

Resource mobilization theory

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Resource mobilization theory (RMT) developed during the 1970s as a new generation of scholars sought to understand the emergence, significance, and effects of the social movements of the 1960s (see Jenkins 1983; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald 1988; Edwards & McCarthy 2004). Rejecting both the view held by some earlier movement scholars that social movement actors were deviant or anomic, and the pluralist assumption that all parties willing to engage in the political process have a reasonable chance that their grievances will be heard and addressed, resource mobilization scholars sought to understand how rational and often marginalized social actors mobilized effectively to pursue their desired social change goals (Freeman 1975; Gamson 1975; McCarthy & Zald 1977; Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; Morris 1984; Zald & McCarthy 1987; Staggenborg 1988; Tarrow 1994).

ORGANIZATIONAL-ENTREPRENEURIAL TRIBUTARY OF RESOURCE MOBILIZATION THEORY

The organizational-entrepreneurial branch of resource mobilization theory (RMT) reoriented social movement analysis by taking the analytical insights of organizational sociology and extending them by analogy to social movements. More recent exemplars of this perspective include Minkoff's (1995) analysis of women's and race-ethnic organizations; Smith, Chattfield, and Pagnucco (1997) on transnational *social movement organizations* (SMOs); Andrews' (2004) study of the impact of the civil rights movement on local communities in Mississippi; a special issue on SMOs edited by Caniglia and Carmin (2005); and Gillham

and Edwards' (2011) analysis of SMO efforts to manage legitimacy in order to preserve key resource streams or exchange relationships. From this perspective a social movement is a set of preferences for social change within a population (McCarthy & Zald 1977). Individuals who share those social change preferences are called *adherents*, while those who contribute resources of various kinds to help the movement mobilize are *constituents*. Those who watch from the sidelines are *bystanders*. A key analytical issue for RMT is understanding how social movements turn bystanders into adherents and subsequently adherents into constituents and ultimately mobilize constituents to active participation. Such tasks of mobilization are undertaken most often by SMOs.

In their classic formulation McCarthy and Zald (1973) identified a trend in US social movements toward the increasing significance of large, formally organized SMOs deploying professional staff to pursue the broad social change goals of their constituents. Early RMT was closely associated with the trend toward professionalization and debates over its impact were a focus of much research (Staggenborg 1988; Andrews & Edwards 2004). Yet, while many SMOs are quite large with professional staffs and substantial resources, most are small, less formally organized groups operating at the local level (Edwards & Foley 2003). At a minimum an SMO is a named group that undertakes actions to further the social change goals of the social movement.

All SMOs pursuing the goals of the movement comprise a *social movement industry* (SMI). SMIs vary in size, and the capacity of a movement to engage in collective action is influenced greatly by type, amount and distribution of resources within its SMI. RMT expects that the greater the mobilization capacity of an SMI, the greater its potential for achieving some of its social change goals. The broader *social movement sector* (SMS) is

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comprised of all SMIs and their component SMOs. In leaning on organizational sociology to reorient the study of social movements, RMT holds that SMIs and SMOs differ from governmental and market-sector organizations because of watershed differences in goals, their structural location in civil society, and in the varied resources and power they wield. Nevertheless, the SMS has grown dramatically over the last 30 years and has contributed to the increasing social change potential attributed to “civil society” worldwide.

RESOURCE ACCESS

Early formulations of RMT focused on broad patterns of resource availability and paid disproportionate attention to the mobilization of material resources from external sources. By contrast, recent RMT analysts emphasize more explicitly the uneven distribution of resources in a society, and seek to understand how individual and collective actors endeavor to alter that distribution in order to direct resources to social movements. In other words, RMT is becoming more explicitly a partial theory of overcoming resource inequality. Thus, questions of general resource “availability” have shifted toward questions of specific means of resource access.

Two long-standing debates about resource access center on whether social movements obtain their support primarily from internal or external sources and the closely related question about the extent to which external supporters constrain movement goals and activities. Recent developments in RMT seek to reframe this debate in several ways. Research has made it clear that social movements and individual SMOs generally obtain their resources from a combination of internal and external sources. All but the very smallest SMOs gain access to resources by multiple means.

MECHANISMS OF RESOURCE ACCESS

Four mechanisms of resource access are particularly important: self-production; aggregation

from constituents; appropriation/co-optation; and patronage (see Edwards & McCarthy 2004).

Self-production

A fundamental mechanism by which social movements gain access to resources is to produce those resources themselves through the agency of existing organizations, activists, and participants. Movements produce social-organizational resources when they launch SMOs, develop networks, and form issue coalitions. They produce human resources by socializing their children into the ways and values of the movement, or by training participants and developing leaders. Movements like those for civil and human rights have produced out of their struggle a moral authority that is a powerful resource. Social movements also produce items with movement symbolic significance like T-shirts, coffee mugs, posters, art, and even cakes and cookies for bake sales, which can be sold to raise money or used directly to promote the movement.

