

Special Thematic Section on "Societal Change"

Regarding Societal Change

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Abstract

In this paper we introduce our special thematic section on societal change. We begin by providing an overview of the aims of the section, and how these aims grew out of a need to address conceptual and empirical challenges in the study of societal change. In response to these challenges, the section was intended to provide a forum for theoretical and empirical work from a range of disciplinary perspectives on how societies change, and how such change can be understood. Together, the contributions argue for (1) the need to contextualize the study of societal change, (2) the value of considering factors and processes other than collective action in transforming societies, (3) the importance of ideology and its operation through social institutions such as news media, and (4) an imperative to ensure that our research is fully engaged with society in terms of its grounding in social issues, its sensitivity to our own social context as researchers, and in its practices and outcomes.

Keywords: societal change, protest, collective action, social change, social movements, inequality, resistance

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Change is a central concern for social and political psychology, and for many of the behavioural sciences. Indeed, some go so far as to argue that change is the *foundational* concern of social psychology and that the ability to explain both change and stability in social phenomena is the yardstick by which the adequacy of social psychological theories should be judged (Reicher & Haslam, 2013, this section). The ‘dream’ (to borrow from Sweetman, Leach, Spears, Pratto, & Saab, 2013, this section) of this special thematic section is to provide a forum where we might stand back and reflect on the adequacy of our theories and methodologies; observe where we have become somewhat complacent; and perhaps give ourselves a little shake. We, the editors of this section, think (or at least hope) that in this collection of papers we have gone some way to achieving this. You will find in these pages challenges to the questions we ask, the fundamental assumptions enshrined in our theories, and our methodological limitations. Hopefully you will also find the promise of new horizons: of new questions we haven’t yet thought to ask and new methods to master. To this end, we are most grateful to our contributors for providing such thought-provoking responses to our call. We are also very grateful to the Journal of Social and Political Psychology – and

particularly to its editors Christopher Cohrs and Johanna Ray Vollhardt – for facilitating the section, and more generally for providing a forum in which such work can be brought together.

The theme of this special section is ‘societal change’. Our choice of this term seeks to signal our concern with processes of change in human relations within and between societies. It is also a term that evokes related terms such as social change, social movements, protest, and collective action, which have been the focus of a vibrant and growing literature within social and political psychology, as well as in sociology, politics, anthropology, history, and other behavioural sciences. The contributions of this literature to understanding change are many, and efforts at integration and extension continue with vigour (see, e.g., [Van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009](#)). Nevertheless, as is probably the case with the rapid development of research on any topic, this surge in research has been accompanied by the emergence of popular trends in what is studied, how it is studied, and how it is conceptualised. This can serve to funnel subsequent research into particular directions, and thus away from other directions. A popular trend can also lead to the infusion of taken-for-granted meaning in terms central to the trend, such as ‘social change’ and ‘collective action’. Thus, as the trend grows, scholars become increasingly free to refer to terms such as ‘social change’ and ‘collective action’ without ever offering an explicit definition. The assumption is that we all know what ‘social change’ is. As a result, conceptual terms—meant to describe a particular kind of societal process in which human beings are active—become abstract labels that refer to phenomena in the most general and vague ways. [Billig \(2013\)](#) has recently discussed the danger that this process of ‘nominalization’ poses to behavioural science. Regarding ‘social change’ specifically, [Stewart, Leach, and Pratto \(2013\)](#) have argued that the term has become taken for granted to such a degree that there is a great deal of slippage and fuzziness in its usage. More troublingly, they argue that casual reference to ‘social change’ has come to take the place of precise definition and analysis of the processes of change in human relations within and between societies.

When terms such as ‘social change’ come to be taken-for-granted labels for phenomena described in only the most general ways, it can obscure the value of explicitly and reflectively defining what we mean with our terms. Indeed, it is difficult to discern and thus to discuss the underlying assumptions, meta-theory, and (theoretical, societal, political, psychological) perspectives in work on ‘social change’ if scholars do not commit to an explicit definition of the phenomenon described by the term. In this way, taken-for-granted terms become calcified—hardened against internal reflection and external critique. In contrast, explicit definition, and reflective use, of terms can highlight where our definitions systematically underplay important aspects of the phenomena we seek to explain, and in doing so open up new agendas for research and societal engagement ([Livingstone, 2013](#)). For example, recognising that societal change can involve sharp, discontinuous change as well as smooth, continuous variation (see also [Zeeman, 1976](#)) highlights potential limitations to linear models of relations between predictors and (for example) collective action outcome measures, and suggests the value of studying in situ moments of change within and between individuals and between interacting groups (e.g., [Drury & Reicher, 1999](#)).

