Moral incentives

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One of the most fascinating and puzzling features of collective action is the fact that people undertake potentially high-risk protests with little likelihood of reward. Take the widespread protests of early October 1989 in East Germany with high chances of repression and low chances of success. Why are people time and again prepared to participate in protests?

This question refers to the so-called collective action problem. Collective action problems arise in relation to public goods because they attract free riders who consume but do not contribute to the production of public goods. Why were the thousands of East Germans prepared to overcome this free rider dilemma? The literature identifies two main answers (Olson 1965). The first explains participation in terms of *collective incentives*, a combination of individual demands for public goods and perceptions of individual and group efficacy. The second explains participation in terms of *selective incentives*, benefits that participants – participants only – derive from the activity itself, irrespective of whether they manage to provide the public good or not.

Selective incentives are classified according to the different ways in which they affect people's motives and actions (e.g., Marwell & Oliver 1993; Opp, Voss, & Gern 1995). *Material incentives* are payments or incentives for participating or coercion for not participating. *Social incentives* are benefits or costs of participating (or not) arising from relationships with other people, either their respect and honor, or the communal pleasures of doing things together. *Moral incentives* arise from the internal feeling of doing the right thing. A person acting on moral incentives can expect a sense of self-esteem, and approval or even admiration. People take a free ride on the collective good unless selective incentives propel them to protest participation. Olson (1965) emphasized material incentives as the logics of action, whereas scholars such as Chong (1991) and Opp, Voss, and Gern (1995) emphasized social and moral incentives. Note that Olson did *not* argue that people participate in social movements out of rational self-interest. He acknowledged that moral attitudes could mobilize to the extent they provide selective incentives, but, he argued, it is not possible to get empirical proof of the motivations behind these "soft" incentives (1965: 61, n.17). Nowadays, moral incentives and motivations *can* be and *are* measured (e.g., Gross 1995; Opp, Voss, & Gern 1995; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995; Muhlberger 2000; Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & Van Dijk 2009). They appear to be of utmost importance in explaining protest participation.

People participate in protest because they see it as an opportunity to change a state of affairs they are unhappy with at affordable costs (*instrumental route*), or because they identify with the others involved (*identification route*), or because they want to express their values and their anger with a target that violates their values (*ideology route*, cf. Klandermans 2004). The literature suggests efficacy and selective incentives (Olson 1965; Klandermans 1984) as the logics of action in the instrumental route. The feeling of being able to make a difference combined with selective incentives helps to lower the costs and increase the benefits of participation. Social incentives: commitment, respect and honor, and communal pleasures of doing things together, are the logic of action in the identification route (Stürmer et al. 2003). Moral incentives function as the logic of action in the ideological route. Violated (sacred) values generate moral outrage propelling people into action to express their views (Jasper 1997). The more a political or social "wrong" is against people's principles and values, the more they feel obliged to defend their subjective moral

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boundaries (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & Van Dijk 2009).

In taking the instrumental route people have to overcome the free rider dilemma, but the identification and ideological route generate an inner obligation that helps to overcome this dilemma – even though the two routes create an inner obligation for different reasons. Maintaining one's moral integrity may incite an inner *moral* obligation to *oneself*, versus the inner *social* obligation to other group members incited by group identification (Stürmer et al. 2003). These obligations release an energizing force *if* and only *if* one participates, and therefore make free riding less likely. Hence, one might take a free ride on the production of a *collective* good, but one cannot take a free ride on one's own *inner obligation*.

With these insights in mind, let me conclude by returning to the East German protesters of early October 1989. Opp, Voss, and Gern (1995) demonstrate that social and moral incentives especially helped them to overcome the fear of repression and negligible success probability. Successful collective action requires an ever-changing mix of material, social, and moral incentives that work together to overcome collective action problems, and hence, dependent on the sociopolitical context, a different mix of incentives may motivate people to protest.

SEE ALSO: Collective efficacy; Free rider problem; Mechanisms; Rational choice theory and social movements; Selective incentives; Social and solidary incentives.

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