

# Revisiting the crowd: Peaceful assembly in Irish water protests

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## Abstract

The enactment of the Water Services Bill into Irish law on December 28, 2014, was met with strong opposition from the Irish public, manifesting in local and national demonstrations. This social movement provided an ideal case to examine interactions between protesters and police in different contexts. Ethnographic observations and randomly sampled interviews took place before, and during, seven national demonstrations in Dublin, Ireland. Simultaneously, urban ethnographic research yielded in-depth observational and interview data at local protests in another Irish city. Data from both national and local protests are examined in light of classical and contemporary sociocultural psychological conceptualizations of the crowd. The elaborated social identity model offers most explanatory power to comprehend the observed and reported events between police and protesters in this cultural context during an unprecedented economic recovery following recession. No evidence is found to support classical conceptualizations of the crowd. I describe the consequences of this analysis for conceptualizing police–protester interactions to generate peaceful assembly in liberal democracies.

## Keywords

economic crisis, elaborated social identity model, Ireland, police, protester, social movements, water

## Introduction

### *The Irish water services bill and an outline of the article*

On December 28, 2014, Michael D. Higgins, the President of the Republic of Ireland, signed a controversial Water Services Bill into law. For the first time in Irish history, the

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Irish public were expected to directly pay for water services. The ratification of this law was met with strong opposition from some sectors of the Irish public in the form of national- and local-level demonstrations. The large national-level demonstrations in Dublin, Ireland, were peaceful. In contrast, confrontations between protesters and police were observed frequently at local-level protests in another Irish city. Understanding the policing of the Irish water protests helps answer a question of broader interest to liberal democracies: How best to comprehend police–protester interactions to maximize peaceful assembly?

In this article, I first review and assess the utility of classical and contemporary conceptualizations of the crowd. Classical social scientific theories tend to conceptualize the crowd in pathological terms: violent mobs lose control of their cognitive faculties in a crowd and act in a senseless manner. This representation of the crowd is widely utilized by conservative governments who see crowds as potentially undermining their authority. In contrast, contemporary theories highlight the agentic and purposeful actions of an engaged crowd (Drury, 2020). This is considered a more progressive representation of the crowd because it emphasizes the legitimacy of people to peacefully protest and to challenge authority. Next, having described my methods and described the context in which the research was conducted, I use prominent intergroup relation theories to examine and explain the police–protester dynamics observed during thickly descriptive (Geertz, 1973), in-depth, urban ethnographic research. I find that classical theories of the crowd are not supported by the ethnographic evidence. In contrast, I found that a socially orientated theory—the elaborated social identity model (ESIM)—is better able to account for the observed intergroup dynamics between police and protesters. I use this theory to examine the micro-psychological interactions between demonstrators and police within the similar, yet distinct, national- and local-level protests. The application of this model to the Irish historical and cultural context, with multilevel and multisite triangulated data generated during an unfolding social movement over a year, speaks to the utility of the ESIM in explaining police–protester interactions outside of the cultural context (United Kingdom) in which it was developed. The principles of the ESIM could apply to policing in other cultural contexts in Western liberal democracies. Before reviewing theoretical approaches to understanding crowd behavior, it is necessary to comprehend why theorizing about the crowd and their interactions with authorities is important in the first place.

### *Police–protester interactions: Microcosms of neoliberalism in democracies*

Crowds pose a particular dilemma for democratic governments. Freedom of assembly, association, and expression lie at the basis of liberal democracies. An inability for people to protest and express frustrations is contradictory to a liberal democracy. This is because without the ability to organize demonstrations, citizens are not part of a liberal democracy. Paradoxically, however, crowds pose challenges to the authority of government. This manifests in two ways (Durrheim & Foster, 1999). First, crowds can develop social movements to oust governments. Second, governments also have a responsibility to maintain law and order, protect property, and ensure the safety of other denizens who are

not involved with a particular social movement. Given this dilemma, several prominent social scientific theories have emerged to explain “the crowd.”

### *A history of the crowd: Contagion and delegitimatization*

The earliest social scientific theories of the crowd tended to pathologize it (Le Bon, 1903; also see Canetti 1984; Moscovici, 1986; Reicher, 1984; van Ginneken, 1992). Although others, including Taine and Sighele, had conceptualized the crowd in this way, the theorizing of Le Bon (1903) was the most influential (see Wagoner et al., 2018). Le Bon’s influential book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, was a source of ideas concerning the crowd that were taken up by extremist political leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini (Durrheim & Foster, 1999; Moscovici, 1986). Le Bon conceptualized people in the crowd as barbaric, senseless, and uncivilized, and he also applied the metaphor of “contagion” to explain how ideas, feelings, and behaviors spread throughout crowds.

