

The Social Psychology of the Black Lives Matter Meme and Movement

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Abstract

Since the 2012 killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, a string of publicized police killings of unarmed Black men and women has brought sustained attention to the issue of racial bias in the United States. Recent Department of Justice investigations and an expanding set of social science research have added to the empirical evidence that these publicized incidents are emblematic of systemic racism in the application of the law. The Black Lives Matter meme and movement are prominent responses to racism that have animated intense interest and support, especially among African Americans. We summarize recent social science research on Black Lives Matter. As a first step toward understanding the social psychology of the meme and the movement, we apply the dynamic dual-pathway model of protest to Black Lives Matter. Examinations of the dynamics of real-world movements such as Black Lives Matter may enrich psychology conceptually, methodologically, and practically.

Keywords

racism, prejudice, violence, collective action, protest, efficacy

One of the telltale signs of an *herrenvolk democracy*—where rights and freedoms are apportioned unequally across groups—is bias in the application of the law by police and other authorities of the state (for a review, see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Today, as in the past, African Americans and other disadvantaged people of color in the United States suffer disproportionate police violence (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Weitzer, 2015). For example, the Goff, Lloyd, Geller, Raphael, and Glaser's (2016) analysis of over 19,000 recent encounters found that police use physical force against Blacks about 3.5 times more than against Whites.

Since neighborhood watch officer George Zimmerman killed unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012, a string of police killings of unarmed Black men and women has attracted particular attention (Cobb, 2016; Kelley, 2016; Weitzer, 2015). The killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and Laquan McDonald in Chicago were especially significant because the Department of Justice subsequently documented widespread police misconduct in each of these cities (<https://www.justice.gov/crt/page/file/922456/download>). Black people are more likely than Whites and others to interpret these individual events as indicative of systemic racism (see Pew Research Center, 2016; Reinka & Leach, in press; Weitzer,

2015). One poignant example at present is the African American-led Black Lives Matter meme and movement (<http://blacklivesmatter.com>), which emerged in response to George Zimmerman's acquittal in July 2013 and officer Darren Wilson's killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown in August 2014 (Cobb, 2016; Kelley, 2016; LeBron, 2017).

Black Lives Matter has animated intense social and political activity, especially among younger people and others who have been less politically engaged (De Choudhury, Jhaver, Sugar, & Weber, 2016; Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016a). We summarize recent social science research on the meme and movement. As of yet, very little psychological research has been done on Black Lives Matter (Reinka & Leach, in press). As a first step toward understanding its psychology, we apply van Zomeren, Leach, and Spears's (2012) dynamic dual-pathway model of protest to the Black Lives Matter meme and movement. Examinations of the dynamics of real-world movements such as Black Lives Matter can enrich psychology conceptually, methodologically, and practically.

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Black Lives Matter

Meme and support

Because so many contemporary protest movements use social media to influence, organize, and protest, recent social science scholarship relies on social network analysis, communication models, and other methods of analyzing social action over time (for a review, see Snow, Porta, Klandermans, & McAdam, 2013). These temporal methods for examining the dynamics of coordinated action across individuals within (online and offline) networks are infrequently utilized by social and other psychologists (for a discussion, see Kende, Ujhelyi, Joinson, & Greitemeyer, 2015). Recent work on memes suggests that they can frame issues, inform people, shape attitudes, and mobilize various forms of political action (for a review, see Snow et al., 2013). Although little social psychological research directly examines memes and the social processes of communication that underlie them (but see Thomas et al., 2015), work in the social identity and relative deprivation traditions does demonstrate the ways in which the social sharing of information, emotions, and intentions can reinforce individual psychology and thereby increase the chances of concerted and coordinated action across individuals (for reviews, see Becker & Tausch, 2015; van Zomeren et al., 2012).

