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A Cognitive-Relational Process

It is not men in general who think, or even isolated individuals who do the thinking, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought.

Karl Mannheim

Simone, a sixty-five-year-old activist, is committed to defending asylum seekers. Her main task is to visit migrants in state shelters and offer administrative advocacy. For the last fifteen years she has been helping migrants obtain residential permits to remain in Switzerland. Simone is also involved in cultural projects related to migration and was recently involved in the publication of books of drawings by children of asylum seekers. When we met for our last interview, our conversation ended with a cup of tea as Simone offered us the books. Full of tenderness, she said: “Those children carry their sorrows, their joys, but also their dreams with them. They are like any other children.” Simone is also involved in politics. She was never solely satisfied with providing legal counsel and making the national population aware of the harsh conditions asylum seekers face. For her, migration is a political battle.

Like Margot, who is committed to Greenpeace, Simone perceives society and politics through specific mental lenses. She relies on a particular understanding of common good which she perceives in universalist terms and as a matter of rights to which all members of society are entitled. For Simone, to be deprived of rights constitutes a real injustice. And this is how she makes sense of migration issues: “Most of the people who apply for asylum status have suffered in their home country, have risked their lives, and we deny them asylum. It’s insane! . . . Migrants obviously have no rights.” Her universalist understanding of common good is clear in the following declaration: “It’s important that migrants benefit from support and be recognized as human beings. . . . [W]e are all part of the same human community.” Her
belief in common belonging was also stressed when she gave us the book of children’s paintings and said: “Those children are . . . like any other children.”

Simone also relies on a specific understanding of politics. She perceives politics as a field of intervention in which civil society actors increase state accountability. For Simone, state actors are mainly responsible for the provision of common good, that is, for the well-being and improvement of people’s lives. And she understands civil society actors through specific mental lenses. For her, they are pivotal actors who challenge the state when it fails to ensure common good. This is clearly articulated in her views on migration: “We should fight on a legal basis to defend migrants. What matters most is the political struggle. . . . It’s vital that people protest. We must raise awareness and say ’enough!’; migrants can’t be treated as lesser humans.”

What theoretical explanation is available to make sense of Simone’s intentionality? In other terms, how are mind and action connected? Borrowing from the epistemologist Bunge (2004) we ask, How does it work? How does an activist’s mind orient that person’s action? A second theoretical question we address in this chapter relates to why Simone and Margot, mobilized in distinct political struggles in the moral commitment community, share similar views of common good and politics. How is this possible? Shared understandings bring up the question of how the activist’s mind is shaped. More specifically, it raises questions about the intimate relation between mind and interaction. The synchronized understandings that Simone and Margot share ask us to reflect on the impact of social interaction in the same commitment community. A final question we discuss here pertains to sustained commitment. Simone and Margot’s understandings of common good and politics enable them to sustain their commitment. But what process links the activists’ minds to their ability to maintain commitment? The human mind sets action, but a non-recursive process is also at work. We should therefore consider the impacts of action on the mind. More to the point, we should explain how commitment shapes the activists’ minds and enables them to sustain their action.

The aim of this chapter is to further develop the theoretical framework we suggested in Chapter 1. To construct our theoretical explanation we need to present the current research on key concepts: the human mind, social interaction, and sustained commitment. The literature review will also emphasize our contributions to the existing knowledge. We begin by discussing why the mind matters to human activity and action. In a second step, we discuss the close relation between mind and action. In a third step, we scrutinize the
close bonds between mind and social interaction. Finally, we focus on the relation between action and mind, that is to say, the non-recursive tie between the mind and action. We conclude the chapter by examining the cognitive-relational process behind activists’ commitment and their sustained participation in collective endeavors.

The Qualitative Experience of the World

Why is the mind so central to human life? The philosophy of mind is the most important domain in contemporary philosophy. For Searle (2004) the main reason for its centrality is that core philosophical questions are intimately related to the mind. Philosophy of the mind queries the ways in which individuals make sense of reality. Questioning who we are and how we relate to the rest of the world are directly linked to the most prevalent question in Western philosophy: “What does it mean to be human?” (Searle 2004, 7). With those questions at hand, it becomes obvious that mind and meanings are central to human life.

As Searle states, everyone understands that the mind is central to our lives. We understand our close surroundings with our mind, what we live and experience. In other terms, the mind allows us to make sense of reality and of our lived experience. In addition, we act because of our intentions that are first elaborated mentally. Wittgenstein has emphasized that boundaries of meanings and action overlap and the space of individuals’ potential action is delineated accordingly, while for Searle: “Not all consciousness is intentional, and not all intentionality is conscious, but there is a very serious and important overlap between consciousness and intentionality” (p. 97). The mind is therefore a central element in human life because it allows individuals to perceive reality and to make sense of it. But it also sets an individual’s intentionality.

Meaning is also central to the interpretative tradition in sociology. Following neo-Kantian thinkers who see reality as chaotic, Weber developed a conception of human beings as “voracious meaning makers” (Weber 1978). The construction of meaning enables individuals to make sense of a chaotic world as we focus our attention on certain aspects of reality to organize our perceptions. Rational order therefore derives from the subjective perception of certain elements of reality. For Weber, grasping the subject’s meanings is central to understanding human action. The Weberian tradition, followed by
Mead, Blumer, Goffman, Berger, and Luckman, among other thinkers of the interpretative turn in sociology, relies on three main heuristic pillars. First, individuals are thinking actors. Second, their interaction with their social environment and fellow humans shapes their subjectivity, and constructs their inter-subjectivity. Third, human action ensues from the inter-subjectivity of actors. Like the philosophers of the mind, interpretative sociologists argue that meanings are central to an individual’s life. They enable them to perceive social reality, to make sense of it, and to act in their social environment.

The primary question interpretative sociologists ask overlaps with that asked by philosophers of the mind. Questioning who we are as social individuals and how we relate to the social environment, sociologists raise the fundamental question: What does it mean to be a social individual? Sociologists have never fully answered the question. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) have, however, recently offered a compelling response. For them, the existential function of the social world is collaboration in the construction of meaning. But why does this process matter so much?

Fligstein and McAdam recognize that humans face existential fears and uncertainties. The very meaning of life can constitute an existential dread. What happens after death? What is the meaning of my life? Why am I so lonely facing such uncertainties? These existential anxieties are essentially countered by the meanings individuals construct with others, and language acquisition is central in this regard. It offers us three advantages. First, language enables us to communicate with others and to produce collective meanings. Second, it enables us to consider ourselves as the object of our own reflections. This skill is at the basis of a human’s ability to empathize with others and to collaborate with fellow beings. Finally, language enables humans to engage in coordinated exchanges with others and to elaborate symbolic activity, especially important when it comes to naming and dealing with existential fears. For Fligstein and McAdam: “The existential function of the social is the meaning worlds we fashion in concert with others that insulate us from the threat of the ‘outer perspective’ and confirm our own significance” (p. 42). Humans not only act collectively to improve their material conditions, but also construct meanings that enable them to silence their existential fears.1 The essence of social individuals is thus to collaborate in meaning making.

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1 Religions are a good example of this coordinated production of shared meanings as they allow individuals to make sense of their existential fears.
Enriched by these various disciplinary contributions, we understand that individuals are symbol-making creatures and that their relation to reality guides their action in the social world. First, they enable individuals to relate to reality and make sense of their social environment. Second, meanings set an individual’s intentionality, for without ideas about reality, action is unlikely to occur. Finally, the construction of meaning is a collaborative effort, whereby individuals make sense of their social environment through communication with others.

