

# PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF OUTRAGE AGAINST INJUSTICE

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People can become outraged by what they perceive as injustice, like torture or aggressive war, and sometimes this stimulates social action. Perpetrators of such actions regularly use a number of methods, such as cover-up and reinterpretation, to minimise outrage. The struggle between powerful perpetrators and challengers over reactions to occurrences potentially perceived as unfair can be called the dynamics of outrage. Psychology is a crucial factor in such struggles, but there has been no study of psychological perspectives relevant to outrage dynamics. We survey several psychological theories—Freudian psychoanalysis, just world theory, Bandura’s theory of moral disengagement, reactance theory, balance theory, and studies of persuasion—that seem relevant to outrage dynamics. These theories, among others, offer insights about why and when people become outraged and about the tactics of devaluation, reinterpretation, and use of official channels used by perpetrators to minimise outrage. Insights about the psychology of outrage dynamics can assist activists opposing injustice.

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Many people become outraged when something occurs that they perceive as unjust, unfair, excessive, or otherwise inappropriate. Consider, for example, the photos of abuse and torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, revealed through the media in 2004. These led to widespread disgust, revulsion, and anger in many countries, especially among Muslims.

Because perceived injustice predictably leads to outrage, those who are deemed responsible have much to gain by preventing this reaction. Perpetrators with great power—governments, large corporations, militaries—have the greatest capacity to minimize outrage. In the case of Abu Ghraib, initial reports from the Red Cross to the US government led to no action. It was only the publication of the photos that triggered widespread revulsion. Furthermore,

similar prison abuse and torture has occurred at US-run prisons in Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay, but with far less public protest.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, not all people react to events in the same way. What is upsetting to one person may be welcomed by another. Even so, it is clearly observable that some events cause an adverse reaction in a wide cross-section of the population: torture and genocide are two dramatic examples.

Surprisingly, there is relatively little study of the psychological underpinnings of popular reactions to events or situations perceived as unjust. There has been much research into anger, but primarily into anger about what a person directly experiences, not into a person's anger directed outwards—"out-rage" at injustice to others.<sup>2</sup> Our aim in this paper is to give an overview of some psychological theories that can help in understanding the political struggles that occur over the production and inhibition of outrage. In other words, we seek psychological understanding that is relevant to political practice.<sup>3</sup>

In the next section, we give a summary of the dynamics of public outrage as revealed by struggles over events such as the beating of Rodney King. In the following sections, we examine several psychological theories. We start with Freud, concentrating on defence mechanisms. We then examine just-world theory and Bandura's social cognitive theory, each of which gives considerable insight into the dynamics of outrage. Next, we take a brief look at reactance theory, balance theory, and studies of persuasion. In the conclusion, we spell out what psychological understanding has to offer to the study of tactics against injustice.

## OUTRAGE AND BACKFIRE

Social historian Barrington Moore, Jr., examining a wide range of cultures, concluded that there are recurring moral codes, including what is perceived as unjust.<sup>4</sup> For example, in a tacit social contract, people grant certain powers to rulers with the expectation that rulers will offer protection and some degree of justice. When rulers violate common expectations—for example by imposing excessive punishments—this will be perceived as unjust and cause an adverse reaction. In essence, Moore offered a sociological observation that perceptions of injustice are central to the operation of societies.

A closer approach to the dynamics of outrage can be obtained by looking at violent attacks on peaceful protesters. Gene Sharp, the world's leading nonviolence researcher, observed that when peaceful protesters are violently attacked, this regularly causes outrage.<sup>5</sup> He cites, for example, "bloody Sunday,"

the killing of protesters in Russia in 1905, an occasion that caused a great increase in opposition to the Czar. Another example was the 1960 shooting of black protesters in Sharpeville, South Africa by white police, an act that greatly increased international opposition to apartheid. So predictable is this outcome of attacks on peaceful protesters that Sharp gave it the name “political jiu-jitsu,” an analogy with the sport of jiu-jitsu in which the opponent’s force is used against her/him. Sharp’s concept of political jiu-jitsu is an extension of the earlier concept of moral jiu-jitsu developed by Richard Gregg to explain the power of Gandhi’s methods.<sup>6</sup>

Violence is usually considered to be inevitably effective against nonviolent resistance. The phenomenon of political jiu-jitsu shows that this is sometimes incorrect: the violence of the attack can rebound against the attacker, causing greater support for the target among the “grievance group” (those potentially represented by the protesters), among third parties, and among some members of the attacker group. Consider, for example, US civil rights protests in the 1950s and 1960s. Brutal attacks on peaceful protesters generated greater support for the civil rights movement among the black population, among the uninvolved white population who learned about the attacks through media reports, and even among segregationists, some of whom disowned the tactics and supported a degree of change.