In only a few years, the meme of Black Lives Matter has been taken up by many in U.S. society, especially those historically most concerned with issues of racial inequality and injustice (see De Choudhury et al., 2016; Freelon et al., 2016a; Snow et al., 2013). For instance, in the 3 weeks after officer Darren Wilson avoided indictment for the killing of Michael Brown, the “BlackLivesMatter” hashtag was used 1.7 million times on Twitter mostly in support of the movement (Freelon et al., 2016a; Pew Research Center, 2016). In the nearly 11 years Twitter has existed, “BlackLivesMatter” and “Ferguson” have been among the most used hashtags referring to a social cause (Lowery, 2017). “BlackLivesMatter” was in the top 10 tweets in both 2015 and 2016, surprisingly outpacing “Trump” in 2016 (Kottasova, 2016). However, support for Black Lives Matter is not universal (Reinka & Leach, in press; YouGov, 2016). According to the Pew Research Center (2016), a clear majority of African Americans, Democrats, and White Americans under 30 express support for the movement. Many others are neutral toward the group or unsure of its aims. Republicans are one of the few groups adamantly opposed to Black Lives Matter.

Psychological processes

Although social sciences such as sociology and political science have long dominated the study of protest, and communication science is essential to understanding the recent role of social media and other memes,

psychology is also important (for reviews, see Becker & Tausch, 2015; Duncan, 2012; Klandermans, 1997). Recently, van Zomeren et al. (2012) proposed the dynamic dual-pathway model to integrate psychological models of protest and related cognition, emotion, and motivation with the more macrosocial approaches to protest common outside of psychology. To root protest in psychological processes, van Zomeren et al. (2012) view individuals facing societal stressors, such as racial bias in policing, as engaging in the dynamic process of coping with shared stressors collectively as members of a group. Consistent with this, many social psychological studies show that it is a perceived pattern of racial bias against Black people as a group that makes specific incidents of police violence relevant to individuals who see themselves as vulnerable to similar bias and feel solidarity with the victims (e.g., Leach, Rodriguez Mosquera, Vliek, & Hirt, 2010; for a general discussion, see Leach et al., 2008).

In addition, the dynamic dual-pathway model conceptualizes group members as able to offer their fellows social support that facilitates appraisals of the stressor as unfair and thus anger worthy (i.e., emotional social support) or as something that the group has the efficacy to deal with (i.e., problem-focused social support). Partly on the basis of these two forms of social support, group members engage in emotion-focused or problem-focused coping efforts that may lead to protest or other relevant action. This coping effort is then reappraised in light of its effectiveness in dealing with the stressor or in response to changes in the stressor itself.

Broad support for the dynamic dual-pathway model has been obtained in numerous studies of real-world and laboratory protest (for a review, see van Zomeren et al., 2012). It is important that van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, and Leach (2004) used a series of three experiments with Dutch students facing tuition hikes to examine the major causal claims in the model. For instance, manipulations that established most students as opposed to tuition hikes increased participants' own anger, whereas manipulations that established that most students were ready to take action increased participant's sense that the group had the efficacy to collectively improve their situation. More recently, Leach, Çelik, Bilali, Cidam, and Stewart (2016) used the dynamic dual-pathway model to explain active participation in the 2013 large-scale antigovernment protests in Turkey. As expected, perceived social support from others played a vital role in the independent routes to protest via anger and perceived efficacy. In addition, the decision to protest was dynamic in that it brought with it two divergent consequences—a feeling of collective empowerment from coordinated action and the experience of intense police violence (e.g., receiving baton beatings, being shot with water cannons).

The dynamic dual-pathway model dovetails with macro-social approaches to movements such as Black

Lives Matter because the model focuses on the social sharing of reality as a dynamic process over time whereby individuals come to define their experience in common ways. This social validation generates stronger identity, appraisal, emotion, and motivation—the psychological explanations of collective actions such as protest. Consistent with the model, research on Black Lives Matter suggests that anger and efficacy are based, in part, in perceived social support from like-minded others either online or in person (De Choudhury et al., 2016; Freelon et al., 2016a, 2016b). And, as proposed in the dynamic dual-pathway model, anger about police bias and the perceived efficacy of protest are key explanations of Black people's motivation and behavior in support of Black Lives Matter (Freelon et al., 2016a, 2016b). For instance, De Choudhury et al. (2016) performed linguistic analyses of Twitter posts over time by matching these data to geographical tags, objective data about police killings of Black people, and rates of attendance at Black Lives Matter protests. Individuals in areas with recent, or historically high rates of, police killings of Black people engaged in more online activity and expressed more negative affect in their posts. It is important that areas with greater online activity had greater subsequent involvement in Black Lives Matter protests.