*Meanings, intentionality*, and *social interaction* are the core concepts we discuss in this book to explain how activists commit and sustain their participation. We argue that without specific understandings of their social and political environments, activists would not be able to act and sustain their action. Philosophers of the mind and interpretative sociologists have urged scholars of social movements to reassess the importance of the mind in studies of participation. Moreover, interpretative sociologists have emphasized that individuals do not construct meanings in isolation but through interactions. This means that we should consider the activists’ environment, and specifically the conversations that take place in their social sites if we are to understand the specificities of their perceptions about society and politics.

Philosophers question what it means to be a human, while sociologists probe what it means to be a social individual. Our study asks, What does it mean to be an activist? How do activists relate to their social and political environment? How are their qualitative experiences of the world and their interactions with others reflected in their minds? And, finally, what does their perception of their environment owe to their commitment and its sustainment? To answer these questions, we rely on a specific epistemology in which the mind is viewed as central to social action, whereby an individual’s subjectivity orients his or her action, and where social interactions enable the elaboration of shared meanings that, in turn, lead individuals into performing joint action. Interpretative sociology therefore guides us on our theoretical path.

**The Activist’s Mind**

How do social movement scholars take the activist’s mind into account? The subjective and cultural dimensions of contentious participation have received less attention compared to structural components (Goodwin and Jasper
2004; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; McAdam and Schaffer Boudet 2012; Polletta 2004a). However, this objective and structural bias has been recently redressed. Many works have broadened our knowledge on frames and identity and have also yielded insights into the impact of narratives on contentious dynamics (Polletta 2008). We know much more about the cultural and subjective dimensions of contentious commitment than in the past. In the literature on social movements, four concepts—interest, identity, frames, and narratives—help us grasp the activist’s mind, which is defined as the thinking and perceiving “inner box” that sets human intentionality. We now examine these concepts and highlight how they depart from the notion of activists’ understandings we develop in this book.

The concept of activists’ interest emerged in the sixties with a new generation of scholars who were largely committed to contentious politics. They contested previous explanations provided by psychologists who construed protest activities as irrational phenomena emerging from “psychic disorders” and personal “breakdowns” (Davies 1962; Hoffer 1951; Le Bon 1895; Smelser 1968; Tarde 1901). This new wave of scholars approached the question of contentious politics armed with a distinct epistemology, heralding rationality and interest as central to their theories (e.g., Fireman and Gamson 1979; Klandermans 1984; Kriesi 1984; McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Snow et al. 1986; Tarrow 1983; Tilly 1978). Contention was accordingly understood as an organized action driven by strategic actors who aim to bring about social change. Collective actors and activists act rationally while interests (not mental disorders) drive their action. The concept of the activist’s interest was popular in the sixties and the ensuing decades. It was indeed seminal when it came to understanding how activists reason.

Epistemologically anchored in individualist theory, the concept of interest entails the satisfaction of self-interest, a significant inner force that motivates people to act. Olson stresses that “rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests” (Olson 1965, 2) and consequently, only individual inducements lead individuals to act in a group-oriented way. Interest is hence featured as the sole motivational factor that explains participation in collective action. The contribution of rational choice theorists cannot be understated, as they argued that collective action is not self-evident. Social problems and injustice are actually more common and persistent in society than collective action is.

Many critics have addressed this figuration of the human mind (e.g., Green and Shapiro 1994; Mansbridge 1990; Monroe 2001; Sen 1990). But it is
beyond our aim to reexamine their criticism here. Rather, we want to underline one major disadvantage: the narrow conception of the activist's mind as it is portrayed in individualist theory. Instrumental motives guide a person in collective action. Yet they fail to exhaust the entirety of individual motives that enable someone to participate in collective endeavors. Human beings rely on a plurality of motivations that cannot be neatly summed up by the stylized individual constructed by individualist theory. Unsurprisingly, the sporadic enquiry of rational choice scholars into the activist's mind lacks depth. Instrumental preferences do not motivate individuals to participate in much collective action (e.g., Knoke 1988; Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Walsh and Warland 1983). This failure has incited scholars to open the Pandora's box of human motives. Along with instrumental motives, solidarity, identity, normative, and many other “soft incentives” help explain individual participation in collective settings (e.g., Chong 1992; P. B. Clark and Wilson 1961; Moe 1980; Opp 1986, 1988).\(^2\) Unquestionably, these models provide a more refined explanation as to what occurs when activists partake in collective endeavors. Despite this, scholars who extend the concept of self-interest remain indebted to a monist conception of human motivations, whereby a person's action is motivated only by the satisfaction of private interests, either instrumental or “soft.” Yet, as underlined above with reference to Fligstein and McAdam (2012), humans not only act to improve their material conditions but also to collaborate in meaning-making with others. Individuals rely on a plurality of logics of action that includes but also transcends mere logics of self-interest (Passy 2013; Sorber and Wilson 1998; Terestchenko 2004).\(^3\)

Today, the concept of self-interest features less frequently in the study of social movements. Yet it remains important to expound at least part of the story of participation as the proponents of the individualist theory saw it. In doing so, however, scholars of activists' action should rely on a plural conception of human motivations. The distinction between the individualist concept of interest and that of activists' understandings then appears as twofold. First, the latter does not refer to personal inducements conceived as rational and objective but rather as subjective perceptions of the world.

\(^2\) Opp (1986) elaborated the concept of “soft incentives.”

\(^3\) In addition to the drawback of the monist understanding of human motives, individualist scholars face a loss of the predictive strength of their model when the concept of self-interest is stretched: Selective incentives are not selective anymore (e.g., Green and Shapiro 1994; Passy 2013).
Second, individuals cannot be reduced to the sole mental dimension of self-fulfillment. Other mental dimensions are at play.

Scholars have stressed the importance of identity on activist commitment, advancing an epistemology often opposed to that proposed by individualist theorists. Identity also constitutes a mental process, whereby it is understood as “an individual cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 285). Those researchers have emphasized that individuals share bonds with others, and that solidarity is a vital force for participation in collective action (e.g., Della Porta 1995; Diani 2011; Fireman and Gamson 1979; Gould 1995; Kriesi 1988; Krinsky 1999; Mansbridge 2001; McAdam 1988; Melucci 1989; Oberschall 1973; Passy 1998a; Polletta 2005; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980; Tilly 1978, 2005; Whittier 1995). As Fireman and Gamson wrote: “[A] person whose life is intertwined with a group has a big stake in the group’s fate. . . . The person is likely to contribute his or her share even if the impact of that share is not noticeable” (1979, 22). Solidarity is foregrounded in identity and allows an individual to find the motivation for group commitment. Identity therefore operates as an important catalyst that orients individuals toward collective action. This scholarly contribution is key: Commitment, then, is a matter of belonging. In addition, scholarship has underlined that identity is helpful when it comes to explaining how interests emerge, rather than taking them as given, as is the case in individualist theory (Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Identity undoubtedly contributes to explaining why ordinary people engage in collective endeavors. But again, proponents of this view rely on a narrow view of the activist’s mind. Obviously, identification with a group, defined by boundaries between a “we-group” and the “they” of outsiders or opponents, is a catalyzer for commitment. But it is not the only meaning at work. While we draw on the subjective and constructivist dimension of the concept of identity, our notion of activists’ understandings goes beyond the notion of identity. The latter relies on belonging and sentiments of attachment to apprehend what binds people together in a community or a social category. By contrast, the concept of activists’ understandings includes the notion of identity and other activists’ views, and we argue that it is also these that enable them to participate and sustain their commitment.4

4 In addition, broad activists’ understandings about common good and politics generate specific perceptions of belongings, as we will see in the empirical chapters.
The concept of *frames* also relates to mental processes. “Mobilizing people to action always has a subjective component,” according to Noakes and Johnson (2005, 2). And those elements of perception have been conceptualized as a social-psychological process called framing. A frame is an “interpretative schema that simplifies and condenses the world ‘out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action” (Snow et al. 1986, 137). Both collective actors and individuals engage in this this meaning-making work. While Snow et al. (1986) understood the notion of frame in its collective dimension, Gamson focused on its individual counterpart, which is more directly tied to our interest in the activist’s mind (Fireman and Gamson 1979; Gamson 1992). It is worth discussing what both contributions have to offer and outlining their limits.

