inter-personal or inter-organizational
Putnam’s Social Capital

**SOCIAL CAPITAL**
- Networks of Civic Engagement, e.g., Neigh associations, Political parties, Sports Leagues, etc.
- Norms of Reciprocity

**COLLECTIVE ACTION**
- Collective Efficacy (Sense of Empowerment)
- Communication (Monitoring)
- Reputations (Credible Sanctions)
- Inter-personal Trust

- Protest events, Letter writing campaigns, Self help efforts/Self regulation
Events

• Membership in organizations is not as important as participation in events & activities, e.g., meetings, social gatherings, projects, convenings, task forces, conferences, governance, etc.
  
  – When people are together and interact these outcomes are more likely than if they simply attend events, write a check, or make a donation
Collective Efficacy

• People seem to need a sense of empowerment in order to move forward on common problems
  – “Expectations for action within a collectivity (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993)”

• Not based on people knowing each other but on perceiving trust and inferring shared expectations about public behavior (Sampson, 2012)
Bridging Vs. Bonding Venues (Putnam, 2000)

• Bonding venues, e.g., church memberships or unions, perpetuate cleavages as members are quite similar
  – Ties tend to be ‘strong’ and with folks like yourself
• Bridging venues, e.g., sports leagues, political parties (in a two-party system) force different kinds of people to interact with each other
  – Ties tend to be ‘weak’ and with folks different than you
• Question whether more effective mobilizations are between different or similar people
  – For example, black & white, rich & poor, Christian & Muslim, etc.
Bridging vs. Bonding Venues

• Yes, a closed, homogeneous network with strong ties engenders trust among those in that family, congregation, neighborhood, or bowling team
  – But this creates a Balkanized community and little community wide cooperation (Granovetter, 1973)

• But, a more open, heterogeneous network with weak ties connects disparate people together
  – Supposedly resulting in more broad based mobilizations
Brokers

- ‘Brokers’ are often useful to span the chasm between groups by having weak ties to each (Vasi, 2011)
  - Sometimes people, e.g., community organizers, social entrepreneurs
  - Sometimes organizations, e.g., network administrative organizations (Provan & Kenis, 2008), mediating organizations (McQuarrie and Krumholz, 2011)
Example: The Structure of the Network Matters
Integrated Community Structure

Organization A → Organization B → Organization C → Organization D

Event X

HH1 → HH2 → HH3

Event Y

HH4 → HH5

Event Z

HH6 → HH7
Observations

• Premised on a Theory of Collective Action similar to Mancur Olson (1965) and James Coleman (1990)
  – Indivisible or public goods, free riding, selective incentives

• Key is to create conditions where...
  – People identify with the collective (we feeling/sense of empowerment)
  – People willingly contribute resources to the endeavor (trust that others will reciprocate because of communication and potential loss of face)

• However, there is overwhelming evidence that people seem to prefer others who are somehow like themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, Cook, 2001)
II. Other Conditions

• Accumulative advantage
  – Financial, cultural, and social capital of residents
    • People who have the time, money, knowledge, and connections outside their communities will do better than those who lack these ‘capitals’

• Political opportunity structures (McAdam, 1982; for a review see Meyer, 2004)
  – Favorable political conditions
    • Having allies among the elites
    • State’s capacity for repression
    • Openness of the political system to initiatives from below
Other Conditions

• Framing and identities (Snow et al 1986; for a review see Benford & Snow 2000)
  – Existence of ‘stories’, ‘facts,’ ‘accounts’ that articulate justifications for the collective action
    • A way for people to talk about and understand the problem and their roles in the solution
    • Activities that make some cause or event ‘significant’ to others

• Discursive opportunities (Vasi et al 2014)
  – Precipitating events that focus people’s attention
  – Broadcast technologies to disseminate information about a threat or crisis
  – Social networking (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) to allow people to share experiences and coordinate responses
III. The First Law of Geography

"Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things."

Waldo Tobler, 1970: 236

OK, space matters, but how?
Why Does Space Matter?

• Contestation often take places within and/or is about spatially defined units, e.g., neighborhoods, school/police districts, etc.
  – Citizens are disgruntled about actions which are taken by some official who has authority over a jurisdiction
  – Outside funding and policy initiatives often target specific geographical areas
  – Storms and floods affect some places more than others
The Urban Design

• A neglected condition affecting mobilization is the spatial configuration of households, organizations, and events
  – The urban design is the spatial positioning of buildings and streets
  – The spatial configuration then affects who can come together and who are kept apart
    • It’s about ‘access to diverse things’
  – In the space syntax literature this is referred to as the ‘spatial capital’ of an urban area (Marcus, 2010)
Mobilization

• At some point activists need to get together and act! These places to meet are called foci (Feld, 1981)
  – Often this takes place in a physical place, e.g., a church basement, a community center, park, city hall, college campus, or town square
  – Increasingly this happens virtually, e.g., email exchanges, listservs, chat rooms, Facebook, etc.

• These physical or virtual places need to be accessible to potential activists
Hypotheses

• In communities which are small and less segregated residentially, it is more likely that *broad based mobilization* will occur at community wide foci, e.g., town squares, city halls
  – Different people living close to one another will facilitate broad based coalition building

• In communities which are larger and more segregated residentially, local or *niche protests* are more likely to occur at neighborhood foci, e.g., local parks, schools
  – Similar people living near each other coalesce to solve a common problem
Technology Extends Social Capital

• Transportation and communication technologies can compensate for the lack of spatial proximity
  – Because of technology, activists of a given bent, do not need to be co-located in the same area
  – When it is necessary to convert grievances into action, social media can communicate information quickly and thus facilitate a coordinated response across the urban landscape (Earl and Kimport, 2011)
  – If transportation networks are efficient as well, more people can respond to these virtual rallying cries from greater distances
Hypotheses

• However, in communities which are less segregated residentially, but have highly efficient transportation networks and internet access, it is more likely that niche protests will occur but will be located at community wide foci, e.g., town squares, city halls
  – People use technology to ‘access’ those who are similar to themselves
  – An efficient urban design allows activists to congregate at central places
  – But protests tend to be about special interests and are less spatially specific, e.g., a living wage, LGBT rights
IV. Conclusion

• American exceptionalism
  – Are Americans uniquely inclined to participate in associations and become mobilized on their own behalf (DeTocqueville, 2000)?

• Can a literature that explains mobilization in the U.S. be useful in other societies?
  – Maybe more so for Australia and Canada than elsewhere

• If there is cross-national variation, what are the factors which account for the differences?
  – Trust/distrust of government and elites, individualist vs. collectivist cultures, federalist vs. centralized states
  – Empirical work on this is beginning (Paxton 2007; Schofer and Longhofer 2011)
Thank You!
References

• Benford, Robert D. and David A. Snow. 2000. “Framing Processes and Social Movements: an Overview and Assessment.” Annual Review of Sociology 26: 611-639


References


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