More practically, we were conscious that the deployment of now popular terms such as ‘social change’ and ‘collective action’ risked becoming a subtle marker for what was likely to be welcome (or unwelcome) in this special section, when what we really wanted was to take the opportunity to challenge such orthodoxies and provide a forum for critical, broad-minded, diverse, and (hopefully) mutually-enriching perspectives. Thus, part of the aim of inviting contributions on ‘societal’ change was to encourage the presentation of different disciplinary, theoretical, and empirical perspectives that typically do not find themselves occupying adjacent journal space. We were fortunate enough to receive a diversity of excellent contributions from different fields of psychology as well as sociology, political science, and media studies. These contributions are also refreshingly diverse in terms of their aims, with

some focusing on theory and meta-theory, some on definitional, conceptual, and methodological issues, some on innovative programmes of research, and some on critically examining the relationship between our research and the world with which it seeks to engage.

Perspectives on Societal Change

There are a number of themes that thread through many of the contributions in this section. One concerns the ahistorical and decontextualized study of change and how this may blind us to both the ubiquity of change, and to the operation of ever-present countervailing forces. Another, reflecting the discussion above, is the narrow conceptualisation of change as that which arises from particular forms of collective action and the corresponding neglect of causes and consequences of unintended change and dramatic transformations in societies and nations. Finally, the role of power and of ideology, both in the phenomena we study and in our own institutions, theories, and practices, emerges as an area that requires further attention.

We turn first to contributions that engage with current theoretical debates that have played out in our journals in recent years. One is between theoretical perspectives developed to explain challenges to intergroup inequalities (e.g., relative deprivation theory: [Runciman, 1966](#); [Walker & Smith, 2002](#); and social identity theory: [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)) and theoretical perspectives that aim to explain the maintenance of inequality (e.g., social dominance theory: [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#); and system justification theory: [Jost & Banaji, 1994](#)). Perhaps reflecting the maturation of this debate, both [Reicher and Haslam \(2013, this section\)](#), and [Pratto, Stewart, and Bou Zeineddine \(2013, this section\)](#) argue that an adequate perspective needs to explain both stability and change in inequality. In doing so, each article draws on historical examples to challenge assumptions that appear to have (mis)directed the theoretical gaze of prevailing theories of societal change. So, for [Reicher and Haslam \(2013, this section\)](#), the lesson of Milošević in the former Yugoslavia is that mobilizations around collective interests are always multiple and contested. In their view, mobilization in defence of existing societal arrangements is no less effortful and centred on processes of identification, authority, and influence than are mobilizations for the change of societal arrangements. Accordingly, Reicher and Haslam argue for greater mutual attention to processes of stability and change, both in our (re)examination of prior research and in the conduct of future research. To do otherwise is to accept the status quo of existing societal arrangements as the default. For [Pratto and colleagues \(2013, this section\)](#), the lesson of historical examples from the Black Death to the desertification of Iraq is that when the conditions for societal stability (such as access to resources, social cohesion, functioning institutions, and internal security) are compromised, so too is the form that group-based hierarchies can take. Pratto et al. argue for an extension of social dominance theory that pays attention to the shifting and blurring of boundaries in the modern world of international and transnational organisations and movements. As such, they emphasize the ways in which dynamic interactions between micro (person), meso (institution), macro (societal), and meta (transnational) levels may lead to societal change in ideologies, institutions, and indeed in what constitutes a society.

The importance of attending to processes of both resistance to and reproduction of power, and of attending to the real-world conditions that support or undermine 'progressive' social change, is a central concern in four further papers. Such real-world conditions are the focus of the paper by [Van Stekelenburg, Anikina, Pouw, Petrovic, and Nederlof \(2013, this section\)](#), which presents both an overview of historical trends in research on collective action and protest from social psychological and sociological perspectives, and a novel empirical investigation into the social conditions that facilitate collective action. As these authors suggest, the novelty of this research is in high-

lighting both the specific importance of social embeddedness in shaping protest, and the more general importance of studying 'real', unfolding social relations in situ in addition to the highly-controlled, but potentially rarefied, study of social relations in the lab or in the university. [Zubriggen \(2013, this section\)](#) then examines the links between processes of objectification that members of dominant groups perform on members of target groups, and self-objectification that members of target groups perform on themselves, to suggest that these processes work hand-in-hand to maintain oppression. They do so by increasing the likelihood of dominant groups legitimating violence and by undermining target group perceptions of injustice, social identity, and collective efficacy that are critical to collective action.