For Snow et al., frames are collective, motivational, and strategic. They are collective constructions with which we apprehend reality and which are elaborated by actors through their agency and contention. This suggests that collective action frames are never fixed in time, being the product of a struggle for meaning among actors. Frames also include a motivational component, enabling individuals and collective entities to perform action. Finally, they possess a strategic component as collective action frames seek to draw people into collective endeavors and orient their action. The contribution of framing theory is essential to the study of social movements, as it underscores how fundamental meaning is to collective action.

Nevertheless, the conception of frames used by Snow et al. faces a major shortcoming: The activist’s mind is not accounted for. While they talk about collective action frames, discussion of the activist’s mind is lacking, the exception being the concept of “framing resonance.” Frame resonance describes the degree of receptivity of a collective frame in the public arena and in the aggrieved community that is the beneficiary of the mobilizing effort. It is also through a “frames alignment process” that collective actors recruit new adherents into the aggrieved community (Snow et al. 1986). According to distance (or resonance) of collective frames from potential activists’ worldviews, members are simply bridged to the group, or they should modify, extend,
or, even, transform their meanings to be able to join a collective effort. For Snow et al.—and for most framing theory proponents—collective frames resonate with an individual's understandings. Yet these understandings have never been studied. With framing studies we never know what the activist's understandings might be. The concept of activists' understandings clearly departs from that of collective action frames. First, activists' understandings are located in the participant's head: They are personal perceptions. Second, they are meanings that emerge from personal interactions and not strategic elements elaborated for performing collective action, as the collective frames are.

The conception of action frame developed by Gamson is much closer to our notion of activists' understandings (Gamson 1992, 1995; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982). Without denying the collective aspect of frames, Gamson focuses on the individual counterpart. He emphasizes the idea that specific cognitions people elaborate mentally motivate their participation in collective endeavors. Three key cognitions are here noteworthy. Activists must first develop a moral indignation, then identify with the people they mobilize for, and finally, construct the acknowledgment that they can redress the social problem through their commitment. For Gamson, injustice, identity, and agency frames are necessary prerequisites for participation in social movements. Without those mental constructions, contentious action is unlikely to occur. Gamson's work constitutes a key contribution to our understanding of the intimate link between the activist's mind and participation in contentious politics. He underscores, as did Klandermans (1997) who followed in his theoretical wake, how activists' cognitions are essential to commitment in contentious politics. Moreover, Gamson (1992) stresses how pivotal social interactions are to the construction of personal frames. Conversation, then, definitely has an impact on people's minds.

However, Gamson falls short on two issues. First, he conceives the activists too narrowly. Participation necessitates that individuals make sense of the aims and means of their commitment, and that they relate to their social and political environments. Those environments are complex and multifaceted, reflected in the activists' minds in the construction of multiple cognitions that allow them to engage in collective endeavors. A much broader cognitive

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6 Snow et al. (1986) define various process of frame alignment: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation.

baseline is actually at work, one that exceeds the three motivational frames Gamson saw as crucial. The qualitative material collected for this study shows that all activists spontaneously discuss their perceptions of their social and political environment. Stating that injustice, identity, and agency frames are insufficient does not mean that those cognitions do not play a role in orienting action. As we will see in the chapters that draw on empirical material, those frames consistently appeared in activists’ accounts and helped to set their intentionality. Hence, we are not opposed to Gamson’s analysis, but we stress that it is not sufficient to explain why activists commit.

Yet how are broader understandings fashioned during the commitment process? This question stems from the second limitation we identify in Gamson’s analysis: The origin of the three motivational frames is left unquestioned. Raising this issue does not mean that we are not interested in knowing how external factors shape the activist’s mind. Rather, we ask how broader meanings enable activists to construct these three specific action frames, among others. As we will show in this chapter, cognitions do not function in isolation but form as clusters in the human mind. Cognitive mechanisms are hence at play, which means that broad cognitions are connected to specific cognitive components. Concretely, understandings about society and politics enable activists to construct specific cognitive components, like perceptions of injustice, identity, and agency, which set intentionality and orient action.

More recently, the concept of narrative has been central to studies of contentious action (Fine 2005; Franzosi 1998; Gamson 2005; Groves 2001; Polletta 1998, 2007). “A narrative is an account of a sequence of events in the order in which they occurred to make a point” (Polletta et al. 2011, 111). Only relevant events, or those perceived as such, are included in a narrative, where they constitute a plot. Narratives are therefore chronicles that are invested with moral meaning through use (Polletta 1998, 140). Narratives and the notion of collective frames developed by Snow et al. overlap in many respects. However, they differ in at least three aspects (Polletta 1998). First, a narrative is constituted by a configuration of events over time. Second, the narrative is closely linked to outcome. Finally, as stated previously, frames must resonate with an individual’s values or wider culture, which is not necessarily the case of narratives.

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8 This evidence was present in each activist’s narrative collected in the first interview, when we let them talk freely without intervening (see our methodology in Chapter 1 and Appendix A.2.)
While the notion of narratives can be useful in understanding the emergence and transformation of contentious politics (see Polletta 2006), it is clearly distinct from our notion of activists’ understandings. A narrative is a particular speech act in which the use of events is key. Individual or collective actors tell a story that binds a number of events to an outcome. This speech act is also delivered in a public setting, which can alternatively be the contentious arena, the group, or the public sphere. A narrative, to be sure, is a public performance.9

The concept of activists’ understandings as we conceive it clearly departs from the notions of interest, collective frames, and narrative. Activists’ understandings are subjective meanings rather than objective interests, and personal perceptions rather than collective ones. Our notion of understandings shares much ground with Gamson’s concepts of frame, and with the concept of identity. All are subjective constructions elaborated in the person’s mind that motivate him or her to act. The main difference stems from the range of meanings: We take a much broader part of the activist’s mind into account than Gamson does in the concept of frames and the concept of identity. And we also pay attention to the cognitive mechanisms that tie broad understandings to specific cognitive elements. We therefore develop the notion of individual frames and identity further and our contribution to the social movement literature can be said to be twofold. First, we enlarge the set of meanings used to explain commitment and sustain participation. Second, we highlight the cognitive path that links broader understandings to action.

Setting Intentionality

As Searle and interpretative sociologists have argued, the mind is central to the puzzle of human action. But how does our mind set our intentionality? Both philosophers of the mind and interpretative sociologists remain rather

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9 The concept of narrative presented here does not overlap with the term “narratives” used in qualitative methodology. Here, the concept of narratives is a public performance whereby individuals tell a story in the public sphere. Narrative in methodology refers to a story provided by an interviewee about events or his or her own life expressed to an interviewer. This narrative couches the speaker’s view of what is canonical; it requires the narrator’s perspective, as well as a subjective sequential ordering of events (Patterson and Monroe 1998:316). Narrative is actually useful in revealing the speaker’s concept of self, and it allows the person to explain and justify why he or she went down a particular road in life (Patterson and Monroe 1998). A person’s story is therefore not a public performance as the concept of narrative in sociological theory would have it.
silent on the topic. They admit that a substantial bond exists between mind and action but stop short of investigating what the nature of this bond is. To apprehend the paths that link the mind to action, we turn to cognitive and social psychologists as their empirical investigations provide substantial insight. Two contributions are here noteworthy.