This line of thinking was both influential and consequential for how crowds were represented and controlled by those in power. Applying biological metaphors—like “contagion”—to social life introduces the potential for incommensurability in applications (Shweder, 1996). Through the lens of this metaphor, crowds and their members were seen as “sick” or “infected” and behavior was seen as “irrational” and “pathogenic.” This, in turn, delegitimizes the ideology, cognitions, and motivations driving the diverse actions of the crowd and the behaviors of the crowd itself. Because possible reasoned motivations connected to structural, and systemic, forms of inequality or prejudice from those in power are denied, authorities do not need to engage with the meaning of the crowd, for example, by responding to questions of social and political change. Instead, they are prone to respond with actions designed to suppress and disperse the crowd, with force if necessary (Cornish, 2012; Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2009; Reicher, 2017; Reicher & Potter, 1985).

Other classical psychological accounts extended Le Bon’s core idea that the self, and by implication, self-control, are lost once an individual became part of a crowd. Allport (1924) developed an extreme process of individualization to explain behavior in the crowd. He argued an individual in a crowd is more an individual than when alone. The individual is again stripped of agency: only a solitary individual is capable of rational thought and action. A crowd was senseless. Other theories highlighted the “unconscious” nature of the crowd (Freud, 1940). Similarly, to extreme individualization theories of the crowd, concepts of a dehumanized, hypnotized, criminal, crowd serve to delegitimize the voices, perspectives, and meanings behind collective actions (see Moscovici, 1986 and Drury, 2020, for summaries).

In contrast to Allport, deindividuation theories focus on the anonymity of the individual in a group as the mechanism through which behavior becomes dysregulated and antisocial in group settings (Diener, 1980; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989; Zimbardo, 1969). Deindividuation in a crowd allowed individuals to indulge in behaviors which, when alone, they would not do (Festinger et al., 1952). This logic is clearly inspired by Le Bon’s claims that people become “submerged” in the crowd. Again, in more contemporary psychological accounts, the motivations for crowd behavior were maligned. If the

crowd are barbarians, hypnotic, and unconscious, they are therefore dangerous and consequently the appropriate political response is to eliminate the crowd by tough policing tactics (Drury, 2020; Reicher & Potter, 1985; Stott & Radburn, 2020). From these theoretical perspectives, a crowd needed to be controlled and dispersed.

### *Putting the crowd in sociocultural context: Dynamic intergroup relations*

Contagion metaphors, and related ideas about deindividuation and the automatic dysregulation of behavior within crowds, do not explain the spread of *coordinated* behaviors through the crowd nor do these ideas engage with what motivations drive crowd behavior in the first place, when and why crowd behavior changes or stops, and why police themselves do not riot. In comparison, historical research examining the individual in social, political, and economic context of crowd behavior provides compelling accounts of purposeful, nuanced, and meaningful actions of ordinary people in forms of collective action (e.g., Davis, 1978; Reddy, 1977; Thompson, 1971). These accounts undermine classical social psychological theories of the crowd by highlighting the agentic and meaningful actions of demonstrators. By comprehending individual and collective actions within their wider context, and focusing on the interactions between self and other, both on the individual, group, and societal levels, a more dynamic—and more accurate—understanding of the crowd should be possible. To develop this more dynamic, contextually informed, perspective, I draw on the elaborated social identity model to explain how dysfunctional police–protester dynamics escalated peaceful protests into civic unrest.

### *Police–protester interactions: Elaborated social identity model*

The elaborated social identity model (ESIM) was developed to understand the interactions between protesters and police; how protests can turn violent; to explain behavioral patterns during violent protests and riots; and to offer a socially embedded, contextually sensitive, dynamic psychological model that overcame the problematic epidemiological assumptions underlying Le Bon’s concept of “contagion” (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher, 1984, 1987, 1996; Stott & Reicher 1998a, 1998b; 2011; Warren & Power, 2015).

The theory has its roots in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). It has three elements at its core: concepts, conditions, and dynamics (see (Drury & Reicher, 2018)). The theory postulates that protesters often define themselves as a heterogeneous group, with diverse reasons, motivations, and justifications for protesting. In contrast, police often identify groups of protesters as a potential threat to public disorder—they identify diverse protesters as a potentially threatening homogenous group. Therefore, they represent and subsequently treat the heterogeneous viewpoints and complaints of the protesters as a homogenous threatening identity. The power dynamics between the two groups are asymmetrical: the police are often the dominant force. The repositioning of protesters’ identity by the police from a multifarious collection of individuals, to a homogenous and potentially threatening crowd, leads to a subsequent shift regarding how protesters identify themselves. Protesters respond to, and embody, their representation by a powerful

and adversarial out-group (i.e., the police). Associated with this new identity are new forms of now legitimate action that can encompass violent actions. Moderate actors in demonstrations identify with more extreme viewpoints and actions from the in-group (i.e., other protesters). From this perspective, any action taken by the police against an individual protester is felt, experienced, and responded to by the now-homogenized, collective in-group of protesters.

