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Social Movements as Moral Confrontations: With Special Reference to Civil Rights

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One of the central problems faced by groups seeking social changes is how to overcome the inertia and apathy which tends to characterize the orientation of a populace toward most social issues. This problem is exacerbated for those who lack the institutional and organizational bases of authority that enable legislators, educators, jurors, and other legitimate agents of change to affect social policy. Those individuals or groups who do not have access to legitimate avenues of influence will attempt to affect policy by direct appeals to the populace; in brief, to mobilize pressure for change through means of a mass social movement. Those social movements which were able to have an impact on the popular conscience seem also to have had greater impact on the course of social events.

In this chapter we shall explore some of the mechanisms available to social movements in their efforts to overcome public inertia and appeal to social conscience. Specifically, the thesis developed in this selection is that the creation of a morality play is an effective mechanism for mobilizing support for the movement's objectives. We do not claim that the capacity to create a successful morality play is sufficient for accomplish-

ing the larger movement goals of preventing or bringing about change. Others (Smelser, 1963; Tilly, 1964; Olson, 1965; Turner & Killian, 1972; Oberschall, 1973; McCarthy & Zald, 1973; Berk, 1974; Marx & Wood, 1975) have analyzed the critical role of historical-structural forces and organizational and material resources in movement formation and impact. However, the morality play contributes an essential impetus through its capacity to bring about belief and behavior change via moral confrontation. Further, its dramatic qualities effectively absorb the player and the audience alike into a symbolic dynamic which heightens and intensifies the interactions. This dynamic elicits the media coverage so necessary for movement visibility and success.

We shall first identify the essential players in contemporary social movement morality plays. We will then identify five strategies of moral confrontation that articulate the moral problem from the movement's point of view to pose the moral dilemma to nonmembers. Morality play construction and strategies of moral confrontation are then elaborated in a case study of one of the most successful civil rights movements in American history, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

THE PLAYERS

We conceive of social movement morality plays as having at least four players—the good, the bad, a chorus, an audience—and, possibly, a fifth player—decision makers—depending on whether the movement is change oriented. It is generally in the interests of social movements to be cast in the role of the “good,”¹ since it casts at least an informal legitimacy upon the movement and its goals. Such legitimacy is enhanced when the movement embellishes the good role through martyrdom or victimization at the hands of the “bad.” Observers have noted, for example, the impetus given the civil rights movement by Bull Connor's brutality against black demonstrators in Birmingham in 1963, thus prompting President Kennedy to observe: “The civil rights movement owed Bull Connor as much as it owed . . . Lincoln” (Metcalfe, 1968).

Individuals and groups whose values and interests are in conflict with the goals of a particular social movement will understandably resist the “bad” label and attempt to reverse the order of moral attribution. Wealthy or powerful targets usually fail to be convincing in the good or martyred role and, thus, resort to other means of avoiding the bad label. Efforts may be made to keep the issue from public awareness by avoiding confrontation, by discrediting the opposing side through challenge

¹There are, of course, exceptions, such as terrorist and satanical movements that do not seek to be cast in the role of the “good.” In the case of terrorists, however, rationales usually include the ultimate good that, unfortunately, can only be reached through “bad” means.

of credentials and motivation or by explicitly denying the moral issue. Directly confronting one or another of the moral components of the issue will be a last resort (Tallman, 1976). Thus, we see the initial struggle between the movement and its target to be over the very construction of the main substantive theme of the morality play.

In modern societies, the role of the "chorus" is frequently played by the mass media, which disseminate and interpret the morality play to the "audience." An increasingly important component of movement visibility is media coverage, because the major communication links between movements and the public or the audience are provided by the mass media (Katz, Gurevitch, & Haddassah, 1973; Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). It is usually in the movement's interest to establish reciprocity between it and the media, wherein the movement provides the media with a "newsworthy" event to cover and, in exchange, the media provides the movement with an audience. Since, increasingly, "newsworthy" is interpreted in terms of dramatic appeal, those movements that are characterized by conflict, violence, pathos, and uniqueness are most likely to be considered newsworthy and are, therefore, most likely to gain a media chorus. The "chorus" plays a key role in unraveling the drama, for it speaks "objectively" with the truth of an oracle.

