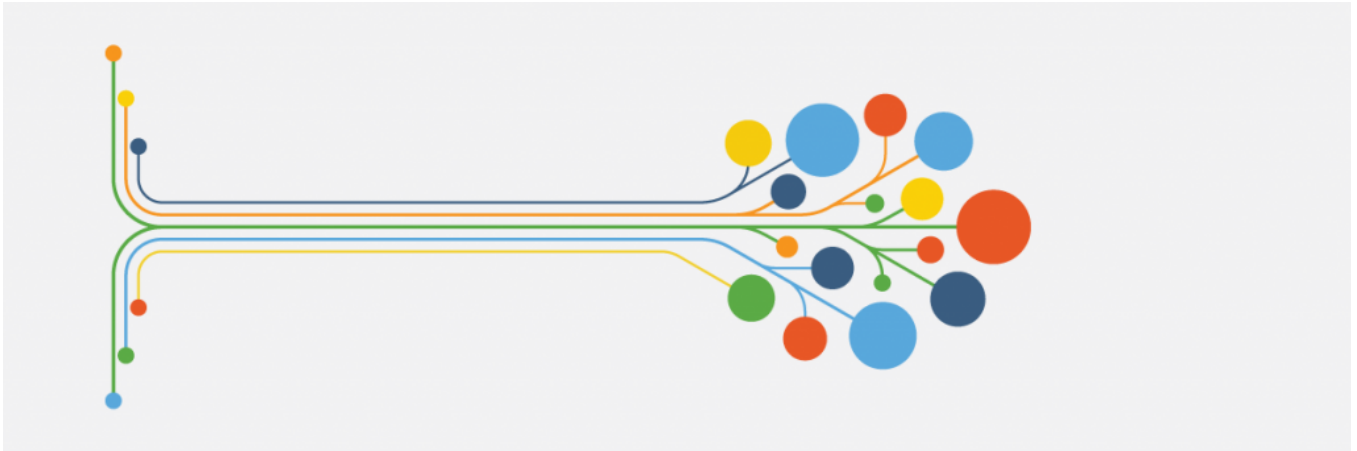


Collective Emotions

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Whether through religious rituals, concerts, or protests, synchrony with others through movement, behavior, and collective emotions often brings us together. Current research suggests strikingly similar psychosocial effects resulting from a variety of interpersonal and collective conditions. APS Fellow Bernard Rimé, an emeritus professor of psychology at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium, has drawn on theories from sociology — as well as psychological science — to investigate the processes that allow us to experience this blurring of individual boundaries across so many contexts.

In 1893, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim published his theory of collective consciousness, describing how within each individual there exist two forms of consciousness: an individual consciousness, which emphasizes our individuality and distinctiveness, and the collective consciousness, which includes the shared values, ideas, and beliefs that are common within our entire group or society.

Drawing on these sociological theories, Rimé proposes that experiences of synchrony and collective emotion induce in individuals a shift between two parallel cognitive “modes.”

The executive “individual” mode, which is well-documented by empirical psychology, underlies purposeful behaviors and engages executive functions such as attention control, goal setting, cognitive flexibility, and information processing. The “communal” mode, which has been largely neglected by psychological science, Rimé argues, involves our long-standing attachment ties to family members, friends, community, and society as well as the socially shared cultural knowledge derived from these relationships.

In everyday life, the executive “individual” mode prevails. When people experience synchrony or collective emotions, however, a condition occurs that Rimé describes as alignment. When this happens, the effortful functions of the executive mode are disengaged, allowing the communal mode to come to the fore. As in attachment contact settings, the self-other distinction then vanishes and the person experiences feelings of openness, inclusion, and prosociality.

Rimé's research has consistently found that individuals react to events by communicating and sharing their emotions with others — generating shared collective knowledge. This social sharing of emotions has been linked to increased social belonging, positive affect, and prosocial attitude. Rimé and colleagues have studied the phenomenon of social sharing across many traumatic events, including the Rwandan genocide and the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid.

In a 2019 paper published in *Psychological Science*, Rimé and coauthor David Garcia (Medical University of Vienna, Austria) analyzed a set of data collected from 62,114 Twitter users after the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015. Garcia and Rimé observed that in the months after the attack, individuals who participated more intensely in social sharing also expressed higher rates of prosocial behavior and positive affect in their social-media activity on Twitter.

By engaging in collective emotions through social media, individuals were able to synchronize their thoughts and emotions, stimulating a sense of social belonging and shared beliefs.

