

Editorial overview: The psychology of rallies, riots, and revolutions

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2020, 35:v–x

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#)

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.08.018>

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“The knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular” (Shweder, 2003, p.2).

The papers contained in this issue aim to illuminate this fundamental maxim of social scientific investigation in the context of the psychology of rallies, riots, and revolutions. The literatures reviewed and ideas advanced across this edition collectively speak to the importance of a generative social science, where researchers stay on the move between multiple perspectives in an effort to holistically comprehend unfolding socio-political phenomena: what Shweder [1] has dubbed ‘the view from *manywheres*.’

In this introduction, I first locate this edition in two distinct and opposed contemporary global narratives of regression to dictatorship and resistance to oppression. I then discuss the psychology of revolutions, imagining more utopian societies, and the consequence of this process for understanding crowd psychology, resistance, and the drawbacks of social movements. In the spirit of staying on the move between perspectives, I end by outlining future directions that could inform research agendas based on the current state of the field.

Setting the scene: narratives of global development

The early decades of the 21st century have been marked by two notable global trends. The first is a slide from democratic governance towards dictatorship in some nations. This is evident in the re-emergence of populist leaders and the curtailment of civil liberties, the shrinking of the free-market, and the forced reduction of movement of people across borders. The second noticeable global trend is the widespread mobilization of social movements — in the forms of rallies, riots, and revolutions — aimed at achieving socio-political change to mitigate injustices and inequalities. It is in the context of these two interrelated global narratives that the papers in this edition can be positioned.

The psychology of revolutions

One of the most dramatic forms of social change is revolution [2]. Perhaps the most notable example of this radical form of political upheaval in recent times is the Arab Spring, a period in which several dictatorial governments in Northern Africa were toppled. However, the initial optimism of millions of citizens across the Arab world seeking socio-political reform quickly gave way. Although Tunisia experienced some democratic reforms, civic discontent and rebellion in other Arab countries was met with oppressive

responses. The revolution in Syria, for example, was met by government retaliation, leading to a prolonged civil war. Elsewhere, in Iraq for instance, extremist groups including Islamic State (ISIS) formed to fill power vacuums created by civic unrest in the region. Revolutions are not simple affairs.

Revolutions on the streets, such as the rebellion centered in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, show that, under certain conditions, a societal state of collective inertia can be overcome to galvanize violent revolution [3]. Yet, when President Morsi replaced President Mubarak during the Arab Spring in Egypt it became clear to citizens one dictator had replaced another [4,5]. This unintended consequence of violent rebellion nonetheless highlights a pattern common across attempted revolutions. As a further example, the attempted revolution in Syria, also part of the broader Arab Spring, plunged the country into a prolonged civil war. A review of transdisciplinary research makes clear the detrimental effects of this attempted revolution — marked by severe and protracted violence — by detailing the plight of Syrian children and youth after the ensuing civil war [6].

The disjunction between political change at the level of those in power, and the lived subjective realities and aspirations of millions of citizens for fairer, more equitable societies, can explain why real democratic reform might not occur following a revolution such as in Egypt [7]. There is often only a relatively brief period of time between the toppling of one dictator and a new one coming to power within which the true democratization of social institutions and citizens is possible. In order for people to manifest the necessary behaviors during this brief window of opportunity, a certain malleability of thought and action — termed *political plasticity* — with regard to democratic ideals is needed, something that can be developed through education [8].

The development of new social norms, such as creating systems for encouraging citizens to vote in free, transparent, democratic elections, is another technique to help generate democratic citizens [9]. Dramatic social change, of the kind caused by revolutions, typically also alters both the physical and symbolic environment — for example, through posters, slogans, and graffiti. In the Egyptian context, street art during the Arab Spring became symbolic of revolutionaries' representations of government oppression, and subsequently authorities attempted delegitimization of their citizens' attempt for reform [10]. Protest symbols open up the possibility to understand and examine social change through these manifestations in visual culture [11]. Symbols of resistance can act as motivators triggering collective action and also as unifying symbols for group solidarity against an oppressive regime. 'Protest symbols,' through activating group processes, might bring about the creation of new norms — and

prompt new ways of thinking and behaving democratically.