Social psychological research supports the proposition that how police view protesters has direct implications for how peaceful a protest will be (Stott & Radburn, 2020). For example, when police view the crowd as illegitimate, protesters begin to develop a common in-group identity in opposition to the police. They begin to share grievances with other members of the crowd. Escalating tactics used by the police against, and a general engagement with tactics that treat the entire crowd as uniformly dangerous and hostile, lead to a small group of aggravated people becoming a much larger group. The larger the group, the more empowered its members feel to vent anger against the police. Those who are nonconfrontational become marginalized and have reduced power to modulate the group. Police escalation, including attempted dispersion of the crowd, and kettling increase to chance of violent protest. These dynamics have been displayed in numerous violent protests including anti-Poll tax riots (Drury & Reicher, 2005), student protests (Reicher, 1996), football protests (Stott, Hutchinson, & Drury, 2001), environmental protests (Drury & Reicher, 2000), and anti-road protests (Drury et al., 2003). These theoretical processes are assumed to be applicable to a variety of situations and cultural contexts. It is believed, for example, these processes can help explain how recent protests turned violent on the streets of Paris, Hong Kong, Khartoum, Washington D.C., and elsewhere. Yet, the empirical work using the ESIM has largely been undertaken in the United Kingdom. The theory is yet to be applied to these diverse situational and cultural contexts.

In this current analysis of ethnographic research, I apply the elaborated social identity model to help comprehend two concurrent anti-water charge protest movements that occurred on a national and local level in Ireland. These two forms of protest provided an opportunity to apply the ESIM with in-depth ethnographic research. First, I apply the ESIM in a novel Irish context. Unlike previous applications of the model in the context of the United Kingdom, the Irish context provides a culturally, historically, and institutionally different context to examine the applicability of the model—built in one cultural context—to illuminate relationships between police and protesters within another. This is important because culture and minds co-constitute one another (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder, 1991, 2003), and social psychology has been criticized for assuming models developed in one context automatically apply to others (Shweder, 2010). The ESIM is used to examine the relationship between An Garda Síochána (the Irish police force) and anti-austerity protesters within the Irish cultural milieu. As such, it is designed to assess the potential generalizability of the ESIM to explain police–protester dynamics across a broader range of situational and cultural contexts. Second, this study is the first to examine the relationship between police and protesters in the context of harsh austerity measures introduced following the 2008 economic collapse. In contrast to several EU nations, the Irish passively accepted austerity when first introduced in 2008,

but paradoxically protested during stark economic upturn in 2014, rather than recession (Power, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Power & Nussbaum, 2014, 2016). As such, the present analysis speaks to an unusual economic context where police–protester interactions are located within broader global narratives of unfair economic growth. To apply the ESIM in a context where low-paid workers are demonstrating in the context of stark economic growth is to examine the applicability of the model in the context of the wealthiest epoch in economic history but also one of the most unequal times (Power, 2020). Third, in contrast to the majority of social psychological studies of protest movements that use experimental or survey methods, but congruent with participant observation methods used to develop and extend the ESIM, the present analysis relies on field data collected during, not after, a prolonged social movement. Therefore, the data collection for this study has high levels of ecological validity; it is triangulated using multiple sources and is interpreted within the broader historical and cultural context in which the participant observation took place over the course of several years (Power & Velez, 2020). Subsequently, this analysis provides a broad methodological framework on how to conduct ethnographic research in both multiple and moving field sites within two cities over the course of a year. This form of data collection is an advance on the relatively shorter periods of data collection used to develop (Reicher, 1984) and apply (Stott & Reicher, 2011) the ESIM in relation to the spread of various riots in the United Kingdom. And fourth, ethnographic research provides a natural, nuanced, and indirect descriptive comparison within two protest movements, occurring simultaneously, around the same issue with two different observable outcomes. This study design offers some comparative insight between cases that has not been undertaken in the Irish context.

## Methods

### *Field social psychology: Sampling and triangulating data*

Ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders at a series of seven national demonstrations in Dublin, Ireland. These protests were attended by tens of thousands of protesters from throughout Ireland. In each of these contexts, I approached a random sample of potential participants and asked if they were willing to be interviewed about their reasons for protesting. All interviewees gave informed consent verbally. One in every 10th cluster of people was approached for interview before and during the protest. When the protest reached its conclusion, talks given by a series of left-wing politicians, community activists, and trade unionists were recorded. Ethnographic observations of protest and police behavior, including their interactions, were also recorded with detailed field notes.