Even if movements have all of the other essential ingredients for success (e.g., material resources and organizational skills), "decision makers" will probably not attend to movement objectives unless they perceive the movement as capturing the audience's attention and involvement. Because movements generally lack easy access to decision makers, they are forced to use dramatic means to make their issues salient matters of public opinion that decision makers must attend to (Lipsky, 1968; Turner, 1970; Klapp, 1970). The morality play is a particularly effective tactic because it can provide the drama of conflict between the good and the bad to meet media and audience requirements to be both absorbing and entertaining, and thereby heighten pressures for decision-maker involvement.

Values provide the symbolic threat that ties all these players together around a common moral theme. The values of the players may differ in their hierarchical ordering, but they come from the same value pool, a value pool that is generally known and adhered to by virtually everyone in society. The movement seeks to promote or prevent change in the name of certain universal moral values. These values are usually translated into prescriptions for change that would not only require decision makers to alter their present policies and practices, but would also bring some cost to those benefiting from the status quo. A social movement's values not only guide the articulation of such changes, but also provide justifications as to why such changes constitute moral imperatives. Likewise, the arguments of the movement's opponents are couched in

value terms to justify the policies and practices that the social movement would change. The social conflict that emerges is rooted in competing value priorities that guide and justify competing policy prescriptions for resource distribution (Marx & Holzner, 1977; Oberschall, 1973).

MORAL CONFRONTATION

While the media considers itself successful if it draws a large and attentive audience, the social movement must go further: it also attempts to have an impact on the audience. To engage the heart and mind of an audience in the moral struggle, movement strategists must not only know the audience's conceptions of good and bad, but also what constitutes a genuine moral dilemma for it. With this information in hand, the movement can then set the process of moral confrontation into motion.

Our conception of moral confrontation instigated by natural social movements seems analogous to the self-confrontation technique employed in many laboratory experiments (Rokeach, 1973, 1979, and chapters 12 to 15 in this volume). Self-confrontation is brought about by the communication of information that exposes awareness to specified inconsistencies between values, attitudes, or behavior. Research has shown that awareness of such inconsistencies often produces an affective state of self-dissatisfaction, and, consequently, relevant values and related attitudes and behavior undergo change designed to remove the self-dissatisfaction. People need to see themselves and to be seen by others as moral and competent beings, and this need provides a powerful vehicle for belief and behavior change. When social movements—change agents—are able to point to specific instances in which people are violating their own conceptions of morality and competence, the mechanisms of behavioral and social change are often set in motion. We are suggesting that social movements employ self-confrontation to bring about social changes in ways which parallel the techniques used in laboratories to produce value, attitude, and behavior change. Indeed, we will attempt to show that all of the components of this technique are evident in certain civil rights struggles of recent years.

Of the many possible variations of the confrontation technique, five that are particularly suitable for social movements are identified below. These are not mutually exclusive, for a movement may use more than one strategy at the same time or over time. Letting X = an individual or group, and Y = another individual or group, the moral confrontation strategies are as follows:

1. *Hypocrisy*: Value-Behavior Discrepancy

Xs are confronted with evidence indicating that their behaviors are inconsistent with their espoused values.

2. *Forced Choice: Value Incompatibility*

Xs are confronted with the fact that one of X's cherished values cannot be fulfilled because it is incompatible with another of X's cherished values.

3. *False Consciousness: Value Control*

Xs are confronted with evidence that Ys have instilled value priorities in Xs, thus allowing Ys to control Xs.

4. *Disaster: Behavioral Consequences*

Xs are confronted with information indicating that their value priorities will lead to disaster and must therefore be changed.

5. *Purity: Value Conformity*

Xs are informed that their values do not conform to an absolute Y value system, and thus stand in danger of losing Y's approval.

It may be conjectured that all social movements are in the moral confrontation business, employing one or more of the five moral confrontation strategies—to gain public attention, adherents, and the attention of decision makers. Social movements try to bring about or to resist social change mainly by attempting to change values, or by attempting to freeze them, through one or another strategy of moral confrontation. We suspect that the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of any social movement hinges upon the clarity of the morality play and of the strategies the movement is able to employ.

