**Understanding crowd conflict: Psychology, intergroup dynamics and the legitimacy of policing**

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**Abstract**

This review article draws together theoretical and empirical developments in social psychology, sociology and criminology to highlight the central role of intergroup dynamics and policing in the dynamics of riots. Accordingly, this review highlights the need for interdisciplinary dialogue in attempts to understand and effectively manage crowd conflict, giving an example of how the insights of the social identity approach to crowd psychology have been applied both to practice and inter-disciplinary theoretical development.

**Introduction**

The last year of the second decade of the twenty first Century was marked by protests across the globe. In Hong Kong, these took on geo-political significance as associated conflicts escalated and policing became increasingly repressive. While there is as yet very little research on them, the protest events in Hong Kong displayed clear behavioural patterns that can be linked to the political, structural and historical context within which they were taking place [1, 2].

Correspondingly, Jetten et al.’s [3] analysis of the ‘Yellow Vest’ movement in France highlights how structural contexts can feed into shared perceptions of economic inequality. They show how a gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in France was made salient psychologically through high power groups’ active disassociation with the ‘ordinary’ French population. This created a juxtaposition between the structural intergroup context and dominant ‘values’ of French identity, built historically around concepts of liberty, *equality* and fraternity. In combination with dynamics between protesters and police during protest events, these social psychological and intergroup processes intertwined to drive and sustain the protests.

In parallel, (as ￼Drury argues also in this volume), there is now a widespread rejection in the academic literature of the ‘irrationalism’ of ‘classical’ crowd psychology [3]. In its place, there has been a turn toward the social identity approach as the most parsimonious explanatory model of ￼crowd action. This review article draws upon these theoretical and empirical developments to give additional focus to the central role played by intergroup dynamics, micro-sociology and policing in the dynamics by which violent crowd events come about and through which they can be more effectively managed.

**Social identity and riots**

The development of the *Social Identity Model* of crowd behaviour (SIM) was the seminal moment in the shift toward an empirically grounded theoretical explanation of the psychology of crowd action in riots. However, despite being meta-theoretically ‘interactionist’ in its orientation, the SIM was in danger of conveying a reified and mechanistic picture of social identity processes [4]. To address this, it was recognised there was a need to explore and account for change in crowd norms over time [5].

Across a range of contexts research began to demonstrate that crowd norms changed as a function of intergroup ￼interaction. Specifically, that police and other authority [10] action toward crowd participants has a profound impact. Where use of force is disproportionate and seen by crowd participants as illegitimate this can impact upon the identities driving collective action in ways that legitimise and empower conflict. In more theoretical terms, identities can change, and riots can develop, because dynamic intergroup interactions during the crowd event are part and parcel of the contextual processes involved social psychological change [11].

Correspondingly, there is a turn toward what we might call ‘situationalism’ [12] evident in sociologically oriented analyses of crowd events. Drawing heavily upon the work of Randall Collins, the emphasis is upon how behaviours and symbolic interactions construct the meanings and embody the emotions underpinning conflict. Such micro-sociological perspectives [14] go as far as claiming that these situationally embedded dynamics are sufficient in themselves to explain whether or not crowd events will develop into widespread confrontations [15]. Equally, some within this approach call for greater dialogue between the sociological focus on physical objects and actions and the social psychological focus on intra-subjectivity [14].

**The social dynamics of spread**

Research across a range of disciplines has unequivocally demonstrated that ‘riots’ are never random explosions of violence. For example, analysis of the spread of the August 2011 riots in England show there was a clear temporal and spatial pattern or ‘clustering’ of ￼events [16]. Explaining the processes governing these patterns of spread remain a challenge [17]. Recent developments in this regard, also outlined elsewhere this volume, have begun to unpack how intergroup interaction, or micro-sociological processes, in the early phases of the riots meshed with a structural history of policing beyond them to create a contextually determined form of identity through which the riots spread.

