

# Reply

by Jacquélien van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans to Commentary by Kevin McDonald

---

We thank Kevin McDonald for bringing the 'living science' concept propagated by Sociopedia.isa into practice. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to a number of remarks made by him. We would like to take issue with (1) the notion of 'protest' versus 'action'; (2) the history of the concept of 'identity' in contentious politics; and (3) the adequacy of the toolboxes of social psychology to study contemporary protest.

## Protest versus action

McDonald is absolutely right in his observation that action cannot be reduced to protest. Despite the fact that protest became *the* modal way to express grievances and/or indignation (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998; Norris et al., 2005), contentious action is indeed much broader than protest. Be it petitioning, striking, lobbying, or more contemporary tactics as hacktivism, flash mobs, or silent marches, people have a rich action repertoire at their disposal to express grievances and indignation. Is this important? We believe it is, because motivational dynamics vary considerably from tactic to tactic (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987), event to event (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, forthcoming), and from organization to organization (Van Stekelenburg et al., 2009). Hence, different forms of protest entail different costs and benefits and consequently different motivational dynamics; as such the forms of protest affect the social psychological correlates of (non) participation.

## History of identity

Identity is key in explaining protest participation; it is hard to believe this has not always been the case. We

have, however, a somewhat different reading from McDonald of the paradigmatic development. US-based explanations of the rise of the 1960s movements proposed resources and political processes as key to the ebb and flow of movements. In Europe at the same time, new social movement approaches figured centre stage in which identity played a pivotal role. It was Melucci who in 1984 placed Identity on the transatlantic agenda during a workshop on social movements in Amsterdam. The volume edited by Klandermans, Kriesi and Tarrow (1988) resulting from this workshop contained a chapter by Melucci on identity and movements which helped to migrate the concept of identity to the US to be adopted and elaborated by US scholars as Taylor, Whittier, Gamson and Snow.

## Heading for the future

But the times they are a changing, be it through the networked liquid society or the Internet. Changes like these impact one way or the other on why and how people protest. McDonald wonders how far the identity concept brings us in a liquid Baumanian society. Indeed, formal embeddedness has always been a strong predictor of protest participation, supplemented by informal embeddedness and nowadays virtual embeddedness. How identification 'works' in these more liquid arenas is a fascinating empirical question indeed. McDonald also wonders how adequate the term 'protest' is as a tool to allow us to meaningfully design research agendas to cope with this changing reality. Changes in the sociopolitical context and contentious performances indeed question the very concept of 'protest'. Is a giant puppet show entertainment or is it political protest, is a climate change manifestation a music festival or a contentious event? Those

questions are also waiting for empirical answers. Steve Wright et al.'s (1990) definition of *collective action participation* is a good start, i.e. individuals engage in collective action any time that they are acting as a representative of the group and the action is directed at improving the conditions of the entire group. Importantly though, protest participation is political behaviour, *unconventional political behaviour* to be more precise. What do participants, politicians, bystanders and the general public think? Are these 'old' and 'new' actions unconventional political behaviour? Is this entertainment a contemporary selective incentive to bring people to the streets? Is it protest? All these changes seem to question basic aspects of protest behaviour, be it meaning giving, consciousness or identity work. In other words, they seem to question how sociopolitical context influences individuals' political behaviour and this is precisely the core of the social psychology of protest. We therefore believe that social psychology is well suited to study contemporary contentious performances.

In closing we want to share one observation related to the so-called French School. This school, around such scholars as Touraine and Melucci, defined the rise of contention in the 1960s as new social movements in reaction to modernization. Although new social movements featured abundantly in the international literature of those days, work of French scholars was nearly absent, a situation which continues to this day. This is unfortunate, because it is precisely French social movement scholars who have continued to have identity, meaning and consciousness high on their research agendas at a time when such concepts (except for identity) are low on the research agendas of psychologists. Perhaps more importantly, French scholarly work is often

focused on *processes* and *dynamics* underlying the social psychology of protest. Bringing dynamics into the mainly correlational static designs is arguably the biggest challenge for 'international' social psychological approaches to protest. We therefore wholeheartedly invite scholars from the French School to cross the language divide and contribute to this discussion.

## References

- Klandermans B and Oegema D (1987) Potentials, networks, motivations and barriers: Steps toward participation in social movements. *American Sociological Review* 5: 519–531.
- Klandermans B, Kriesi H and Tarrow S (eds) (1988) From structure to action: Comparing movement participation across cultures. *International Social Movement Research*, Vol. 1. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Meyer DS and Tarrow S (1998) *The Social Movement Society: Contentious Politics for a New Century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Norris P, Walgrave S and Van Aelst P (2005) Who demonstrates? Antistate rebels, conventional participants, or everyone? *Comparative Politics* 37(2): 189–205.
- Van Stekelenburg J and Klandermans B (forthcoming) Uploading unrest.
- Van Stekelenburg J, Klandermans B and Van Dijk WW (2009) Context matters. Explaining why and how mobilizing context influences motivational dynamics. *Journal of Social Issues* 65(4): 815–838.
- Wright SC, Taylor DM and Moghaddam FM (1990) Responding to membership in a disadvantaged group: From acceptance to collective protest. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58(6): 994–1003.