Simultaneously, in-depth urban ethnographic work was conducted in summer and autumn, 2015, in another smaller Irish city. This involved spending substantial amounts of participant-observation time with a core group of protesters from the local area in a variety of different sites—mostly working-class housing estates—around this city. Protesters were interviewed individually, in dyads, or in groups. Moreover, in-depth interviews were

conducted with members of the police force, construction workers, non-protesting residents, and occasionally members of local media.

The protesters were mainly, though not exclusively, working class. Few lived in the exact areas in which protests were taking place, though many said they lived close by or in estates that were similar. The age range was from mid-twenties to people in their 80s. I became familiar with most of the core group of approximately 20 people who were from the local area. On occasion, this group swelled to approximately 50 people. This occurred when protesters—from other Irish cities—journeyed to one location to bolster local-level protests. This occurred infrequently. During these times, extra police were drafted in and more arrests were made.

Irish police wear individual numbers to protect their anonymity, yet make them identifiable. Senior and junior police were interviewed, and extensive notes were also taken on their interactions with the protesters. Non-protester residents were also interviewed, particularly to glean their reaction to “flash points” where arrests were made and tensions were running high on the streets.

Combining the national-level protests, with interviews with stakeholders at a local-level, generated over 200 in-depth, semi-structured, interviews. Moreover, extensive field notes, written during or straight after protests, helped contextualize the interviews, add initial analytic insight, and highlight salient points, when they were fresh in my mind. Most interviews were audio-recorded. At times, some interview material became inaudible due to police sirens, construction machinery, or shouting from the crowd. Chants from the crowd were also documented. Multiple forms of data helped triangulate meaning (Denzin, 2012; Power et al., 2018).

Audio recordings were transcribed. Field notes from the day that interviews took place were matched with the recordings. Thematic analysis was performed on this text (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and revealed master narratives (Hammack, 2011; Shweder, 2008) underlying, and uniting, the discourse of the demonstrators, police, and non-protesting bystanders. The analysis presented in this article is based on, and informed by, this holistic “thickly descriptive” ethnographic research (see Geertz, 1973; Shweder, 1997). The specific events described and examined are incidents of explicit police–protester interaction which are taken from this broader corpus of multi-method data collection. Interpretations of police–protester interactions are informed by previous research on the crowd, the elaborated social identity model, and the broader ethnographic project which has been generated (Power, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2020; Power & Nussbaum, 2014, 2016).

## **Analysis part I**

### *National-level demonstrations: Peaceful and facilitative*

Across seven national demonstrations in Dublin, attended by at least tens of thousands of people, there were no acts of violence, no destruction of property, and no arrests (either observed or reported in media). There was excellent planning, a well-defined route that was known to protester organizers and communicated to attendees before demonstrations,

a specific purpose to the march, informed police who communicated efficiently with demonstrators, protest leaders who moderated the crowd and purposefully narrated a peaceful version of group behavior to the crowd, a purposeful controlling of potentially dissonant behaviors by police, timely and efficient transport to and from the location via public transit and privately chartered buses, media cameras and interviews with protesters, professional photographers, and demonstrator documentation of the protests which was often later uploaded to various relevant social media groups. The atmosphere at all the national-level protests was peaceful, jovial at times, and importantly, safe and moderated both by police who presented as representing the demonstrations as a legitimate democratic process and by protesters who were armed with smart phones.

There was one potential flash point, where the crowd diverged from the path, several people “occupied” the central branch of the Bank of Ireland in the center of Dublin city. The majority of people continued along the defined path. Police, unarmed, stood in front of the bank, arms folded, guarding the bank, but not physically engaging with protesters. Their stance was disinterested. I interviewed one protester about why a small subgroup of protesters—of which she was one—had diverged from the predefined path, “occupied” the bank, before being told to leave and rejoin the crowd. She replied:

Woman: We wanted to show them [the police] we are serious. That we could cause trouble if we wanted to.

Police effectively managed a potentially tense situation, where a small minority of a much larger demonstration briefly occupied a bank before rejoining the main demonstration, without turning a deviation from the prescribed demonstration route, into a major incident. The event revealed the potential for anger, manifested in a potentially confrontational way that was peacefully dealt with by police. Those people who “occupied” the bank left and rejoined the protest. The police saw the protesting crowd as heterogeneous and legitimate. The small minority of “occupiers” were conceptualized, and subsequently treated, by the police as being separate from the main crowd. And, as predicted by the ESIM, there was no escalation of the incident.

On another occasion, I interviewed a young unemployed man on a march through the city center. The protester was discussing neoliberal politics in Ireland, when a bystander saw the interview and approached. He interrupted the interview and asked what we were discussing, before he said “this protest is bullshit.” He looked around before continuing “nobody is going mad, nobody is wrecking anything.” “It’s a peaceful protest” my interviewee rebutted. The other man looked around again, before leaving the street, walked back to the footpath and left the route of the protest.

