Beyond peaceful protest: When non-participants support violence against the police

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Abstract

One of the most controversial issues related to protests is the use of violence by protesters. Although there is a strong social norm against protest violence, research has suggested that protesters' endorsement of non-violent actions can change according to the legitimacy of police actions during protests. However, both non-participants' support for protest violence and its relationship with authorities' measures regarding protests have barely been studied. To address this, we interviewed 17 British undergraduate students with diverse previous experiences as protesters about their views on protest violence. For the interviews, we used vignettes to describe two fictional scenarios, one where the government and the police actively restrict the right to protest and another where authorities facilitate protesters' actions. A thematic analysis incorporating elements from the ideological dilemmas approach was carried out to explore the range of arguments related to protest violence. We found that most participants articulated a variety of expressions that made up a recognisable cultural pattern: protest should be peaceful. However, when participants perceived that 'the right to protest' was threatened by state repression, those who earlier rejected protest violence argued that they would support the use of violence against the police as 'self-defence'. Our findings suggest there are pervasive frameworks for interpreting and responding to real contexts of political openness and repression, and reflective of people's ability to simultaneously hold contradictory views about the legitimacy of protest violence.

Keywords: self-defence, right to protest, political openness, non-participants, repression.

Even though there is a recent global trend towards restricting the right to protest by some governments, one of the most recognisable characteristics of Western democracies (as well as an indicator of their strength) is to allow people to organise and take part in protests (Howie, 2018). Indeed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948) supports the right to protest under the umbrella of the rights of freedom of speech, peaceful protests, and assembly. However, Jarman and Hamilton (2009) have pointed that restricting the right to protest to peaceful actions is problematic because it ignores both the existence of tensions during protests and people's reasons to join in violent confrontations. Indeed, although there is a pervasive and supposedly 'universal' norm to promote peaceful protests to reach social change (see Murdie & Purser, 2017, for a discussion), people have continued carrying out protest violence worldwide to challenge the status quo – for example, the summer 2019 protests in Hong Kong (e.g., Yeung, Sidhu, & Wright, 2019).

Considering that protest violence has occurred in various places, scholars of social movements and collective action have tried to describe the political conditions (e.g., Della Porta, 1995; Tarrow, 1994) and the social-psychological factors (see Drury & Reicher, 2018; Jiménez-Moya, Spears, Rodríguez-Bailón, & de Lemus, 2015; Tausch et al., 2011) that might explain people's willingness to carry out violent actions during social mobilization processes. However, non-participants' reasons to support protest violence by challengers of the status quo have received less attention (cf. Saab, Spears, Tausch, & Sasse, 2016; Saavedra, Drury, & Easterbrook, 2019). The present study is an attempt to identify these reasons focused on protest violence against the police and the political conditions under which protests take place. Following Neville and Reicher's (2018) idea of studying the impact of crowds (e.g., protests) on people outside the crowd, we interviewed a group of British university students to explore their support for protest violence in a political scenario where the right to protest is either

harshly restricted or facilitated by authorities. To put it differently, our main aim is to explore if people's adherence to the societal norm that protests should be peaceful is conditional on the political context protesters have to face.

Violence during social mobilisation processes

One of the most well-known accounts of violence during social mobilisation processes can be found in the work of Gustave Le Bon. From Le Bon's (1895/2002) point of view, people in crowds are capable of carrying out violent and 'atrocious' acts due to the crowd's intrinsic irrationality. In particular, he argues that in crowds, individuals resort to violence due to their lack of both self-control and critical thinking. Indeed, in subsequent work, Le Bon (1898/1980) claimed that because of their inherent danger, authorities should prevent the occurrence of crowds and fight them to keep public order. Since then, scholars have tried to explain the occurrence of violence within crowds using diverse approaches (see Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2012, for a review) like stressing its normativity (e.g., emergent norm theory; Turner & Killian, 1972), rationality (e.g., game theory; Berk, 1974), as well as the role of social identity (i.e., the social identity model of crowd behaviour, SIM; Reicher, 1984).

Based on the SIM, the elaborated social identity model of collective conflict (ESIM; Drury & Reicher, 2000) proposes that violence in diverse events involving crowds is a function of the dynamic relationship among different groups of participants (e.g., police and protesters) rather than a consequence of the supposed inherent irrationality of crowds (Reicher et al., 2007). In line with this, researchers have demonstrated that participants in demonstrations who initially rejected violence may agree with the use of violence once the actions carried by police officers are considered illegitimate (e.g., try to hinder protests through coercion) and indiscriminate

(i.e., police act against everyone in the crowd) (see Reicher, Stott, Cronin, & Adang, 2004, for a review; Stott & Drury, 2000). In this case, the collective legitimisation of protest violence within crowds can be explained through the emergence of new norms of conflict as a result of the interaction with police officers. Thus, what was previously unacceptable for most people (i.e., protest violence) may become acceptable as acts of self-defence against, or retaliation for, illegitimate aggression carried out against peaceful protesters (Drury & Reicher, 2018).

