

Summary

What Happened After Gezi? The Role of Empowerment, Politicization, and Organizing in Collective Action

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On May 28, 2013, a small number of people began gathering in Gezi Park when bulldozers arrived to start cutting down trees. Police responded with what was considered by many to be excessive force over the following days, and many people – in total estimates over 3.5 million – took to the streets in cities across the country in solidarity as well as to raise their voices regarding plans for the park. Participating in protest gives actors the opportunity to actualize their identities (Drury & Reicher, 1999), which can boost efficacy (Cocking & Drury, 2004) and a sense of psychological empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005). The goal of this research, therefore, is to discuss collective action, focusing specifically on its antecedents and the issue of efficacy and how it has been interpreted in the social identity literature as empowerment.

Social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985) proposed the concept of social identity, which is the part of the self-concept derived from our membership in social groups. A social identity defines individual category members in ideological terms. People in any given situation behave as expected based on their group membership. Thus, context defines the set of norms according to which individuals behave. The importance of context is emphasized in the elaborated social identity model (ESIM) of crowds (Drury & Reicher, 2000), which frames crowd events as intergroup encounters, examining identity development as a function of intergroup dynamics (cf. Di Giacomo, 1980).

This is especially relevant in the Gezi Park context, where, during the protests, a normative behavior set was created, referred to as the “Gezi Spirit” (*Gezi Ruhu*). People carrying the Gezi Spirit are colloquially understood to embody the spirit of the protests, a notion that continues to be recognized even after the protests have ended.

Empowerment can be defined as a social-psychological state of confidence in one’s ability to challenge existing relations of domination (Drury & Reicher, 2005). If the feeling of empowerment endures beyond

the collective action itself, it has the ability to affect participants’ personal lives and motivate involvement in further collective action.

Overview of the Studies

This paper reports two studies examining the role of efficacy and empowerment through collective action in creating and maintaining new identities, using the Gezi Park protests as the collective action context.

STUDY ONE

Study 1 was an online survey investigating engagement in future organization with a focus on normative behavior at Gezi (labeled “Gezi Spirit”) and on subsequent organization, the relationship between perceived efficacy and identification, and the impact of participation in the protests on future engagement.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants ($N = 303$; 110 males, with a mean age of 28.98) were recruited through social media and personal contacts to participate in an online survey based on experiences during the Gezi Park protests.

Procedure

Participants were asked questions regarding the protests, including how they first heard about them, their location and reason for the protest. Participants were then asked whether they believed the Gezi Park protests were effective (Yes/No). They then received three protester identification measures based on group identification items adapted from Hains, Hogg, and Duck (1997). In addition, participants were asked if they believed the Gezi Spirit exists and to describe how they believed an individual with the Gezi Spirit should behave. Participants were then asked if they had joined a political group or organization after the Gezi Park protests.

Results

There were two predictor variables (perceived efficacy and protester identity), two background variables (age and gender), and four outcome variables: existence of a Gezi Spirit, joining a political organization, the impact of Gezi in joining the new organization, and the overlap of the new group with the Gezi Spirit. Data were analyzed through hierarchical multiple regression.

Belief in the Gezi Spirit

Binomial logistic regression was computed using protester identification and perceived efficacy to predict whether participants believed in the Gezi Spirit. As predicted, the more strongly people identified as a protester, the greater the odds that they would report belief in the Gezi Spirit. For every point higher in protester identification, the odds of believing in the Gezi Spirit increased by a factor of 1.67, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 18.31, p < .001$. The model explained 27.7% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in belief in the Gezi Spirit.

Joining a Group After Gezi

Binomial logistic regression was performed using protester identification and perceived efficacy to predict whether participants went on to join a new political organization after Gezi. No significant effects were found, though it should be noted that overall, only 27 participants stated that they joined a political organization after Gezi.

The Gezi Spirit and Overlap with the New Organization

Hierarchical linear regression was employed to predict the overlap of the Gezi Spirit with the new organization. In the model, Step 1 included age and gender and Step 2 included perceived efficacy and protester identification, and Step 3 included the interaction term of efficacy and identification. Perceived efficacy was not significant, $p = .26$. Protester identification was significant, $F(5, 24) = 3.03, p = .05$. On average, higher ratings on protester identification were related to higher ratings on overlap, such that those who scored 1 point higher on protester identification scored about .46 points higher on overlap, $t(24) = 2.06, p = .05$. Interaction terms were not significant.

Gezi and Its Importance in Joining the New Organization

At Step 1, age and gender were entered into the model. Gender was significantly associated with overlap, $p = .02$. At Step 2, perceived efficacy and protester identification were entered into the model. Efficacy was not significant, $p = .78$. Protester identification was significant, $F(5, 23) = 10.29, p < .001$. On average, higher ratings on protester identification were related to higher ratings on importance, such that those who scored 1 point higher on protester identification scored about

.89 points higher on importance, $t(23) = 4.41, p < .001$. Interactions, included in the model at Step 3, were not significant.

