

Unionism as Collective Action: Revisiting Klandermans Theory

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This paper examines unionization as a subset of collective action. It is an attempt to reappraise Klandermans' model of union participation. The three theories stated by Klandermans' to explain union participation namely the frustration aggression, the rational choice and the interactionist theories are claimed to be limited in their application when viewed in isolation. The historical, cultural, social, economic and political environments the individual is embedded in are also instrumental in determining union participation. Limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

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Introduction

Politicized collective action is defined as “a power struggle between various entities within a society with the understanding that it affects the broader social structure.” (Simon & Klandermans 2001). When the values and norms of the out group are judged as non-normative and negative (Mummendey & Wenzel 1999) intolerance towards the out group is experienced and in such situations people tend to prefer collective to individual action (Louis & Taylor 1999).

Social Identity theory, Self Categorization theory (Tajfel 1982, Turner et al 1994, Tougas & Veilleux 1988, Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam 1990; Simon et al 1998, Mummendey et al 1999, De Weerd & Klandermans 1999, Mummendey & Wenzel 1999, Louis & Taylor 1999, Tajfel & Turner 2003, Van Zomeren et al 2004, Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears 2008, Van Zomeren, Spears, & Leach 2008, Musgrove & McGarty 2008, Derks, Van Laar & Ellemers 2009) and the Relative Deprivation theory (Crosby 1976, Guimond & Dube-Simard 1983, Martin, Bricman & Murray 1984, Kawakami & Dion 1993)

are amongst the three most studied explanations of collective action.

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These explanations seem equally relevant to understand trade union activity as a kind of collective action. Trade unionism is also a power struggle between the management and the workers and is determined by and in turn determines the economic and social structures of the society. It too involves a relatively deprived in-group (workers) and an out-group (management) which most theories of group behaviour suggest to be the necessary condition for politicized collective action. The use of social-psychological theories to explain union activity was not very popular in the industrial relations literature (Heartly & Kelly 1986) till Klandermans (1986a) proposed three social psychological theories to explain union participation. The three theories suggested by him were the frustration aggression, rational choice and interactionist theories. Frustration-aggression, as the name suggests, refers to an increase in union participation as a way to vent one's frustration against the employer. The rational choice perspective uses the expectancy theory to explain participation behaviour. An individual weighs the expected costs and benefits of engaging in a particular union activity, if the benefits outweigh the costs he/she engages in union activity. Lastly the interactionist theory proposes that union participation is a result of social mimicking. When people in ones vicinity

engage actively in union activities the social linkages and social pressure lead the non-participants also to participate. The three theories are used as three separate unrelated explanations of union participation.

Despite the popular appeal of the paper, Klandermans (1986a) points out that each theory is limited in its application. The frustration aggression hypothesis is weak as dissatisfaction might not always lead to aggression. Union participation is just one of the many ways in which frustration can be reduced. The interactionist theory too is limited as it over emphasizes homogeneity and neglects individual differences in behaviour. It doesn't answer the question: "Why would people conform?" Klandermans (1986a) does not suggest any limitations of the rational choice theory.

Each theory is limited in its application.

The present paper looks at participation in trade unions as a form of collective action. It aims to reappraise Klandermans' (1986a) proposed theories of union participation. The three social-psychological theories cannot be looked at in isolation. It is claimed that only when they are seen as an interrelated whole can it be called a useful theory for predicting union participation.

The next section extends on the stated limitations of the three theories using sound theoretical explanations and an integrated model of union participation is proposed.

Frustration-Aggression Theory

The Frustration-aggression explanation assumes that dissatisfaction with one's work situation would cause an individual to participate in trade union activity. But does this always happen?