It worth noting that in parallel to ESIM, a large amount of social-psychological research mainly draws upon the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) and has explored diverse antecedents that may predict people's participation in different forms of collective action including protest violence. In particular, some of those studies have suggested that social beliefs about how fair or dangerous the world is (Gulevich, Sarieva, Nevrujev, & Yagiyayev, 2017), and certain implicit theories about social change (Shuman, Cohen-Chen, Hirsch-Hoefler, & Halperin, 2016) may increase people's readiness and willingness to carry out violent actions during protests (e.g., throw stones or bottles, clashing with the police). In addition, researchers have also suggested that certain emotions (i.e., anger and contempt) are critical to predict people's intentions to carry out non-violent or violent actions respectively (see Becker, Tausch, & Wagner, 2011; Tausch et al., 2011).

Apart from their focus on the dynamic of protests rather than on predicting people future participation in these activities, a crucial discrepancy among those works drawing upon ESIM and those based on SIMCA is the conceptualisation of norms regarding protest violence. While Reicher and collaborators have suggested that protest violence may dynamically emerge as a new norm of conflict according to protesters' interaction with the police, most of the

subsequent research based on SIMCA has employed the ‘static’ binary categorisation normative and non-normative actions as a point of reference to judge people’s action tendencies (see Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Thus, under the latter categorisation, protest violence has consistently been labelled as non-normative, or even as a radical action, due to its apparent incompatibility with societal norms regarding the use of violence (see Becker & Tausch, 2015, for a discussion).

The perceived political context

With respect to the political context, a large body of sociological literature has addressed the influence of political conditions on the actions that protesters might undertake. From different approaches based on *political opportunities*, sociologists have explored the potential effects of the political authorities’ openness (Eisinger, 1973; Meyer, 2004, for a review; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Tarrow, 1994), the presence of repression (see Davenport, 1995, 2004; Della Porta, 1995), and the regime type activists need to confront (see Hipsher, 1998; Regan & Henderson, 2002) on social movement dynamics. Although several sociologists have held that the impact of political opportunities on social movements is necessarily mediated by the perceptions that participants share about these opportunities (see Gamson & Meyer, 1996, for a discussion; Suh, 2001), while others have argued for the need to explore individual perceptions about the political conditions people have to face (see Earl, 2011; Honari 2017, 2018), psychological research has not delved on how people perceive the political context in relation to protests.

To our knowledge, there are two main approaches aimed at exploring people’s perceptions of their political context regarding protests from a psychological perspective. The first of them

has used measures associated with people's trust in political institutions, politicians, and their representativeness (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2018; Li, Lee, & Li, 2016; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2018), whereas the second has used a validated scale of measurement, subjective political openness repression (SPO-R), to evaluate non-participants' perceptions of the restrictions that both the government and the police impose on protests (see Saavedra & Drury, 2019). Thus, employing SPO-R, Saavedra and collaborators (2019) have demonstrated that non-participants may support protesters' violence against the police according to the extent people perceive authorities impose harsh restrictions on protests.

Public opinion and non-participants' support for protest violence

Apart from incorporating the perceived political context into the analysis of protest, we suggest the work of Saavedra and collaborators is useful to understand non-participants' support for protesters' violence for two other reasons. First, it has included public opinion as a factor that people may consider when supporting protesters' violence. This suggests that to understand protest violence, what other people think about protests should be considered alongside other aspects described in psychological research on collective action such as the efficacy of alternative actions (e.g., Saab et al., 2016), perceived police legitimacy (e.g., Gerber et al., 2018), corruption perceptions (e.g., Thomas & Louis, 2014), and the potential damage to the public image of high status groups (e.g., Teixeira, Spears, & Yzerbyt, 2019).

A second reason to take into account Saavedra and collaborators' work is its conceptualization of protest violence as a variable and context-sensitive phenomenon. Thus, non-participants' support for protest violence follows a rationale centred in the specific perceived contextual conditions (i.e., government restrictions and police actions) where the protests take place, and

does not necessarily imply a dis-identification with protesters (see Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2017) or attributing irrationality to those who use violence (see Orazani & Leidner, 2019a, 2019b; Simpson, Willer, & Feinberg, 2018).