Not everyone believes that shooting peaceful protesters is wrong, but many people do, and that is enough to create political jiu-jitsu. This same dynamic can be observed in many cases that fall outside the violence-nonviolence framework. An example is the beating of black motorist Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1991, an event that caused a massive adverse popular reaction after a video of the beating was broadcast on television. King was not a peaceful protester: he was drunk and had been speeding to escape arrest. Nor was he part of a social movement. Nonetheless, large numbers of people believed that the beating was excessive, and this was enough to make it seriously counterproductive for the Los Angeles police, whose reputation plummeted.<sup>7</sup>

The same process can be observed in a wide range of arenas such as defamation,<sup>8</sup> sexual harassment,<sup>9</sup> treatment of refugees,<sup>10</sup> corporate disasters,<sup>11</sup> and war.<sup>12</sup> This more general process, in which an action perceived as unjust is counterproductive for the perpetrator, is called “backfire.” The psychological foundation of backfire is an adverse reaction—which can be labelled outrage, disgust, anger, revulsion, or concern—to a perceived injustice or norm violation.<sup>13</sup>

Although backfires sometimes occur, it is much more common for injustices *not* to backfire. For example, police beatings occur regularly, quite a few of them far more serious than what happened to Rodney King. But few of them generate much attention.<sup>14</sup> The key factors in the King beating were that the beating was perceived as inappropriate and excessive and that vivid information about the beating was communicated to receptive audiences—specifically, a video of the beating, taken by observer George Holliday from a nearby building, was broadcast on television.

Examining a wide range of cases, it can be observed that powerful perpetrators regularly use five methods that inhibit outrage and thus reduce the risk of backfire:

- cover-up of the action;
- devaluation of the target;
- reinterpretation of the action, including by lying, framing, and blaming;
- use of official channels to give an appearance of justice;
- intimidation and bribery of targets, witnesses, and others.<sup>15</sup>

For example, independently George Holliday and Rodney King's brother went to the police about the beating, but, despite their efforts, no official report was recorded. Los Angeles police denigrated King, calling him a "felony evader" and subsequently trying to set him up in compromising situations. The police claimed that King was threatening them during the arrest, and that they were following standard procedures. An inquiry into systemic police problems was established soon after the beating, giving the appearance of official concern, though its recommendations received little attention. Finally, due to fear of reprisal, many witnesses were deterred from testifying at the trials of the officers involved. Thus, all five methods of inhibiting outrage were used in the King-beating saga, though in this case they were insufficient to prevent a major backfire.<sup>16</sup>

The first method of inhibition, cover-up, can prevent people from becoming aware that anything has happened, so psychological processes are not directly involved. But each of the other four methods has important psychological dimensions. Devaluation of the target—through pre-existing prejudices and/or through active processes of labelling, discrediting, and degrading—is centrally about perceptions of a person or group as worthy or unworthy. Reinterpretation, namely the telling of alternative accounts or

encouragement of alternative perspectives, has both cognitive and emotional facets. The use of official channels taps into beliefs about authorities, experts, and formal procedures. Finally, intimidation and bribery operate through people's psychological susceptibility or resistance.

The phenomenon of backfire is important because it shows that injustice perpetrated by those with more power need not be successful: it can be challenged, and, in some circumstances, it can be counterproductive for the perpetrator. Arguably, many potential injustices are prevented by the possibility of backfire: because of the likely public reaction, torture is not carried out in public, but is cloaked in secrecy and denial. The dynamics of outrage are at the core of backfire: a struggle occurs between perpetrators and opponents, with perpetrators regularly using methods of inhibition and opponents using countering methods that can be summarized by the terms revealing, redeeming, reframing, redirecting, and resisting.

There appears to have been little psychological research specifically on political jiu-jitsu or backfire. The closest we have discovered is surveys of university students by Bob Altemeyer, in which students were asked how they would react to government repression of violent and nonviolent protests. The student responses indicated a much stronger reaction against the government when protests were nonviolent. Altemeyer concluded, "When governments try to suppress peaceful protest movements with force, they appear to trigger a backlash against themselves. This might be called the 'Gandhi trap.'"<sup>17</sup>

Some existing psychological theories do throw light on backfire. We outline several of these, looking at the connections between each theory's components and backfire categories, and at the implications of the theory for social action. We do not attempt to survey or judge the theories in general terms, nor to assess their empirical validity, but rather to mine them for insights relevant to the dynamics of outrage.

