

## Short Paper Assignment: Anger and Collective Action

In *The Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson provides an influential theory regarding the decision making of individuals in groups that seek collective goods for their members. In the specific context of large groups, Olson argues that rationally-acting members do not have incentives to bear the costs of individual action for the advancement of collective objectives because gains are distributed evenly among all group members, regardless of the costs one bears, and because no individual contribution is likely to have a significant impact on the group's outcomes (Olson, 1965, p. 16). Thus, in order to "stimulate a rational individual to act in a group-oriented way," large groups must offer members "selective incentives," or incentives that are distributed conditionally based on the individual's contributions to the group (p. 51).

Olson's theory is relevant to political science, as political science scholars have an interest in the motivations that drive individuals to participate or not in collective actions such as political protests. However, Olson paints an improbable picture for participation in collective action. Given the prevalence of protests and publicly-expressed grievances in the United States and around the world today, it seems to be a useful exercise to revisit Olson's theory and seek potential complementary or alternative explanations for the motivations behind collective political action.

The recent literature on emotions offers new territory for reexamining the logic of collective action and considering explanations that move beyond rational choice. Rather than simply steering us to the conclusion that individuals are irrational so rational choice theories should be thrown away, the emotions literature can help provide a more systematic evaluation of the specific beliefs, emotions, and action tendencies that may influence political action.

In this paper, I draw on emotions research in psychology to look specifically at how anger may motivate participation in political protests. First, anger may lead to an adjustment in a group member's cost-benefit calculations, as angry individuals tend to perceive lower costs and risks for their actions and feel that they have a high level of control over outcomes. Second, given that one of the functional tendencies of anger is coercion, angry individuals may be more likely to take actions that seek to coerce change in others, such as contentious mobilization. Third, anger is associated with attributing responsibility to others, so angry individuals may feel that they have a clear sense of who to blame for their grievances, thus inspiring target-based political actions like protest. Lastly, anger may motivate protest action by intensifying individuals' convictions.

Research in psychology has suggested that anger causes individuals to ignore or downplay the costs and risks of their actions. Leith & Baumeister (1996) found that after inducing anger in their experiment subjects, the subjects were more likely to prefer a long-shot lottery option to a sure option, even with the added risk that they would be subjected to a stressful outcome if they lost the lottery. The authors propose that angry people do not seek out self-defeating behavior, but rather, they are more likely to yield to their impulses (Leith & Baumeister, 1996). Complementing these findings, the laboratory experiments of Lerner & Keltner (2001) found that angry subjects had more optimistic risk estimates, regardless of whether exact probabilities of an action were known or unknown and including scenarios that induced personally-relevant estimates. Relating their findings to the appraisal-tendency framework, Lerner and Keltner's subsequent experiments suggested that high appraisals of certainty and individual control were influential in driving angry subjects to be more optimistic and risk-seeking (p. 154).

Both experiments suggest potential explanations for why individuals may decide to participate in protest action, even if the costs seem to outweigh the benefits from a rational choice perspective. In most contexts, the probability of protest actions bringing about change is low, and in some cases, protesters may face the severe potential costs of repression by authorities. Furthermore, applying Olson's theory, any one protester's efforts are not likely to influence a social movement's final outcomes. However, Leith and Baumeister's studies suggests that angry protesters may be yielding to an impulse rather than making these sorts of calculations. Lerner and Keltner's experiments indicate that angry individuals may be highly confident that they are going to succeed, even against long odds. Thus, in the context of protests, angry people may be inclined to believe that they have a high level of individual control over a movement's outcomes and that, with their participation, the movement will be able to accomplish its objectives.

Anger differs from other negative emotions in that it is associated with the social function or relationship goal of engaging with the source of conflict and attempting to bring about change. Fischer & Roseman (2007) state that "the social function of anger can be conceptualized as attaining a better outcome by forcing a change in another person's behavior" (p. 104). In their experiments comparing anger with contempt, the authors find that individuals in an angry state were more likely to seek to coerce others, and that the intensity of a subject's anger was significantly and positively associated with the coercion goal. Political protest can certainly be considered within the realm of coercive actions, as groups are seeking to directly address those they see as responsible for their grievances. Thus, the coercion goal associated with anger may lead individuals to seek a change in others through protest.

Thirdly, according to the appraisal-tendency framework, if an individual feels angry, there is an increased tendency to believe that negative events are brought about by others (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015). For example, Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards (1993) found that even when presented with rather ambiguous hypothetical situations in which there is not an obvious person to blame, angry experiment participants placed blame on others for negative social outcomes. The relationship between anger and the identification of a responsible party for injustices has potential implications for the decision to protest. A group of individuals may share a collective grievance or frustration, but it is difficult to imagine them organizing collectively around political goals if they don't have a target of their grievance. Javeline (2003) illustrated this in her study on the role of blame in the context of the Russian wage arrears crisis of the 1990s. She found that those who were able to identify specific culprits for their unpaid wages had a higher propensity to protest; those who did not attribute specific blame were more likely to remain passive.

Javeline (2003) used the concept of blame and didn't conduct experimental analysis of emotions in her study. However, based on the existing emotions literature, one could argue that angry Russians were more inclined to protest than Russians experiencing other types of negative valence emotions. An issue that is difficult to disentangle from the study is whether the Russian individuals that decided to protest had more access to information that allowed them to conclusively identify those who were blameworthy, independent of emotion, or if preexisting anger (related or unrelated to the unpaid wages) led them to more readily conclude that somebody must be deserving of blame. Providing support for the latter hypothesis, that anger may have served as a causal mechanism, Goldberg (1999) found that those induced to feel angry

in one situation have an increased desire to blame individuals in their subsequent judgments, if they feel that the cause of their initial anger went unresolved.

Anger may also motivate protest participation by increasing the strength of an individual's convictions about a political issue. Frijda & Mesquita (2000) argue that emotions can strengthen the beliefs that one holds. Thus, returning to the previous example, a Russian worker may have an intuition or belief that his direct supervisor is responsible for his unpaid wages. He may then witness something, such as his supervisor wearing an expensive new watch, which triggers an angry response that serves to reinforce his convictions that the supervisor is unjustly harming him by withholding his wages. Intuitively speaking, those who decide to endure the costs and risks of protesting would seem to be those who hold strong convictions about a particular issue. Thus, the role that emotions, and in this case anger, play in strengthening beliefs could be important in understanding protest participation.

In short, psychology research on anger offers some potential insights into why individuals may decide to engage in group protests, despite the dilemma for large group action that Olson presents in *The Logic of Collective Action*. However, there are several unanswered questions that research on emotions in the context of political science can help to uncover. If anger is generally thought of as a short-lived emotion, what strategies may social movement leaders or politicians use to stoke continued or repeated episodes of anger among their followers in order to build sustained movements? Second, if anger is associated with perceptions of high levels of individual control, why would angry individuals bother to partner with others in a group to realize their coercion goals rather than seeking to accomplish their goals independently? And lastly, while Fisher and Roseman (2003) argue that anger isn't always maladaptive and can be expressed in relatively constructive ways, they cite various existing studies on the connection

between anger and physical, verbal, or social forms of aggression (p. 104). In a similar sense, Elster (2009) states that the action tendency of anger is to “cause the object of the emotion to suffer” (p. 11). Thus, an important question to address when exploring the relation between anger and protests is whether anger generally leads to violent protest action or if it can also be associated with nonviolent collective behavior.

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