Given that support for violence against the police may vary according to the restrictions authorities impose on protests, we suggest that the use of specific tools associated with the concept of *ideological dilemmas* (Billig et al., 1988) could help us to get a deeper understanding of non-participants' accounts of protest violence. The main reason for this is that the ideological dilemmas concept seeks to challenge the notion that public opinion is necessarily coherent and unchangeable in relation to different aspect of the social world (e.g., 'protests need to be peaceful'), as has been traditionally proposed in social sciences (see Condor & Gibson, 2007). Thus, what Billig and collaborators (1988) have suggested is that social scientists need to analyse different features of people's discourse to explore the presence of contradictory ideas once people could face (or at least imagine) the same phenomenon in different scenarios. The latter is because both formal ideologies and everyday common sense embody incoherencies and dilemmas people need to solve in their daily lives (e.g., Condor, 2011; Towns & Adams, 2009). In other words, the ideological dilemmas concept considers both the particular context where the individuals are situated and people as active agents able to interpret the inherent contradictions of their social world (e.g., using violence to defend the right to protest) instead of just following an explicit belief system (see Gibson, 2011).

The present research

This study seeks to explore non-participants' support for (and then legitimisation of) protesters' violence against the police, taking into account the political conditions under which protests take place. Thus, similar to what ESIM has described for protesters, our aim is to inquire whether *non-participants* might support protest violence against the police in response to a changing social context. In particular, we want to know whether non-participants might hold contradictory ideas (i.e., protests should be peaceful vs defend the right to protest) when authorities impose harsh restrictions on protests. Even though protest violence in the United Kingdom has been rather scarce (see Reiner, 1998), we think this dynamic process may be possible because non-participants are active interpreters rather than passive recipients of formal ideologies and societal norms concerning protests.

Method

Participants

British undergraduate students received course credits as a reward for taking part in the study. The recruitment was carried out using an online platform where the researchers published two separate calls for participants regarding a study about protests in the UK. While the first call was looking for students who had participated at least once in protests, the second was aimed at people without any experience. Initially, we considered a minimum of twenty participants (ten people with and ten people without experience in protests). However, after conducting seventeen interviews (nine women and eight men), we decided to stop the recruitment

considering that regardless of participants' previous experience in protests, more or less the same themes and patterns of response appeared during the interviews without adding new elements that may have enriched our analysis.

Concerning the range of experience of those who had attended protests in the past, participants declared having participated at a minimum of one and a maximum of ten protests on different topics. However, none of them claimed to be an activist, part of a social movement, nor a member of a political party.

Procedure

We designed an interview schedule as well as two vignettes of a fictional student protest in the UK. The first of these vignettes described a scenario where the government and the police try to restrict the protest announcing measures such as deploying riot police and police horses; authorising the use of batons; and conducting random stop and search. By contrast, in the second vignette, the government and police officers acted as facilitators of the same student protest. Thus, in this vignette, the Prime Minister publicly reinforces people's right to protest, while the police are engaged in helping protesters and kept the protest safe. To minimise the effect of the order in which vignettes were presented playing a role in participants' answers, we randomised vignettes' presentation order in each interview.

The materials for this study were designed to get interviews that lasted between 25 and 45 minutes (see the complete interview schedule in the Appendix). In the first part of the interview, we asked participants about their own experience in protests (e.g., 'have you participated in

some protest before? About what?’), and their thoughts about protests carried out in the UK (e.g., ‘what is your opinion about protests in general?’). In the second part, the participants read the first vignette, and then answered some questions regarding hypothetical situations might happen under the described circumstances (e.g., ‘would you participate in this protest?’ or ‘what would you think if some people threw objects at the police?’). In the third part of the interview, participants answered the same type of questions described above but concerning the scenario described in the second vignette (see all the vignettes in the Appendix).

Analytic approach

We used the guidelines described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a reference to conduct our thematic analysis. Thus, the first author listened and re-listened to the interviews during the data collection process to get a general idea of the information provided by the interviewees. In a subsequent step, the audio interviews were transcribed changing the names of the interviewees to preserve anonymity, and the scripts re-read several times seeking to identify relevant topics about the use of violence in protests. Then, we compared these topics across interviews and created broader categories of themes. Once we identified the most salient themes, we analysed different sections of each interview delimited by the question, ‘what would you think if people hit or threw objects to the police during this protest?’ Then, following the analytic strategy proposed in the ideological dilemmas approach, we focused our efforts in exploring the possible existence of contradictory ideas participants might hold regarding protest violence and how they talked about these.

Results

In the analysis of our interviews, we identified five main themes: protests should be peaceful; authorities should ensure the right to protest; protest violence is illegitimate when the right to protest is guaranteed; harsh restrictions to the right to protest make violence more likely; self-defence actions against the police.

