Collective identity

JACQUELIEN VAN STEKELENBURG

From the 1980s onward movement scholars have increasingly emphasized the significance of collective identity as a factor stimulating protest participation. Sociologists were among the first to emphasize the importance of collective identity in protest participation. They argued that the generation of a collective identity is crucial for a movement to emerge (Taylor & Whittier 1992). Similarly, social psychological studies report consistently that the more people identify with a group the more they are inclined to protest on behalf of that group (e.g., Reicher 1996; Simon et al. 1998). Apparently, identification with a group is an important reason why people participate in protest on behalf of that group. In order to understand why, we must elaborate the identity concept.

Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally other people's understanding of themselves and others. As for "understanding who we are" Klandermans and de Weerd (2000) distinguish an individual personal level and a collective group level. For the individual level they rely on the distinction made by Tajfel and Turner (1979), who argue that a person has one personal and several social identities whereby a *personal identity* refers to self-definition in terms of personal attributes, and *social identity* refers to self-definition in terms of social category memberships. *Collective identity* at the collective group level concerns "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Taylor & Whittier 1992). According to Klandermans and de Weerd, *group identification* forms the link between collective and social identity, and thus forms the bridge between the individual and collective level of identity. Different levels of identity require different levels of analyses. A group's collective identity can be studied by examining such phenomena as the group's symbols, rituals, beliefs, and the values its members share. An individual's identification with a group can be studied in its own right as well as by examining the individual's beliefs, sentiments, commitment to the group, use of symbols, participation in rituals, and so on.

The literature on collective identity and social movements is extensive; this contribution therefore only touches upon a few movement dynamics in which identity may operate (for overviews see Stryker et al. 2000; and more recently Snow 2013; Taylor 2013). The first section focuses on the identity–protest link, followed by the influence of the sociopolitical context on the politicization of identities, and finally a section on "identities of the future," that is, how more "liquid" identities in contrast to the traditionally more "solid" identities "work" and affect social change.

IDENTITY AND PROTEST

Social movements are built on identities and they are populated by people who identify with the collectivity and the movement. Identity is thus simultaneously a characteristic of collectivities *and* people. There exists a division of labor between movement scholars of identities. Sociologists tend to study identity at the collective level on the supply side of contentious politics, while social psychologists typically focus on the individual level of social identity and group identification at the demand side of politics. This division of labor affects the study of this phenomenon conceptually and empirically (see the entry on Politicized identity for a similar argument regarding politicized identity).

Collective identity. Collective identity is conceived as an emergent group phenomenon. Melucci (1989: 793) refers to the *process* of collective identity: "Collective identity is an interactive, shared definition of the field of

opportunities and constraints offered to collective action produced by several individuals that must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals to groups." Hence, identity is not a given fact; identity is a practical accomplishment, a process. Identifying ourselves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation (Jenkins 2004). Taylor and Whittier (1992) show how strong bonds existing in social networks contribute to the formation and politicization of collective identities. 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" (175). These boundaries are not clear-cut, stable, and objectively given, 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 their networks, people negotiate in order to change symbolic meanings of daily life's thinking and acting "the politicization of daily life." The politicization of identities unfolds as a sequence of politicizing events that gradually transform the group's relationship to its social environment. Hence, collective action can be an important instrument to change collective identities. As the Elaborated Social Identity Model (Reicher 1996) holds: "identities should be understood not simply as a set of cognitions but as practical projects." In this account, identities and practice are in reciprocal interaction, each mutually enabling and constraining the other. In other words, collective identities are constantly "under construction" and collective action is one of the factors that

shape collective identity. Taylor (2013) therefore conceives of social movements as *discursive communities* held together not only by common action and bonds of solidarity, but by identities, symbols, shared identity discourse, and practices of everyday life that attribute participants' experiences to particular forms of social injustice. In movements that frame injustice in terms of identity politics, *identity strategies* provide a crucial link between individual and collective identity (Taylor 2013). Identity strategies include "individual or group disclosure of identity with the aim of producing change in how individuals understand and feel about their identity, in how the group is defined in the larger culture, or in the politics of state and other institutions" (Whittier 2011: 4, in Taylor 2013).