The exit-voice-loyalty model suggested by Hirschman (1970) as a response to organizational decline has been researched extensively. Later versions of the model included a fourth response category i.e. neglect. Exit refers to quitting an organization. Voice refers to an active attempt at changing the circumstances either by discussions or actions like participating in the union or whistle blowing. Loyalty refers to waiting with patience for conditions to improve and neglect is a means of passive inaction. The four response strategies could either be active (voice, exit) or passive (loyalty, neglect), constructive (voice, loyalty) or destructive (exit, neglect) (Rusbult, Zembrodt & Gunn 1982, Louis & Taylor 1999). This extended version of Hirschman's exit-voice-loyalty model has been especially useful in understanding how individuals might respond to dissatisfaction at work (Freeman 1980, Farrell 1983, Rusbult et.al 1988, Mayes & Ganster 1988, Withey & Cooper 1989, Boroff & Lewin 1997)

Satisfaction, Investment & Alternatives

Prior satisfaction with the job, amount of investment in a job (both psychological and material) and the kind of alternatives available were found to predict

one's reaction to dissatisfaction at work apart from individual personality characteristics. High investment on a job in terms of number of years spent, training in skills specific to the job etc led to voice behaviour especially when one's satisfaction with the given job was high. It may be that voice is regarded as a difficult and costly action, and that workers engage in voice only when their motivation to improve conditions is particularly strong (Rusbult, Zembrodt & Gunn 1982, Rusbult et al 1988)

The presence of attractive viable alternatives was a strong predictor of exit (Rusbult, Zembrodt & Gunn 1982, Rusbult et al 1988, Withey & Cooper 1989). While some suggest that the availability of alternatives increases the probability of an active (exit, voice) response to job dissatisfaction (Rusbult et al 1988 cited in Withey & Cooper 1989) others claim that it generally leads to destructive reactions (exit and neglect).

Klandermans (1986a) while stating that frustration might lead to union participation also suggests that "frustration seems to be filtered through the sieve of rational choice". The cost of action (Withey & Cooper 1989, Hoffman 2006) seems to be quite an important predictor of whether active, passive, constructive or destructive strategy is chosen as the means to vent dissatisfaction with one's work situation.

Proposition 1 :

- a. Frustration (Dissatisfaction) with the employer/work situation will lead to

union participation (voice) when the cost of non-participation (exit/neglect/loyalty) is higher than the benefits of participation.

- b. When one experiences high satisfaction with one's job, high investments are made on the job and lesser number of attractive alternatives are available, frustration most often leads to union participation.

Rational Choice Theory

The rational choice theory of union participation suggests that individuals will participate in union action only when the benefits outweigh the costs of doing so.

The value expectancy theory has been used extensively to explain the cost benefit analysis undertaken by individuals in union participation. Three chief concerns of people while deciding to participate in union activity are costs and benefits related to the goal of the activity called *goal motive*, costs and benefits related to the expected reactions of significant others referred to as *social motives* and the material costs and benefits related to participating in union activity known as the *material motive* (Klandermans 1986 b, Flood 1993). The value one places on collective action or the perception of relative deprivation is necessary but not enough to instigate the willingness to act. In fact whether one participates in union activity or not is a multiplicative effect of the value he/she places on the action along with the expectancy of the effectiveness of action in terms of the rewards it can procure at

the least possible cost or group efficacy (Klandermans, B. 1984, Klandermans, P. G. 1984, Martin, Bricman, & Murray 1984, Flood 1993, Mackie, Devos & Smith 2000, Musgrove & McGarty 2008, Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer & Leach 2004, Van Zomeren, Spears, & Leach 2008, Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears 2008) the permeability of the out-group boundaries, one's distance from these boundaries and the stability as well as legitimacy of the groups actions. (Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam 1990, De Weerd & Klandermans 1999)

Proposition 2 :

The willingness to act is determined by the expectancy of rewards (rational choice) even when the activity is valued positively.

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Despite its intuitive appeal the rational choice theory seems incomplete. Is human behaviour always driven by rationality? There is more than ample evidence in the history of social movements when rationality seemed to have failed to explain human action. The interactionist theory answers this question to some extent.

Interactionist Theory

The interactionist theory looks at the social context the individual is embedded in as the cause of union participation. When people in one's vicinity engage actively in union activities the social link-

ages and social pressure lead other non-participants also to participate.

Klandermans' (1986a) explanation of interactionism seems to be somewhat blurred. His explanation of interactionism can be understood at two levels. Firstly, it is the immediate context that the person is situated in. If people in one's immediate surroundings, community, organization etc are participating in collective action it motivates that person to collectivize too especially if there is a perception of a '*collective grievance*'. Second is whether, at a broader level, the "*images of society*" that individuals carry within their minds determine their decision to participate in union activity or not. Klandermans claims that the interactionist theory though relevant in many situations tends to overemphasize homogeneity? Why will people conform? He asks. It is suggested here in defence of the theory that the psychological aspects of group dynamics can be intriguing at times, surpassing rationality.