Protests should be peaceful

Regardless of their experience in protests, interviewees assumed and explicitly recognised that taking part in protests is a right that people have to voice their opinions on diverse societal issues. In line with this, in Extract 1, Emily (who has not participated in protests) argues that this right should not be restricted, while protests need to be conducted in a peaceful way:

1. Emily: [...] I think it is kind of universal opinion that government should not stop people from saying what they want to say, and if it is a peaceful protest that is fair.

Indeed, for some participants, as Laura (who has participated in protests) in Extract 2, the absence of violence is an essential requirement that protests have to meet. To put it differently, Laura holds that those who want to protest in favour of a cause should do it peacefully, otherwise, protesters' actions may be de-politicised and considered as mere riots:

2. Laura: I think as long they [protests] are peaceful, and it is like...I think when people use it is as an excuse to like, do rioting or just kind of riot shops, I think it is just kind of like quite mess and really useless [...] I think if it is something you really truly believe, in a way you truly believe that needs to be changed, and if you're doing it in a peaceful way.

Despite the fact that our interviewees demonstrated being aligned with the pervasive idea that protest should be peaceful, only a few of them offered a clear definition of what can be understood as a peaceful protest. Interestingly, in Extract 3, Jenny (who has not participated in protests) offers a criterion that may define a peaceful protest: the absence of both criminal damage and wounded people:

3. Jenny: [a protest where] there is no criminal damage, people don't usually get hurt [inaudible]. They [journalists] do some cover times where there is a lot of people and sometimes do get hurt in large con [concentrations] of people but it is usually no [inaudible], no damage or people come injured.

Indeed, Jenny's definition of a peaceful protest partially matched other interviewees' views that mostly associated peaceful protests with the lack of physical aggression among participants. An example of this can be found in Extract 4, where Emily mentions that a peaceful protest is an activity in which physical violence is absent. In other words, Emily's concerns about keeping protests peaceful are not just about potential outcomes (criminal damage or wounded people) but also for the occurrence of physical aggression (process):

4. Emily: [in a peaceful protest] I would be comfortable just going because you think you will be surrounded by like...by people who believe what you believe but you don't have to be worried that is gonna turned into people fighting or any of that.

According to these interviews, it can be argued that our participants recognise the right to protest as a universal right that allows people to have their say within a democracy. However, the legitimate exercise of this right is restricted to the use of non-violent actions by protesters. This means that, at least initially, our interviewees were in agreement with the pervasive idea that protests should be peaceful.

Authorities should ensure the right to protest

Closely related to the norm that protest should be peaceful, we found that when our interviewees referred to either of the fictional scenarios, they repeatedly mentioned that in a democratic society the duty of both the police and government authorities is to guarantee that people can voice their opinion in the streets. Thus, in Extract 5, Alison (who has not participated in protests) positively evaluates that authorities allow people to have their say, even when these authorities may have the capability (e.g., equipment and officers) to hinder protesters' actions:

5. Alison: I think is good the government is allowing [the student protest in the facilitated scenario] ...mmm...people's voice has to be heard. I think it is important if we say we're a democracy that we can...mmm...to voice our opinions. So, it is good

that they [authorities] value that because they can easily just ignore the protest and have the police... mmm ... stopping them [students] from protesting. So, yeah, I think is good. It shows that we're allowed to have freedom of speech.

Apart from allowing protests, in Extract 6, Laura argues that the political authorities and the police also have the responsibility to monitor protests in case 'something violent' happens as well as to protect those who can be affected. In other words, alongside ensuring that people can protest peacefully in the streets, people expect that police officers implement measures to protect protesters. Conversely, Laura also suggests that any restriction imposed on peaceful protests might be considered as a sort of transgression to the freedom of speech:

6. Laura: So, I think is good there would be police in there to make sure, like...I think is good get the policemen just to make sure that nothing look violent happens...but when they're shutting down anything even if it is a peaceful protest that is gonna...I don't understand why they would do that. It is just a bit pointless, like that is when your freedom of speech right is taking away slightly.

In line with the idea about the police's role in protesters' protection, Alison (in Extract 7) suggests that cooperation between authorities and protesters would help to keep protests safe for everyone. Indeed, Alison argues that violence is less likely to occur when the police are engaged in facilitating protesters' actions and establishing a cooperative relationship with protesters. The latter would prevent the emergence of a power imbalance and therefore, a conflict between protesters and police officers is less likely to occur:

7. Alison: I think it is good, like personally, I think is good if the police aren't fighting the protesters but helping them. I think...mmm...it is important for people safety...mmm...and also in some ways it shows support for the protesters because it is kind of suggest they are in the same team instead of fighting each other [...] I think in a situation where the police are aiding them, it kind of suggest that...there is not a such great power imbalance [...] I mean, the police are not necessarily protesters but they're not trying to stop the protest. So, in some ways they are allowing it up.