“In line with a central tenet of Durkheim's model, these effects were mediated by participants' perceived emotional synchrony with other people,” Garcia and Rimé write. “Our findings support the conclusion that collective emotions after a disaster are associated with higher solidarity, revealing the social resilience of a community.”

Fitter with Friends

Team sports and group physical activity is proving to be a rich area for studying the impact of shared emotion and social support on the body.

“In team sports, and group physical activity more generally, the social and the physiological are functionally and inextricably interlinked,” explains Emma Cohen, a professor of cognitive anthropology. “Movement, emotion, and performance bind together at the individual level, but also at the collective level.”

At the Social Body Lab at the University of Oxford's Institute of Cognitive & Evolutionary Anthropology, Cohen and colleagues investigate the interactions between social, physiological, and psychological phenomena with a focus on how group exercise and movement strengthen social bonding and even physical performance.

“It appears that social support not only influences emotions — both positively and negatively — but also physiological functioning,” she explains. Across several studies, Cohen and her colleagues have found evidence that exercising as a group increases perceptions of social bonding and support, ultimately buffering stress responses during physical activity.

In a 2009 study published in *Biology Letters*, Cohen and colleagues tested the pain thresholds of the University of Oxford's world-class rowing team as they exercised on rowing machines either solo or as a group. The study found that in the group condition, the pain threshold increased to double what it was in the solo condition.

Cohen and colleagues are currently interested in pursuing the idea that perceived social support acts as a

buffer toward the stress response in exercise, potentially leading to improvements in performance. This suggests that the social support sparked by collective movement or offered by family, friends, and fans may act as a powerful top-down mechanism for modulating muscle performance and fatigue.

“Performance in exercise is not regulated wholly in response to things like muscle fatigue or cardiovascular activity in delivering blood to the muscles,” Cohen explains, “Pain and fatigue are part of a whole feedback system that includes information from outside the person as well as inside the body.”

In another study looking at players from the University of Oxford rugby club, Cohen and colleagues again found that synchronous movements can have a positive impact on exercise performance. In this study, rugby players completed warm-ups together either synchronously, using beats on headphones, or nonsynchronously before embarking on a challenging sprint. The group that warmed up synchronously shaved a significant amount of time off their sprints compared with those who warmed up nonsynchronously.

Although Cohen’s lab primarily explores the evolutionary, social, and psychological aspects of group movement and exercise, she is also interested in investigating the potential for symbolic culture to cue social support, and the consequences of this for psychophysiological functioning. People’s ability to draw social support from cultural objects or symbols such as mementos, flags, anthems, architecture, and even local accents likely constitutes an evolutionarily novel and unique form of social buffering, potentially guiding patterns of cultural evolution.

More Than Emotional Contagion

French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon carried out some of the earliest work focusing on collective emotion. In his 1895 book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Le Bon describes how behavior can shift as individuals amass together into groups.

Le Bon and other early-20th-century social theorists generally viewed the phenomena of collective emotion in an unfavorable light, explains Dan Zahavi, a professor of philosophy with joint appointments at the University of Copenhagen and University of Oxford. They largely viewed the psychology of crowds as driven by violent and extreme sentiments, impulsiveness, and the absence of critical judgment. Collective emotions arose out of processes like emotional contagion and involuntary imitation — never by reasoning, Zahavi said during an Integrative Science Symposium at the 2019 International Convention of Psychological Science (ICPS) in Paris.

Whereas Le Bon thought that the group behavior demonstrated by crowds reduced men to animals, research and theory from contemporary social neuroscience and psychology have found that the ability to engage in complex group behaviors is unique to humans and is fundamental to many of our higher order cognitive abilities. When comparing the behavior of human toddlers with that of chimpanzees, APS Fellow Michael Tomasello (Duke University) found that great apes share many intentional skills with human toddlers but do not experience the kind of collective intentionality that allows humans to cooperate and share psychological states with each other.

Humans share minds and emotions in a number of different ways, Zahavi continued, far beyond the such low-level processes as imitation and contagion fueled by the “mob” or an anonymous crowd. Shared

emotions are fundamental to many different group experiences. For example, when watching a soccer game on TV, you might share the elation of a victory along with the winning players even though you have never met them, simply because you identify with the team or country they are playing for. And if you are one of the players, the shared joy you feel with the other players as a result of winning after months of preparation is again quite different.

“If we want to assess and understand the role of collective emotions in cooperation and conflict, it’s not sufficient simply to focus on the low-level process of contagion,” Zahavi explained. “We need to appeal to other more complicated processes related to group identification and socially mediated forms of self-consciousness.”