A reversal of power relationships between crowd participants and police in the first stages of the original riot location enabled previously hostile groups to overcome their antagonism with each other and work cooperatively to attack police [18]. This emergent capacity empowered rioters to actively spread the conflicts to new sites and targets [19]. For some participants in new locations across the following days, this initial rioting was highly self-relevant, and a shared identity was the basis of their subsequent involvement. For others, previous rioting was empowering because it demonstrated the vulnerability of their historical ‘common enemy’, in this case the police. While, in each location, interactional dynamics appear to have mediated the link between initial perceptions and collective action it is evident a broader structural context of economic inequality and over-zealous policing prior to the riots were critically important [18, 19, 20, 21].

**Policing crowds**

Research focused on the policing of crowds has long recognised changing patterns in approach. These sociologically defined configurations, changing over decades, have been related to their social, political and legislative contexts [22, 23]. For example, it is argued by some scholars that a ‘negotiated management’ approach began to develop across and beyond the United States of America from the late 1970’s onwards. It is contended that this transition was made possible because of a growing contradiction between the violent police repression of civil rights protests and the growing dominance of political liberalism. Equally, the strength of organised unionism and legislative changes (e.g., in the UK, the 1986 Public Order Act) allowed, indeed legally required, protestors and police to negotiate. A subsequent shift back toward a more repressive ‘strategic incapacitation’ at the turn of the Century seen as the result of the emergence of less centrally organised transnational protest movements more committed to street-based forms of ‘direct action’, most notably in Seattle in 1999 [24].

Such explanations bring emphasis to the idea that police action toward crowds cannot be adequately understood merely in psychological terms. While police understanding of crowds [25] is crucial there are an array of other factors, such as legal ambiguity and pragmatism [26], that enable and constrain how they deploy strategically and tactically toward them.

For example, in the UK in 2009, following the death of a crowd participant as a result of police use of force, a landmark review of public order policing was published by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC [27]). The report was built around three core pillars. Philosophically, it (re)emphasised the political commitment in the UK to policing by consent, seen as under threat by the creeping dominance of police coercion. Conceptually, there was a rejection of the irrationalism of classical crowd psychology and recognition of the need to draw upon ESIM, with its emphasis on intergroup interaction, as the framework for understanding the potentially negative impact of police action on crowd psychology and dynamics. Perhaps most importantly, the report was primarily a legal analysis of how the European Convention on Human Rights applies to the policing of public assemblies. More specifically, that the Human Rights Act (1998) created a legal context of both positive and negative duties for the police not to interfere with and to positively protect rights of peaceful assembly, expression and consciousness. This legislation also framed the legality, proportionality and constraints upon police use of force [28].

Accordingly, the HMIC created a context for reform in the UK within which it became possible for police to develop greater capacity to avoid coercion by promoting communication, dialogue and negotiation with crowd participants [29, 30]. There is substantial research showing that where police have capacity for effective dialogue, crowd participants tend to perceive policing as legitimate and conflict is avoided because a culture of behavioural self-regulation is empowered [31].

Nonetheless, while progressive changes both within and beyond the UK have taken place, they are precarious, and issues remain [32, 33]. For example, research on crowd policing in a football (‘soccer’) context [34, 35] has consistently demonstrated that there is still a pressing need to address these legal [36, 37], human rights and policing [38, 39] challenges.

**Future directions: Crowd theory and procedural justice**

With its focus on legitimacy, power and self-regulation there are striking parallels between the social identity analysis and a leading criminological theory of police-citizen interactions, Procedural Justice Theory (PJT [40]).

In line with the ESIM, PJT places importance on the interactions between powerholders and subordinates and places emphasis on legitimacy in terms of the right to power [41] but at the same raises powerful questions about what ‘legitimacy’ actually is [42]. PJT suggests that public ‘compliance’ with the law is best achieved through officers demonstrating to those that they interact with that police actions are legitimate [43]. According to PJT and its associated research, the primary way police officers encourage perceptions of police legitimacy is to treat citizens in ways that they experience as ‘fair’ and equitable [44].

Whilst there is an emerging body of work beginning to explore how PJT and ESIM principles combine in their application to crowd policing in the USA [45, 46, 47] there is a danger of PJT being misread [48] as an overly cognitive account of police-public relations which are conceptualised as dyadic in nature.