In the backfire framework, the focus is on tactics—verbal and physical actions—used by perpetrators, with little attention to the mental processes that are involved. For example, when Stacey Koon, in charge of the arrest of Rodney King, said King was in control of the situation in which he was beaten,<sup>18</sup> Koon could be said to be using the tactic of reinterpretation; an associated mental process might be attribution of blame. Psychological theories can provide a means of understanding the way that tactics as statements and actions can be linked to mental processes.

## FREUDIAN THEORY

The most historically influential and controversial psychological theory is Freud's psychodynamic theory. For Freud, humans are driven by instinctual urges and motivated toward fulfillment of their own bodily needs above all else: they are seen as essentially hedonistic, self-interested, passive, and incapable of fighting their natural urges. Freud proposed that the human psyche is comprised of three distinct structures: the id, wholly unconscious and housing socially unacceptable and primitive instincts; the superego, representing internalized societal rules for behaviour, presumably learned in childhood; and the ego, a mediator between the childishly impatient urges of the id and the stiff morality of the superego. The ego attempts to match id-driven needs with socially appropriate objects to fulfill these needs.

Freud considered repression to be the basic defence mechanism by which memories, thoughts, wishes, or feelings deemed too anxiety-provoking or distressing are pushed into the unconscious. Defence mechanisms distort or misrepresent reality and thereby reduce the anxiety caused by the leakage of repressed material into consciousness. Defence mechanisms can help explain perceptions of injustice or their absence.

*Displacement* is when an unacceptable need is repressed and is replaced with a more acceptable and less anxiety-provoking one. *Sublimation* is a form of displacement in which inappropriate or anxiety-provoking feelings are displaced onto more appropriate or positive goals. For example, in the same way that someone may use art to express negative emotional experiences, some individuals join protest actions as a way of expressing personal anger. In this way, sublimation is an irrational distortion of reality that can help explain the propensity of angered people to join in pro-social action.

*Identification* is where an individual attempts to increase self-worth by becoming affiliated with a valued or powerful group. This can work in two ways in relation to injustice because there are two groups to consider: the dominant attacking group and the victims of injustice. It is more likely that identification will work in favour of the attacking group, the group that is powerful and enviable. This defence mechanism may also explain prejudicial attitudes toward groups external to the affiliated group, and blind obedience toward powerful groups (for example, the Nazis). Thus, identification as a defence mechanism explains more about the motives of attackers and their supporters than about the victims.

*Denial of reality* involves protecting the ego by denying some aspect of reality that is too distressing. An example might be an observer's denial that an injustice has occurred, despite abundant evidence to the contrary. As injustices are usually distressing to observe, denial may be one of the primary defence mechanisms used to avoid an outrage response.

*Projection* involves repressing one's true feelings and attributing them to others. For example, members of a group may accuse another in their group of plotting to overthrow the group leader because they themselves have a repressed wish to do so. Projection is involved when people deny their own capacity for action and attribute power and agency to leaders.<sup>19</sup>

*Reaction formation* is the mechanism by which a person's true feelings or wishes are repressed and replaced by the opposite feeling. Here, the individual is essentially overcompensating for unacceptable feelings by expressing their opposite. This defence mechanism can be related to characteristics of the observer or to members of the attacking group. Because outrage itself can be anxiety-provoking, it is likely to be repressed, and feelings of pity for victims may be converted to feelings of hatred or resentment. In this way, a prejudicial and unsympathetic view of the victim may be maintained, even when direct evidence of their suffering is available.

Freud's psychodynamic theory has many additional dimensions that have been debated, challenged, and elaborated at length. We have outlined the part most obviously relevant to backfire, namely the concept of defence mechanisms that can serve to inhibit awareness of, or responses to, injustice.

## THE BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD

When confronted with atrocities, abuse, or other unfortunate situations, many observers blame, devalue, or condemn the victim, even when the victim cannot logically be held responsible. The explanation proposed by Lerner and Simmons was that humans assume there is some overarching fairness inherent in the world, in other words that we live in a "just world."<sup>20</sup> Researchers in this area consider the belief in a just world to be a fundamental delusion,<sup>21</sup> motivated by a need for security, predictability, and safety. If we live in a world where justice prevails, then people get what they deserve and outcomes are predictable results of one's own actions. This reasoning is said to encourage a sense of safety: if individuals behave appropriately, they can expect to avoid unforeseen negative consequences.