Many social psychologists stress that cognition includes a motivational component that orients human action (e.g., Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Fiske and Taylor 2013; Higgins and Sorrentino 1990; Levine, Resnick, and Higgins 1993). However, they recognize the existence of domain-specific knowledge necessary to a person’s performance. This is a seminal contribution provided by this field of knowledge: Individuals do not rely on general or universal knowledge, but on a specific knowledge delimited by a field of experience (e.g., Fine 1979; Fine and McDonnell 2007; Fine and Turner 2001; Lawrence A. Hirschfeld and Gelman 2004). Cognitions, in this view, are understood as particular and situated (Levine, Resnick, and Higgins 1993). This insight invites us to specify the cognitive dimensions at work in the performance of activism. As established in Chapter 1, perceptions about the aims and means of activism constitute the domain-specific knowledge required to perform activism. Activists must make sense of the aim of their commitment by elaborating meanings about society and common good in their minds and the means to act so that the social problem that concerns them can be resolved. We accordingly postulate that common good and politics are the necessary cognitions in the performance of activism.

The second key contribution of psychologists is to point out that cognitive mechanisms bind specific meanings to individual’s intentionality and to action. The work of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) is relevant here, as they showed that broad cognitions are connected to more specific cognitive components, which in turn construct an individual’s intentionality and lead to action. A cognitive funnel is hence at work. The strength of this contribution is the emphasis placed on the idea that cognitions are intertwined, tying parts of one’s knowledge together. Although the models Ajzen and Fishbein employ

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10 Two distinct types of cognitive processes bridge mind and action together: an unthought process and a deliberative one (e.g., D’Andrade 1995; DiMaggio 1997; Fiske 2010b; Fiske and Taylor 2013; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). The former is based on automatic cognitions, which are implicit, unverbalized, and rapid. In this case, human action is grounded in routine. While the latter is based on deliberative cognitions, which are explicit, verbalized, and slow. Deliberation occurs when a new problem emerges and attracts the individual’s attention, when existing schemas fail to account adequately for a new situation, or when individuals are dissatisfied with the schemas available (DiMaggio 1997). Whether through automatic or deliberative cognitions, the mind motivates individuals to perform action.
are linear—moving from general to specific cognitions—we can also conceive of cognitive linkages in terms of networks. Neuroscientists have revealed that cognitions take the form of clusters in the human mind (e.g., Medaglia, Lynall, and Bassett 2015; Sporns 2014), generating associated networks, or nodes of meanings (Cerulo 2010). Regardless of how we figure cognitive linkages, linear or in constellations, individuals connect different cognitions to construct intentionality, prior to acting.

Highlighting the cognitive paths involved in different forms of activism constitutes one of the major tasks we undertake in this study. We seek to explain how broad cognitions about common good and politics set an activist’s intentionality, and which cognitive mechanisms are involved. Investigating the cognitive mechanisms is a task that we mainly carry out inductively, as explained in chapters 4 and 5. In the present theoretical section, our aim is merely to gesture toward the cognitive mechanisms that result from our inductive work, sketched out in Figure 2.1. Let us first examine how the perception of common good enables activists to set specific intentionalties.

As discussed in Chapter 1, two specific dimensions enable activists to make sense of common good. Commonness permits us to apprehend how activists comprehend what binds people together and how they perceive society either on a universalist or communitarian basis. By contrast, goodness allows us to scrutinize how activists make sense of the social problem that concerns them. It can be understood according to the care or social justice repertoire. Both dimensions allow activists to fashion three specific cognitive components that figure in the construction of their intentionality. The understanding of commonness enables the construction of a specific relation to otherness, which pertains to the way activists conceive relations to others and to human diversity. The way activists perceive commonness allows us to evaluate whether they commit for others or if their commitment is restricted to a group to which they belong. Commonness also constructs a particular concernedness about common good. According to their conception, either in universalist or communitarian terms, activists should be able to develop a wide concern or a narrow concern about common goods, restricted to the group they belong to. Finally, the perception of goodness allows for the attribution of responsibility. The way activists perceive common good—either as a matter of justice or of care—enables them to identify collective actors as accountable for social problems and to decide where political responsibility lies. The attribution of responsibility should, in turn, orient them toward political or social action. Otherness, concernedness, and responsibility are
hence cognitive constructs that set an activist’s intentionality and orients his or her action: toward specific social groups, toward certain social issues, and toward the political or social arena. Those cognitive components set activists’ intentionality and help us explain for whom, for what, and in which field mobilization occurs.

Understandings of politics also contribute to the construction of cognitive components that orient action. The way activists perceive state and civil society actors enables them develop a particular relation to the state and concernedness regarding political commitment. We call these cognitive components state relatedness and concernedness about politics. Activists either construct a conflictual or a complementary state relatedness. The former defines a relation to state actors based on such actors’ lack of accountability and legitimacy, whereas the latter refers to a view in which state actors are seen as complementary to other actors involved in the production and maintenance of common good. Finally, activists’ perception of civil society actors,
which can be grasped as interventional or substituting, allows them to construct ideas about what it means to be a citizen. Activists can be concerned about politics, which implies that they want citizens to remain critical about political processes and active in participatory politics. Or activists can be unconcerned by politics and develop another idea of citizenship accordingly, one based on the care of others and in which participation is restricted to institutional politics. State relatedness and concernedness about politics are cognitive constructs that set an activist’s intentionality toward specific forms of activism and help explain what form of action is chosen.

Contributions from the field of psychology hence allow us to grasp the relation between the mind and an activist’s intentionality. It allows social movement scholars to move beyond the rather elusive bond between mind and action that philosophers of the mind and the interpretative sociologists allude to. But the account advanced by psychologists remains hindered by the lack of attention devoted to the mind’s social dimension.

The Social Mind

Psychologists have too often neglected to consider an individual’s mind as a social mind. Their approach has remained centered on “a solitary and, for the most part, purely intellectual being” (Levine, Resnick, and Higgins 1993, 586). Most ignore that cognition is a fundamentally social activity, which does not prevent people from thinking, perceiving, feeling, and acting in culture-specific ways (DiMaggio and Markus 2010, 349). A burgeoning field of cultural psychology has emerged over the last decade and provided us with knowledge as to how culture shapes psychological processes (Lehman, Chiu, and Schaller 2004, for a review). Various paradigms have underscored the influence of culture on the human mind, but most studies subscribe to a stylized conception of culture, understood in terms of norms and values. Culture is accordingly frequently conceived of as static, thereby reinforcing stereotypical images (Lehman, Chiu, and Schaller 2004). Finally, these studies are plagued by a lack of attention devoted to the manner in which individuals make use of culture mentally. While variations are observed, explanations are absent as to how the process of importation works. With

12 See Alexander et al. (2012) for a critical discussion about culture grasped as norms and values.
few exceptions (Doise and Mugny 1984; Moscovici 1984; Vygotsky 1978), psychologists have left aside just how crucial conversation is to internalizing cultural practices, and interactive processes are undermined. Finally, casting social factors aside has led psychologists to forget that people do not rely on personal cognitions to act but on socially shared meanings. We can perform joint action thanks to meanings we hold in common, the latter emerging through conversational interaction, as sociologists have stressed.

For sociologists, the mind is above all to be understood as a social optic constrained by the social world. As Zerubavel has claimed: “I experience the world not only personally, through my own senses, but also impersonally, through my mental membership in various social communities” (1997, 7). Sociologists hence conceive our minds as social constructs, and this involves a view of cognition as always particular, contingent upon specific cultural contexts. The mind, perceived as a thinking and perceiving “inner box” is therefore rooted in social processes. But how does the importation of the social occur?