Discussion

Study 1 examined the relationship between perceived efficacy, protester identification, and decisions to organize post-Gezi. Protester identification had a significant relationship with belief in the Gezi Spirit. Protester identification also significantly determined the importance of Gezi in joining a new organization, as well as the degree of overlap between the Gezi Spirit and the new organization.

STUDY TWO

Study 2 interviews were conducted with participants who protested in the Gezi Park protests as individuals and later made the decision to join a political group or organization. Questions focused on feelings of empowerment, normative behavior during the protests, and joining a political party or organization post-Gezi. Study 2 also explored the relationship between the Gezi Spirit and the principles of the group that individuals subsequently joined.

Method

Participants and Design

Recorded interviews were conducted with 14 males and 11 females ages 18 to 35, with most (22) under the age of 30. All participants participated in the Gezi Park protests and subsequently joined a political group, party, or organization.

Results

Efficacy and Politicization

Participants mentioned that the protests changed the way individuals thought about politics. As time went on, coalitions among leftist parties formed, also calling on the Gezi Spirit as the reason to do so. Some described a need to bring the Gezi Spirit to their own political parties, and saw Gezi as a means to bring about change to an existing, albeit stagnant, organization.

Police Conflict Experiences

For many, the Gezi Park protests functioned as the first real contact with police as a protester. Contact with police functioned as a way to see oneself less as an individual and more as part of the crowd. There was further evidence that participants' perceptions of the in-group (i.e., other protesters) and the outgroup expanded to include not just police, but also representatives of the state or government.

Empowerment at Gezi

Most participants cited direct conflict experiences with police and discussed the empowerment felt through those experiences. Also, while overcoming police through direct conflict was indeed an empowerment experience, occupying the park and living communally was in and of itself a means of empowerment.

On Feeling Empowered with the New Group

Participants also discussed different ways that their empowerment experiences impacted their willingness to engage in future protest. All participants described empowerment experiences with the new group, albeit in different forms.

On the Gezi Spirit

When asked how a person who embodied the Gezi Spirit should behave, participants from all different groups had highly overlapping descriptions. The most often repeated descriptions referred to the Gezi Spirit as anti-authority, liberal (pursuing freedom), collective, helpful, and non-discriminatory.

The Gezi Spirit and the New Group

When asked to what degree the characteristics of the Gezi Spirit overlap with the defining principles of their new group, participants' responses skewed positive, ranging from "considerably overlap" to "completely overlap."

Empowerment and Future of Engagement After Gezi

Participants discussed the importance of Gezi in creating a general change in the political landscape. Gezi was perceived by participants as creating larger social change. Rather than focusing on the immediate gains of the protest, they described the way Gezi would impact the future.

Discussion

In asking participants about the effectiveness of the protests, their focus was on the change experienced in people's awareness of ongoing struggles and the increased politicization after the protests. They saw the legacy of the protests as the reason it was efficacious.

Empowerment experiences during the protests were in line with expectations of the ESIM. Participants who engaged in conflict with police felt they overcame them in some way, and found this to be an empowering experience. Beyond the understanding of traditional protest was the occupation of the park.

Questions regarding the Gezi Spirit and the principles of the new group were asked to understand whether the overarching identity created during the protests influenced the way the new group was chosen. Participants described the Gezi Spirit similarly across groups.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Through a mixed method design, I have examined the experiences of protesters during the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul to understand what led the protestors to feel efficacious, empowered and what role those empowerment experiences played in impacting participants' decisions to join political parties or organizations after the protests ended and maintaining participation in collective action through these new groups and identities.

In Study 1, participants who perceived the protests as efficacious also indicated significantly greater identification as a protester. The recognition of both efficacy and the subsequent identification indicates that the identification may have the ability to foster willingness to engage in future protest.

Results from Study 2 indicate that participants overwhelmingly feel that protests were successful despite not achieving many tangible changes. This finding suggests support for the social identity approach to the self and related concepts of collective action, whereby social change occurs not only where social movements have power but where individual members are subjectively empowered through their identification with the movement they are part of (i.e., their identification as a protester).

In line with the ESIM, protesters who experienced conflict with police described this as a new way to understand other protesters present. As described in ESIM, new understandings of the group (protesters at Gezi) formed as individuals began working together in conflict against police. Participation in the daily activities of an occupied park was also described as an important empowerment experience on par with direct conflict with police.

Implications

Since the Arab Spring and then the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, more and more attention has been focused on grassroots uprisings occurring globally. As these events continue, questions of how and why they start, and how individuals start to "locate" themselves within those movements becomes increasingly important. Understanding the experiences that create those changes within the individual can lead to a better understanding of how social movements start and continue. Understanding how politicization and organization come about and are sustained will have a profound effect on how states and the public interact, how one may achieve lasting social change based on those interactions.