Aggregation

Resource aggregation refers to the ways a movement or specific SMO converts resources held by dispersed individuals into collective resources that can be allocated by movement actors. Social movements aggregate privately held resources from beneficiary and conscience constituents in order to pursue collective goals. Monetary or human resources are aggregated by soliciting donations from broadly dispersed individuals in order to fund group activities, or recruiting volunteers to help with an activity. Yet, SMOs also aggregate other types of resources as well. For example, moral resources held by others can be aggregated by compiling and publicizing lists of respected individuals and organizations that endorse group goals and actions.

Co-optation/appropriation

Social movements often utilize relationships they have with existing organizations and

groups to access resources previously produced or aggregated by those other organizations. Resource co-optation generally carries the tacit understanding that the resources will be used in mutually agreeable ways. In the US context churches and church-related organizations have probably produced resources most often co-opted by social movements from buildings, members, and staff, social networks, rituals, and discourses or moral authority.

Patronage

Social movements also gain access to resources through patronage. Patronage refers to the provision of resources to an SMO by an individual or organization that often specializes in patronage. Foundation grants, private donations, or government contracts are common in financial patronage. In monetary patronage relationships actors external to the movement or SMO provide a substantial amount of financial support and usually exert a degree of control over how their money can be used. Patrons may even attempt to influence an SMO's policy decisions and day-to-day operations. Human resources can be acquired through patronage relationships as when one SMO loans staff to another for a set period of time as is common in issue campaigns or coalitions.

RESOURCE TYPES

Despite the obvious centrality of resources to RMT, analysts were slow to develop a clear conceptualization of resources. Analysis and often heated debate focused on a narrow range of material and human resources. Yet, resources important to social movement mobilization are more varied. In recent years RMT analysts have benefited from broader developments in social science and made considerable gains in specifying and differentiating between five distinct types of resources: moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material (see Edwards & McCarthy 2004).

Moral resources

Moral resources include legitimacy, integrity, solidarity support, sympathetic support, and celebrity. Of these, legitimacy has received the most theoretical attention, and celebrity perhaps the least. Collective actors who most closely mimic institutionally legitimated or "mainstream" expectations gain advantages over groups that fit those expectations poorly. Similarly, celebrity endorsements of an issue campaign can increase media coverage, generate public attention, and open doors to policymakers and resource providers alike. Moral resources tend to originate outside of a social movement or SMO and are generally bestowed by an external source known to possess them, as in a celebrity lending their fame, the receipt of awards like the Nobel Peace Prize by a prominent activist, or the certification by an external credentialing body like the Internal Revenue Service. Nevertheless, some movements succeed in the difficult task of creating moral resources, as was clearly the case with the US Southern civil rights movement or, more recently, the international human rights movement. Because moral resources can often be retracted, they are both less accessible and more proprietary than cultural resources.

Cultural resources

Cultural resources are artifacts and cultural products such as conceptual tools and specialized knowledge that have become widely, though not necessarily universally, known. These include tacit knowledge about how to accomplish specific tasks like enacting a protest event, holding a news conference, running a meeting, forming an organization, initiating a festival, or utilizing new social media. This category includes tactical repertoires, organizational templates, and technical or strategic know-how required to either mobilize, produce events, or access additional resources. Specific cultural resources are widely available in a given society, but neither evenly distributed, nor universally available. In

other words, not every member of a society or social group possesses specific competencies or knowledge that could be valuable to a social movement or SMO. This points to a key difference between cultural and moral resources. Cultural resources are more widely accessible and available for use independent of favorable judgments from those outside a movement or SMO. Cultural resources include movement- or issue-relevant productions like music, literature, magazine/newspapers, or film/videos. Such cultural products facilitate the recruitment and socialization of new adherents and help movements maintain their readiness and capacity for collective action.

Human resources

Human resources are both more tangible and easier to appreciate than the above resource types. This category includes resources like labor, experience, skills, expertise, and leadership. Individuals typically have control over the use of their labor and other human resources and make them accessible to social movements or SMOs through participation. Yet, not all participants offer the same mix of capabilities. SMOs often require expertise of varying kinds and having access to lawyers, web designers, social media consultants, dynamic speakers, organizers, or outside experts when the need arises can be vitally important. The use-value of expertise often depends on the situation. For example, a prominent scientist may have little more to offer than a college intern if an environmental group needs to restore its web page after a crash. Similarly, a celebrated musician participating in a blockade contributes no additional human resource to the blockade, yet, from the standpoint of the moral resources contributed by the celebrity's presence the evaluation would be much different.