Mead (1934) pioneered the investigation of the socially constructed aspects of one’s mind. For him, the importation of social processes is the outcome of a constant dialogue between two parts of the self: The “Me” and the “I.” The “Me” is the organized set of meanings about others and the social world, whereas the “I” is the response of the individual to the “Me.” For the American sociologist, the emergence of the mind is therefore contingent upon social interaction: It is constructed through an ongoing process where language and conversation are key. More recently, Zerubavel (1997) also stressed that the social construction of our minds is achieved through language and during conversations held in the communities we are part of. Such interactions allow us to construct socially shared meanings, which can lead us to perform joint action (Collins 2004; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Without shared meanings, joint action is unlikely to occur.

Drawing on Mead’s work, we argue that activism undeniably relies on shared meanings that enable individuals to perform joint action. Two questions arise at this point. The first is deceptively simply: What are those shared meanings? A large part of our empirical analysis is devoted to the identification of activists’ shared meanings—and their shared understandings of

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13 Few psychologists refer to "shared meanings." Resnick et al. (1991) and Levine et al. (1993) are among the few cognitivists who raise the issue of inter-subjectivity. They label “shared meanings” as “socially shared cognitions” whereas we refer to “shared meanings” and “socially shared cognitions” interchangeably.
common good and politics in particular. The second question follows from the first: How do activists develop shared meanings mentally? More specifically, how is the convergence of views on common good and politics possible? The task is to explain how social interactions fashion activists’ shared understandings that allow them to perform joint action, which will be undertaken in the following section. But we need first to examine how social movement scholars have understood social interaction and its relation to contentious commitment.

Social interaction is a key concept in the literature on social movements. Contentious participation has been apprehended as a relational process (Tilly 2002). Activists are seen as highly interconnected, part of multiple attachments, and engaged in constant fluxes of interactions with their peers (e.g., Della Porta 1988; Diani 2015; Gould 1995; Klandermans 1997; Kriesi 1988; McAdam 1988; Mische 2003; Passy 1998a; Passy and Monsch 2014; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980). Social interactions evidently play a crucial role in contentious activism. However, many processes are obscured by the somewhat totalizing notion of a social network. To specify how networks matter and influence contentious processes has become a recurrent concern for social movement scholars, who have worked hard to follow Wellman’s (1988) advice to move “from metaphor to substance” (Diani 2003; McAdam 2003; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Passy 2003). The injunction is to understand the influence of networks on contention. This was an essential move toward a more refined comprehension of participation, but one that arguably suffered from structuralist and objectivist biases (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994), leading culture and meanings to be undermined. Seeking to reinscribe the cultural logics of meaning, social movement scholars started a new approach: “From structure to meanings,” seeking to apprehend how meanings arise out of structures. In addition to the work of Emirbayer and Goodwin, scholars began to consider networks, not only as structural and instrumental settings but also as cultural ones, which depended on meanings and cognitions (Emirbayer 1997; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

White’s contribution was pivotal to our understanding of networks in terms of cultural setting. The conception he developed saw networks and

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14 Scholars developed different theoretical approaches to explore the relationship between networks and culture, starting with a relatively poor conception of the link, whereby networks were viewed as mere vehicles of cultural components, and arriving at the development of a richer conception, whereby networks and culture are understood as co-constructs (Mische 2014).
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culture as co-constructs. Grounding his work in the interpretative turn of sociology and the theory of language, White argued that networks were “islands of meanings” (White 1992). For him, social networks are permeated by cultural components: discourse, meanings, and stories. Yet these elements also construct the networks. This view postulates that networks are not simply channels that feed an individual’s mind, but rather that they are formed thanks to meanings and narratives constructed through interaction. In this interpretative stance, networks are conceived as “inter-animation of talks and ties” (Mische and White 1998, 696).

White’s conception of networks is heuristically productive for social movement scholars. First, his perspective provides analytical tools that help us understand why activists share common meanings. Through talks and ties, the activist’s mind is enriched with and transformed by meanings derived from the social and political environment. Second, White’s perspective enables social movement scholars to have a better understanding of social networks. They are not merely structural platforms composed of nodes, ties, and some coordinated actions, but envelopes of meanings that shape commitment performances and the minds that carry them out. Finally, White allows us to apprehend the emergence and transformation of networks over time, as they are viewed not merely as the outcome of structural ties but also of stories, meanings, talks, and identities exchanged through ongoing interactions.

White’s conception parallels that of Mead to a certain extent, but also that of Tilly, the latter having made social movement scholars aware of the intrinsic relation between interaction and consciousness, identity, and interests (Tilly 1964, 1978, 2002, 2006). Tilly’s more recent work clearly stressed how ongoing interactions shape the human mind: “Humans live in flesh-and-blood bodies, accumulate traces of experiences in their nervous systems, organize current encounters with the world as cognitions, emotions, and intentional actions. . . . However, the same humans turn out to interact repeatedly with others, renegotiating who they are, adjusting the boundaries they occupy, modifying their actions in rapid response to other people’s reactions, selecting among and altering available scripts, improvising new forms of joint action, speaking never-uttered before sentences, yet responding predictably to their locations within webs of social ties they themselves cannot

15 The work of Thompson (1963) and the more recent studies of Gould (1995) and Walder (2009) reveal similar findings: collective consciousness, identity, and interests emerge not from structural position but from interaction.
map in detail. . . . We live in deeply relational worlds. And if social construction occurs, it happens socially, not in the isolated recesses of individual minds” (Tilly 2001, 39–40).

However, few empirical studies have been conducted to demonstrate the interplay between the activists’ meanings and conversational interactions advocated in White’s compelling theory. Polletta (2006) and Mische (2007) have enquired into the emergence and transformation of contentious performances through this interpretative lens. Polletta showed how narratives, meanings, and identities are constructed through communicational ties, and allow protest to occur, while Mische analyzed how contentious leaders, located at the intersection of multiple networks, are able to organize and transform contention through cross-talks. Likewise, few works have sought to scrutinize how social networks conceived of as “islands of meanings” shape the activist’s mind. Specifying the relational mechanisms behind contentious participation, McAdam and Paulsen (1993) and Passy (1998a, 2001, 2003) have shown that three relational processes help explain participation in contentious politics. One of these is the influence of interactions on the activist’s mind. However, this research, including our own previously, is limited by two elements. First, the studies rely on a narrow view of activists’ minds by examining the influence of talks and ties on a limited set of cognitions (identity for McAdam and Paulsen, and problem and empowerment for Passy). Second, neither work examines the extent to which the activist’s mind reflects the commitment community he or she evolved in.

In the present study, we wish to corroborate White’s theoretical account with a specific focus on individuals’ minds, and expand on McAdam, Paulsen, and Passy’s studies by examining the broader cognitive baseline that enables activists to perform joint action and to sustain it. Indeed, we aim to demonstrate how the “interanimation of talks and ties” nourishes the activist’s mind and allows for the construction of shared meanings, which in turn leads to commitment.

16 During his long and exciting intellectual life, Tilly got increasingly close to relational sociology and finally adopted a clear relational perspective in the 1990s (Collins 2004; Krinsky and Mische 2013; Passy 2009). This relational heuristic is visible throughout his work, be it in his theoretical writings, his studies on contention, social inequalities, state formation, and so forth (Tilly 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2008). Tilly’s readers know that macro-processes fascinated the author of The Contentious French. However, Tilly’s later works betray an interest in micro-processes too (Krinsky and Mische 2013).