Recent research also suggests that shared exposure to emotionally moving images on social or traditional media can increase protest. In an online experiment, Casas and Webb Williams (2016) gave 5,000 adults on the Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing platform the chance to sign a petition asking President Obama to recognize and formally support the Black Lives Matter movement. Only 4% signed this quite strong statement in support of Black Lives Matter. However, when participants were shown images of either a funeral for a Black victim of police violence or a militarized response to protest, 7% signed the petition. Thus, the sort of images that are shared online to promote the Black Lives Matter movement led to greater political action. In another experiment, Reinka and Leach (in press) exposed Black and White adults to images of Black protest, some of which were taken from Black Lives Matter actions. A linguistic analysis of written descriptions of the images showed Whites to be more uncertain and less definitive. In contrast, Blacks were more direct and made greater reference to themes of social solidarity, injustice, and power in their more positive representation of Black protest against police violence. Thus, images, too, appear able to galvanize action via the routes identified in the dynamic dual-pathway model.

Conclusion

As in the past, recent instances of apparent racial bias in police use of force have moved and mobilized African Americans and others concerned with the equal

application of justice (see Kelley, 2016; Weitzer, 2015). Likely because Black people have greater personal experience, and historical context, for racial bias, they are the most opposed to it in attitude and most ready to act against it through protest and other means (Reinka & Leach, in press). Recent reporting, historical analyses, and macrosocial research on Black Lives Matter suggests that this particular meme for framing racial bias in policing has become well-known and widely endorsed in Black America. It also seems that Black Lives Matter has become fairly well-known, if less widely endorsed, among other groups. Given the meme's ability to provide information and critique of racial bias, it appears to be at the heart of a still developing political movement for change. Black Lives Matter is a presence in the streets, in the town halls, and on campuses across the country (Cobb, 2016; Kelley, 2016; Lowery, 2017). Recent policy actions—such as the Department of Justice reports on civil rights violations and consent decrees to reform police forces in places such as Ferguson, Cleveland, Baltimore, and Chicago (<https://www.justice.gov/crt/page/file/922456/download>)—add real weight to the movement, and its leaders count this as evidence of their effectiveness. That judgment, however, is probably best made some years hence when concrete reform in policing and the broader application of the law can be better assessed. Early signs are that President Trump's administration will alter the recent momentum for reform. On March 31, 2017, Attorney General Sessions announced that all Department of Justice consent decrees and other activities with police departments would be reviewed (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/954916/download>). And on April 7, 2017, Attorney General Sessions expressed “grave concerns that some provisions of this decree [by the Obama administration] will reduce the lawful powers of the police department and result in a less safe city” (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/statement-attorney-general-jeff-sessions-district-courts-entry-baltimore-consent-decree>).

The dynamic dual-pathway model suggests that future failed action, or effective counteraction by the opposition, will feed back into the appraisal and coping process. It can undermine the motivational bases for protest if it undermines the group's sense of efficacy that it can cope actively through protest. In such instances, other less direct forms of active coping, and perhaps even passive forms of coping, may increase in frequency. It is also possible that a turn in the tide of sharing and endorsing a meme such as Black Lives Matter will undermine the social support for the appraisal of injustice and attendant feeling of anger that such socially validated ideas can promote. However, as Black Lives Matter and other related memes appear to be firmly established in group-based social and other media, reduced emotion-focused social support seems

unlikely. For instance, Kende, van Zomeren, Ujhelyi, and Lantos (2016) found that students continued occupying a university building in protest in part because of their preceding involvement in the protestor's Facebook page and their use of social media to provide each other social support. Future work on the dynamic dual-pathway model and other psychological models of coping with societal stressors should address the ways in which social media and other technology operate in ways that may or may not translate well into existing conceptual and methodological approaches. This is part and parcel of the way in which protest and other active coping is best viewed as a dynamic social and psychological process operating within societies and the individuals that constitute them.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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