

Cognition, Emotion, and Organized Racism

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Cognition and emotion are foundational for many of the mechanisms proposed behind racist movement recruitment and mobilization. Cognition and emotion are, of course, incredibly general terms that capture a range of psychological and social-psychological phenomena. *Cognition* refers to the set of mental processes behind knowledge acquisition, storage, and usage; and *emotion* refers to the range of sudden, short-term neurobiological reactions to environmental stimuli as well as to more durable affective dispositions that one might call “moods” or “feelings” (Jasper 2011, 287).

Social movement researchers vary in the extent to which they treat cognition and emotion as mutually exclusive analytical categories or otherwise examine the interface between the two. Researchers also usually focus their attention on more concrete and analytically tractable cognitive and emotional processes as explanations for recruitment and mobilization. In terms of research on explicitly racist movements (i.e. “organized racism”), some such processes that have received empirical treatments include identity residual, threat perception, and gendered emotional cultures. I briefly address each in turn.

Identity residual – as a form of identity work (Einwohner 2006; Snow and McAdam 2000) – refers to the phenomenon whereby a rejected former social identity continues to impact a person’s interactions, behaviors, and thoughts (Simi et al. 2017). Simi and colleagues (2017) examine identity residual within the context of former US white supremacists. They use dual-process theories of culture and cognition (Lizardo et al. 2016) to show how the embodied nature of respondents’ former white supremacist identities often lead them to experience unwanted thoughts or bodily sensations (such as goose bumps when seeing a swastika on TV (Simi et al. 2017, 1177)). These unintended and unwelcome reactions arise because their immersive bodily experiences with organized hate created deeply entrenched and affect-rich neural networks that are activated at the unconscious level – what is popularly referred to as “hot cognition” (Abelson 1963). These dispositions to racist stimuli can be difficult to “overwrite” with new thoughts and behaviors – at least until they themselves are habitualized.

Work on *threat perception* focuses on the conditions under which a person or group is more likely to sense a threat, from whom or what they perceive the threat, and what they do in response to the (perceived) threat (Almeida 2019). Much threat perception research comes from political psychology, where scholars have found that individuals who identify as politically conservative tend to have a heightened disposition toward the perception of threat (Jost et al. 2003, 361–362). Sociological research on organized

The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements, Second Edition. Edited by David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Douglas McAdam, and Bert Klandermans.

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racism tends to focus on theorizing and identifying the structural environments which might promote racist threat perception (e.g. McVeigh 1999; van Dyke and Soule 2002). For example, McVeigh and Sikkink (2005) find that active racist organizations in the US are more likely to be found in counties with large nonwhite populations that are residentially segregated from other racial-ethnic groups in those counties. They theorize that racist frames are more likely to resonate (and, therefore, racist organizations are more likely to emerge) in communities where the “threat” is legible but not subject to disconfirming evidence through intergroup contact. This theory of “structured ignorance” (McVeigh 2004) is both similar to and divergent from legitimating contexts theory – which builds on an implicit cognitive theory of attention to posit that anti-immigration activity is more likely in communities where immigrant populations enjoy *less* political and demographic representation because such activity is not likely to be publicly salient and therefore not subject to much critical scrutiny (Ebert and Okamoto 2015). In other words, from the legitimating contexts perspective, anti-immigration actions might be cognitively “irrelevant” (Zerubavel 2015).

Ethnographic work shows that, perhaps contrary to popular belief, the day-to-day interactions in racist movement spaces are filled with positive emotions such as pleasure and pride (Futrell, Simi, and Gottschalk 2006, 289–290) – though negative emotions such as fear and anger still serve important attention-focusing and framing purposes (see Bail 2015 for an example in the context of anti-Muslim organizations). However, solidarity-building emotional exchanges such as these appear highly gendered within white supremacist groups. In that sense, white supremacist groups can be thought of as having *gendered emotional cultures* (Latif et al. 2018, 497) – i.e. group-specific beliefs, values, and practices concerning feelings that differ for men and women. In her interviews with women in Klan and neo-Nazi groups, Blee (1996, 696–697) finds that women tend to adopt “emotional resignation” as a sense-making practice, whereby they interpret recruitment into organized racism as something that simply happened to them as opposed to something they seek out actively. These asymmetrical emotional energies can then be a source of “social friction” that leads to movement exit (Latif et al. 2018, 491). At the same time, the collective emotional experiences and social networks formed in these spaces can keep people affiliated with organized racism or otherwise reenter the movement even after the explicit beliefs of white supremacy have abated (Latif et al. 2018).

SEE ALSO: Alt-right; Culture and Social Movements; Emotion and Social Movements; Framing and Social Movements; Identity Work Processes; Participation in Social Movements; Social Psychology of Movement Participation; Neo-Nazi Movements (Europe and the United States); Racist Social Movements; Threat; White Supremacy as a World-wide Movement.

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ABSTRACT

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KEYWORDS

culture; identity; race; social psychology; threat