17 McAdam and Paulsen talk about a “positive/negative influence attempts” process, while Passy names the same process as a “decision-shaping” one.
Conversational Interactions

Thanks to the work of interpretative sociologists and social movement scholars, we have stressed how influential social interactions are on the individual’s mind. Questions nevertheless persist: How do relational processes shape an individual’s mindscape? And how do interactions nourish the cognitive toolkit of people committed in activism?

As emphasized in Chapter 1, people mobilized in activism act collectively, in broader cultural settings we have called a commitment community. Therefore, once activists join contentious politics, volunteering, or unionism, they actually integrate a specific social network, laden with cultural components (White 1992). They evolve in social sites that shape their minds. This echoes Mannheim’s words quoted in the introduction to this chapter: “It is not men in general who think, or even isolated individuals who do the thinking, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought.” Commitment communities provide activists with particular styles of thought that allow them to construct socially shared meanings, which, in turn, allow them to engage in joint action with members of that community.

But how do communities provide activists with shared meanings? As with any social site, commitment communities are networks where shared meanings, stories, and identities are created and transformed through interactions between members and with outsiders. Commitment communities hence constitute networks in which cultural scripts circulate (e.g., Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Polletta 2006), each relying on specific cultural scripts. A community can therefore be said to constitute a cognitive world in its own right. The activists in our study are part of various organizations that belong to three distinct commitment communities: the moral voicing, Christian aid, and workers voicing communities, which should specifically shape their shared understandings as to perceptions of common good and politics, and their conception of political citizenship.

When activists integrate a commitment community, they actually practice the cultural scripts available there (Mische 2007). But how are these scripts practiced? Essentially, through communication with peers (Mead 1934). Talking and disputing about issues, strategies, views on politics, or the contention that mobilized them allows activists to interact with their peers using their own cognitive toolkit as well as the cultural scripts that circulate in their community. By the same token, these ongoing conversations also construct, modify, and transform the cultural scripts and, by extension, the
network itself. Constant conversational interactions bear on activists’ cognitive toolkits and allow them to synchronize their understandings with those of their peers, which leads to the construction of socially shared meanings that enable activists to perform joint action. Synchronization is hence an essential process in action and its sustainment, but it is a process that entails change, whether marginal or substantial. How, then, are worldviews adopted and integrated?

Psychologists and neuroscientists have emphasized the plasticity of the human mind (e.g., A. Clark 2007; D’Andrade 1995; Davidson, Jackson, and Kalin 2000; Gardner 2011; Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000; Mercado 2008). Both psychology and neuroscience provide evidence that people acquire new cognitions, and adapt and transform their cognitive toolkits throughout life. This finding overlaps with that of sociologists who underscore learning as a lifelong process (Sigel 1995). By all accounts, we are more open to change than past research on socialization has suggested. Psychologists, neuroscientists, and sociologists have provided abundant empirical evidence that shows how malleable our minds are. They also supply a theoretical grounding that helps us understand how our minds change. Actually, our minds are both stable and adaptive. The stable part relies on automatic cognitions, while the adaptive one operates with deliberative cognitions. Inner deliberation enables individuals to face nascent problems, to respond to new situations and interactions, and to improve upon responses judged to be inadequate. Deliberative cognitions, and mind plasticity more generally, therefore allow us to understand how activists seize opportunities to synchronize their minds. Integrating new social sites, such as commitment communities, they are able to store, modify, and discard cognitions.

Synchronization is nonetheless never fixed in time. Activists experience fluxes of communicational interactions and are therefore involved in a dynamic process that constantly challenges their worldviews, alters some of the meanings they had constructed, and even transforms some of their understandings. In addition, conversations draw on the cultural scripts available, but these scripts also modify and transform in the flux of social interaction. Synchronization is obviously an ongoing process.

Nor is synchronization a homogeneous process, which entails that activists within a commitment community “simply look in the same direction.” Views can be synchronized, but not homogenized. Multiple scripts and stories circulate, and many shared meanings are practiced simultaneously in a community. Moreover, activists are involved in other social communities
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(e.g., family, work, friends, leisure communities,) which shape their minds too. Hence, they must make sense of multiple meanings and organize their cognitive toolkit to suit the conversational interactions that occur in these different social sites. The integration of those multiple, and often conflicting and variegated, cognitions is a creative process, which also leaves room for human agency. This creative process is akin to what Levi-Strauss (1966) elegantly called “bricolage.” Given these factors, the homogenization of activists’ worldviews is therefore unlikely.

One could expect that once activists participate in collective endeavors, their views on activism would be synchronized. Yet activists have multiple opportunities for peer interaction but not all interactions lead to synchronization. Simply put, not all conversational interactions shape the activist’s mind. One question then arises: What are the relational mechanisms that enable individuals to develop shared meanings? Our previous research sought to specify why social networks matter to contentious processes (Passy 1998a, 2003; Passy and Monsch 2014), and we here trace the relational mechanisms that enable activists to synchronize their understandings. More concretely, we ask what are the relational mechanisms that allow synchronization to occur. We accordingly identify six distinct mechanisms presented in Figure 2.2 that have the potential to shape the activist’s mind.

Direct interactions (face-to-face conversations) obviously allow activists to synchronize their views with those held by their peers. However, most activists are passive members who seldom enter into direct communicational interactions with fellow activists. They nonetheless intermingle with the commitment community indirectly, through mediated interactions, the support material the organization produces, such as newspapers and newsletters. At stake is the question of whether mediated communicational interactions are sufficient to convince passive members to synchronize their understandings. Are active participants, who enjoy direct conversation with their peers, the only group able to do so? It is hence necessary to empirically examine whether direct interaction and mediated conversations are relational mechanisms equally apt to shape the activist’s mind, or if only one mechanism is required.

Conversations can of course take place in formal networks, within the commitment community. But they also occur in an activist’s interpersonal network. As established, passive members do not enjoy direct conversation in the formal networks. However, friends and relatives can be involved in the same commitment networks, or share concerns about the same social and
Cognitive mechanisms within the activist’s mind

Relational mechanisms during social interactions
- Direct interactions
- Interactions
- Formal networks
- Interpersonal networks
- Abundance and redundancy of interactions
- Cross-pressured interactions

Domain-specific action

Perceptions ➔ Cognitive components ➔ Intentionality ➔ Domain-specific action

Common good
- Common good concernedness
- Responsibility

Politics
- State relatedness
- Politics concernedness

To mobilize for whom?
- For what?
- In which field?

To mobilize with which form of action?

Figure 2.2 Relational mechanisms that shape the activist’s mind
political issues. The flux of conversational interaction in this network can mean that passive members synchronize their views with fellow activists. We therefore consider whether conversational interactions activists enjoy within interpersonal networks are sufficient to synchronize their understandings with their active peers. Does this relational mechanism suffice for passive members to construct shared meanings, or is this process confined to direct interaction within the formal network, the commitment community?

Active members and community leaders enjoy dense and multiple interactions, especially as many of them are engaged in several spheres within their community. They usually are members of various groups or action campaigns and often evolve in an interpersonal network composed of friends or relatives involved in the same commitment site. We will question whether a multiplicity of spheres of interaction is essential to the nourishment of an activist’s cognitive toolkit. We will also examine whether conversations that take place in only one sphere suffice to synchronize an activist’s understandings. How does an *abundance* of interactions determine the development of activists’ shared meanings about common good and politics?

Finally, some activists are engaged in several commitment communities and are therefore cross-pressured when it comes to conversations. As stated above, each commitment community relies on specific cultural scripts and socially shared meanings. The question is to what extent *cross-pressured interactions* shape an activist’s mind. We empirically investigate whether cross-committed activists have a blended mind as a result of their adherence to multiple commitment communities, or if shared meanings from one commitment community prevail over those of another.

