

The field of psychiatric contention in the UK, 1960–2000

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the question of how we should understand the concept of “social movements”, particularly as applied to health related movements. My argument is that movements should be understood as “fields of contention”. This concept, as I develop it, emphasizes two key aspects of social movement mobilization. Firstly, departing from traditional models of movements, which tend to view them as unified “things”, it draws our attention to the numerous groups and agents who interact within the internal space of a “movement” and to the relations, alliances and conflicts between those various groups/agents as they unfold through time. Secondly, it draws our attention to the embedding of social movement struggles within multiple differentiated contexts of struggle, each of which affords different opportunities for struggle but each of which makes different demands upon activists if struggle is to prove effective. The model of fields of contention is explored within the paper using empirical data on a variety of “social movement organizations” (SMOs) which have formed around the mental health system in the UK over the last forty years.

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Introduction

Health, illness and the various practices and professions devoted to them are a source of considerable contention in contemporary western societies. In some cases the conflict is longstanding. It has been amplified in recent years, however, as the medical field has been a key site of mobilization for the so-called new social movements (see this issue, Habermas 1987; McInerney 2000; Melucci 1989). How are we to make sense of this contention?

This question can be broken down into three parts. Firstly, what are the grievances and strains that give social agents reason to mobilize and to what extent are they new? What changes in the medical field, if any, have provoked conflict? Secondly, since it is widely acknowledged that grievances and strains, though perhaps necessary causes of mobilization, are by no means

sufficient causes (Crossley 2002a, b, c; Smelser 1962), what are the other key causal factors? Is mobilization related to shifts in structures of opportunity for protest? In changing resource flows? In new “framings”? What have been the key trigger events of recent health mobilizations? Thirdly, there is the question of the organization of the “movements” themselves. How are we to understand “movement” in this context?

The discussion in this paper will touch upon each of these three questions but my key concern is with the final one. Taking mental health mobilizations in the UK between 1960 and 2000 as my case study, I am going to argue that movements and protests are best understood as “fields of contention”. This concept of “fields of contention”, which draws inspiration from a number of sources,¹ is multi-layered and must be briefly unpacked.

¹The key inspiration behind this conception of fields is the work of Bourdieu (see Bourdieu 1993, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Much of my earlier work in this area and even earlier

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In the first instance it implies that resistance to mental health agencies and practices, to develop my specific example, is orchestrated and affected by a variety of distinct agents and organizations. Secondly, it implies that these agents and organizations interact with and are interdependent upon one another in a variety of ways, such that they form a relatively autonomous configuration. They sometimes exchange resources; sometimes compete for resources; sometimes co-operate, other-times come into conflict. In some cases we will find overlap in membership but in other cases they form into polarized and juxtaposed camps. In all cases, however, these groups and individuals take up positions relative to one another, defining their selves in terms of one another and thereby constructing a complex and internally differentiated identity-meaning complex. Furthermore, and coming to my third point, these “positions” are just one amongst a number of emergent products produced within the field. Interaction, particularly when it becomes stabilized in specific networks and channels, gives rise to norms, semiotic codes, language games, identity narratives and traditions, all of which put cultural distance between participants on the inside of the field and outsiders; and all of which, increasingly, mediate interaction within the field. The meaning and effect of actions and gestures in the field depends upon its emergent cultural structure and effective participation and in/comprehension of the field is increasingly dependent upon having a practical grasp of this structure. Power ratios² too belong, in part, to this list of emergent properties. Fields of contention are fields of power but power is not a possession of agents involved in a field, rather a function of their relative access to resources (including support) and the relationships of each to the others at any one point in time. Fourthly, because affected through interaction fields are necessarily mobile and fluid. The agents, positions, power ratios and cultural texture of the field are in a constant process of becoming. Furthermore, this process is *sui generis* in the sense that its order and dynamics are affected by way of interactional dynamics and are thereby irreducible to individual (inter)actors. Agents interact purposively but the combined unintended effects of interaction give rise to unforeseen exigencies

(footnote continued)

drafts of this paper used a concept of fields which was entirely Bourdieusian. In this paper, however, I have sought also to integrate into the concept of fields ideas taken from Elias (1978, 1984) and social network analysis also. These other approaches allow me to enrich the idea of fields in a consistent and coherent fashion.

²The concept of “power ratios” is one which I borrow from Elias (1978). In essence it suggests that power is always a matter of a probabilistic balance of forces between parties. All sides to any relationship can influence all other sides to some degree but the ratio of potential influence will vary between relationships.

and dynamics which all must respond to but none are individually responsible for. This may entail a very general trajectory, in which all participants are implicated. However, it may equally involve the flow of quite specific trajectories in the field, trajectories which most agents in the field respond to but which they do not necessarily belong to. For example, a new ideological position may begin to take shape and gather momentum in the field, prompting most to respond to it in some way whilst only some are inclined to subscribe to it.

Finally, though relatively autonomous, this field is simultaneously embedded in or at least impinged upon by a variety of further fields. At a very basic level, for example, mental health protest groups emerged in response to the configuration of the wider field of mental health provision. They attempt to change this field. And in doing so they necessarily come up against its key agents and organizations; its power balances and culture. And the process does not stop there. Protestors take their struggles, very often, into the legal, parliamentary and media fields, or perhaps they find themselves enmeshed in those fields as consequence of certain of their actions (journalists, for example, may take an interest in them, thereby drawing them into the media field). In each of these cases they find themselves drawn into and interacting with a distinct “world”, a world they may neither understand nor feel themselves equipped to deal with. At a further level still, requiring money to mobilize, they are affected by events in the economic field. Economic downturn may mean a reduction in donations for those groups who depend upon them, for example, which may in turn alter the power balance between groups who are donation-dependent and groups who are not. Furthermore, each of these “enviroming fields” interact with one another, generating further *sui generis* dynamics which agents in each of them are required to accommodate to in one way or another.

This latter point is perhaps just a way of saying that the field of psychiatric concentration, or indeed any such field, has both an internal and an external aspect to its development. It has its own internal dynamics and properties but they never function in isolation from the wider dynamics, properties and agents of other fields; such that, in the final instance, the boundary between internal and external is highly permeable.

In this paper I want to put some flesh upon the bones of this model by way of a reflection upon a number of episodes, patterns and trajectories in the history of the psychiatric field of contention which I have encountered in my attempt to chart its broader history. These historical “bytes” in no way encapsulate the history of the field as a whole but they at least allow me to begin to demonstrate certain of the claims that I have made with respect to the concept of fields above. The paper divides roughly into two halves. In the first half I reflect upon a

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