This small incident is revealing of a broader nature of the protest: demonstrators were not simply a homogenous, thoughtless, group as *Le Bon*—and many conservative governments—characterized them. They were not a senseless mob. Rather, the peaceful dynamics of the crowd were defined both on a structural level due to planning facilitative policing, and just as importantly, due to micro-interactions, such as the one described above, where a protester maintained the peace by successfully challenging a call for antagonism. On national- and local-level protests, there was no senseless “contagious”



spread of ideas and behaviors. Micro-interactions within the crowd show meaningful negotiations and interactions between crowd members. It illustrates their agency and how crowds self-regulate to keep the peace (see [Reicher et al., 2004](#); [Reicher et al., 2007](#); [Stott & Radburn, 2020](#), for reviews of public order policing).

On the national level, police clearly facilitated protests. For example, certain roads were blocked off along the quays in Dublin to prevent cars disrupting the route of protesters. Police were often alone, or with one partner, and had bicycles (not cars, vans, water tanks, or other crowd-control vehicles). I witnessed police joking with protesters, chatting, and exchanging good-natured banter with demonstrators, who at times made cheeky comments: “you’ll get more overtime” said one man to a young police officer he walked past; “sure, don’t we all need it” the police officer replied. There was a sense of solidarity created between these exchanges—and a public representation of the police doing their jobs—that police were underpaid workers too, and in a different context, they too would be on the streets protesting against unequal distribution of wealth gains in economically neoliberal Ireland. The emphasis placed on “we” during these types of interactions—combining the economic stance of police and protesters—within earshot of other demonstrators created an inclusive atmosphere where police and protesters were not in conflict but mutually respected and legitimized each other’s social positions.

This graduated, proportionate, and facilitative organizational approach to managing a heterogeneous crowd—who, themselves, self-regulated and had a variety of complaints that brought them to the streets—provides a model for how to manage large-scale demonstrations (see [Reicher et al., 2004, 2007](#); [Stott et al., 2001](#)). The orientating assumption from the point of view of the police—contrary to Le Bon’s characterization of the crowd or Zimbardo’s deindividualized conceptualization—is demonstrators had agency, were legitimate in their concerns, and were respected by police.

However, these observations diverged from the group dynamics between protesters and police at the local-level demonstrations. No mainstream media were present during any of the local protests in the other Irish city. Interviews with protesters, police, non-protesting bystanders, construction workers, and other observers were conducted over a period of several months. Confrontations between various protesters and police were witnessed multiple times, leading to multiple arrests and subsequent court trials. The dynamics and micro-organizational interactions were more tense at these demonstrations. Police and protesters were more agitated. Ethnographic work was more challenging in this environment.

## **Analysis part II**

### *Local-level demonstrations: Initial observations*

Once I gained access to the location of a local demonstration, via contacting a key informant, I frantically noted the scene on arrival before approaching members of the crowd. The field site was comprised of Irish Water construction workers, protesters (some of whom held Irish flags), non-protesting bystanders, nearly more police than protesters,

and me, with a notebook and Dictaphone in hand. The protest took place in a small cul-de-sac of about 20 houses.

Protesters “slow-marched” in front of construction vehicles—technically slowing down construction work without inhibiting it outright. I interviewed my key informant, and he orientated me to the protest dynamics. He explained protesters went to the local police station in solidarity with other protesters who were taken away from the initial site of the protest by police earlier that day. The protesters were arrested for minor infringements that were not clear to me or meaningfully articulated by key informants. I interviewed the protesters who were arrested earlier that morning. I observed, and interviewed, other protesters who approached me. At this stage of the protest, I did not interview any police, construction workers, or non-protesting bystanders on this day. One police officer commented in the form of a question “You’re press [a journalist]?” “I’m a psychologist” I said, “interested in water protests in Ireland.” He made no further comment and merely walked away.

### *Local-level demonstrations: Tense and confrontational*

The interactions between police and protesters fluctuated daily, but mutual mistrust, and representations of illegitimacy between both groups, was common. The group of protesters had a core of about 20 people and a subsidiary group of between 5 and 40 extra people. On one occasion, protesters from another Irish city joined the local demonstrations. This brought the attention of police, who deployed more officers, to circumvent potential violence.

Protesters represented themselves as being peaceful and controlled, on the right side of morality and the law, and as having the support of local people. They represented the police as puppets of the state who were interested in protecting big business such as *Irish Water*, who were seen as a company commodifying a natural resource that was already being paid for by Irish citizens through general taxation.