As Figure 2.2 indicates, various relational mechanisms are contrasted to evaluate the impact on the activist’s mind. By no means do we want to suggest that those mechanisms exhaust the list of possible interactions that occur within a commitment community. Rather, we advance the notion that they constitute key relational mechanisms behind the shaping of the activist’s mind. The empirical enquiry presented in Chapter 6, using both a deductive and inductive approach, will assess the six mechanisms (direct interactions, mediated interactions, interactions in formal networks, interactions in the interpersonal network, abundance of interactions, and cross-pressured interactions) discussed here and probe whether other relational mechanisms are at play.
Sustaining Commitment

The interplay between the mind and conversational interactions enables action, but it also allows activists to sustain their participation. In this section, we seek to explain how shared meanings relate to the sustainment of commitment. But beforehand, a short detour through the literature on social movements is necessary. As discussed in Chapter 1, we know little about what happens during action as few researchers have questioned how activists maintain commitment. Contention is improbable if participation is not sustained (Tilly 1978, 2008). Several studies have indeed shown that sustaining commitment is a form of behavior more frequent than it is rare (Corrigall-Brown 2012; Passy 1994; 1998b).

The few scholars who have paid attention to the sustainment of participation identify two cardinal factors: social interactions and the activist’s mind. Examining how participation is sustained in the Swedish temperance movement, Sandell (1999) found that activists with close friends engaged in the same movement were more likely to uphold commitment over time: Friendship discourages people from leaving their commitment behind. McPherson and his colleagues (1992) revealed similar conclusions. However, they emphasized that the quality and number of ties are factors to be taken into account, an observation with which Corrigal-Brown (2012) concurs. Strong ties and dense interactions enable activists to persist in contentious action.

Other scholars have seized on the importance of cognitions in sustaining activism. Drury and Reicher (2009), for example, have shown that participation generates a social-psychological transformation. This process necessitates two cognitive mechanisms: identity and empowerment. Participation emboldens one’s identity, enabling commitment to a specific cause. It also reinforces one’s capacity to oppose dominant groups and authorities. Whittier’s study (1995) on radical feminists in the United States underlined the centrality of cognitions (identity in particular) to the sustainment of activism. Klandermans’s insightful contribution pointed out that both motivational and relational factors concur to explain persistence in

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18 Sustaining commitment in volunteering action is not that rare a behavior either (see Wilson 2000, 2012).

19 Those results suggest that the organizational setting in which activists evolve increases, or decreases, the possibility of their sustaining participation. Less hierarchical organizational settings lead to higher likelihoods of sustained commitment. According to McPherson et al. and Corrigal-Brown, horizontal organizational settings increase the volume of interactions between activists.
contentious participation. Like scholars who stressed that social ties matter for one to join contentious action, Klandermans (1997) pointed out that individuals must be embedded in social networks, and tied to fellow activists, in order to pursue their contentious activity. Furthermore, he includes motivational factors in his explanation and shows that if activists perceive a higher ratio of benefits to costs they are more likely to maintain their contentious effort. For Klandermans, both cognitive and relational processes contribute to the maintenance of an activist's commitment.

These studies teach us that social interactions and cognitions are crucial to the sustainment of participation. However, despite their pioneering quality, these studies have two shortcomings. First, most of them assess the impact of ties and cognitions separately (e.g., Drury and Reicher 2009; McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic 1992; Sandell 1999). They do not link these factors together with the aim of examining sustainment. Second, scholars who investigate the relation between motivations and interactions, as Klandermans does, adopt a “realist view” of networks, which means that they understand networks in their structural and instrumental dimensions. This concerns Klandermans, but it also applies to scholars who argued that ties prevent departure from commitment (McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic 1992; Sandell 1999). The interpretative dimension of networks is hence overlooked.

Yet the influence of the interpretative side of social networks is a vital aspect if we are interested in understanding how participation is sustained. Work by Rupp and Taylor (1987) has been cardinal in this respect. They showed that during the McCarthy era, when few opportunities for mobilization were available, the women's rights movement was able to survive thanks to the ties among activists. In addition, the network offered the next generation of feminists a path into the arena of contentious politics. Structural and instrumental dimensions of networks obviously play a part in the sustainment of activism. However, networks, replete with talks and ties, played a crucial role too. Thanks to interpersonal exchanges, activists rehearsed cultural scripts that secured their identities, stories, and meanings despite the repressive atmosphere instigated by McCarthyism. Two more studies can be said to subscribe to this interpretative stance. Whittier's study (1995) of radical feminist networks describes a process that binds talks and ties, thereby enabling shared meanings and identities to be maintained, which,

20 For a critical assessment of the “realist view” of social networks in sociology, see Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994).
in turn, helped sustain contention, while Corrigal-Brown (2012) explained that networks matter to sustained participation because they embolden an activist’s identity in relation to the contentious group. The cultural dimension of social interactions therefore appears to be intrinsic to the sustainment of commitment.

In this book, we seek to underscore how conversational interactions and understandings help activists maintain their commitment. We propose to formalize the process alluded to in work by Rupp and Taylor (1987), Whittier (1992), and Corrigal-Brown (2012). How does the “interanimation of talks and ties” sustain commitment? Although it is a complex relation, the mind and action are intimately tied. We have already discussed the relation between mind and action. This relation echoes the world of William James, often considered the father of psychology: “My thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing” ([1890] 1938, 960). The sociologist Monroe expressed a similar view, stating: “Perception effectively delineates and sets the domain of choice options perceived as available to an actor” (1996, 12). Action ensues from thoughts: Our “mental horizon” therefore defines the repertoire of our possible action (Zerubavel 1997). While action is unlikely to occur without prior thought, action shapes the mind too. A non-recursive process is hence at work between thinking and acting, configured as an ongoing process.

Performing action reinforces activists’ understandings about the commitment itself. But how? Activists’ perform joint action because they mentally elaborate shared meanings about the aim and means of their commitment, which are reinforced and legitimized once action takes place. As underlined by new developments in the theory of Fishbein and Ajzen, past behavior impacts the beliefs, attitudes, and cognitions that set human intention (Albarracín et al. 2001; Boster et al. 2014). As political scientists, we know that interest in politics favors participation in politics, but the opposite is also true: Participation strengthens political interest. To miss the bidirectional nature of this relation would hence be to misunderstand it entirely.

Individuals can face two distinct situations. First, if action resonates with their meanings, it tends to sharpen their worldviews. This situation is more likely to occur in activism. Because activists develop shared meanings in order to act collectively, their commitment should be aligned with their mindset. Otherwise said, their understandings regarding the aims and

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21 See Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) for a review of their theory.
means of commitment should be legitimized and reinforced through commitment. A virtuous circle hence takes place between action and the mind, enabling sustained commitment. By contrast, if the action does not resonate with the understandings activists have constructed, a dissonance between their action and their worldviews leads individuals to modify or transform their views through interactions with their peers, with the aim of attaining a harmony of views, or, if the gap between action and worldviews is too wide, the dissonance culminates in their departure from the community.

A Cognitive-Relational Process

To conclude this theoretical chapter, let us summarize the cognitive-relational process. Throughout the chapter we have highlighted how critical the mind is to the performance of action, and how conversational interactions allow activists to construct socially shared meanings. The mind, interactions, and action are the three cardinal points that guide our understanding of the cognitive-relational process, sketched out in Figure 2.3.

