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Editorial: Global perspectives on activism during COVID-19

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Global perspectives on activism during COVID-19

Between empowerment and learned helplessness

In presenting a proposal on *Global Perspectives on Activism during COVID-19*, the main aim was to understand whether and to what extent the unprecedented experience of restrictions on the freedom of movement and alteration of everyday behavior which characterized the global response to the spread of the SARS-Cov2 virus in 2019–2021 had an impact in the political expression of citizens across the world. The review we proposed (Coen et al.) shows how scholars have been exploring this area utilizing a series of well-established theoretical and empirical paradigms, while creatively adapting them to the exceptional conditions posed by the emergency. On the one hand, the obvious limits to the freedom to gather and to socialize are an objective impediment to the carrying out of traditional forms of political engagement such as political rallies or protests. On the other hand, however, the unique circumstances in which citizens were living highlighted the existing structures and regulatory forces. This might have enhanced the salience—and awareness—of the influence political decision-making has in our lives. What follows is a discussion of the contribution offered by the papers in this Research Topic, and the proposal of a novel overarching theoretical framework.

Activism and inequality

In their conceptual framework paper, Vestergren et al. propose a model according to which the experience of disasters (of which—we argue-the pandemic is one) can lead to increased violent or political unrest by triggering—or further enhancing processes that the literature in social psychology has identified as crucial in promoting collective action. This increased likelihood would be traced back to an emergence of a stronger sense of cohesion and solidarity, empowerment and collective anger resulting from a common experience of injustice of members of disadvantaged/minoritized groups. Importantly, while focusing on whether experiencing disaster may increase the likelihood of protest and violent collective action, the authors acknowledge that the same processes can help better understanding pro-social behavior and mutual support. Indeed, it could be the case that the global nature of the COVID-19 experience might have enhanced citizens' identification with all humanity, a factor that Lantos et al. demonstrated being crucial in predicting pro-social action intention. In their four-wave longitudinal study, Lantos et al. showed how identification can play an important role in promoting pro-social behavior both directly (in the case of identification with all humanity) and indirectly, via increased empathy.

The differential effects of COVID-19 on political activism for members of groups with advantaged and disadvantaged status were the focus of the paper by Vezzoli et al. who surveyed a large representative sample of Italians. Interestingly, and in contrast with the mod el proposed by Vestergren et al., the authors found that perceived economic inequality predicts political activism for wealthier participants, belonging to higher socio-economic status. As for the lower socioeconomic status, the authors found that people experiencing more difficulties in procuring resources as a result of COVID-19 were less likely to engage in political activism. The authors propose that this result can be explained in terms of Solt (2015) resource model. From this perspective, increased levels of inequality lead to poorer individuals "withdrawing from a political environment that is unresponsive to them and their needs" (Solt, 2015, p. 11314). Indeed, it is possible to link this to the theory of Learned Helplessness (LH, Seligman and Maier, 1967). In a classic learned helplessness paradigm, participants are led to plan and execute actions aimed at reaching a particular goal. Individuals, however, fail achieving the goal due to circumstances outside their control (for a review, see Mikulincer, 2013). A similar mechanism might operate when members of low socio-economic classes are faced with evidence of the uncontrollable outcomes of their efforts in a context in which the odds seem to be stacked against them.

Learned helplessness

Mohanty et al. (2015) highlight how learned helplessness is associated with the development of motivational, cognitive, and emotional deficits. Significantly, the authors propose that the key to understanding and being able to predict the psychological outcome of facing a negative event for an individual is to consider three attribution dimensions proposed by Abramson et al. (1978): whether the negative outcome is attributed to an internal vs. external cause; whether the issue is seen as stable or unstable; whether the individual predicts negative outcomes globally or in the specific instance.

This formulation might help reconcile the apparently different predictions of Vestergren et al. and Vezzoli et al., who predict that people belonging to disadvantaged groups would be more (Vestergren et al.) or less (Vezzoli et al.) likely to engage in collective action in response to a crisis such as COVID-19: when the outcome is seen as achievable and the cause of the failure to pursue it is attributed to an unstable external force, one can expect that group members would feel entitled to the outcome and would attempt to pursue it. Indeed, Brehm (1966) theory of psychological reactance predicts that when people see a reduction in their individual freedom, they will be motivated to regain it. In line with the predictions made by Vestergren et al., being faced with such a deprivation would result in increased hostility and anger, as well as a motivational incentive to (re)gain the (lost) privilege.

On the other hand, however, a Learned Helplessness perspective would predict that an individual faced with uncontrollable negative outcomes would become passive and depressed. This different outcome can be attributed however not to its uncontrollability but to how the individual appraises the negative event (Dweck and Wortman, 1982, cited in Mohanty et al., 2015). Hence, if individuals from a low socio-economic background viewed their condition during COVID-19 as something due to external forces that chronically disadvantage their group in a pervasive way, it is possible to expect that the outcome would be the one observed by Vezzoli et al..

Indeed, on an individual level, we have initial evidence that learned helplessness is a significant predictor of levels of anxiety, depression, and stress in a sample of Chinese college students during the COVID-19 lockdown (Xue et al., 2023). It is my tenet that this would apply also at a collective level.

