Movement Outcomes: A Review and Agenda

One of the underlying rationales for studying social movements is that they are important social phenomena that often lead to significant change at the level of individuals, organizations, communities, and societies ... First, what can be said about the range of potential outcomes or consequences of social movements? Second, what are some of the problems associated with identifying social movement consequences or outcomes and how would you, as a researcher, solve some of these problems?

Discussions of outcomes are everywhere in social movement research. Participation in movements changes members’ lives (McAdam 1988); movements rise, fall, and rise again (e.g., Minkoff 1997); and organizations fail and disappear (Voss 1996). The careers of activists, organizations, and movements are an important question, without a doubt, and are legitimately identified as a kind of “outcome.” However, until relatively recently, the field of movement outcomes has been left relatively unproblematised. Social movements and social movement organizations, these great change-seeking forces in society, are hard to connect to the actual changes they seek. Even when social change occurs in the most dramatic fashion possible, as in a revolution, the connection between change-seekers and the revolution is difficult to conclusively draw. Some theories of revolution even deny the effects of change-seekers on such events, explaining revolutions as results of strictly structural processes and thereby eliminating any causal link between conscientious challengers and dramatic state transformation.

The central problem of connecting social movements to outcomes of social change is that of causality. How do researchers tie collective action, insurgency, and protest to outcomes that are so frequently the result of, for example, policy changes, court decisions, or legislative processes? It is somewhat ironic that researchers who study social movements are quick to argue that, at least when it comes to U.S. protest, the field of contention is anything but pluralistic (e.g., Gamson 1975; Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982), because pluralism — theoretical, equal access to polity — would make certain outcomes far easier to see, as in case of direct democracy processes observed in Switzerland by Kriesi et al (1996). Instead, however, most social movement perspectives see movement activity as being distinctly outside of and in opposition to institutional processes. The ascription of motive to changes that do eventually occur in the presence of such challenges, is extremely difficult. In short, movement outcomes are extremely problematic.

Numerous scholarly efforts have been undertaken to both specify what is meant by “outcomes” and to develop theoretical perspectives that lend themselves to understanding outcomes. As suggested earlier, these efforts range from outcomes at the level of individuals and organizations, to the level of policy and regime. An early conceptualization of resources is found in Gamson (1990) who
classifies outcomes at the level of organization; Gamson suggests that two important consequences of insurgency for organizations are first, acceptance as a legitimate contestant for power, implying some level of access to the polity, and second the receiving of new advantages, that is the gaining of some material objective or desired benefit. For Gamson, these items roughly constitute movement “success,” and he argues that insurgency and bureaucratic organization are correlated with such achievement.

Also on the subject of outcomes on an organizational level, Cress and Snow (1996) consider the typology of particular resources that enable the “success” of organizations that provide services to homeless, success being defined as operation for at least one year, regular meetings, and sponsorship of collective action campaigns. It is clear that organizational outcomes are distinct from what we might call “movement outcomes,” as Cress and Snow do not evaluate the success or failure of sponsored collective action projects. While this distinction may reflect a tendency toward the kind of organizational moderation predicted by Jenkins and Perrow (1977), it nonetheless seems to reflect fairly on organizational viability. Further, Cress and Snow actually argue that, to the contrary, organizations that achieve the conjunction of multiple necessary and optional types of resources, particularly from external benefactors, are actually able to focus more on movement tasks than on tasks of organizational maintenance.

Scholars have attempted to move beyond organizational outcomes, to the level of policy, but this subject is harder to evaluate. One relevant direct analysis of movement-outcome links may be found in the work of Soule et al (1999), who consider the extent to which specific legislative activity (roll call votes and hearings on women’s issues) correlates with protest. The authors find that such activity is, to some extent, dependent on the mobilization of women’s SMOs, and to a large extent, on women’s labor force participation, leading them to suggest that “money talks” (1999:251) when it comes to legislative activity. Further, they suggest that movement activity may often itself be the result of other processes: “Broad structural changes (such as the incorporation of women in the labor force) lead to congressional outcomes, the growth of SMOs, and collective action” (1999:251).

Social movements as the outcome of other processes? The complication of causality by this research serves to underscore that outcomes are not an easy subject, either theoretically or empirically. Seeking some middle ground, Diani (1997) has an interesting approach: He treats network ties and social capital as an outcome in their own right, exploring the extent to which movement activity creates social capital for its participant members and organizations. To the extent that access is frequently included in discussions of movement outcomes (e.g., Gamson 1990, Tarrow 1994), this is a significant idea; social capital and network centrality are both reasonably expected to be associated with access to the kinds of influence that are important to movements. In addition, Diani argues that movement-developed social capital is ultimately important in developing movement cultures, such as those evident in the gay and lesbian movements.

Reviewing a great deal of previous outcomes research, Giugni (1998) echoes
Gamson’s finding that unruliness and disruption are associated with “positive outcomes,” but that other types of violence, such as violent strikes and riots, are frequently associated with the constriction of benefits. Explicitly accepting Gamson’s construction of access and benefits as useful outcomes, Giugni emphasizes however that outcomes are nonetheless a much thornier subject for research. He offers two historical outcomes as evidence, first the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and second the accession of Shell Oil to activist demands that it clean up a failing oil rig. Giugni (1998) points to the obvious disparities between these two cases, arguing that there is more than a difference in scale. That is, he argues that regime change is a fundamentally different outcome of change efforts than is yielding to environmental protesters. While both are arguably the culmination of multiple social and political processes, Giugni suggests that the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe is so much broader that it cannot be understood as the straightforward result of insurgency, the result of a particular mobilization campaign or the particular characteristics of any single organization.1 Some outcomes, he argues, are contingent on factors that are a degree of magnitude greater than activist processes. State breakdown, in other words, is hard to classify as any kind of straightforward “outcome.”