Protest violence is illegitimate when the right to protest is guaranteed

In the context of facilitated protests and the norm of keep protests peaceful, in Extract 8, Sarah states that violence is out of place when police officers try to facilitate protests. In other words, for her, protest violence cannot be legitimated in a scenario where there is neither a manifest power imbalance between police and protesters or restrictions imposed on protests. Moreover, Sarah makes a negative judgement on those who violate the societal norm of peaceful protests, while she argues that the police should not be chosen as a target of violence because police officers are not responsible for political decisions:

8. Sarah: Why you first gonna hurt the police? They are just standing there...make, ensure safe, they are not actually...the police didn't make decision on increased the budget. So, I think it would be silly, especially in a peaceful protest [...] I would be...if the police were just literally standing by a barriers, I just think that is evil because hitting someone is not right and especially to a police officer who hasn't done anything

personally to you...even if you don't like the police force, they haven't done anything directly to you, so, I would be shocked.

In line with Sarah's argument, in Extract 9, Laura argues that if protesters resorted into violence when protest activities were facilitated, public opinion would withdraw its support for both protesters' actions and their claims. Laura also suggests that, under favourable conditions for protests (i.e., absence of conflict between groups), violence is as an irrational behaviour carried out by people that cannot think properly about their actions. The latter means that for our interviewers, when authorities facilitate protesters' actions, violence is not acceptable by any means and its occurrence is attributable to individual psychology:

9. Interviewer: Do you think this kind of actions [throwing objects or hit police officers] can change what other people think about protests?

Laura: Yeah, I would be less like to support them [the protesters] I think. If they were violent...about the support from other people, if I was looking it from the other side, and then they being violent, it would be less likely they just support them. It would be...I think, it would cloud judgements of the characters as well. I just, they can't be a very rational people.

Harsh restrictions to the right to protest make violence more likely

In contrast to what might happen in a scenario where authorities actively facilitate protests, it seems that placing harsh restrictions on the right to protest makes it more likely that people resort to violence against the police. Our interviewees gave three reasons for this. First, authorities' restrictions on the right to protest might make evident the existence of a direct conflict in the streets, protesters versus police officers (as Alison points in Extract 10). Undoubtedly, this emergent conflict might also involve an imbalance of power between both groups taking into account police officers are those who have the technical capabilities and the support from political authorities to disperse any protest:

10. Alison: Mmm...well, the police in this scenario aren't supporting the protesters and they [the police] are going all the way to stop the protesters...like, kind of like...It is kind of becomes like two teams going against each other.

Second, the measures implemented by the police in the restricted scenario (e.g., the use of batons and the deployment of riot units) may be seen as real threats to protesters who might react to these measures using violence against police officers. The latter is stressed by Peter (who has not participated in protests) in Extract 11. Thus, Peter declares that the imposition of harsh restrictions against protesters might lead to a 'disaster' characterized by clashes against the police:

11. Peter: If you put the police riot, you put the dog, you put the batons, so there are gonna be tough. So, of course the protest wants get many numbers as it could if the

police and those forces [inaudible] whereas at the same time the people who are getting to protest are the hard guys. When I say hard, I mean they are brave, they are courageous but there are more hooligans in that sample space than in if it was open [like in the facilitated scenario]. So, there are more hooligans, so, if you have all these hooligans together and then you have... They [protesters] are fighting for the freedom of speech and at the same time you have police trying to suppress them. The result will be a disaster.

It worth noting that the ‘disaster’ mentioned by Peter is not limited to physical clashes with police officers, it also involves protesters needing to fight against authorities’ restrictions to defend freedom of speech. Thus, when authorities impose restrictions on the right to protest, our interviewee suggests a conflict between challengers to the status quo and the police might emerge because of two reasons. First, threats to the physical integrity of protesters, and second, threats to the exercise of freedom of speech.