To illustrate such a general "morality play" view of social movements, we will focus our attention in the remainder of this chapter on Martin Luther King's civil rights movement as a case study, in the hope of learning what made it so successful, at least at the outset, and what later led to its decline. We will first analyze the players and the strategies employed by Martin Luther King's SCLC and its opponents; how SCLC first managed to gain media attention and, through the media, the attention and support of the public; some morality play factors that led to the decline of SCLC; and a novel, emerging morality play within the civil rights movement of the late seventies. Finally, we will consider briefly some research implications.

THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

The formation of SCLC can be seen as a continuation and extension of a struggle that began with the American Revolution. Content analyses of the major revolutionary documents—the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Federalist Papers—uniformly show that the value of freedom is the most frequently mentioned of all values (Tracy, 1975). But the constitutionally guaranteed freedoms were initially restricted to landed male adults. It was this re-

striction that was to become the focal point for virtually all the civil rights struggles that were to follow. It set the stage for one group after another (up to and even including the movement culminating in the Bakke case) to articulate the dominant theme of all such morality plays: expressing a demand for equal access to constitutionally guaranteed individual freedoms.

In analyzing how the SCLC became one of the most potent morality plays in American history, it is instructive to comment briefly on how it first came into being. It is not enough to say that the movement was precipitated by a black woman's imprisonment for failing to give up her seat on a bus to a white, because it does not tell us why this particular incident and not others led to the formation of the SCLC. While there are a number of factors that could be considered, the most relevant for present purposes is that members of the black community responded to the Montgomery bus incident by demanding a meeting with local black church leaders to discuss the situation. During the course of this meeting, the church leaders were accused of hypocrisy for failing to act on behalf of the imprisoned woman, on the one hand, while espousing pious concerns about her welfare, on the other. This moral confrontation is said to have activated the church leaders—and, in particular, Martin Luther King—to form a protest movement that came to be known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a local movement that in a few years would engulf the whole South and then the nation as a whole. We can only speculate about the extent to which the Conference leaders—and, in particular, Martin Luther King—were shaken and influenced by their own moral self-confrontation as hypocrites. What is clear is that they proceeded to employ this same strategy in their exhortative appeals to other blacks, the larger white community, and decision makers.

At the heart of the SCLC movement was its moral advocacy of non-violence. Their first effort was a boycott of the segregated Montgomery bus system. Overcoming their enormous inertia and fear to mount and sustain this boycott, and later demonstrations, must have taken a special coalescence of moral forces, which included a leader endowed with special moral qualities,² compelling strategies of moral confrontation, organizational ties (Freeman, 1975; Weller & Quarantelli, 1973) between community and church, and incidents that could readily be translated into questions of values.

Many blacks must have undergone their own individual moral confrontations before they could change from a lifetime of resigned and passive acceptance of segregation to, suddenly, a shared, yet nonviolent

²Potent and effective morality plays would seem to be conducive to the attribution of "charisma" to the movement leader.

militant resistance to discrimination on buses, in restaurants and schools, and at the voting booth. SCLC's tactics for mobilizing the black members of the community included strategies of moral confrontation to make them dissatisfied with their images of themselves: How can we go on saying among ourselves that we are as good as anyone else, yet behave in public as though we are not (Hypocrisy)? How come some of us are their Uncle Toms, and how come we go on thinking of ourselves as they do (False Consciousness)? How can we maintain our dignity and self-respect when we are so polite and obedient to those who oppress us (Forced Choice)?

It was possible to couch variants of such moral confrontation strategies to appeal more specifically to whites. Two examples of the Hypocrisy strategy come readily to mind: an espousal of Christian love and brotherhood, yet indifference or discrimination against black Christian brethren; an espousal of Constitution-sanctioned principles of justice and fairness for all, yet condoning of one or another instance of discriminatory treatment of black Americans. And three examples of the Forced Choice strategy: justice and fairness versus law and order; supporting the funding of the war on poverty versus funding the war in Vietnam; equal treatment and opportunity for all versus individual freedom to exploit or profit from the labor of others.

But whereas the third strategy, False Consciousness, was more directed by SCLC to black Americans, the fourth strategy, Disaster, was probably more directed to white Americans: If you don't listen to those few of us who preach love and nonviolence, you will strengthen the hand of many others of us who preach hate and violence; if you continue to ignore our demands for equal treatment, you will have to face certain disastrous consequences—moral decay, rioting, looting, burning of our ghettos, and loss of prestige and influence abroad.

