

Collective Action

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Collective action is the pursuit of a goal or set of goals by more than one person. It is a term which has formulations and theories in many areas of the social sciences.

In sociology

As an explanation of social movements, an inquiry into collective action involves examining those factors that cause the setting of standards of social integration, as well as those factors which lead to standards of deviance and conflict. An explanation of a collective action in sociology will involve the explanation of those things which are similar or dissimilar to collective actions at different times and in different places. Theories of collective action emphasise how group behavior can, in some sense, be linked to social institutions.

In political science and economics

The economic theory of collective action is concerned with the provision of public goods (and other collective consumption) through the collaboration of two or more individuals, and the impact of externalities on group behavior. It is more commonly referred to as Public Choice. Mancur Olson's 1965 book *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, is an important early analysis of the problems of public good provision. Olson's theory explores the market failures where individual consumer rationality and firms' profit-seeking do not lead to efficient provision of the public goods, i.e. where another level of provision would provide a higher utility at a lower cost.

Besides economics, the theory has found many applications in political science, sociology, communication, anthropology and environmentalism.

Collective action problem

The term "collective action problem" describes the situation in which multiple individuals would all benefit from a certain action, which, however, has an associated cost making it implausible that anyone individually can or will undertake and solve it alone. The rational choice is then to undertake this as a collective action the cost of which is shared.

Exploitation of the great by the small

Mancur Olson made the highly controversial claim that individual rational choice leads to situations where individuals with more resources will carry a higher burden in the provision of the public good than poorer ones. Poorer individuals will usually have little choice but to opt for the free rider strategy, i.e. they will attempt to benefit from the public good without contributing to its provision. This may also encourage the under-production (inefficient production) of the public good.

Institutional design

While public goods are often provided by governments, this is not always the case. Various institutional designs have been studied with the aim of reducing the collaborative failure. The best design for a given situation depends on the production costs, the utility function, and the collaborative effects, amongst other things. Here are only some examples:

Joint products

A joint-product model analyzes the collaborative effect of joining a private good to a public good. For example, a tax deduction (private good) can be tied to a donation to a charity (public good).

It can be shown that the provision of the public good increases when tied to the private good, as long as the private good is provided by a monopoly (otherwise the private good would be provided by competitors without the link to the public good).

Clubs

Some institutional design, e.g. intellectual property rights, can introduce an exclusion mechanism and turn a pure public good into an impure public good artificially.

If the costs of the exclusion mechanism are not higher than the gain from the collaboration, clubs can emerge. James M. Buchanan showed in his seminal paper that clubs can be an efficient alternative to government interventions.

A nation can be seen as a club whose members are its citizens. Government would then be the manager of this club.

Federated structure

In some cases, theory shows that collaboration emerges spontaneously in smaller groups rather than in large ones (see e.g. Dunbar's number). This explains why labor unions or charities often have a federated structure.

Wikipedia is another example: while its overall organization is quite flat, it fosters collaboration at the level of individual pages, while loose organizations maintain consistency within narrow topics or subjects areas. This involves fewer participants than collaboration on the encyclopedia as a whole. Collaboration on wikibooks is more difficult for the same reason.

In philosophy

Over the past twenty years or so analytic philosophers have been exploring the nature of collective action in the sense of acting together, as when people paint a house together, go for a walk together, or together execute a pass play. These particular examples have been central for three of the philosophers who have made well known contributions to this literature: Michael Bratman, Margaret Gilbert, and John Searle, respectively.

In (Gilbert 1989) and subsequent articles and book chapters including Gilbert (2006, chapter 7) Gilbert argues for an account of collective action according to which this rests on a special kind of interpersonal commitment, what Gilbert calls a "joint commitment". A joint commitment in Gilbert's sense is not a matter of a set of personal commitments independently created by each of the participants, as when each makes a personal decision to do something. Rather, it is a single commitment to whose creation each participant makes a contribution. Thus suppose that one person says "Shall we go for a walk?" and the other says "Yes, let's". Gilbert proposes that as a result of this exchange the parties are jointly committed to go for a walk, and thereby obligated to one another to act as if they were parts of a single person taking a walk. Joint commitments can be created less explicitly and through processes that are more extended in time. One merit of a joint commitment account of collective action, in Gilbert's view, is that it explains the fact that those who are out on a walk together, for instance, understand that each of them is in a position to demand corrective action of the other if he or she acts in ways that affect negatively the completion of their walk. In (Gilbert 2006a) she discusses the pertinence of joint commitment to collective actions in the sense of the theory of rational choice.

In Searle (1990) Searle argues that what lies at the heart of a collective action is the presence in the mind of each participant of a "we-intention". Searle does not give an account of we-intentions or, as he also puts it, "collective intentionality", but insists that they are distinct from the "I-intentions" that animate the actions of persons acting alone.

In Bratman (1993) Bratman proposed that, roughly, two people "share an intention" to paint a house together when each intends that the house is painted by virtue of the activity of each, and also intends that it is so painted by virtue of the intention of each that it is so painted. That these conditions obtain must also be "common knowledge" between the participants.

Discussion in this area continues to expand, and has influenced discussions in other disciplines including anthropology, developmental psychology, and economics. One general question is whether it is necessary to think in terms that go beyond the personal intentions of individual human beings properly to characterize what it is to act together. Bratman's account does not go beyond such personal intentions. Gilbert's account, with its invocation of joint commitment, does go beyond them. Searle's account does also, with its invocation of collective intentionality. The question of whether and how one must account for the existence of mutual obligations when there is a collective intention is another of the issues in this area of inquiry.

Collective action as a response to climate change

Climate change has been described as one of the greatest challenges to international cooperation that the world has faced. The Stern Review stated that 'no two countries will face exactly the same situation in terms of impacts or the costs and benefits of action, and no country can take effective action to control the risks that they face alone. International collective action to tackle the problem is required because climate... is a global public good -- and because co-operative action will greatly reduce the costs of both mitigation and adaption. The international collective response to the climate change problem required is therefore unique, both in terms of its complexity and depth'.

Examples of international collective action already taking place are:

multilateral frameworks such as UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol
partnerships, networks, and organisations such as the International Energy Agency, that enable coordinated international action
mutual understanding of domestic policy goals.

International collective action has been shown to be more likely to succeed where there is mutual self-interest, when it is in response to a shared threat, and where there is leadership from a dominant country.

Game theory has been used to identify key criteria for designing frameworks for international collective action on climate change. Lessons from game theory include:

changing the structure of incentives to make cooperation more appealing
understanding the role of reciprocity, particularly when faced with prisoner's dilemma situations: players may adopt strategies of conditional cooperation, where the more others contribute to the public good, the more they will contribute themselves
increasing the frequency of contact and transparency (institutional structures and repeated negotiations
offering opportunities to renegotiate rules at key stages
understanding the role of reputation in influencing outcomes.

FLOSS development as collective action including private actors

The development of Free and Libre Open Source Software FLOSS is an example of collective action where individuals create a public good: the source code freely available to everyone. The uniqueness is that not only individuals contribute to the common good but also private firms invest into the production of the freely available knowledge. Therefore this phenomena is called private-collective innovation.