Social identity. In the late *s*eventies, a social psychological identity perspective on protest emerged in the form of social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Social identity is seen as a cognitive entity; if social identity becomes more salient than personal identity, then people see themselves less as unique individuals and more as the prototypical representatives of their in-group. When social identity becomes more salient than personal identity, people think, feel, and act as members of their group. Hence, the notion of identity involves two criteria of comparison between people: "sameness" and "distinctiveness." Tajfel and Turner (1979) showed that social categorization according to some trivial criterion such as the "blue" or the "red" group suffices to make people feel, think, and act as a group member. SIT proposes that people generally strive for and benefit from positive social identities associated with their groups. The only way for participants in minimal group studies to obtain a positive social identity is by identifying with the groups into which they are categorized, and then ensuring that their group comes off best in the only available comparison between the groups (i.e., giving more rewards to the in-group than the out-group). Compared to this "minimal group paradigm," real-world intergroup conflicts with histories

and the high emotional intensity attached to them, and sociopolitical consequences can be seen as "maximal group paradigms" that bring group membership powerfully to mind. Why would people identify with groups that reflect negatively on them (e.g., disadvantaged or low-status groups)? SIT's answer is that three social structural characteristics affect how people manage their identity threats. The first characteristic is *permeability of the group boundaries*. Permeable group boundaries allow disadvantaged group members to leave their group for a higher status group, whereas impermeable boundaries offer no such "exit." When people do not perceive possibilities to join a higher status group, they might feel commitment to the lower status group. The second characteristic is *stability*. People who conceive status positions as variable see protest as a possible method to heighten group status, especially when the low group status is perceived as *illegitimate*. Members of a low-status group who perceive the dominant group's position as illegitimate and unstable can use a variety of strategies to obtain a more positive social identity. They may, for instance, redefine characteristics of their own group previously seen as negative (Black is beautiful!), or they may engage in social competition of which protest is the clearest expression.

Group identification. Group identification links social identity to collective identity and is the social psychological answer to the question of what drives people to participate in protest. Because it bridges individual and collective identity processes, the stronger the group identification, the more shared beliefs and fate are incorporated in the individual's social identity and the more people are prepared to take action on behalf of the group. 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 variety in the *content* of the social identity. Indeed, not all Muslims have identical social identities, yet they do feel like Muslims. The same holds for Hispanics, workers, and

women, for example. Huddy (2003) argues that it is not group identification *per se* but the strength of such identification that influences group members' readiness to view themselves and act in terms of their group membership. She criticizes social identity literature for neglecting the fact that real-world identities vary in strength; identifying more or less strongly with a group, she argues, may make a real difference, especially in political contexts. Related to this point is the fact that identity strength is related to identity *choice*. Huddy distinguishes between *ascribed* and *acquired* group membership, ascribed identities are "quite difficult to change, and acquired identities are adopted by choice" (2003: 536). Group identification tends to increase in strength when it is voluntary. Membership in a social movement organization can be seen as a prototypical example of a voluntarily acquired, hence strong, identity. Social movement participation may help people to change their stigmatized or "spoiled" imposed identities into strong and empowered social movement identities.

Dual and multiple identities. Work on multiple identities moves beyond attention to singular identities and emphasizes that people can hold many different identities at the same time, which may come into conflict *or* may push in the same direction. The intersectional approach emphasizes the conflictual side of multiple identities at the group level. This approach argues that when activists work to create solidarity among diverse constituencies and struggle to represent themselves as similar to or different from those they oppose or seek to influence, there is always the potential for disagreement and conflict, and the construction of collective identity becomes challenging. Cross-pressure means identity conflict at the individual level; when two of the groups people identify with end up on opposite sides of a controversy (for example, union members who are faced with the decision to strike against their company), people might find themselves under cross-pressure. Indeed, workers who go on strike or movement activists who challenge their government are often accused of being

disloyal to the company or the country. Advocates of multiple identities, on the other hand, have high hopes for the social and political relevance of dual identities (González & Brown 2003). They hold that a "dual identity" is the desirable configuration as it implies sufficient identification with one's own group to experience some basic security and sufficient identification with the overarching identity to preclude divisiveness. Multiple identities are thus – in the words of González and Brown – potentially highly conducive to democratic politics. There is evidence that immigrants who display a dual identity are more inclined to take to the streets on behalf of their group. 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 (Klandermans et al. 2008).

COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES AND CLEAVAGES

The fact that people have many collective identities raises the question of why some collective identities become central to mobilization while others do not. People have many identities that remain latent most of the time. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979) hypothesizes that, depending on contextual circumstances, the transition from an "I" to a "we" as locus of self-definition occurs, and thus a social identity becomes salient. A particular identity is said to be salient if it is "functioning psychologically to increase the influence of one's membership in that group on perception and behavior" (Turner et al. 1987: 118). What makes a dormant identity salient and spurs action on behalf of that identity? Besides contextual factors and direct reminders, the presence of other ingroup members can be a potent reminder of someone's social identity, the more so if the members are aiming at a common goal. The presence of an out-group will also remind people of their in-group identity. Another effective prompt is being treated as a member of a

minority. Although all these reminders can make a social identity salient, probably the most powerful factor that brings group membership to mind is conflict or rivalry between groups. Sociopolitical conflicts don't emerge randomly, but in the context of ongoing, unequal power relations rooted in structural and cultural cleavages in society. These cleavages operate as fault lines along which opposing identities emerge and organizational fields break up, and thus create a demand and supply for politics. Why do sociopolitical conflicts emerge in the context of social cleavages? This can be explained in terms of salience, embeddedness and shared fate, and movement–countermovement dynamics.