According to our interviewees, a third reason that might explain the occurrence of violence is the type of people may join protests in case of authorities restrict the right to protest. Thus, Peter identified two broad categories of people might hit the streets under the described circumstances. First, a depoliticised group, ‘hooligans’, who are those that in a facilitated scenario could be considered as a ‘conflictual minority’ looking for confrontations with the police. Second, ‘brave protesters’ that might be willing to hit the streets and confront the restrictions to people’s freedom of speech. In other words, in a scenario full of constraints and threats against protesters, these two categories of people might act together to challenge authorities’ measures and confront the police. However, it is necessary to highlight that for

several interviewees, as Laura in Extract 12, the potential occurrence of protest violence, and the subsequent violation of the norm that protest should be peaceful, may backfire, causing a decrease in turnout:

12. Laura: I feel no, I think what could end up happening is less people...who want a peaceful protest could not go there.

Self-defence actions against the police

In line with the idea that the restrictions imposed on the right to protest may act as a pre-condition or provocation to turn protests into violence, we found that our interviewers justified protest violence against the police to defend themselves from authorities' measures and protect the right to protest:

13. Sarah: mmm...well, obviously...I don't know because I haven't never been in that situation but from watching stuff you can tell if someone is attacked by the police they fight back. You wanted to say in your head that you wouldn't fight back but in that situation you probably would because there is someone restricting you for no reason. I'm already angry about the cops, you can be really angry, so, you will fight back against the police but...I don't know, I might have to go to protest and see.

In Extract 13, Sarah suggests that she may support the use of protest violence as self-defence in response to police attacks (i.e., police officers as main aggressors), and the constraints imposed on people's right to protest. This means that under some circumstances (e.g., police

repression), to protect their rights, people may have to decide between conformity to societal norms or choose alternative methods (e.g., use of violence) that are not necessarily aligned with those norms. However, rather than being a straightforward decision, supporting the use of violence against the police involves a conflict for Sarah. Thus, in a first moment, Sarah mentions that she cannot imagine herself breaking the societal norm of not using violence in protests. Indeed, her statement suggests that keeping the protest peaceful is a norm most of the people are aware of even though someone is unfairly attacked.

Nevertheless, in a second moment, Sarah argues that despite fighting back might be a no desirable outcome, people might support protest violence against the police as a reaction to the harsh restrictions that authorities have arbitrarily imposed on protests. The equivocations mentioned above shed light on how Sarah grapples with contradictory ideas about protest violence. On the one hand, as the societal norm establishes, protest violence should not be allowed. On the other hand, this norm is challenged as a result of police transgressions against the right to protests and freedom of speech.

Apart from Sarah, other interviewees also expressed contradictory ideas (dilemmas) about protest violence against the police but used diverse strategies to deal with it. For instance, Paul (who has no experience in protests), in Extract 14, declares that he would never use physical violence against the police. Nevertheless, he says he would understand if other people (i.e., protesters) fought back against police if the authorities do not guarantee the right to protest and police officers are the main aggressors during a peaceful protest. In other words, Paul's formula to support protest violence without completely discarding the societal norm about keep protests

peaceful consists in making other people responsible of carrying out self-defence actions, while he reaffirms that himself could not participate in any violent action against the police:

14. Paul: Well, I think it would be me on a personal level. I think, you know, if someone is, you know, say hit by the police in a peaceful protest and then they act in self-defence, then it is justified but me personally I would not do it [fighting back the police] because of the person I am.

Another interesting strategy to deal with the dilemma can be found in Extract 15. There, Peter depoliticises his own (potential) reasons to fight back against the police. For him, fighting the police would be a matter of survival, a result of an instinct to stay alive in a dangerous context, instead of fight against either authorities' restrictions or police repression against the right to protest. However, he also argues that police aggression is due to him or someone else going against the criteria to define a peaceful protest (e.g., no criminal damage or fight against the police):

15. Peter: Wow...no, if they attacked me physically, well. Yeah, I would fight back because, you know, it is a primal instinct to want be safe yourself but at the same they are police, and who knows, maybe I did something. Maybe, I look like someone who hit the police or like who broke up in a store [inaudible] So, you can say they [the police] justify in taking me for questioning but I would fight back and I would try to run away.

In terms of the actions our interviewees would consider as legitimate self-defence, some of them suggested that instead of fighting back, the most appropriate action to confront restrictions on the right to protests would be pushing back against the police. Thus, in Extract 16, Rebecca (who has not participated in protests) states that in case of facing police repression, she would try to run away from police officers or push them back:

16. Rebecca: I think I would just like try to run away or get [inaudible] how to defend me, like push them away.

Even though most of our interviewees supported protesters' self-defence against the police when authorities impose harsh restrictions on protests, a few of them rejected the use of violence in all circumstances. Thus, similarly to what Drury and Reicher (2018) have described for actual protesters, in Extract 17, Paul expresses that even he could shout at the police, he would refuse supporting violence against the police based on a moral argument, non-violent actions should prevail during protests and those who use violence are doing something wrong no matter the conditions under which protests are carried out:

17. Paul: I probably get involved in shouting, but I wouldn't use physical force again it. If you're in a peaceful protest and then the police are using aggressions while everyone is being peaceful it shows that...paths you on the right side and they're on the wrong for showing aggression to people.