From a quite different perspective, the central premise of [Shnabel and Ullrich's \(2013, this section\)](#) paper is that social change involving the redistribution of power and wealth towards greater equality is facilitated through cooperation between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Drawing on the needs-based model ([Shnabel & Nadler, 2008](#)), they argue that in order to unlock the potential for cooperation, symbolic threats to both advantaged group morality and disadvantaged group agency must first be addressed. The critical question this paper raises is whether drawing attention to advantaged group morality helps or hinders efforts to address inequalities. Finally, [Dixon, Durrheim, Kerr, and Thomae \(2013, this section\)](#) point to the growing body of research showing that intergroup contact may bolster the status quo, and question whether we should continue to prioritise prejudice reduction interventions. In outlining possible future directions, the authors define three approaches currently pursued in the research. First, the incommensurabilist approach examines the evidence for prejudice reduction interventions undermining support for social change. Second, the compatibilist approach examines the conditions under which this may not be the case—for instance where intergroup contact explicitly addresses inequality. Third, the contextualist approach examines the concrete particulars of intergroup relations. Rather than concluding that the prejudice reduction approach is inherently flawed, they conclude instead that the problem is the way in which a narrow focus on prejudice reduction blinds us to the limitations of such efforts in societies with deep inequalities.

While the above authors are concerned with current theoretical debates and fundamental assumptions in popular perspectives, other authors raise the possibility that the popularity of these perspectives has narrowed our focus to instances of societal change that result from direct and intentional efforts by group members to challenge existing societal arrangements. Without denying its importance, such a heavy focus on collective action potentially obscures the range of other factors implicated in societal change. [De la Sablonniere, French Bourgeois, and Najih \(2013, this section\)](#) argue for a holistic psychology of social change that can address the question of how dramatic social change affects the individual and the ways in which people cope and adapt. In developing their argument they identify a number of limitations of current psychologically-informed research. Most critically, they argue that the focus on change as an outcome of a group's collective action has limited the field to examining social change as an *outcome* of intergroup conflict and has excluded the *effects* of events such as migration movements, natural disasters, and technological advancements. They propose a temporal relative deprivation approach to examine the direct experiences of those who live through dramatic transformations; how they cope and how they adapt and make meaning out of these events. [Hansen and Postmes \(2013, this section\)](#) echo many of these concerns. In their presentation of research on the goals and outcomes of development aid projects to introduce laptops in Ethiopia and micro-finance in Sri Lanka, they also make a case for increased scholarly attention to societal change that is driven by processes other than intergroup conflict. Importantly, their research draws attention to the profound and often unintended consequences of development efforts (e.g., the development of an agentic self and new ways of interacting), and how these may change the structure of social relations. [Sweetman, Leach, Spears, Pratto, and Saab \(2013, this section\)](#) in turn argue that even for societal change that is driven by collective action,

scant attention has been paid to the full range of goals that inspire groups to strive for change. They present a typology of seven social change goals ranging from *collective* mobility to progressive revolution underpinned by three dimensions: perceived system legitimacy (what requires change), ability to achieve social value within the system (how change may be achieved), and inclusiveness of the intended beneficiaries (who change is for).

Two further papers, while employing quite different empirical approaches, share a concern for factors in societal change that have all-too-rarely been the focus of psychological work. The importance of the role of institutions is alluded to in a number of papers in this special section. But [Happer and Philo's \(2013, this section\)](#) review of their research on how media shapes public debate underlines how little psychological research actually engages with this question. Happer and Philo draw our attention to under-examined social and economic relationships (e.g., media ownership and organisation; and the influence of political and commercial interests) and to the dynamic relationship between public opinion, media, and government policy. Likewise, whilst ideology appears in many of the papers, [Homer-Dixon and colleagues' \(2013, this section\)](#) paper draws our attention to how the meaning and usage of the term ideology remains opaque, despite its centrality as a construct within the social sciences. These authors argue that research on ideology has been stymied by theoretical and methodological fragmentation. What they propose is a cognitive-affective mapping approach informed by complex systems theory, which they argue can bridge spatial (dimensional) and non-spatial (descriptive) approaches and address individual and societal level explanations.

The final two contributions echo the concerns of earlier contributors regarding the limits of our theories in addressing the full range of social change phenomena and attending to both resistance to and the reproduction of power. However, for these authors, the problem lies largely in approaches that have distanced us from the 'real' world of social action. [Howarth and colleagues \(2013, this section\)](#) present the societal psychology approach developed by [Himmelweit and Gaskell \(1990\)](#). The hallmarks of this approach are the identification of research problems and location of research in the real world; and the treatment of societal change as both an object and objective of research. In paying attention to contexts of change in all their complexity, this approach seeks to expose the politics of competing interests, and the reality of on-going and often unpredictable change processes. Importantly, societal psychology draws attention to how our theories and practises are implicated in these processes, and the need therefore for participatory research approaches that entail a critical awareness of the politics of change. [Goff, Mentovich, and Martin's paper \(2013, this section\)](#) makes a compelling case for a return to a time where both laboratory and field research were considered vital to the advancement of social psychological theory and to the translation of our theories into practice. In tracing the shift towards the dominance of laboratory-based research, they seek to expose the political realities that have shaped and constrained our own endeavours. If, as some of our contributors argue, our discipline should be concerned not just with explaining societal change but with being agents of change, an obvious question is: why have we failed to challenge and change the structures and practices of scholarship that support a retreat from society?

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