Collective learned helplessness

One of the rare references to group-based learned helplessness is in a paper by Yoon (2011), in which the author explores the processes involved in the lack of community-based action to protect the environment and the community's wellbeing. In the paper, Yoon suggests that one of the potential explanations for the lack of action was limited learned helplessness—that is learned helplessness developed by the community because of past failures to achieve change in particular issues. In other words, Yoon (2011) proposes that (1) learned helplessness can arise at a collective (group) level, (2) learned helplessness can be a predictor of collective efficacy, and (3) can arise from appraisal dimensions akin to the attributional processes identified by scholar analyzing learned helplessness at an individual level (internal-external, stable-unstable, global-specific). Notably, the author makes an implicit conceptual distinction between learned helplessness and (lack of) collective efficacy, by acknowledging that learned helplessness might partly account for community members' lack of collective efficacy. In this model, therefore, learned helplessness is a predictor of collective efficacy.

Javeline (2003), in her book entitled Protest and the Politics of Blame: The Russian Response to Unpaid Wages, presents a compelling argument concerning the necessity of being able to identify a specific source of blame for protest to arise. Importantly, she states:

> "Organization leaders have pointed fingers and made excuses and justifications, but they have not explained the essentials of how wages came to be delayed and how they can now be paid. Without clarity on these matters, Russians have been unlikely to take to the streets." (p. 16)

What matters is the extent to which citizens can identify a source of blame or, in other words, make specific attributions about who is responsible for the problem (causal attribution) and who is responsible for its solution (treatment attribution).

Failure to identify the sources of blame for a collective grievance may lead to people developing a sense of helplessness and lack of engagement in collective action. In the case of the wage arrears analyzed by Javeline, failure to identify who is responsible for the lack of payment of the wages resulted in issue-specific helplessness which consequently led to the development of generalized helplessness. This, in turn, could account for increases in negative psychological and health outcomes for the entire population: increased levels of depression, alcoholism, suicide, and ill-health.

Crucially, the author stresses: "for the purposes of protest, however, objective reality is less important than perception." The message here is that whoever wins the blame game will also have the power to mobilize supporters. This is a well-known process in politics, where right-wing leaders and populists have built their entire careers on blaming "corrupt elites" for the problems faced by the electorate (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008).

Defining activism

Javeline does not provide an exact definition of what she means by "collective action" but she does mention participation in protests or strike action, hence taking a narrower definition of activism than others. So, what is activism according to our contributors?

In our scoping review, Zogmaister, Vezzoli et al., and I chose to rely on scholars' own evaluation of any behavior taken by citizens on the basis of their community membership, for the benefit of the community. Similarly, Vestergren et al.'s work suggests that collective action is any action (cooperation, mutual aid, protesting, etc…) emerging from a shared (common) identity.

These definitions, therefore, include both forms of participation, one following the rules and avenues offered by the existing political system (e.g., voting, signing petitions, writing to one's MP, volunteering) and those not relying on the existing political system (protests, non/violent direct action, boycotts). Lantos et al. operationalize collective action with two items: on the one hand, the authors asked whether participants felt it appropriate to put pressure on politicians to achieve a goal (hence, one could argue, deferring to the system to bring change), the other asserting the duty of citizens to speak up against authorities when these are falling short (hence, reclaiming the power to bring change in the hands of the people). Similarly, Vezzoli et al. propose a distinction between "formal participations" (such as running for office) and "activism," such as participating in protests, strikes or demonstrations.

A particular case here is outlined in the paper by Adunimay and Ojo, which adds another important layer in the power relations and understanding of collective action. While COVID-19 was a global challenge, the world looked West for the solution: vaccines were developed, rolled out, and acquired by WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) Countries, while non-WEIRD Countries found themselves often under-resourced and having to rely on local, traditional medical solutions. Adunimay and Ojo ask whether there are lessons to be learned in terms of the international (over?) reliance on Western medicine and whether alternative medical solutions could be offered by the rich practice of traditional, natural medicine. This poses also another interesting question concerning the role of culture and cultural dominance in predicting and explaining collective action. Can we conceive reliance on traditional medicine in Africa as a form of political activism against the dominant Western-centric way of living?

Conclusion

The idea of empowerment vs. learned helplessness can offer a potential framework to understand whether and how citizens will participate actively in the political life of their Country. On the one hand, the development and strengthening of a common identity resulting from the common experience of a crisis can encourage citizens to spring into action. Depending on whether citizens perceive the existing system as capable of accommodating and supporting their needs, this action will take the form of increased participation in the established avenues of political life, of actions aimed at criticizing and/or destabilizing the system. On the other hand, past experience of failure in bringing change can result in increased depression, anxiety, and helplessness in the citizenry, especially in a context in which existing inequalities and forms of oppression are laid bare and enhanced.

Overall, an Empowerment-Helplessness lens seems to well account for the contributions in this issue.

Future research could explore the predictors of the appraisal of helplessness and empowerment in relation to the different types of action, the role played by media in informing the conversation, and the extent to which the model can account for human experience in non-emergency situations.

Author contributions

SC: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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