



How Does It Feel to Leave Your Protest?

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Abstract

Social justice movements, protests, marches, and direct action are collective events including many people. Although organizers should carefully plan the goals and strategies of these actions broadly, and behavior analysts have made significant progress to systems level analyses of social and cultural practices, it is important to continue to include analyses of the individuals involved and how the contingencies of protest may encourage or discourage continued involvement. One critical aspect of these contingencies, I argue, is how the action ends. Two protest actions are analyzed as a participant with a focus on how the protest ended and if the operant “attending a protest” was reinforced or punished.

Keywords Protest · Anti-racism · Contingency analysis

Anyone involved in activism has experienced the walk back to your car/bus/train station after an event. You are tired, typically, having spent at least an hour or two on your feet, maybe walking, in the sun or cold, probably yelling or chanting. But aside from feeling tired, how do you feel emotionally? Sometimes you are excited, smiling, uplifted; other times you wonder why you left the house in the first place. I would like behavior analysts to consider the interaction between (and sometimes independence of) the strategies and goals of a protest, event, or movement with the reinforcers contingent on the large, broad operant “attending a protest.” I will describe two protests with different goals, outcomes, and most important to the present topic, contingencies, from the point of view as a participant. In a 2020 editorial in this journal, “Ten Guidelines for Strategic Social Action” (Ardila Sánchez et al., 2020a), the authors suggest behavior analysts “Get involved . . .” and “Commit to participation . . .” (p. 18); in addition to the reasons they provide I would add another: when behavior analysts participate in social actions, even if they have no part in the larger organization or planning, we are in a unique position to observe the relevant contingencies that may or may not support continued participation,

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and can generate potentially useful analysis and suggestions of strategies for improvement.

The goals of a protest are sometimes hard to nail down, and may be known exactly, vaguely, or not at all to the participants. Those planning the event may have specific, measurable goals, or something more subjective like “sending a message” or “building awareness.” Both the events I’ll describe had specific goals. When goals are specific, it can be clear to the participants that the action was successful or unsuccessful, but a resolution (or revolution, as it were) is sometimes not expected immediately and it remains to be seen if a protest pushed toward some kind of victory.

The first event, on July 28, 2018, was a noise demonstration (often shortened to “noise demo”) in front of the Atlanta City Detention Center (ACDC). In addition to being a prison and subject to attention from prison abolitionists as a rule, the ACDC was also at that time being used to house immigrants to the United States by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The noise demo took place after a more organized event with speakers including then-Representative John Lewis protesting immigration policy in front of the nearby Federal Building. At that event, flyers were passed around about the noise demo at the jail. The stated goal of the action was to “shut down” the prison, which assumedly was not something the organizers hoped to actually accomplish on the day of the event. The noise demo did deliver noise, and enough attendees to fill the intersection in front of the prison. Corrections officers came out of the prison and lined the front doors, and Atlanta Police ran motorcycles into the crowd, causing people to disperse then fill back into the street after each pass. It was stressful, tiring, and without direction or leadership.

The noise demonstration did not have a planned end time that I knew of; if there was a clear end to the event I did not see it. After over an hour (in addition to the time at the preceding immigration policy protest/march) and anticipating police would soon arrest the activists blocking the intersection, I left. Speaking to another activist leaving the event, what I was feeling was not unique; we were tired, heads pounding from the sun and noise, and we did not think being arrested would be useful to the action or the greater movement. Despite these sensible reasons, leaving the action felt like quitting, like failure. In the molar sense, attending this protest was punished. I can tell you that after that experience I was and am less likely to participate in actions that had similar qualities. This feeling of defeat was unrelated to the material outcomes of the event; this disruption and other actions may have contributed to the decision that same year from then-Mayor Lance Bottoms to stop housing ICE detainees in the ACDC (Lopez, 2018).

In contrast, 6 months later I participated in a march in Stone Mountain, Georgia. The city is named for the adjacent mountain, scarred with a relief of three Confederate leaders. The carving was inspired and originally designed by Ku Klux Klan sympathizers, and the mountain was the site of the so-called “re-birth” of the Klan in 1915. In February 2019, white supremacists planned a rally at the mountain during Super Bowl weekend; anti-racist activists began planning a counterprotest in response. Organizers of the counterprotest joined under the banner FLOWER (FrontLine Organization Working to End Racism), working not just to plan a rally, but to pressure the white supremacist groups, their allies, and politicians to

make it as hard as possible for them to carry out their event. The FLOWER event was endorsed by over 50 organizations, including Atlanta Antifa, Atlanta Food Not Bombs, the Atlanta branch of the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Socialist Coalition of North Georgia. Those efforts were successful, and the white supremacists actually cancelled their event just days before it was to take place (Joyner, 2019). FLOWER did not cancel, and I joined what was now more akin to a victory lap, without planned confrontation. The event started with short speeches from affinity group leaders, then a brief march around the majority of downtown Stone Mountain, and finished with what I still remember as the most inspiring image of any event I've attended: from a covered rolling handcart, a little cardboard and paper Klansman emerged. Attached to a pole and held above the crowd, he was burned in effigy. Everyone cheered, and once he was reduced to a burning lump on the ground police came forward without speaking, blasted the husk with a fire extinguisher, and we all left. Everyone, myself included, was in high spirits. Leaving was a victory, and the event reinforced the act of going.

The end of an event is obviously important to how people feel when they are leaving. Both these events could have been very different. At the noise demo, small changes could have turned the whole thing around. There is actual value in a noise demonstration, particularly in this instance. Those housed in the detention center could hear what we were doing, I saw faces and hands waiving from the small windows above the street. Expressing our solidarity with the people detained there, letting them know we were thinking about them, cared about them, and supported their freedom—those are important outcomes. If an organizer had said to the assembled group, something like “we are here to show the people inside they are not alone, and to show our government we will not let them be forgotten. For the next 10 min we're going to make ourselves heard,” that would have changed everything. A brief statement and a clear end to the event would have kept all the value and removed the punishing feeling experienced upon “quitting” the event when I did. Stone Mountain could have been different as well. The FLOWER event could have simply been cancelled. The aims of the group were successful before the day began, why go through with it? Moreover, the fact that the organizers were successful before the day shows that it isn't the success or failure of a protest during the action that makes it feel good or bad.

These events have continued to make me think about the contingencies that surround protest, activism, and direct action. In addition to analyses of strategy and tactics (e.g. Subar, 2021) I hope that in planning for political action, organizers consider the contingencies at play for the individual people involved. There is considerable and important work being done in this journal and elsewhere in our field examining the metacontingencies, or cultural materialist conceptualizations of superstructure, or turning the strategies of organizational behavior management towards understanding and changing social/cultural practices. Although we continue to do these things and taking a larger view, we should continue attending to and analyzing the individual operant contingencies involved in those systems and social actions. These examples and suggestions for change are most closely related to what Ardila Sánchez et al. (2020b) categorize as “Select[ing] a Feasible Practice . . .” (p. 425) in their valuable chapter, “Activism, Advocacy, and Accompaniment.” If

we do not want people to burn out on activism, we should take care to arrange for reinforcing consequences for participating. These are *distinct* from the success or failure of the action itself in achieving its goal.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This article did not require approval from an institutional review board for human subjects research.

Conflicts of Interest I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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