Violent revolutions can also be conceptualized as conflicts based on opposed moral worldviews and visions for how society ought to be. However, not all revolutions can be deemed moral from the perspective of outside observers. ISIS, for example, are a radical group fighting to (re)create an ethnonationalist version of their homelands in opposition to alternative versions of these spaces. Their attempted revolution brought broad condemnation from western liberal governments. Yet, to resolve conflicts based around incommensurable moral worldviews, it is necessary to comprehend the motivations of those we might despise [12]. Moving beyond concepts of 'rational actors,' or unstable, 'irrational actors' to understand the motivations of their fighting, a focus on how these 'devoted actors' and their shared sacred values explains how, from their point of view, ISIS fighters, are morally motivated in their willingness to fight and die for their country [13]. Developing the theme of willingness to fight and kill, recent evidence points to the limited importance of dehumanization for comprehending how such violence occurs [14]. The act of killing — even dramatic acts of violence like ISIS beheadings — cannot be adequately explained by dehumanizing others. Such dramatic violent behaviors are based on instilling fear in others which implicitly recognizes the importance of taking the perspective of how others will feel which emphasizes their humanity.

Comprehending the complexity of violent revolutions necessitates the asking, and answering, of questions concerned with seemingly incommensurable cultural and moral worldviews; unequal power dynamics that form, and inform, broader societal inequalities; and the psychological processes needed when civic discontent creates potential for democratic reform, practices, and citizens. The Arab Spring, and its unintended consequences, in the form of power struggles and violent maintenance of the status quo, highlights these complexities. Still, the psychological investigations into revolutions do not always have violent civic unrest as a default.

Moving away from the violence of revolution, an alternative conceptualization of radical social and political change focuses on achieving these aims non-violently. One approach is to focus on generational identity changes, for example, by detailing the private revolutions of second generation American Muslim girls in their presentation of self through everyday activities within contemporary American and traditional Islamic cultural frameworks [15]. As such, revolutions are not always solely fought in the streets, but, also, at the level of practices and ideas. What is, and can be, said can inhibit [16] or generate [17] revolutionary ideas. For example, a discourse analysis of Gustav Le Bon's book

— *The Crowd* — [18] shows how semantic barriers are used to avoid, delegitimize, or limit, the potentially disruptive, revolutionary, ideas of other people [16]. The scopes and limits of cultural practices and discourses impact the trajectory of private revolutions in terms of re-representations of negatively stereotyped social groups, such as second-generation Muslim girls in the United States. Moreover, discursive framing can help galvanize violent revolutions in the form of articulating injustices, communicate the status of revolutions online or on the streets, and importantly what is said during the period following revolution, can inform whether actual and meaningful democratic change can occur, and what further changes can be imagined.

The scopes of imagining, and limits of creating, future worlds

Implicit in the drive for revolutionary socio-political change is the idea of an imagined future that is more equal, just, fair, or, at least, simply more tolerable than the present. The centrality of imagining to processes of radical social change has recently received deserved attention [19–21]. Imagining is key to comprehend people's dissatisfaction with what is, or what may be, which often relates to motivation or support for social movements [22].

Remembering the past, and imagining the future, lie at the basis of social comparisons in the present [23]. Imagining alternative futures of how society could or should be can have consequences for how people think, feel, and act in the present.

Such comparisons are central to relative deprivation theory which states that when people compare their lot to others, and in doing so, find themselves disadvantaged or discriminated against, in comparison to salient others, then they are likely to feel anger and frustration [24,25]. Reviews of the latest literature on relative deprivation extend this classic theory in ways that can help illuminate motivations for social movements. This work highlights the role of imagination in galvanizing feelings of injustice; the role of technology in creating feelings of deprivation by expanding our imaginative horizon; questioning the moral worldviews of the 1% of global income earners; and evaluating moral and cultural challenges of migration [26]. Another review highlights how relative deprivation fuels violent extremism [27]. Related issues of feeling relatively deprived manifest in discussions of labor unions, strikes, and related social movements, to demand greater equality for workers in neoliberal contexts [28].