Giugni suggests that the analysis of outcomes must be done in conjunction with a consideration of a relatively narrow scope of movement activity and an allowance that any given outcome may be very divergent from, or produce long-term consequences that are divergent from, the intentions of the activists that produce them. In addition, he suggests a large-scale comparative methodology to the study of outcomes. This process is clearly easier when movement outcomes are more readily empirically evident — legislative outcomes, for example — than in cases of cultural change — McAdam’s (1988) narration of the long-term changes in the meaning of political participation brought about in part by Freedom Summer activists, for example. Nonetheless, the task is significant if movement outcomes are to be genuinely understood. In this vein, Tilly (1998) argues that researchers should consider three overlapping sets of variables concerning movement outcomes: (1) movement claims; (2) effects of movements’ actions; and (3) effects of outside events and actions. Movement outcomes, he argues, fall into the overlap between the first and second elements — but Tilly argues that all the logical possibilities must be considered in order to understand movement outcomes.

This leaves contemporary scholars in a no less difficult position. The tasks in a developing research agenda on movement outcomes are ambitious and weighty, both empirically and theoretically. What follows is an outline of research that would attempt to apply some of these insights about movement research to a particular field of interest: movements associated with health care reform.

The problem of defining outcomes remains extremely problematic. In the field of health care, reformers come from many constituencies: The mentally ill, the homeless, the poor, the elderly. Some in the health care sector seek

1Voss 1996 makes a similar point, albeit on a smaller scale: In contrast to the implications of Gamson’s typology of organizational characteristics, the success or failure of organizations may be dependent on much more than internal organizational characteristics.
to block health care reform. As Giugni (1998) points out, one challenger’s victory is another’s defeat. It seems that, at the broad level of health care, deciding what constitutes a “positive outcome” for any one of these groups is counter-productive. Rather, outcomes may be considered on the national level. One approach would be, analogous to the work of Soule et al (1999), to treat legislative activity as a kind of outcome. That is, votes and hearings on health care reform — broadly constructed, lacking a particular valence — could be correlated with the activity of relevant SMOs.

This approach is very attractive — for one thing, we know that it works, at least as far as demonstrating some aspects of the dynamics of movement causality. However, to genuinely build on the model requires expanding, as Giugni suggests, to a broader comparative context. Reform activity is likely to correlate with SMO activity, but under what additional conditions? The answer may lie in an international comparison. I propose to consider instances of health care reform as they relate to characteristics of different political regimes. If it is true, as Soule et al (1999) argue, that “money talks” when considering policy at the national level, does this relationship hold up internationally? One key insight to understanding outcomes, and specifically health care reform in this case, would be to explore its relationship to additional factors: Population age, party composition, budget crises, existing system of health care. It would be a significant advance in the study of outcomes to find that, for example, instances of health care reform vary independently of national health care systems but instead are associated with some kind of movement activity. Such a finding would be a genuine connection, or at least the start of one, between movement activity on one hand, and political response, on the other, independent of other national level factors.

That said, there is a more complicated problem with analyzing health care reform. Political events are one thing, but actual implementation of policy, such that it “matters” to consumers of care, is another entirely. It is at this level that I think the multi-national comparison runs into difficulty. At the patient level, health care reform is really measured in terms of an entirely different kind of outcome. It is difficult to approach reform at this level without considering the kinds of explicit advantages and benefits discussed by Gamson (1990). That is, if the goal of reform is to provide better patient care to a certain population, understanding national differences in the consideration of different health care systems is a far cry from success.

It is here that analyzing outcomes on the macro-level might find a counterpart in a comparatively micro-sociological analysis at the level of hospitals or health care markets. The second stage, then, of this project in outcomes on health care reform, would be to study the implementation of changes within particular health care systems. These are the kinds of changes implemented by organizations, boards of directors, physician-administrators, and insurance underwriters, and I suggest that an understanding of health care reform is somewhat empty without a concept of local interactions between patients, care providers, and reformers. This kind of analysis would carefully look for not only the effects of broader-level reform (national insurance plan changes), but for what happens
to such reforms when it comes time to apply them to patient care. An analysis at this level may be much more sensitive to the valence of changes — that is, who is seeking them and what interests do they represent.

This outlined project clearly does not solve all problems of movement outcomes. Causality is still a significant problem, but the broader, international comparison may alleviate some issues of causality. At the same time, however, it arguably amplifies others, by reducing the level of detail at which the concrete actions of reformers can be considered. Internationally, health care movements become one of many national-level characteristics used to compare states. Further, as with other projects investigating outcomes, the parameters of “outcome” and “expectation” must be specified fairly narrowly if the concept of movement consequences is to be useful. Nonetheless, the suggestions given here are meant to fairly build upon the insights and efforts of existing work, and as such may represent some meaningful contribution to the project of studying social movement outcomes.