This kind of reasoning explains beliefs like the “rape myth,” the idea that rape victims are responsible for being attacked, because they “asked for it” by being flirtatious, dressing inappropriately, or walking through areas known to be unsafe. Although there is no rational basis for these assumptions, this reasoning process allows individuals to feel safe: as long as they behave appropriately they will not be raped themselves. Blaming the victim is a psychological method of reaffirming a threatened belief in a just world.

A person’s belief in a just world is threatened by witnessing an unprovoked or undeserved attack. Observers are theorized either to make efforts to reduce the suffering of the victim or, in cases where this is not possible, to use rationalizing processes and denial to reinterpret the situation by blaming, devaluing, or undermining the position of the victim.

The just-world hypothesis becomes increasingly complex upon examining individual differences in the strength of belief in a just world, the myriad of behavioural reactions and psychological defences available to restore the belief, and conditions under which victimization *does not* result in blaming the victim.

Studies extending the just-world hypothesis propose that people differ in the extent to which they believe the world is just, and in their commitment to this worldview. While some strong believers may react very intensely to a threat to their belief in a just world, others who hold more moderate forms of this belief will not.<sup>22</sup> Individuals who are weak believers in a just world are less likely to blame victims and will have more difficulty accepting enduring social inequities, as they cannot as readily rationalize these to be the fault of the victim. Thus the extent of reaction to a particular event should vary depending on the extent to which an individual believes in a just world: individuals who hold tightly to their belief may be motivated to pro-social action only in cases where they feel that their actions will indeed have an effect in reducing the suffering of the victim—for example, some experiments require observers to make decisions to reduce the level of electric shock apparently given to a victim. In this case, because the proposed action will have an impact on suffering, justice will be restored by pro-social action, and belief in a just world is not threatened. If, however, “strong believers” have no opportunity to control the outcome (for example, only being able to witness a victim receiving ever more painful shocks), their evaluations of the victim will be overwhelmingly negative, as justice must instead be restored by reinterpreting the situation as being the victim’s fault in some way. Accordingly, providing a means to protest, counter,



rebuke, or otherwise control outcomes of injustice would be effective in reducing devaluation of the victim, as the perception of exerting control over the situation would theoretically short-circuit the rationalization process.

One factor that influences the tendency to devalue others is the information provided about the victim. A more complex version of the just-world hypothesis holds that attributions of blame are less likely when positive information is presented about the victim's character. For example, Friedman and Austin found more sympathy and less derogation for an imaginary hit-and-run victim framed as a distinguished researcher (positive condition) compared to a sensationalistic, self-interested researcher (negative condition) or a researcher with routine accomplishments (neutral condition).<sup>23</sup> They also varied the level of suffering supposedly experienced by the imaginary victim, with the finding that, in the positive condition, as suffering increased, so did sympathy for and attraction to the victim. In the negative condition, however, derogatory responses increased steadily as suffering increased. Thus, for those observers who hold strongly to the idea that the world is a just place, positive information appears to evoke sympathy for the victim, and to prevent the irrational process of victim devaluation.

The just-world hypothesis can readily be applied to the dynamics of outrage. The belief in a just world affects perceptions of injustice and, when in combination with cues such as information about a person's character, can predict the apportioning of blame to either the victim or the attacker. It is also useful in terms of explaining why particular methods of inhibiting outrage may be effective. For example, devaluation is easier for those with a strong belief in a just world. This explains why individual differences exist in target devaluation: those who believe strongly in the inherent justice of the world will be more likely to apportion blame to a victim in cases where the observer has no control over the outcome. This is enhanced when the victim is actively devalued by the attacking group (especially in terms of defamation of character). Reinterpretation could be said to employ similar processes. For example, reinterpretation can often involve observer-appeasing reframing by perpetrators that can reaffirm the belief that justice will ultimately prevail and that the attackers' motives are pure. Redefining or reframing the issue is aimed at changing attributions of blame (usually from the attacker to the victim), and is therefore a way of denying that the injured party is in fact a victim. The tactic of reinterpreting the outcome of an attack works by encouraging people to rationalize that there is some positive element to any situation—the "every

cloud has a silver lining” approach. In terms of the just-world hypothesis, this is a non-rational psychological defence to preserve the belief in a just world.<sup>24</sup>

The effectiveness of the tactic of appealing to official channels is particularly well-explained by this model. Most people believe that official systems are in place to preserve justice in society: to punish the wicked and protect the innocent. This perception is stronger for those believing strongly in a just world, so appeals to official channels such as expert panels, courts, and official inquiries will be particularly appealing. This tactic relies upon, and reinforces, existing beliefs that these organizations will eventually “set the record straight.” Therefore, individuals who strongly endorse belief in a just world can be expected to be placated by an appeal to official channels.<sup>25</sup> Overall, the just-world hypothesis has a high degree of conceptual match with elements of the backfire framework, and can adequately explain individual differences in pro-social action via the idea that people hold the belief in a just world to different degrees.