There could be two different reasons why people mimic other actors in their social milieu and engage in collective action as a result. This dual pathway model has been referred to as goal based or problem focused coping and anger based or emotion focused coping strategies in collective action (Van Zomeren et al 2004, Stürmer & Simon 2004, Van Zomeren, Spears & Leach 2008). Problem focused coping refers to the perception that engaging in collective action will be instrumental in the achievement of desirable goals. The perception of the group's efficacy in reaching its desired

goal - a rational choice, is the cause for social mimicking in these cases. (Mackie, Devos & Smith 2000, Musgrove & McGarty 2008 Van Zomeren et al 2004, Van Zomeren, Spears & Leach 2008, Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears 2008)

Yet when motives behind participation in collective action or social movements were studied it was found that identification with the group and one's own identification as an activist was this extra element that went beyond rational cost-benefit analysis of participation in collective action (Tajfel 1982, Tougas & Veilleux 1988, Turner et al 1994, Simon 1998, De Weerd & Klandermans 1999, Tajfel & Turner 2003). The emotion based coping is driven by anger directed against the out-group. This anger is strongest when the group identification is high. Though perceived injustice, efficacy and identity theory have been the most studied explanations of participation in collective action, the social identity theory showed the strongest effect on participation both directly and indirectly through its effects on the other two theories. (Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears 2008)

Social identity theory showed the strongest effect on participation both directly and indirectly through its effects on the other two theories.

The relative deprivation explanations too claim that a perception of relative deprivation at an individual or personal level (egoistical deprivation) at best leads only to individual action. It is the percep-

tion of the deprivation of one's group relative to another (Fraternal deprivation) that leads to collective action. Fraternal deprivation is experienced only when one identifies highly with one's group. (Crosby 1976, Guimond & Dube-Simard 1983, Kawakami & Dion 1993, Mummendey et. al 1999)

In an organizing model of union recruitment suggested by Cregan (2005) it was seen that most unions use a collective sense of grievance to instigate social identification and collective action. When participation in collective action is based on instrumentality (leading individuals to weigh the costs and benefits of participation) alone it may lead to disillusionment when the goal is not reached. Group identity seems to add something more to the essence of collective action which many a times may be "non-rational" (Gallagher & Strauss 1991 cited in Cregan 2005). Contribution in union activity was seen to be higher for people who place a higher value on the collective good as opposed to individual benefits (Flood 1993) and strong attitudes favouring labour unions biased reasoning leading to a justification of union action (Lynn & Williams 1990)

Proposition 3:

- a. Social mimicking (Interactionist Theory) would directly lead to union participation if the group identification is high.
- b. Social mimicking (Interactionist Theory) will be mediated by a cost benefit analysis when the group identification is low.

Applicability

If we take into consideration the above mentioned propositions it is clear that the three theories suggested by Klandermans (1986a) to explain union participation are not distinct and separate but are related. Yet this formulation gives only a partial understanding of union participation. Politicized collective action is not a struggle between two parties alone. Since it affects the broader social structure it invariably involves the state authorities or any other third party causing 'triangulation' (Simon & Klandermans 2001) and spreading the ambit of the factors that could influence one's decision to participate in collective action. Whether or not an individual engages in collective action is also affected by the economic and political characteristics of the society one is placed in (Kolarska & Aldrich 1980) and varies across regions even within the same nation (Van der Veen & Klandermans 1995)

The same companies which are supportive of unions in their home countries do not support such activity in their branches in other countries.