The cognitive-relational process unfolds in four steps. It begins with the activist's participation in an organization or action campaign. Once an activist joins activism, he or she integrates a commitment community. There, conversational interactions with peers take place and available cultural scripts are practiced. These help shape the activist’s mind. But specific relational mechanisms are at work in the construction of socially shared meanings. In addition, not all the activist’s mental dispositions are affected by those conversations: Only those tied to the domain-specific field of experience of activism are thus shaped, while specific cognitive mechanisms set the activist’s intentionality. The interplay between mind and interaction allows an activist to enter a process of mind synchronization with peers that enables him or her to elaborate shared meanings and, in turn, perform joint action. A virtuous circle is hence inaugurated, whereby conversations, socially shared cognitions, and joint action allow activists to commit and sustain their commitment.

The cognitive-relational process examined in this book unfolds during action and takes place in a particular location in the continuum of an individual’s participation in activism: after joining a collective endeavor, and before leaving it. In both processes (joining and leaving) the activist’s mind and social interactions are at work, along with other factors. As shown
Participation within a commitment community

Joining activism
- Social networks
- An individual’s mind
- Individual’s resources
- Biographical availabilities

Leaving activism
- Social networks
- An individual’s mind
- Biographical un-availabilities
- Disappearance of the social problem/or the commitment community

Integration into a commitment community

Conversational interaction
Practicing cultural scripts

Relational mechanisms

Synchronization
Construction of socially shared cognitions

The activist’s mind
Cognitive mechanisms

Figure 2.3 The cognitive-relational process in the continuum of participation
in Figure 2.3, the journey into collective action is initiated once a person joins a specific contentious group, volunteering organization, or union. Social interactions are key in drawing individuals into activism. Karl Marx ([1852] 1996) already singled out the importance of ties to rebellion.\footnote{Since Marx, scholars have specified three main influences of social interactions: they enable a structural platform to emerge thereby providing an opportunity for mobilization to potential activists (e.g., Blee 2002; Diani 1995; 2015; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Morris 1984); they strategically connect individuals to a commitment community (e.g., Della Porta 1995; Diani 1995, 2015; McAdam 1982; Snow et al. 1986); finally, networks intervene culturally by shaping the activists’ minds. Recruiters try to convince potential activists to join the collective effort by erasing, modifying, and transforming some cognitions (Kitts 2000; Krinsky 1999; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Passy 2003; Passy and Giugni 2001; Passy and Monsch 2014; Whittier 1995).}

The individual’s mind is at stake too. The cognitive toolkit allows the person to be concerned about certain social problems, to be aware of certain political conflicts, and to identify with certain groups that gear the individual toward activism.\footnote{E.g., Jasper 1997; Klandermans 1997; Kriesi 1988; McAdam 1982; Eder 1993; Passy 1998a.} Individual resources are also important in the game of commitment. This sociological concept has been identified by social movement scholars through the notion of social networks (and the idea of social capital), as well as through our concept of the individual’s mind (values, attitudes, or worldviews as inner resources); also, other resources, like education, are instrumental to joining activism.\footnote{E.g., Klandermans 1997; Kriesi 1993, 1995; McAdam 1988; Morales 2009; Passy 1998a.} Finally, biographical availabilities constitute an important facilitator in the joining of contentious action (McAdam 1988).

Social interactions, the human mind, personal resources, and biographical availabilities are hence the key factors we see as enabling people to join collective endeavors.\footnote{The literature on volunteering also highlights such facilitating factors (e.g., Eckstein 2001; Handy and Hustinx 2009; McFarland and Thomas 2006; Musick and Wilson 2007; Schnabel 2003; Snyder and Omoto 1992; Wilson 2000; Wuthnow 1995).}

If the interplay between mind and interaction is crucial to joining commitment, it is also the force behind the decision to leave it. Once activists no longer enjoy conversations with their peers, the virtuous circle between mind, interaction, and joint action fades away, and a progressive disengagement from the community occurs. Activists can also decide to exit once collective action no longer resonates with their mindset. In both processes the activist’s mind and interaction with social networks remain fundamental. Biographical availabilities can also help explain the exit process. If personal constraints change, this inevitably affects the individual’s ability to maintain commitment. Finally, the disappearance of the social problem (and that of the commitment community), as was the case with the anti-apartheid
movement once democracy was achieved in South Africa in 1994, inevitably leads to an exit process.

Let us rehearse what we view as our main contributions. Relying on philosophers and sociologists who have explored the centrality of the human mind on individuals’ action, we argue here that the activist’s mind is a central piece in the puzzle of activist commitment, either in the form of contentious politics, volunteering, or unionism. But what can we say that is new? First, we stress how the mind concretely affects action. Endorsing findings by social psychologists, who argue that cognitions are domain specific, we identify the main cognitive dimensions involved in activism. We postulate that understandings of common good and politics enable people to commit in collective endeavors and further concretize the impact of the mind on activism by relying on contributions from psychologists who have proposed that complex bonds exist between the mind and action. This means that broad understandings about common good and politics are not directly linked to activism, but that various cognitive mechanisms bind worldviews to more specific cognitive components that set an activist’s intentionality. This ultimately orient his or her action toward a particular form of activism. We therefore aim to identify the cognitive channels at work during this process.

Second, drawing on the interpretative tradition in sociology and the idea that human minds are essentially social entities, we argue that conversational interactions shape the activist’s mind. Again, we seek to spell out the impact of social interactions and the relational channels at work. Communicational interactions enable the process of mind synchronization that allows activists to socially construct shared meanings behind the performance of joint action. Talks and disputes lead activists to fashion understandings of common good and politics, as well as a specific view about democracy. Although mind synchronization occurs in the wake of a relational process, specific relational mechanisms allow activists to construct the shared meanings that define their action.

Finally, the interaction between the mind and conversations allows us to highlight the cognitive-relational process at work once activists commit. This process enables activists to perform joint action and to maintain commitment. Yet, as stated, this process is not fixed in time but evolves according to the interactions between activists. Change is therefore likely to occur, but not at random. Because conversational interactions occur in commitment communities, changes depend on the stock of knowledge and the cultural scripts available there. Changes are hence path dependent.
Our contribution arises from cross-disciplinary enquiries between psychology and sociology initiated at least two decades ago (e.g., Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Cerulo 2002; DiMaggio 1997; DiMaggio and Markus 2010; Massey 2002; Wuthnow 2007; Zerubavel 1997). DiMaggio’s pioneering work spelled out a more complex view of culture and a more refined understanding of cognition and thereby enabled the interdisciplinary dialogue (e.g., DiMaggio 1997) we hope to further. Indeed, the aim of this book arises from the interface of sociology of culture and cognitive psychology to grasp how cognitions, culture, and action interact. We therefore hope to contribute to what Zerubavel called “a truly comprehensive science of the mind” (Zerubavel 1997, 4; see also Cerulo 2010).

26 On the one hand, sociologists understood culture as fragmented and inconsistent in its manifestation and further conceived it as a cognitive resource that could be put to strategic use (e.g., Martin 1992; Sewell 1992; Swidler 1986). On the other hand, psychologists no longer understand cognition as general and universal, but domain specific. In this perspective, cognition becomes richer in content (including culture) than the formal intellectual models that psychologists were preoccupied with (e.g., D’Andrade 1995; Levine, Resnick, and Higgins 1993; Shweder 1990).

27 In this respect, we use the term “cognitions” from psychology, and “meanings” from interpretative sociology, interchangeably. When we use the term “cognitions” we refer to socially shared meanings as understood in the interpretative sociological tradition. When we refer to “meanings” we do not overlook the cognitive processes that bind cognition to action, as psychologists stress.

28 Zerubavel (1997) has called the exchanges between psychologists and sociologists “the cognitive sociology,” while Cerulo (2010) opts for the “sociology of the mind.” Psychologists also call for a better integration of cognitive and sociological accounts in the study the human mind, labeled as the “field of sociocognition” by Levine et al. (Levine, Resnick, and Higgins 1993).