What can be said of the fifth strategy, Purity? As far as we can tell, it was not employed by SCLC, but it was employed by Black Separatists and somewhat later by Black Power advocates. Appeals to such values as "Black is beautiful," separatism, and the superiority of Afro-American culture were appeals directed solely to black Americans—to preserve their purity or their moral authority. At this stage of analysis, we can only wonder whether the Purity strategy is a strategy of despair, a dogmatic moral strategy employed as a last resort when all other moral confrontation strategies have failed.

Our case study analysis of the moral confrontation strategies of the civil rights movement must be supplemented by at least a brief analysis of the moral confrontation strategies employed by right-wing social movements opposing civil rights: the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens Council, the American Nazi Party, the John Birch Society, and so on. We observe, by and large, their employment of the same moral confronta-

tion (except for False Consciousness), but with a different content. They argue that it is hypocritical to claim that America is the land of the free when there are so many laws to constrain our freedom to reside, to rent, to employ, to educate our children, to eat, and to play. They argue that advances in equality cannot be brought about without substantial reductions in individual freedom. They argue that Disaster will follow if we lose our individual freedom. And they appeal in various ways to Purity: Anglo-Saxon purity, fear of mongrelization, and a return to a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible.

Having identified the primary strategies of moral confrontation employed to gain members, activate potential supporters, and counter the arguments of opponents, we turn now to an examination of the means used by movements to create viable morality plays capable of gaining media coverage. Again, we shall use the SCLC as our prototype.

GAINING MEDIA COVERAGE

SCLC was able to command media and audience attention by becoming a martyred, heroic victim of violence. Central to SCLC's assumption of this role was its commitment to nonviolent forms of protest, on the one hand, and to religious values, on the other. A simple, easily communicated contrast thus emerged between SCLC's approach and the approach of the opposition. The uniformed police and jeering white onlookers at demonstrations became the readily identified "bad guys" that the media could portray unambiguously to their audience. Drama and action were added when the controlled deliberateness of SCLC marchers refusing to obey the law elicited violent responses from rock-throwing onlookers and police who used dogs, hoses, and clubs in clear view of the cameras. Another factor that SCLC strategists effectively played upon was the Southern setting, which fostered a parallel between its struggle and the "let my people go" morality play of a century earlier.

The national news media entered increasingly into the emerging morality play in the role of chorus as appeal to news value became apparent. The civil rights demonstrations had all of the characteristics of newsworthy events—drama, action, conflict, violence, good guys, and bad guys. It is said that Dr. Martin Luther King deliberately selected schoolchildren for his marches to heighten the drama. Dr. King had said that the black struggle for justice and equality would be *shown* to the American people on television. An important strategic factor in maintaining media and audience interest was the SCLC's ability to focus on different incidents, avoiding repetition and boredom. SCLC thus made it easy and profitable for the media to articulate and present the larger morality play to its audience. Moreover, the clear roles of bad and good

and the simplicity and intensity of the drama combined to prevent the media from blurring the morality issues conveyed.

GAINING PUBLIC ATTENTION AND SUPPORT

Now SCLC had to put it all together by creating a morality play that would touch, involve, and confront a substantial portion of the media audience. They posed their multifaceted lamentations in concrete contexts that the media could transmit to the audience through vignettes and minidramas, and viewers were able to identify with the victims. Many viewers were able to imagine for perhaps the first time what it was like to be black, not in the abstract, but in the context of a Southern bus, restaurant, motel, what it was like trying to exercise the right to vote, and so on. Making people aware of such legally sanctioned forms of discrimination would probably not have succeeded in eliciting a sympathetic audience reaction if put in the context of a speech. Success in eliciting audience identification was probably a combined product of the dramatic moral confrontation between the "good" and "bad," and the legitimation provided by continual national coverage.

