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Why do people take to the streets? Understanding the multidimensional motivations of protesting publics

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ABSTRACT

This study enhances our understanding of protesting publics by exploring the motivations that trigger individuals to take part in protests. This study used 22 in-depth interviews for one case and 25 in-depth interviews for another to investigate why individuals participate in anti-government protests. At the collective level, individuals participated in protests to communicate with and warn their governments; at the individual level, protestors expected to learn through active participation, gain personal satisfaction, and vent their emotions. This study contributes to public relations theory and practices specific to government public relations.

1. Introduction

Dominant public relations theories about individual engagement in collective action have centered on segmenting people and strategically communicating with the most active publics to protect organizations from the threats posed by these groups (e.g., Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1992). Few theories other than the situational theory of publics (STP; Grunig & Repper, 1992) and the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS; Kim & Grunig, 2011) have enhanced our theoretical understanding of when and why individuals become active and behave collectively against organizations. Despite their contributions to understanding publics, researchers have criticized these theories for overlooking the process and individual characteristics of the members that comprise publics (Cozier & Witmer, 2001; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Sommerfeldt, 2012; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001).

Specifically, scholars have argued for more research on publics' own perspectives (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996; Sommerfeldt, 2012; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001), explaining that individuals, through their interactions with various messages, other people, and society, interpret issues and participate in meaning-making processes. Scholars have also highlighted the limitations of currently dominant theories in understanding publics, arguing that people become politically and socially active for multiple reasons (Cozier & Witmer, 2001; Klandermans, 1997; Sommerfeldt, 2012; Vasquez, 1994; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001).

Our understanding of publics is particularly limited in the context of government public relations. Scholars (Hong, Park, Lee, & Park, 2012; Liu & Horsley, 2007) have argued that government public relations differs from public relations in other private sectors (e.g., corporate public relations), as government public relations plays different social roles and functions (Avery, Bedrosian, Brucchi, Dennis, Keane, & Koch, 1996; Hong et al., 2012; Liu & Horsley, 2007). The government should focus on enhancing the public good (Liu & Horsley, 2007) by serving its citizens ethically, embracing the legal responsibility to “maintain its [own] stability” because, regardless of political interests, a government should serve its citizens (Hallahan, 2000a; Hong et al., 2012, p. 38). Despite its scope and influence over society, government public relations has received limited scholarly attention (Hong et al., 2012); most research on an active public has focused on private organizations' public relations practices. More specifically, understanding the dimensions of quality government public relations is critical for both the government and its publics. One method of investigating quality is to

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examine the motives that drive individuals to participate in anti-government protests.

Despite the field's growth over the past 10 years, a state-of-the-field article (Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010) indicated that advancement in public relations research still requires a more public-centered approach. Accordingly, this study adopted a public-centered approach to investigate the multidimensional motives individuals bring to protests. Specifically, this study argues the one-dimensional perspective of existing public relations theories limits their understanding of protesting publics; the study utilized an alternative, motive-based framework to understand protesting publics with multidimensional motives and demonstrated the utility of this approach by analyzing data collected from two anti-government protests. This study aimed to complement the STP and enhance scholarly understanding of protesting publics in the public relations field by investigating protestor motivations and revealing to government public relations practitioners the qualities required to foster good relationships with publics.

2. Literature review

2.1. Situational theory of publics

STP (Grunig, 1997; Grunig & Repper, 1992) has been a dominant approach to understanding publics' active participation in a collective behavior such as protest. Employing sociopsychological variables to examine *when* and *why* individuals become active, STP states that once an issue arises, an active public tends to problematize the issue, recognize fewer constraints against acting toward a resolution, and engage in active communication and organization toward the resolution (Grunig, 1997; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Scholars have integrated variables including shared involvement (Aldoory & Van Dyke, 2006), shared risk (Aldoory, Kim, & Tindall, 2010), and cultural identity (Sha, 2006) into STP, and other scholars further refined it into a more general theory (STOPS; Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012). Recently, researchers have tested STOPS's utility in understanding publics in relation to policy issues that received a great deal of media attention in China (Chen, Hung-Baesecke, & Kim, 2017), Chinese citizens' environmental issues (Jiang, Kim, Liu, & Luo, *in press*), and anti-vaccination issues (Krishna, *in press*). Other studies have divided active publics into subgroups using this theory. For example, Ni and Kim (2009) identified six subgroups of active publics based on the extent of their activeness in problem solving, while Krishna (2017) conceptualized a special type of active public—lacuna public—characterized as those who lack issue-specific knowledge, but exhibit negative attitudes. Despite such contributions, some scholars argued for the need to employ alternative perspectives to better understand publics.

2.2. STP's limitations for understanding a protesting public

Noting the STP's limitations, scholars (Botan, 2006; Botan & Soto, 1998; Chay-Nemeth, 2001; Cozier & Witmer, 2001; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996; Leitch & Neilson, 2001; Sommerfeldt, 2012; Vasquez, 1993, 1994; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001) have argued for alternative approaches to understanding publics. As evidenced by Grunig and Repper's (1992, p. 129) description of publics ("A public, a market, or any other segment of a population exists only because a [...] practitioner uses a theoretical concept to identify it"), the STP locates publics as a subject position (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Specifically, these scholars have criticized the STP for viewing publics as *collectives* that arise around organizational *problems* (Botan & Soto, 1998; Vasquez, 1994).

2.2.1. A public centered around symbolic reality

These scholars have disputed the STP's assumption that publics often arise from problems; instead, they have emphasized that publics often arise around symbolic realities (Cozier & Witmer, 2001; Sommerfeldt, 2012). They view publics as engaging in "an ongoing process of agreement upon an interpretation" to arrive at "more sophisticated, insightful, and socially linked" interpretations than organizations assume (Botan & Soto, 1998, p. 21). Given the autonomous, interpretive, and communicative nature of publics, individuals can become involved in communication processes to understand their world and develop their symbolic reality and group consciousness through a process of continuous interaction (Botan, 2006; Vasquez, 1993; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001).

Scholars adopting this approach have argued that problematic situations are not static objects; rather, they are symbolic realities "created, raised, and sustained through the symbolic convergence (configuring and reconfiguring) or messages" (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001, p. 150). Such realities or collective beliefs develop through social interactions in which events and information are discussed and interpreted; some members will inevitably disagree and deviate from the group, while others will defend and retain their beliefs. Beliefs are constantly "contested, refuted, reformulated, and defended within as well as between groups" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 5).

Empirical studies (e.g., Klandermans & Oegema, 1987) have supported this approach, finding that—contrary to STP's predictions—protesters viewed the possibility that their participation would resolve the problem that triggered their active participation skeptically. Nevertheless, they acted on principle to protect their values. Rather than fixed, individual perceptions are susceptible to interpretation; thus, the meanings individuals attach to their social contexts explain their participation in such protests (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009). Ironically, an empirical study based on the STOPS (Kim et al., 2012) revealed that—contrary to STOPS's predictions—problem recognition had no significant association with motivation or protest participation. Kim et al. (2012) explained that the massive media coverage received by the issue examined in their study limited the potential for variation in how problem recognition affected motivation. However, these empirical studies imply that individuals become active for reasons other than problem solving, as suggested by some scholars (Botan, 2006; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001).

2.2.2. Individuality among a public

Scholars arguing for the incorporation of public-centered and process-based approaches emphasize the importance of a public's

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