Like Paul, Claire (who has participated in protests) also rejects that protesters can use violence against the police even in a scenario where police impose harsh restrictions to protest. Indeed, she passes over the potential conflict between the police and protesters, suggesting that tensions during protests can be solved using ‘rational’ methods among ‘capable’ individuals that want to reach some social change. Thus, for Claire (in Extract 18), violence would be a ‘wild’ behaviour with a negative impact on protest’s public image:

18. Claire: I wouldn’t like condone that [protest violence against the police], I wouldn’t do it personally. I think, I can’t do anything about it...mmm...I mean, I know people are angry but I think that can almost...I think when people use sort of violence and stuff, it almost makes that cause less kind of credible because they just see like sort of wild hooligans rather than people, you know, intelligent people who go to university and want to make a difference in the world.

Finally, we also found a couple of cases in which the rejection of protest violence responds to a practical rather than a moral argument. Thus, Brian, in Extract 19, argues that in the hypothetical case of being part of a protest, he would not fight back the police because of the negative consequence this may have for him. However, he also suggests that in case of being attacked by police officers, one particular form to defend themselves or other protesters is to record videos of police transgressions and then share them on social media. Thus, the use of videos and the internet may be considered as an alternative self-defence action in which people can employ a device used in their everyday lives (e.g., mobile phone) to gain support from public opinion without involving the use of violence:

19. Brian: Probably, I would be quite scared. I guess, I would try to get people around to film it, and I would try to film myself [...] I wouldn't like respond by attacking them because they're gonna have, well...I'll get beat up and probably arrested. So, I would try to keep it...I wouldn't respond with violence but I would try to record it and share it.

Discussion

The analysis presented above helps us to show that the discussion about the use of violence in protests cannot be limited to judge protesters' actions as either 'good' (normative) or 'bad' (non-normative), or restricted to an over idealization of non-violent actions to reach social change (see Seidman, 1995, for a discussion). Instead, we suggest the analysis of these actions should respond to a more comprehensive approach where non-participants are active readers of collective action who can evaluate both the political circumstances protesters have to face (e.g., authorities' restrictions) and the dynamic of collective action (e.g., power imbalances). Consequently, judgments about specific actions (e.g., protest violence) should be considered as part of the everyday dilemmas people face. This argument suggests that people might hold contradictory ideas about the legitimacy of protest violence (as self-defence), making non-participants' support for protest violence as a context-sensitive variable rather than an unalterable belief. Hence, even though for some people protest violence should always be rejected, for others, self-defence actions against the police may become acceptable when authorities impose harsh restrictions on protests and police officers act as the main aggressors. To put it differently, people's support for protest violence is context-sensitive (i.e., based on the dynamic of protests and authorities' restrictions), and selective.

Considering that non-participants' support for self-defence actions is selective and context-sensitive, future research on people's support for violence against the police must include the comparison between diverse (real or hypothetical) scenarios where non-participants can evaluate critical events such as authorities' measures and police actions regarding protests. Otherwise, it may be impossible to explore in detail the circumstances that explain people's support for protesters' self-defence actions, while collective action research will continue to be trapped in de-contextualised analyses of protesters' behaviour.

In terms of the type of actions that non-protesters' may be willing to support, it seems that our interviewees share a sort of 'self-defence' repertoire. Hence, there may be a set of actions (e.g., pushing back and yelling at the police) that most participants know and accept as self-defence against the police. We believe that even though some interviewers mentioned that they would support (or be willing to) fighting the police, most of them may prefer pushing back or yelling at the police because of the real or perceived negative consequences (e.g., getting criminal records) that people may face for hitting a police officer. Interestingly, for other interviewers recording videos of police transgressions and sharing them on social media appears as an alternative form of self-defence without involving physical contact, or resistance through technology (Cammaerts, 2012). The latter may indicate that (British) non-participants learnt about a set of actions that may become acceptable as people's self-defence against police transgressions, while other behaviours which don't involve physical violence (e.g., disobey police orders) but might be interpreted as punishable actions by some police officers (see Soares, Barbosa, & Matos, 2018, for a discussion), can help people to face authorities' transgressions exposing them to a broader audience.