Salience. The more salient a cleavage the denser the multi-organizational field linked to that cleavage, and the more "ready" its mobilization potential is to act in response to that cleavage. In fact, the salience of a cleavage reflects a strongly elaborated supply and a well-defined demand of protest. Hence, identities rooted in cleavages are often organized identities and organized identities are more likely to mobilize than unorganized identities. According to Klandermans and de Weerd (2000), this makes sense because being organized implies communication networks, access to resources, interpersonal control, information about opportunities when, where, and how to act, and all those other things that make it more likely that intentions materialize, facilitated by a collective memory on who "we" are, what "we" are prepared to fight for, and, perhaps most important, how "we" usually take arms. That is why anarchists fight the police during summit protests while unionists strike in the face of factory closings and mass redundancies (Taylor 2013).

Embeddedness and shared fate. Simon and colleagues (1998) describe identity as a place in society. A place is a metaphorical expression and concerns people's social embeddedness, that is the networks, organizations, associations, groups, and categories of which they are members. People are not randomly embedded in society; cleavages affect the formal and

informal networks in which people are embedded (cf. Klandermans, van der Toorn, & Van Stekelenburg 2008), and nowadays this process is complemented by embeddedness in virtual networks (Van Stekelenburg & Boekkooi 2013) which reflect traditional and new cleavages of the physical world. Social cleavages may give rise to shared fate, because cleavages determine people's place in society; a place shared with others, which leads to shared experiences and grievances. People share interests and identify and associate almost exclusively with other members of "their" group. Hence, cleavages create "communities of shared fate" and "sameness" within cleavages and "distinctiveness" between cleavages, and as such create identities *and* opposing identities. The more salient a cleavage, the more organizations will attempt to politicize the shared fate of people embedded in that cleavage. Organizers play a crucial role in this transformation of "readiness" into action. In order to mobilize potential constituencies, organizers must develop master frames that link a conflict to "their" cleavage. Hence, organizers may frame the same conflict in different terms. Inequality, for instance, can be framed in terms of "class" or "ethnicity." The more salient a cleavage and the better organizers align the conflict to "their" cleavage – the more their frames "resonate" – the more successful their mobilization attempts. Traditionally, mobilization emerged around social divisions between class, religion, and region; separate collective identities emerged and divided sections of political and social organizations developed. But Western societies have undergone far-reaching social and cultural transformations. In contemporary Western societies, traditional cleavages are replaced, complemented or cut across by new cleavages such as post-materialism versus materialism and the "winners" versus the "losers" of modernity. In addition to the "old" cleavages, new identities and grievances evolved around these new cleavages and politicized into new social movements.

Movement–countermovement dynamics. There is substantial evidence that cleavages alter conflict behavior via increased ease of mobilization. The argument is typically given as follows. If conflicts flare up, the locus of self-definition shifts from "I" to "we" (Tajfel & Turner 1979). The opposing groups develop their ideas and actions in reaction to each other and the perceived opposition. Both groups assert that what "we" stand for is threatened by "them," tribute is been paid to in-group symbols and values, and the out-group is derogated. In such conflicts group members define themselves in (an opposing) relation to other conflicting groups. Take for instance the pro-life and the pro-choice movement and how they have "kept each other alive." Movement–countermovement dynamics can shape a movement's collective identity (Einwohner 2002). First of all, the presence of powerful opponents makes identities more salient for activists. Second, polarization induces a strategic reformulation of "who we are." Einwohner (2002), for instance, shows how animal rights activists responded to opponents' claims that they were overly emotional by presenting alternate identity characteristics to the public, while in private they often embraced the "emotional" characterization. Thus, the more salient a cleavage the more polarized the multiple organizational fields and the more strongly politicized its related collective identities.

IDENTITIES OF THE FUTURE

The foregoing has demonstrated the role of identity in spurring social movement participation. Indeed, collective action is contingent upon seeing the self as part of a group, while acting collectively requires some *collective* identity or consciousness (Klandermans & de Weerd 2000). The role of identification in movement participation is not simply a matter of on/off. Indeed, the influence of identity strength, identity salience, multiple identities, and sociopolitical context reveal that the role of identity on collective action participation is dynamic and multifaceted.