Material resources

The category of material resources combines what economists would call financial and physical capital including monetary

resources, property, office space, equipment, and supplies. The importance of monetary resources for social movements should not be underestimated. No matter how many other resources a movement mobilizes, it will incur costs and someone has to pay the bills. Material resources have received the most analytic attention because they are generally more tangible, more proprietary, and in the case of money more fungible than other resource types (Edwards & McCarthy 2004). In other words money can be converted into other types of resources (e.g., rent for office space, hiring of picketers, purchase of opinion ads) while the opposite is less often the case.

Social-organizational resources

There are three general forms of social-organizational resources: infrastructures, social networks, and organizations, each varying in their degree of organizational formality. Infrastructures are the social-organizational equivalent of public goods like the postal service, roads, or the Internet that facilitate the smooth functioning of everyday life. Infrastructures are nonproprietary social resources. By contrast, access to social networks and especially groups and formal organizations can be limited by insiders. Thus, access to resources embedded in them can be hoarded by insiders and denied to outsiders (e.g., donor lists). Such differential access only intensifies existing inequalities among groups in their ability to utilize crucial resources of other kinds. SMOs often seek to overcome the problem of resource scarcity by forming coalitions with other SMOs or by co-opting resources produced by others for nonmovement purposes, like churches, schools, service organizations, occupational groups, or, more broadly, civil society. The ease of SMO access to resources available by forming coalitions or produced by others for nonmovement purposes will vary depending on the perceived compatibility of the groups involved.

EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIPS

Combining the four means of access with the five types of resources discussed above specifies twenty specific exchange relationships through which social movements or SMOs acquire the various mixes of resources they use to pursue their social change goals (Edwards & McCarthy 2004). As indicated earlier, exchange relationships can be internal or external to an SMO. In addition, they differ in the use-value they provide and are contextualized by time and place. Exchange relationships differ in the use-value of the resources they make available to an SMO, whether material, human or other. Hence, an SMO wanting to influence conservative political elites might seek out as an exchange partner a large nationally recognized religious organization with the capacity to provide legitimacy, and thousands of dollars and letter-writing members, rather than a lesser known organization with far fewer moral, material, or human resources. By contrast, an organization wishing to generate significant media attention may seek out exchange partners known for engaging in innovative and high-profile tactics. The value of exchange relationships is context dependent in time and place. For example, valuable relations with elected officials or celebrities may lose use-value when such individuals are caught up in a public scandal. Conversely, relations might increase in value when minority parties become the majority or when a celebrity wins an award.

This broad view of exchange relations problematizes the long and narrow debate among social movement analysts over the extent to which acquiring resources from external sources constrains the actions of SMOs. That debate has focused almost exclusively on a single exchange relationship – monetary patronage. Yet, as articulated here, SMOs routinely manage numerous exchange relationships providing various kinds of resources. Hence, the impact of “source constraints” or the set of expectations and obligations between exchange partners depends in part upon the specific mix of resource access and resource

type (Edwards & McCarthy 2004). Thus, among two professionalized SMOs actively involved in planning a large protest event, they may differ in the source of their moral, cultural, material, human, and organizational resources, which will provide different constraints or opportunities for both SMOs. For example, a union which draws resources from a diverse and more conservative membership base and has close relations to political elites might find it difficult to justify to their resource partners the use of confrontational tactics. In contrast, an SMO reliant on self-generated revenues from speaking fees and merchandise sales and with members that favor the exercise of civil disobedience will find it much easier to justify engagement in confrontational tactics, all else being equal.

CONCLUSION

By wedding together rational actors, strategic action, and organizational theory with the perennial effort by social groups to overcome the differential availability and distribution of resources needed to pursue social change, resource mobilization theory continues to be a central and salient theory for analyzing “politics by other means” (Gamson 1975; Zald & McCarthy 2002). Promising theoretical and empirical directions to take for RMT scholars include explorations of the importance of less tangible resources, such as legitimacy and social media networks, for movement mobilization and the formation of movement coalitions. Moreover, scholars might explore further the breadth of exchange relationships on which movement activists draw, including partnerships with agents of social control and even countermovement organizations and hostile political elites. Resource demobilization or reduction of resources to SMOs also needs further investigation, as it is currently assumed that the processes for mobilizing resources are reversed when SMOs fail. Finally, additional theorizing and research might apply RMT to collective endeavors not typically considered to

be social movements. For example, the emergence of alternative or youth subcultures, the development and diffusion of lifestyle sports, emerging musical or performance genres, as well as the formation, development, and decline of corporations or competing views on global climate change.

SEE ALSO: Coalitions; Culture and social movements; Grievances, individual and mobilizing; Mechanisms; Networks and social movements; Political process theory; Rational choice theory and social movements; Social capital and social movements; Social movement industry; Social movement organization (SMO); Social movement sector.

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