On the other side, in contrast to observations reported earlier where police were jovial with protesters at the national demonstrations in Dublin, interviews with police revealed the lack of tolerance they had for the views of protesters whom they represented as “wasting Gardaí time and resources...we could be doing better things with our time” as one junior officer told me. Police represented the protesters, and by extension their cause, as illegitimate, much to the dislike of protesters. For example, one police officer asked me rhetorically during the protests “why aren’t these people (referring to the protesters) at work? They’re unemployed...they just want to cause trouble.” By undermining the socioeconomic status of protesters, police simultaneously undermined the genuineness of the complaints of protesters. An interview with a police officer was revealing. She said:

“There’s a big social class difference between those protesting and those who are not. They [the protesters] are not taking annual leave [paid time off work]. Some of their behaviour is disgusting—they try and provoke you, but you have to keep your cool and not get a rise. They won’t get a rise out of me [i.e., they won’t make me angry]. They record on their iPhones and

post it on social media. It's propaganda. So we record too, and it goes to the D.P.P. (Director of Public Prosecutions) and they decide if it will go to court."

I asked:

S.P.: Are you or your colleagues afraid of being filmed?

Police officer: Nobody has done anything stupid (referring to members of the police force). I'm not worried about my colleagues. I'm certainly not worried about myself...they're really just looking for trouble, [they are] troublemakers. It's a waste of time [policing local demonstrations]. There are other things I could be doing. This is a waste of time and resources that could be going to other problem areas.

S.P.: Do you think the same about the national protests?

"There's differences between the national and local level protests" she said, but was reluctant to say what these differences were. Given the context of the interview, and her previous assertions, I added in my field notes after the interview this implied "the national ones were legitimate, the local ones were not." Maintaining the theme of illegitimacy, she added that "although students [who were observing in the estate, but not partaking in protests] were curious, they had made a choice to go to college and didn't want a black mark against their name." Implicit in this statement is protesters had a black mark against their name. Generalizing from this is a representation of illegitimacy of these protesters that are different from the national-level protests.

Another officer told me that senior management assigned police to this estate as "this is where we expected trouble." Again, unlike the national-level protests, the expectation was for confrontation—informed by previous hostile encounters—that the crowd would act aggressively. Based on this assumption, the number of police was close to, and on some occasions greater than, the number of protesters. Police vans—not evident at national demonstrations—were frequently parked close to the protest sites. They were highly visible and served as a reminder of dominant police control. Protesters, who were arrested, were transported to a local police station for questioning, in these vans. As such, they served as a symbol of crowd control and were associated with arrest, police dominance, and punishment for protesting. It stands in contrast to national-level demonstrations where police either walked with members of the crowd or leaned against bicycles.

An interview with another police officer, who told me he has "been a Gardaí for the last 25 years" to portray legitimacy and authority, echoed the sentiments of his other colleagues. This police officer told me "The protesters don't have popular support. Sure, if they did, they [referring to other people passing by or living in the housing estates] would be out there with them."

He downplays the significance of the local protests in two other ways. First, like the previous extract, he delegitimized the protesters by positioning himself as morally superior: "some of the girls [female protesters] are trying to start some niggles [petty verbal or physical skirmishes]." He added "you just rise above it." Next, he said "these protests

are 10 years too late. They should have protested when they could have done something about it. The installation of the water meters was inevitable and there is nothing they can do to change it." Moving beyond the positioning and representation of the protesters as on the wrong side of social justice, the inevitability of the introduction of water charges—and the implied futility of the protests—further denigrates the role of protesters. Moreover, he expands from his observations of the local protests, and further delegitimizes them by locating their behavior outside of national identity, when he said:

"Irish people don't protest, not like the French who burn bales of hay on the streets. These protests are very tame. They are not burning or turning over cars. We are like the Canadians—we might complain, but we don't like confrontation."

In contrast to this assertion about typical Irish behavior, however, I witnessed multiple points of contention, confrontation, and conflict. In the context where protesters represented police as enforcing economic inequality, and where police represented protesters as being illegitimate and threatening, the potential for antagonism was high as predicted by the elaborated social identity model.

Protesters spoke of "feeling" and "sensing" a shift in the mood as the likelihood for arrest increased. I witnessed numerous arrests: individuals arrested either one after each other or over a close period of time, as violence escalated. On one particular morning, there were approximately 20 protesters, following a small team of 2–3 construction workers, as the team tried to install a water meter in the pavement outside a house on a side road, off a main road, where I observed tensions throughout the day. I arrived at 11 a.m. and was informed by protesters that several demonstrators were arrested earlier that day. There was a large police presence, perhaps 17 police, multiple police cars and vans, and a group of approximately 20 protesters. Some protesters "slow marched" in front of a small construction vehicle as it moved several meters along the pavement from one installation site to another. This was a practice that I witnessed many times. It was meant to delay—without stopping—the construction workers. According to the protesters—who cited a provision in law and told me they had it confirmed by senior Gardaí—that slowing the construction workers was a legal, and in the eyes of protesters—legitimate—form of protest.