The just-world hypothesis also has practical implications for action groups. The emphasis on framing the character of the victim provides a means of generating sympathy from observers. Another implication is that people strongly endorsing the just-world hypothesis need to be made increasingly aware of pre-existing and effective means of action available to them, and the fact that they do have some control in terms of restoring justice to a given situation. Therefore, publicity about protest actions and groups is essential to the persuasion of observers who believe strongly in a just world, as they require more convincing that they can personally do something about the situation.

## MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

Albert Bandura has developed a comprehensive approach to psychology, called “social cognitive theory.”<sup>26</sup> Its essence is that human behaviour is influenced both by social processes and by cognitive ones, especially learning. One particular aspect of Bandura’s approach, namely what he calls “mechanisms of moral disengagement,” is especially relevant to backfire. If some “reprehensible conduct” leads to detrimental effects for a victim, an observer or participant can morally disengage at each of three facets of the process: the conduct, the effects, and the victim. Bandura describes a range of ways in which this can happen:

- Moral justification, such as when religious authorities give explicit or tacit permission to kill, for example in war.

- Euphemistic labelling, such as describing attacks as retaliation or victims as collateral damage. Perpetrators' sense of guilt is reduced by this sort of labelling, which changes the way that they think about events.
- Palliative comparisons, such as noting that one's own transgressions seem minor compared with the most horrific crimes of opponents.
- Displacement of responsibility, for example saying responsibility lies with superiors who gave orders. Authorities find it useful to ensure that their agents take actions without feeling responsible for their consequences. Governments can use proxy fighters to carry out atrocities and then, if necessary, blame the proxies.
- Diffusion of responsibility, for example by seeing oneself as a cog in the machinery of violence. Army accountants or weapons designers may not feel any personal responsibility for their contributions to killing.
- Ignoring, minimizing, or misinterpreting consequences, such as not investigating the aftermath of an assault. When consequences are at a great distance, such as from a long-range missile, they are easier to ignore or dismiss as minimal.
- Dehumanization, such as when targets are represented as savages, fiends, or no-hopers. Injustice does not seem so bad when victims are subhuman.
- Attribution of blame, such as to victims, as proposed by the just-world hypothesis.<sup>27</sup>

Bandura applies these mechanisms of moral disengagement to perpetrators, but they can just as readily be applied to observers. In relation to the backfire framework, most of these mechanisms fall within the methods of devaluation and reinterpretation. For example, dehumanization is a form of devaluation and euphemistic labelling is a form of reinterpretation. Official channels can assist in moral justification. Bandura's mechanisms of moral disengagement provide a psychological parallel, or underpinning, to the overt actions involved in devaluation, reinterpretation, and the use of official channels.

## REACTANCE THEORY

If something perceived as a freedom is taken away, a person may react by desiring it even more. For example, a toddler prevented from playing with a toy may demand it passionately, ignoring equally attractive toys that are readily

accessible. A teenager banned from smoking may make special efforts to smoke, to defy the ban. The psychological reaction of wanting something more greatly when a perceived freedom has been removed is called reactance.<sup>28</sup>

Reactance can increase outrage at injustice. For example, censorship is seen as a restriction on freedom of expression and can trigger efforts to acquire or experience the censored item. Thus, reactance can increase the prospect that censorship will backfire.<sup>29</sup> This can occur in response to government or corporate suppression of free speech, for example the legal action by McDonald's against two authors of the leaflet "What's Wrong with McDonald's?"

Reactance is especially relevant to two of the methods used by perpetrators that inhibit outrage, namely cover-up and intimidation. Cover-up can prevent audiences from finding out about an injustice, but when a cover-up is exposed, this can generate additional outrage because people feel their right to know has been curtailed. Likewise, intimidation can discourage expression of outrage, but when intimidation is exposed, it can result in a greater reaction, because intimidation is a denial of freedom. Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* had increased sales due to the *fatwa* against him, and against anyone selling the book, by Ayatollah Khomeini.