The most critical audience reaction needed to bring about a genuine moral confrontation between SCLC and the audience was introspective or reflective responses that link the self to the problem posed by the movement. It is not enough to have a large, involved audience that sees the problem as merely existing "out there." Such an audience can avoid the experience of self-dissatisfaction that is needed to initiate value, attitude, and behavior change. This is where the several moral confrontation strategies discussed earlier become relevant. These strategies, singly and in combination, and employed in varying contexts over time, stimulated self-examination, self-awareness, and self-dissatisfaction. Equally important, SCLC provided a way to reduce or alleviate self-dissatisfaction; namely, support or join the movement.

Although as yet there is no direct experimental evidence, we think it is a reasonable hypothesis that the process of change initiated by the arousal of moral self-confrontation is sustained when self-dissatisfaction is reduced or removed. This is because the change is psychologically rewarding, if for no other reason than that it eliminates a source of discomfort. It is also sustained by group support. Most Americans watching the morality play portrayed in the media were probably not watching it in isolation from others. The daily media contact probably became a frequent topic for conversation. Group discussion probably mediated and sustained whatever the impact of the moral confrontation, either by supporting and sustaining belief and behavior changes that would reduce self-dissatisfaction, or by group support of individual efforts to

deny the validity of the moral confrontation and thus avoid the experience of self-dissatisfaction. In brief, the SCLC morality play and its strategies of moral confrontation were probably most effective with: (1) persons considering themselves egalitarian who were confronted with a discrepancy between their espoused egalitarianism and their behavior; (2) persons considering themselves compassionate Christians who were confronted with a discrepancy between their espoused compassion and their antiegalitarianism; (3) persons experiencing self-dissatisfaction, whatever the discrepancy with which they were morally confronted; and (4) persons receiving group support for their belief or behavior change.

There is some evidence that the pain of moral self-confrontation did indeed lead to belief and behavior change amongst the American citizenry and decision makers. Many blacks underwent belief and behavior change. They created and adopted positive images of themselves (e.g., "black is beautiful"), stopped teaching their children to defer to whites and to think of themselves as inferior to whites, and began applying the organizational skills developed in the movement to acquire more individual, community, and national power (Tallman, 1976). Equally significant, research indicates that the importance of equality went up in the value hierarchy of many white Americans between 1968 and 1971 (Chapter 7). The proportion of whites who believed that blacks were inferior or deserved inferior treatment went down, while the proportion willing to vote for black candidates for political office went up (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). Decision makers and policy makers in and out of government passed and implemented civil rights legislation that they had previously opposed.

We do not claim that the only precipitant of all such belief and behavior change was the threat to people's conceptions of themselves as moral human beings. The legal tactics of NAACP, the militant tactics of CORE and SNCC, the threat tactics of the Panthers, and the urban riots all undoubtedly played their part. The key difference, we believe, between all these and SCLC's impact was that SCLC as a social movement succeeded in forcing a moral confrontation of right versus wrong on a large segment of Americans. Above all, President Kennedy had stated in a special national address that the issues posed by SCLC constituted a "moral issue" for the nation.

THE FALL

While many factors can probably account for the fall of SCLC and the black civil rights movement in general, one of the most relevant was surely the rise of a competing morality play concerning America's participation in the Vietnamese war. By 1968 the peace movement had

become national in scope, producing an even more active citizen involvement than did the civil rights movement. Much of the media's and the audience's attention was diverted from issues of equality and freedom for blacks to issues of peace and national security.

As we all know, Dr. King felt compelled to take a public stand against the Vietnamese war, largely because he could not compartmentalize the moral issues of the civil rights movement from the peace movement: black Americans were far more often drafted, maimed, and killed in Vietnam. It is reasonable to suggest that no social movement can successfully manage more than one major morality play at a time, unless there is an almost complete overlap of players and themes. Two such powerful and divergent themes as racial equality in America and peace in Vietnam could not both be maintained despite SCLC efforts to portray them as but different aspects of a single problem—racism at home and abroad. The attempt to merge these two morality plays into one failed because it was possible for many people to support the peace movement, and thus enhance their conception of themselves as moral, regardless of their position on civil rights. Thus, the door was open to subordinate or even to ignore the push for peace. Not enough overlap between those playing the role of the good and the bad in the two movements further served to muddy the waters. The U.S. government, for example, was the number one bad guy of the peace movement, but it was one of the good guys in the civil rights movement.