On this particular day, Gardaí arrested several people, one after the next, who were protesting in this manner. One individual, when being arrested, put his hands straight in the air. This was to show he was being cooperative and not resisting arrest. All arrests were being video recorded by protesters, so protesters and police alike were keen to act appropriately. Another woman—a daughter of a protester who I had spoken with multiple times—was brought to the back of a police van. As she was being arrested, her father shouted "just give your name and address and don't talk to them." He then shouted over the noise to the arresting officer and asked "How long would she be kept in the van" referring to the short time lag between arrest, closure of the vehicle back doors, and departure from the site. The police officer quickly replied "none of your business," a response which elicited chants of "cowards" toward the police who had arrested the

individuals. Another crowd member, clearly irate and trying to make sense of the series of arrests, suggested the police take their personal frustrations out on protesters.

This delegitimization of the police, from the protester's perspective, is also evident when the arrested woman's father shouted that the arresting officer "had problems with his wife" and reminded him that "you're a public servant." The implication being that both personally and professionally the police were against the protesters and implicitly take the side of corporations and government. This conclusion, heightened by the interviews with police themselves, stands in stark contrast to the police-protester demonstrations on the national level. Congruent with the ESIM, police identification of the crowd as threatening led to a self-fulfilling prophecy where individual identity in a group shifts to collective identity and legitimized confrontation with the police (Reicher et al., 2004). The dynamic of this incident clearly contrasts with the example of crowd self-policing witnessed at the national level.

Some protesters left the site for some hours—as it was approaching lunchtime when these arrests were made—and they went to the local police station where the arrested individuals were taken. I stayed at the field site. With reduced numbers, the construction workers made progress installing meters. When the protesters returned, including at least one of the arrested individuals, there was a swell of police, protesters, and concerned bystanders, as construction workers tried to do their job. There were lots of noise, chanting, high visibility police—including senior police officers—and a group of demonstrators in this small restricted cul-de-sac.

This tension was not confined to police and protesters. This core group of anti-water charge protesters was mobile: driving to different estates each day to make their point. However, residents in different housing estates sometimes held different views. In some estates, people were afraid and stayed indoors. Others watched from their front gardens, sometimes shouted or taunted, or recorded incidents, and others helped facilitate protesters and police by offering use of their lavatory or made tea and offered biscuits. On the occasion just described, resident non-protesters approached me, thinking I was a journalist and had some influence on matters. As I explained who I was, the three women said:

"I don't want this [the protest] outside my door, like, it's a scandal."

"They [the protesters] are not from this estate, so why are they here?"

"I'll be on [names local radio station] in the morning."

"They [referring to the protesters who have come to the estate] don't care [about the local community]."

I ask the group about police presence and the earlier series of arrests. One woman, whose voice seemed rattled, responded on behalf of the group of three by saying:

"We welcome the Gardai. We told them to make arrests."

"We pay the mortgages here, we should make the decisions."

These statements might help explain the escalation of police arrests that morning: to disperse the protesters so the water meters could be installed and *Irish Water* construction workers could leave the area and avoid confrontation with protesters. However, the opposite was the case. As this tense afternoon trundled on, the three women—next-door neighbors—watched and commented on the unfolding protests from their doorways. “Mind your business” shouted a protester to the non-protesting residents from the street. “This is my business” one resident responded. “Well you must have loads of money. They can put ten meters (referring to water meters which are used to charge for water) in.”

The protesters were not happy with these residents siding with police and further contributing to the representation of the demonstrators as illegitimate, as they were seen by the police. These incidents were the most obvious forms of anti-protester interaction I witnessed from locals who were not protesting. This incident encapsulated a dilemma for police in liberal democracies: to protect the rights of individuals and their property from harm while also trying to facilitate the right for people to assemble and protest.

Over time, the local-level protest dwindled and ultimately faded. The government reversed the law to charge Irish citizens for the water they consume. In this particular city, all court cases resulting from the arrests were ultimately dismissed. Although the *Irish Water* company still exists and oversees water services in Ireland, it is funded through general taxation.

## Conclusions

Similar to the heterogenous complaints I heard at the national-level street demonstrations in Dublin, local protesters in another Irish city were primarily concerned with the introduction of water charges (Power, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Power & Nussbaum, 2016). However, they generally thought the economic recovery they heard so much about in national and international media was bypassing them. The introduction of a new charge on water was emblematic of feelings of injustice. The installation of water meters by construction workers employed by the semi-state body, *Irish Water*, initially set up to monitor, and charge proportionally for, water use per household became a focal point to galvanize a broader anti-austerity protest movement.