Harsh punishment in educational settings can also detrimentally impact minority groups creating further deprivation and discrimination. Restorative justice practices in schools can be used as an alternative to typical punitive

measures against students' acts of rebellion [29]. Such conceptualizations of restorative practices have developmental consequences, and, as such, may help reduce educational — and related — inequalities and feelings of being 'left behind.' Together, unionized work forces and educated youth can help alleviate feelings of relative deprivation. This is because feelings of deprivation help spur social movements in the present to mitigate current and imagined future injustice and inequalities. Imagining future societies, implicitly, or explicitly, is a fundamental psychological process underlying the motives of both individual and crowd behavior.

The crowd, social identities, and resistance

The crowd poses a fundamental paradox for authorities in liberal democracies: on the one hand, they potentially challenge the authority of those who are in power, on the other, freedom of assembly is a fundamental democratic right. In contrast to earlier theorizing that focused on the violent impulses of crowds, analyzing the crowd through the social identity approach, highlights emerging research trajectories extending from crowd conflict and behavior in emergencies, to also incorporate understandings of social identity processes in pedestrian dynamics and mass gatherings [30]. Beyond specific studies of the crowd, the social identity framework continues to be a generative model in understanding topics under the umbrella of social movements, including interactions between police and protesters [31] and how collective action can lead to sustained and prolonged social movements [32]. Moreover, experimental social psychological research from the unique cultural context of the United States suggests different social groups can identify with one another and form alliances to rally against injustices and inequalities [33]. Related to this form of comprehending social change, recent research highlights the potential of people who self-report as being low on feelings of social dominance might be willing to challenge group-based hierarchies [34]. This empirical advance provides a model for similar developments in related theories known for describing the status quo. For example, the scopes and limits of believing in a just world, justifying the prevailing system in which one lives, and the conditions and contexts in which tolerance for inequalities, injustices, and unfairness reach a tipping point, need to be articulated.

One particularly meaningful cultural context in which to explore resistance against injustice and inequalities is the United States where racially marginalized youth galvanize around the Black Lives Matters trope to motivate, and try achieve, greater equality and justice, particularly in relation to their treatment by police [35]. Issues of resistance to oppressive authorities manifest not only in prolonged and highly visible social movements such as Black Lives Matter, but also in forms of everyday, even mundane, forms of resistance from collective

victimization [36]. Some forms of everyday resistance and activism occur online and recent literature in this area suggests online and offline activism typically correlate, and that in terms of documenting individual experiences, creating new norms, and building community, online activism can motivate offline protest [37]. As evidenced by state authorities in places like North Korea, China and Cuba, the internet can facilitate top-down repression of its citizens in more dictatorial regimes. This occurs, in part, by curbing discourse, controlling and manipulating the flow of information, and otherwise opposing imagined alternative views of society. Moreover, Russia is accused of technological interference in western elections and undermining democratic procedures which speaks to the detrimental side of social change for those who advocate for democratic ideals, including free and transparent elections. Such activities undermine a belief the world is simply marching towards Enlightenment values [see Ref. 38]. Democracies can slide towards dictatorships and no pure democracy has ever existed [5].

The dark side of social change in western liberal democracies

One recent feature of contemporary social change, related to misinformation, manipulation, and strongman dictatorial leadership, is the re-emergence of populism [39]. Core intergroup dynamics between in and out groups, basic status concerns expressed in cultural and economic contexts, and the mobilization of emotions can help to understand the appeal of populism.

In this sense, socio-political change, — as evident in the rise of fascist populists in some countries — is not always moral from a utilitarian perspective. The rise of conspiracy theories, particularly abundant following the global outbreak of the Covid-19 virus as people searched for explanations, is another indicator of a regression from Enlightenment values of critical and evidenced-based thinking towards more irrational and illogical forms of social change. In particular, belief in conspiracy theories is associated with anti-democratic attitudes [40]. Demagogues, via disinformation, in the form of fake news and conspiracy theories, were traditionally seen as manipulating the crowd. However, from an evolutionary psychological perspective, evidence suggests leaders and (mis)information actually function to coordinate, rather than manipulate, individuals who are already predisposed to conflict [41]. Regardless of the precise mechanisms underlying social change, the regression from pluralistic liberal democracies to ethnonationalist populist led societies highlights that not all social change equates to social progress.