Moreover, we suggest there are five reasons why research on this particular topic must go beyond the use of the mainstream labels (i.e., normative and non-normative) researchers have used to categorise protesters' actions. First, this categorisation ignores that public opinion's legitimisation of specific actions might change as a function of the interaction between authorities and protesters, throughout time, and across cultures. Thus, the use of violence defined in a neutral form as "the threat or exertion of physical force which could cause bodily injury" (Ball-Rokeach, 1972, p.101) may be considered a legitimate action within a society under some specific circumstances (e.g., high levels of repression implemented by an authoritarian regime) and in certain historical moments.

Second, communities differ in their judgements about the use of violence in collective action because they have different repertoires of protests (see Tilly, 1986, 2008). The latter implies that both the actions that protesters may carry out (e.g., clashing with the police) as well as people's legitimisation of these actions rely on a network of shared knowledge and values located in a specific time and place.

Third, protest violence does not necessarily affect a whole protest, and its legitimacy may change throughout a single protest event (see Day, Seedat, Cornell, & Shuffla, 2018). In other words, what was unacceptable behaviour (e.g., throwing objects at the police) may become acceptable and then unacceptable again within the same mobilisation process. As normative and non-normative actions are static categories, it would be impossible to analyse correctly the dynamic described above, as well as non-participants' evaluations of these changes.

Fourth, there is the potential stigmatisation of those who use violence in protests (see Ball-Rokeach, 1972, 1980). In other words, those protesters who for whatever reason go beyond the pervasive norm that protests must be peaceful might be treated as outsiders (even as criminals) that are not capable of behaving in a civilised way (e.g., “Hong Kong leader Lam condemns ‘rioters’ after violent clashes”, 2019). In line with this, unfortunately, and ignoring the inherent conflict behind the emergence of violence, many scholars have given a negative connotation *per se* to protest violence even relating it to processes associated with terrorism as extremism and radicalisation (e.g., Becker, Tausch, Spears, & Christ, 2011; Jiménez-Moya et al., 2015; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009; Schumpe et al., 2018; Thomas, McGarty, & Louis, 2014). We firmly believe that treating protest violence as a deviant collective behaviour limits the understanding of both protesters’ reasons to carry out protest violence as well as non-protesters’ support for self-defence actions in a particular political context. Indeed, we think that using the terminology mentioned above may help to reproduce and maintain the status quo on behalf of economic and political elites.

Fifth, given the de-contextualised nature of normative and non-normative categories, there is a high risk that those interested in the study of collective action (and protests in particular) neglect the fact that sometimes people need to use and support violence as a primary or alternative strategy to achieve social change, fight against authoritarian regimes, or resist authorities’ misconduct within democracies (see Seidman, 2015).

Limitations and future research

Considering that our interviewees and the protesters presented in the vignette shared the same identity category, students, future research should explore whether non-participants’ support

for self-defence actions is a universal phenomenon on behalf of those who suffered from authorities restrictions, or contrarily, it depends on who the protesters are (e.g., non-students adults).

Another essential aspect that researchers should address is whether non-participants may support self-defence actions carried out against counter-protesters. In other words, researchers should explore if, under a restricted political context, non-participants would support protest violence against those protesters who defend the status quo or the actions carried out by police force (e.g., pro-police demonstrators).

Moreover, taking into account that most non-participants cannot perceive protesters' actions first-hand, media communications becomes a critical factor that mediates what happens in the streets and non-participants' support for protesters' actions (see Koopmans, 2004; Neville & Reicher, 2018 for a discussion). In line with this, future research needs to explore how bias in media coverage of protests may affect non-participants' support for self-defence actions against the police when authorities restrict the right to protest. Addressing the role of media is particularly important once we consider that previous literature on communication has stressed how social movements' prospects can be affected by media ownership and connection with political elites (see Chan & Lee, 1984; Chan, 2017; Tan, 2017); consumption patterns of media (see Lee, 2018); the negative coverage of those protests where violence occurs (see Boyle, McLeod, & Armstrong, 2012; Lee, 2014; McLeod, 2007); and the impact of different media framing on the legitimacy of mobilization processes (see Valentim, 2019).

Finally, as this study was conducted in an advanced Western democracy where the right to protest is granted, researchers should explore non-participants' support for protesters actions in places where the exercise of these rights are restricted (e.g., Singapore), or in non-Western democracies without a long tradition of protests. For this, researchers must be aware that there are different cultural norms regarding protests. On the one hand, societies may grant a high value to protests in the development of societal life. On the other hand, people may consider protests as not so desirable activities in highly hierarchical societies where maintaining harmony within groups is a priority over individual dissent. Consequently, more than seeking mere replications, scholars must ensure their studies become meaningful for the particular contexts where these are carried out.

Appendix

The appendix for this manuscript can be found online at <https://osf.io/8h7ke/>

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