As far as trade union participation is concerned, the national variance is clearly evident in the fact that unionism in the emerging sectors is present and accepted in countries like England (Bain & Taylor 2002) UK, Australia and USA (Lund & Wright 2009). However the same companies which are supportive of unions in their home countries do not sup-

port such activity in their branches in other countries (Bain & Taylor 2002). Sarkar (2009) studied the effect of the two dimensions of culture: collective/individual and vertical/horizontal on unionization in BPO industry in India. He found that vertical individualists as well as vertical collectivists are more prone to participate in union activity because of their belief and dependence on hierarchy as a source of power and influence. External circumstances other than psychological reasons also affect union participation/membership. When unemployment is high one is more likely to want to retain one's job and since exit is difficult it leads to higher levels of union activity (voice) (Zientara & Kuczynski 2009). In an attempt to develop a strong theoretical base for this contention, Frenkel & Kuruvilla (2002) proposed that there are essentially three logics that drive the employment relations environment in a nation especially when seen in the light of globalization-the logic of competition, the logic of industrial peace, and the logic of employment income protection. These in turn are affected by the economic development strategy of the country, globalization intensity, union strength, labour market features, and government responsiveness to workers.

This complex interaction between the logics of action and the factors affecting them makes it impossible for any kind of convergence in ER practices in two different nations. These findings suggest that no theory of union participation including Klandermans' (1986a) can be universally applicable. It has to be seen in the light of the

broader social and political scenario one is situated in.

Proposition 4:

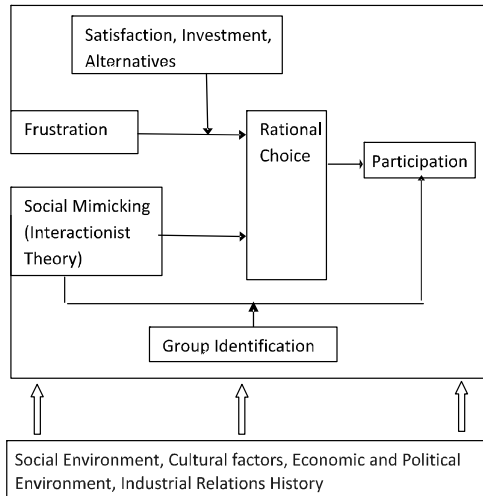
The social, cultural, economic, political and historical context of a nation will affect attitudes towards union participation and actual participation such that the cost and benefits of participation and the tendency for social mimicking are all filtered through them.

Limitations & Implications

Louis & Taylor (1999) point out two methodological flaws in research on collective action. Firstly, researchers tend to look at very extreme forms of collective action not taking the entire range of actions possible. Secondly, researchers have not discriminated behaviour intentions/actual behaviour from attitudes towards collective action. These two loopholes in research tend to confound the results. This flaw is especially applicable in union participation research. Union participation can be of various kinds, and the motives behind participating in each of these activities could differ. (McShane 1986, Parks, Gallagher & Fullagar 1995). The present paper just focused on joining of unions as representing union participation. Future studies could extend the model developed here to include different kinds of participation.

Hirschman's theory has been interpreted differently by various researchers. (Saunders 1992) While some theorists say that loyalty is also a distinct response category just like exit and voice

Fig. 1: Integrated Model of Union Participation



others claim that loyalty acts as a moderator for exit and voice behaviour. When organizational loyalty is high people tend to voice their discontent and try to change the situation. When the organizational loyalty is low they tend to make no extra efforts towards changing their situation and end up exiting the firm. But this loyalty might not always be with the organization. Individuals could feel higher loyalty with the industry, work group, ethics etc. depending upon which group they identify more with. (Hoffman 2006). This possible moderating effect of loyalty and its consequences on participation in union action has not been touched upon in this study. This could be looked into in future studies.

Oegema & Klandermans (1994) cite non conversion and erosion as two possible reasons for many individuals not to end up actually participating in collective action despite initial favourable attitudes

towards them. Therefore instead of looking at why people participate in union activity another interesting way to study this phenomenon is to see why people do not participate in union action. Turning the model inside out could provide some insights which are not obvious now.

The perceptions of the costs and benefits of any action are not static and keep changing with a change in the situation one is placed in. This would therefore imply that the inclination to participate in union activity might also keep changing over-time depending upon the perception of the costs versus the benefits of participation at a given point in time. (Klandermans 1986b). Designing a longitudinal study to look into the changes in the drivers of collective action over time would prove to be really useful in understanding the effects of the social, cultural, political factors on collective action. As of now studies of such nature are scarce if any.

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