Several additional factors may have effected the fall of SCLC. One of these was its growth from a regional to a national movement. As SCLC moved increasingly into the national arena, the simple moral goal of seeking equality in "the racist South," supported by law and custom, was replaced with the more complex and difficult goal of removing "institutionalized racism" in America. A second factor was the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in the spring of 1968. His assassination meant not only the loss of organizational and material resources, but, equally important, the loss of the central symbol of the good in the morality play. A third possible factor, about which not enough has been said, and which admittedly needs more detailed documentation, is the Nixon Administration's attempt to destroy a movement which they regarded as threatening their own political interests.

THE AFTERMATH

By the end of the Vietnamese war, the black civil rights movement had lost its momentum and vitality. While blacks have been elected to local and national office, they were not able to bring about the equalization of the economic and social conditions for which they had hoped

The importance of the value "equality" had once again slipped back to its pre-1968 position in the average American's value hierarchy (Inglehart, 1975). Affirmative Action programs had failed to equalize the distribution of blacks and whites in the occupational structure. We are now entering an era wherein the concept "reverse discrimination" is becoming more salient than the concept of discrimination. All this suggests that conventional institutional forces are not yet altogether ready to continue on the course toward racial equality set by the civil rights movement of the sixties. Thus, we may anticipate that future progress to realize the goals of SCLC will probably depend on the success of yet other civil rights movements.

One such post-SCLC movement is Jesse Jackson's People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), an innovative movement that shows promise of producing a new kind of morality play. Jackson, another young black minister, developed his skills as an SCLC lieutenant to Martin Luther King. Rather than attempting to revitalize the SCLC's morality play in which good and bad roles were assigned mainly to black and white Americans, Jackson has created a new black-black morality play that confronts blacks with the idea that *competence* is the main moral imperative, and that the main players are good blacks who are competent and bad blacks who are incompetent. The goal is to raise the importance of competence values in black value hierarchies so that blacks may ultimately help themselves rather than be helped by others to achieve the "good life."³

The stage, players, and content of the PUSH morality play are in the context of the black, rather than the larger, community. Center stage is the predominantly black school. The theme of "moral confrontation" is that if blacks want equality they must not rely on a racist society to give it to them, but must concentrate on raising the priority of values that underlie and culminate in work competence. The role of the good is assigned to those blacks who seek to "excel" in school and at work, while the role of the bad is assigned to those who would not.

In contrast to earlier civil rights movements, PUSH argues that to be moral one must not only be committed to moral principles of church and family, justice and fairness, but also to competence. Its appeals include several strategies of moral confrontation discussed earlier. For instance, black children are confronted with the proposition that they are doing poorly in school because they have internalized what whites believe about their inferiority and about their greater preference for more immediate hedonistic pleasures (False Consciousness). "Poor diet and ra-

³This is not to say that Jackson and his colleagues have retreated from confrontations with the white community and decision makers. Rather, the movement for black competence is embedded in continuing social and legal struggles for racial equality.

cism didn't prevent us from excelling in sport, so how come it prevents us from excelling in school" (Forced Choice)?

While the media has drawn some public attention to the PUSH movement, its chorus role in developing an effective morality play is obviously less central than it was when SCLC was at the center of the stage. Despite this and other differences between PUSH and SCLC, both movements serve to illustrate the utility of a simple morality play that is able to incorporate strategies of moral confrontation to create a state of self-dissatisfaction that can generate the belief and behavior changes sought by the social movement.

A CONCLUDING COMMENT

A task that remains for students of social movements is to test more systematically and empirically the perspective outlined here. For example, is PUSH effective in creating states of self-dissatisfaction in black students and their parents? And does this dissatisfaction lead to the desired value and behavior change? Empirical data are needed on successful and less successful movements to ascertain the extent to which they differ in creating clear morality play roles of "good" and "bad," the other key components of a morality play, and in effective and ineffective strategies of moral confrontation. Such empirical studies would not only permit evaluation of the fruitfulness of the present analysis, but would also provide knowledge that social movements could apply to design more efficient change strategies. Perhaps most important, such research would also extend our knowledge about the conditions under which value, attitude, and behavior change are brought about, not in the laboratory, but by naturally occurring collectives that deal with real world social conditions that have real consequences.