Staying on the move: sketches for future research

Returning to the opening quotation of this article, given the choice between incompleteness, incoherence, and

emptiness, the collection of articles in this edition illustrate perfectly our understanding, as incomplete as it always will be, of the psychology of radical social change. In an effort to lay some (imaginative) foundations for future research trajectories in the study of the psychology of rallies, riots, and revolutions, I will close by highlighting potential areas for future investigation. Examination of these areas, like much psychological research, might best be informed from transdisciplinary endeavors, using a combination of ethnographic and experimental methods [42,43].

Relative deprivation theory and social identity theory are two dominant social psychological approaches to understand motivation for engaging in social change. However, one un-answered question is how do authorities respond to protesters? A relative dearth of research exists — in contrast to evidence on the causes and proliferation of social movements — from a social psychological perspective to answer this question. Without comprehending the responses of those who are protested *against* — responses that range from relatively open democratic governments to more closed, brutal, dictatorships — we are missing integral empirical and theoretical information concerning processes of social change and the creation of societies deemed more fair, equal, and tolerant.

Explanations of why and how people challenge authorities are well documented in this edition, including feelings of inequality, inequity, deprivation, and injustice. But the domain of morality needs greater integration with questions of radical social change. For instance, theoretical consideration needs to be given, and empirical evidence provided, to chart the (im)morality of uneasy alliances between social groups to challenge the power of other social groups. How do we conceptualize strange bedfellows such as Donald Trump's support for Hong Kong pro-democracy struggles against Chinese state control in the context of the United States becoming more of a fascist state itself [44]? Or how about uneasy celebrations by left-wing animal rights activists and right-wing demonstrators concerning the banning of Halal killing of animals by Muslims in Belgium [45]? Or conservative groups and some feminists in western nations holding transphobic views [46]?

Moral and legal frameworks are not necessarily aligned, and certainly not for all social groups. Incongruence between feelings of illegitimacy create space for civic discontent that may or may not be illegal. A fruitful research program could assess when it is morally permissible to break the law to achieve social change [47]. Questions of group identity also have repercussions for individuals. Another line of research might examine identity paradoxes that occur for some individuals and social groups having achieved social and political change for their cause. Under what circumstances do these

people resist other instances of injustice, opt to justify the current system which now favors them, or simply enjoy their just desserts?

If psychology is to have anything cogent to say about radical social change in the form of rallies, riots, and revolutions, then it needs to further overcome related issues. Psychological theories and research regarding social change will benefit from greater contextualization. One way to achieve this is through increased transdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration. Further contextualization can also occur by diversifying sampling, field sites, and participants in psychological research. How appropriate are models developed on quantitative studies with samples from American undergraduate courses or online survey takers for explaining socio-economic protests in Ireland or Sudan, pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, or anti-dictatorial revolutions in Northern Africa? Relatedly, the overall dependence on the so-called *WEIRD* (western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic) people, hasn't dramatically altered in a decade, maintaining the possibility of the inappropriateness of models developed in one context to fully or even adequately explain occurrences in others [48]. Ultimately, most research on the causes and consequences of collective action is done in contexts that are relatively safe, secure, and equal. Funding bodies might take notice of the potential high return of conducting field social psychology into processes of socio-political change across diverse global regions. Junior scholars might be mindful of the opportunities and rewards field social psychological research can bring in terms of theory integration and development; the accumulation of novel empirical data, and the creation and combination of relevant field social psychological methods.

In a splintered and fractured social, political, and economic world, psychology has an important role to play in describing, explaining, and perhaps alleviating societal challenges. Staying on the move between multiple perspectives — with regard to theories, models, data, and conclusions — is the surest way to most holistically comprehend the changeable and knowable world.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Thomas Morton, Kelsey Robbins, Richard Shweder, and Brady Wagoner for their helpful comments on a previous draft of this essay. Thanks also to Paul Van Lange and Michael Zvolensky for inviting me to assemble this edition and to all the contributors to this collection of essays.

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