Conflicting Emotion

Shared emotions don’t always bring out the best in groups: They are part of the fuel for hatred and large-scale violence in war and intergroup conflict as well. Emerging research has demonstrated the importance of collective emotional processes in the dynamics of intractable conflict and intergroup violence.

Over the past several years, Eran Halperin’s research has focused on emotion regulation and collective emotion in the context of intractable conflict in Israel and Palestine. He has explored the potential of emotion regulation as a tool for conflict resolution.

“Group-level emotions are very, very powerful predictors of policy support,” said Halperin, a professor of psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel. “By helping people to regulate their negative collective or group-level emotions, we can actually promote change.”

In a 2013 study published in *Psychological Science*, Halperin and colleagues found that emotion regulation strategies “can influence intergroup emotions, not just intrapersonal ones, and that emotion regulation can shape political as well as affective reactions.”

In a lab study, Halperin and colleagues found that Jewish Israeli participants assigned to a cognitive reappraisal condition were less supportive of aggressive policies and more supportive of conciliatory policies compared with participants in the control condition. These findings were then replicated outside the lab in response to a real event, the Palestinian bid for United Nations recognition in 2011. Emotion regulation training continued to influence participants’ approach to the conflict as long as 5 months later.

“If you want to predict Israelis’ or Palestinians’ support for very tough political compromises in the context of their conflict, then you should go beyond studying ideologies and interests and values to understand their emotions toward their own group and other groups,” said Halperin.

Changing people’s core appraisals of other groups (e.g., the other group is evil by nature and incapable of change) can reduce collective hatred towards out-groups, leading to increased support for meaningful political compromises. In a longitudinal field experiment, Halperin and colleagues found that even 6 months after 508 Jewish Israelis took part in reappraisal workshops focusing on groups’ ability to change, participants adopted more hopeful and conciliatory attitudes. Importantly, participants

maintained these changes over a 6-month period of increasing intergroup tension and conflict in the region.

“It’s not just that we can downregulate people’s anger or hatred in the context of intractable conflict,” Halperin concluded. “We also show that by regulating people or downregulating people’s anger or hatred we can increase their support for compromises.”

Social Contagion, Social Media

Social media has provided researchers with new opportunities and new methods to study collective emotions across large groups of people in real time.

Political sociologist and journalist Paolo Gerbaudo, a senior lecturer in digital culture and society at King’s College London, has been researching how social and political psychology can explain the power of collective emotions in mobilizing political movements, particularly in relation to the recent rise in far-right populist movements.

Gerbaudo used Matteo Salvini, former Minister of the Interior of Italy, as an example of far-right political leaders’ success in catalyzing collective emotions through social media. Salvini’s highly effective social-media presence, largely organized on Facebook, has been described as typifying the new hateful politics of the far right by targeting often marginalized groups such as migrants and refugees, women, and the LGBTQ community.

“Although his posts are often decried for rousing the worst instincts of social-media followers on Facebook, if you look closely you will see that the emotional content of the far right is far more emotionally complex than just negative emotions and hate,” Gerbaudo said.

Facebook holds huge methodological potential for the study of emotion because “reactions” (which allow posters to tag content with the emotional reactions Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, and Angry) are built into the platform itself, Gerbaudo continues. For example, a simple analysis of Salvini’s Facebook page shows that two emotional reactions dominate among social-media followers: Angry and Haha.

“Hate often goes hand in hand with more positive emotions that are there to drive the kind of sense of belonging to the community,” Gerbaudo explained.

Although there is often a very strong focus on negative emotions and attacking perceived adversaries, this identification of the “other” also creates a self-affirming community social bond among Salvini’s followers. Right-wing leaders have been very effective at using social media to create social bonds within their online groups; content often evokes positive emotional responses by celebrating the success of perceived in-group members.

“It is not simply that Facebook posts by Salvini and the likes are inciting or communicating hate — it’s that they are also triggering hate,” Gerbaudo said.

Social-media-savvy leaders like Salvini often use formulaic elements to design their content in a manner that invites followers to engage in derision and jeering against opponents. This interactive emotional

mobilization is designed to elicit emotional responses that intensify users' emotions. For example, making Facebook posts with questions at the end to solicit comments. Gerbaudo often finds that the comments are far more radical than the initial post, and the deeper one dives into the comments, the more radical they become.

“A lot of what we see on social media has to do with the catalyzing and triggering of individual emotions and their transformation into collective emotions,” Gerbaudo notes. In this context, social media has a role of funneling emotions — bringing together individuals and intensifying these emotions so that a critical mass is reached that can then have electoral consequences. œ

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