This is consistent with recent experimental studies of PJT which have suggested that people do not evaluate crowd policing in a social-historical vacuum. This work demonstrates that the nature of the intergroup context and how people are positioned within it are critically important factors in how people interpret police action. Indeed, research has demonstrated that police use of force toward a crowd can be seen as more or less ‘fair’ depending upon the nature of the groups involved and whether or not those making the judgments identify with those being coerced [49, 50].

This research highlights how police legitimacy is not a judgement formed merely by reference to abstracted, universal and reified ‘rules’ but influenced by *group-level* processes and psychology. Accordingly, what is beginning to emerge is research on a process model of PJT exploring how cognitive evaluations of policing relate more precisely to structural, micro-sociological and social identity processes [51].

**Conclusions**

As recent crowd events in Hong Kong, Chile, France, Iraq, India and elsewhere testify the ‘Age of the Crowd’ is still with us. As creeping authoritarianism and the negative impacts of climate change begin to hit, we can only speculate that protests and the ways in which we police them will become an increasingly important global issue. As we enter the third decade of the twenty first Century it is evident that scientific understanding of the dynamics of crowd conflict has grown exponentially, since Reicher’s seminal contribution in the 1980’s.

Nonetheless, it is important to reflect that this social identity approach to crowds has always highlighted the intimate interrelationship between psychological and social processes. In addressing interdisciplinary research on that inter-relationship, it is increasingly apparent that an adequate understanding of crowd action cannot be merely psychological.

As we hope this review has highlighted, economic, political, legislative and historical factors are all important determinants. It is also evident that micro-sociological dynamics are central because they can shape and reshape the immediate social context and its associated meanings and emotions.

The social psychological identity-based analysis makes further contributions because it shows how these structural and interactional dynamics are mediated by emergent and dynamic group level self-concepts. These self-categorisations feed perceptions of the legitimacy of action and dynamics of power both within and beyond crowd events [52]. The approach is also beginning to outline the psychological dynamics underpinning the spread, resilience and changing form of riots across time and location.

What is also evident from this review is that a focus on intergroup dynamics, legitimacy and ‘procedural justice’ is beneficial not just theoretically but also practically, in that it can help develop new ways of avoiding unnecessary and unintentional conflict. This is important because, as the situations in Hong Kong and elsewhere highlight, there are serious global challenges ahead in addressing how protests are policed. In this sense, our responsibility as academics is not just to develop good theory but as Kurt Lewin, one of the founding fathers of social psychology stressed, to use good theory to do good things.

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This review paper presents a detailed and theoretically rich analysis of the ‘Yellow Vest’ movement in France. The authors show the importance of a non-reductionist approach which focuses on the structural and economic context in France as well as an emphasis on the interaction between psychological, intergroup and intragroup processes.

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Central to the argument of this interdisciplinary paper is the importance of political and economic geography as important structural determinants governing the patterns of riot ‘spread’. The paper also highlights the critical importance of a social psychological level of analysis. In particular, the interrelationship between social identity, intergroup interaction and emergent empowerment processes that develop during ‘riots’.

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This paper critically assesses Anthony Bottoms and Justice Tankebe’s influential ‘dialogic’ model of police legitimacy. The paper acknowledges the important conceptual arguments that the model puts forward. In particular, the idea that police officers as power-holders make ‘claims’ to legitimacy which are responded to in kind by various ‘audiences’ (e.g., citizens). However, Martin and Bradford argue that there are key limitations to the model that need to be addressed. For example, there are often other important ‘actors’ that need to be taken into account when analysing police-‘citizen’ interactions.

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This article argues that there is a danger that PJT is construed and studied as an overly cognitive theory with associated empirical analyses abstracting the cognitions that relate to policing (e.g., perceptions of police legitimacy) away from the dynamic social, political and structural contexts within which such judgements are formed. As such, this paper suggests that PJT researchers can benefit theoretically and methodologically by drawing on the insights of the ESIM and studies of the (non)rioting crowd to advance a ‘process-based’ model of PJT, utilising ethnographic approaches to data collection.

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