Protesters represented their cause as heterogenous, legitimate, and morally correct on both local and national levels. This particular Irish case study speaks to larger issues concerning feelings of being “left behind” (Frank, 2013; Hochschild, 2018) and perceptions of economic inequality (Davidai, 2018; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015) and protest in neoliberal economic systems (Hagerty & Norton, 2018). Examination of the Irish water protests has both theoretical and practical importance for understanding a microcosm of these global processes: the comprehension and organization of police–protester interactions in liberal democracies.

The mutual distrust and delegitimization of police and protesters was evident daily on a local level. Each of the hostile interactions between these two groups provides evidence for how not to organize protests to maintain peace. Police, through their interviews with me, revealed they delegitimized the protesters. Protesters, unlike on a national level, had

little positive interactions with police on the local level, through months of ethnographic observation and interviewing.

Ethnographic evidence from national- and local-level social movements provides lessons for how to understand and ultimately organize police–protester relationships to maximize peaceful assembly in democratic nations. An elaborated social identity model approach to examining micro-psychological processes between groups provides one way of making sense of these interactions. The present study offered a natural, ecologically valid and naturally unfolding (Lewin, 2014; Power & Velez, 2020) setting in which to apply this theory at two different organizational levels to witness the application of different approaches to similar sociological processes. The peaceful national-level demonstrations—where police did not escalate potentially confrontational interactions—provide a model of how to achieve peace during mass demonstrations and to ensure democratic articulation of perceived unfairness from a large minority of people. Facilitative procedures, graded responses to potential deviations from careful planning, coupled with respectful interactions, creation of solidarity, and non-threatening appearance all added to a sense of respect for protesters and a legitimate view of their grievances. This dovetails with other research calling for graduated and proportionate responses to social interaction between police and demonstrators (Reicher et al., 2004, 2007; Stott et al., 2001). A similar orientation in future protest movements can help create an atmosphere where protesters feel respected, that democratic procedures are in place, and people feel as though they can articulate grievances. This is essential for the health of any democracy.

In contrast, the interactions on local levels to water protesters provided a sterner test for police to keep the peace. Underlying all observed confrontations and conflicts was a police belief that protesters were illegitimate, a waste of time and resources, were part of a troublemaking unruly group, who were unemployed, and had nothing better to do with their time. The different organizational levels informed the thoughts and attitudes of police. Nationally, the demonstrations were organized, supported by left-wing political parties, and were recorded by independent media. The local-level protests were ad hoc, were mobile, had smaller numbers, were not tolerated in some cases by residents, and there was a large police presence. Police represented the protesters' complaints and motivations for demonstrating as illegitimate. This belief, evidenced through police (in) action, meant the protesters represented the police to be on the side of the corporations. These companies, from the viewpoint of protesters, were profiting from ordinary Irish citizens who suffered harsh austerity for a decade as the economy collapsed and the banks were bailed out at the expense of the regular taxpayer.

Police managed protests on a local level so that anger did not turn to outright violence and spread through these tightly networked activist communities. Greater identification on both sides—that the other was legitimate and helpful—might have helped prevent mutual and mostly banal radicalization (Moghaddam, 2018; Wagoner et al., 2018). However, further cultural psychological research will help articulate the scopes and limits of the ESIM within a variety of situational and cultural contexts. It is unclear, for example, whether the same principles apply for political contexts where governments—and their agents—do not allow any forms of peaceful assembly.

The ESIM helped comprehend the ethnographic observations in the novel, unfolding context, examined in Ireland. Beyond the applications and validation of this dynamic, socially orientated theory, the ethnographic research on Irish water protests is evidence against a conservative, and decontextualized, formulation of the crowd as a “senseless mob” as described by Le Bon (1903), “unconscious” (Freud, 1940), individualistic (Allport, 1924), or deindividualized (Diener, 1980; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989; Zimbardo, 1969) that is still commonly utilized by conservative governments. Moreover, the culturally, and socially, contextualized group dynamics undermine the metaphor for “contagion” on having explanatory power regarding the spread of violence during protest movements. Violence, or other forms of antisocial behavior, did not spread. Instead, it was stopped, challenged, or dissipated if ever it appeared due to crowd members interacting with each other.

Conceptualizing the relationship of the crowd and the state as mutually and agentially co-constructive rather than antagonistic, senseless, or barbaric forms space to consider the ways in which police and protesters can orientate and act toward one another to create peaceful interactions. Crowds have the potential for chaos or change. Revisiting the sociocultural psychological assumptions explaining crowd behavior can ensure peaceful assembly which is the hallmark of thriving democracies.

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