However, the pace and global character of social change force us to be more reflexive

about processes of action and identity. In late modern societies people are becoming increasingly connected as *individuals* rather than as members of a community or group, they operate their own personal – physical and virtual – networks. Traditional "greedy" institutions such as political parties, trade unions, and churches which made significant demands on members' time, loyalty, and energy are replaced by "light" groups and associations that are less demanding, easy to join, and easy to leave. It is thus arguable that society is becoming increasingly organized around networked individuals rather than groups or local solidarities, and connections are more flexible than fixed. Despite this process of individualization, people in late modern societies *are* still committed to collective causes. Underlying this, is what Lichterman (1996) calls "personalism": people feel a personal sense of political responsibility rather than feeling restricted or obliged to a community or group. Personalism affects the "greediness" of organizations or groups, because the individual rather than an organization or network determines the level of "greediness." Hence, concepts such as "traditional" vs. "new", and "formal" vs. "informal" do not automatically align with being either less demanding or greedy. In fact, some informal groups such as anarchist subcultures can be greedy, while membership of some formal traditional groups such as "checkbook membership" of political parties can be less demanding. So, what matters is the strength of the identity rather than whether a group is traditional or "new," or formal or informal (Van Stekelenburg & Boekkooi 2013). Although our understanding of the traditional collective identity–protest link is rather elaborated, it is unclear whether researchers should revise their understanding of collective identity to meet these challenges. Indeed, how contemporary fluid identities "work" and affect social change and to what extent our traditional "collective identity models" are able to capture these identity processes is a question yet to be answered.

SEE ALSO: Dual identity; Identity fields; Identity politics; Identity work processes; Master frame; Politicized identity; Resonance, frame.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Einwohner, R.L. (2002) Bringing the outsiders in: Opponents' claims and the construction of animal rights activists' identity. *Mobilization* 7, 253–268.

González, R., and Brown, R. (2003) Generalization of positive attitudes as a function of subgroup and superordinate group identifications in intergroup contact. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 33, 195–214.

Huddy, L. (2003) Group identity and political cohesion. In: Sears, D.O., Huddy, L., and Jervis, R. (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 511–546.

Jenkins, R. (2004) *Social Identity*. Routledge, London.

Klandermans, B., and de Weerd, M. (2000) Group identification and political protest. In: Stryker, S., Owens, T.J., and White, R.W. (eds), *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 68–90.

Klandermans, B., van der Toorn, J., and Van Stekelenburg, J. (2008) Embeddedness and identity: Collective action participation among immigrants. *American Sociological Review* 73, 992–1012.

Lichterman, P. (1996) *The Search for Political Community. American Activists Reinventing Commitment*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Melucci, A. (1989) *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. Hutchinson Radius, London.

Reicher, S. (1996) The Battle of Westminster: Developing the social identity model of crowd behaviour in order to explain the initiation and development of collective conflict. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 26, 115–134.

Simon, B., Loewy, M., Sturmer, S., Weber, U., Freytag, P., Habig, C., Kampmeier, C., and Spahlinger, P. (1998) Collective identification and social movement participation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74(3), 646–658.

Snow, D. (2013) Identity dilemmas, discursive fields, identity work & mobilization: Clarifying the identity/movement nexus. In: Van Stekelenburg, J., Roggeband, C.M., and Klandermans, B. (eds), *The Changing Dynamics of Contention*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Stryker, S., Owens, T.J., and White, R.W. (eds) (2000) *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, vol. 13. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Tajfel, H., and Turner, J.C. (1979) An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In: Worchel, S., and Austin, W.G. (eds), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Nelson-Hall Publishers, Chicago.

Taylor, V. (2013) Social movement participation in the global society: Identity, networks and emotions. In: Van Stekelenburg, J., Roggeband, C.M., and Klandermans, B. (eds), *The Changing Dynamics of Contention*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Taylor, V., and Whittier, N.E. (1992) Collective identity in social movement communities: Lesbian feminist mobilization. In: Morris, A., and Mueller, C. (eds), *Frontiers of Social Movement Theory*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Turner, J.C., Hogg, M.A., Oakes, P.J., Reicher, S.D., and Wetherell, M.S. (1987) *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Perspective*. Blackwell, Oxford.

Van Stekelenburg, J., and Boekkooi, M.E. (2013) Mobilizing for change in a changing society. In: Van Stekelenburg, J., Roggeband, C.M., and Klandermans, B. (eds), *The Changing Dynamics of Contention*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Whittier, N. (2011) The politics of visibility: Coming out and individual and collective identity. In: Goodwin, J., Kutz-Flamenbaum, R., Maney, G., and Rohlinger, D. (eds), *Making History: Movements, Strategy and Social Change*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.