On the other hand, some forms of reactance have little to do with social justice. For example, marketers of calorific foods can tap into reactance by suggesting that their products are "forbidden," whether by proponents of healthy foods or by the prospective purchaser's guilty conscience.

## BALANCE THEORY

Fritz Heider developed a theory of how attitudes change due to a drive for consistency, called balance theory.<sup>30</sup> Consider two people, Chris and Alex. If they like each other, there is symmetry in their relationship; there is also symmetry if they hate each other. But if Chris likes Alex but not vice versa, there is a tension, with pressure for one or both attitudes to change. Next, suppose they like each other. If both of them like cooking, there is a balance in their relationship with cooking. On the other hand, if Chris loves car racing but Alex thinks it is pointless and wasteful, there is a tension. To achieve balance in relation to car racing, Chris can reduce involvement, Alex can become less critical and more interested, or Chris and Alex's relationship may cool, or some combination of these. Psychological balance is achieved by reducing the

clashes between the valences—likes or dislikes—in people's relationships with each other and with objects, activities, or events.

Balance theory can be applied to outrage. If Chris and Alex are both outraged about war, or if neither thinks or cares much about it, then there is balance. But if Chris is outraged but Alex is not (and decides to join the army), this can, according to balance theory, cause Chris or Alex to change their attitudes, or their relationship to become less close. Balance theory normally deals with three entities. Extending it to many individuals and one issue, such as war, results in a model like a group of magnetized filaments: each filament is likely, but not guaranteed, to line up like ones nearby.

Consider attitudes toward Rodney King, beaten by Los Angeles police. Citizens of Los Angeles who watched the video would be likely to reinforce each other's beliefs that the beating was an abuse. However, members of the police would be likely to reinforce their belief that the beating was legitimate or that King deserved it. Balance theory thus helps explain the effects of interaction on interpretation and devaluation. People make judgements about justice and injustice in part based on their independent assessments but in part to reduce tensions with others close to them.

Balance theory also helps to explain the power of official channels. If most people believe that official channels dispense justice, there will be pressure on others to adopt similar attitudes and, for example, to accept the legal case against police officers as providing justice for King. Only in anti-establishment subcultures will there be consistency in rejecting official channels. Though there is much more to attitude formation and change than consistency with others, balance theory can nonetheless provide some insight into the psychological dynamics involved.

## STUDIES OF PERSUASION

Persuasion is central to the dynamics of outrage: powerful perpetrators attempt to persuade audiences that their actions are appropriate—that is, not outrageous—whereas action groups often try to generate outrage through various types of appeals and actions. There is a huge body of psychological research about methods of persuasion, much of it driven by advertising interests.<sup>31</sup> Politicians also have a strong interest in persuasion, for example controlling their message through “spin-doctoring;” many of their techniques are covered in the literature on propaganda.<sup>32</sup>

Studies of persuasion draw on a range of psychological theories. Hence, for a brief overview of this area, it is convenient to look at popular accounts of persuasion techniques.<sup>33</sup> Robert Cialdini's widely read book *Influence* classifies methods of persuasion into six categories, each supported by much empirical research.

1. Reciprocation: people who receive something are likely to reciprocate, a feeling exploited by companies that offer free gifts or free trial periods for products. Powerful groups can use their resources to buy off critics through the technique of bribery: some recipients may feel they owe a favour to the supplier.

2. Commitment and consistency: when people make a public commitment, they like to remain consistent with it. This can be used in struggles over interpretation of events.

3. Social proof: as proposed by balance theory, people take cues from others in their beliefs and behaviours. If others express little outrage, it is harder to generate concern. Many important issues languish in obscurity while a few are widely taken up as social problems, passing a tipping point of social contagion.<sup>34</sup> Dramatic exposure in the media, like in the cases of Abu Ghraib and the beating of Rodney King, can help this process along.

4. Liking: if you like someone, you are more likely to be persuaded by him or her, and vice versa. This has direct links to devaluation and is compatible with balance theory.

5. Authority: powerful perpetrators, especially governments, are often seen as having authority; furthermore, they can often call on support from others with authority, such as experts and courts, in the technique of using official channels to dampen outrage.

6. Scarcity: when something is scarce, many people want it more, as described in reactance theory.

Governments and corporations hire communication experts to improve their capacity for persuasion, whereas citizens and customers, if they think about this issue at all, must rely on the relatively few books, articles, and action groups oriented to resisting powerful persuaders.

## CONCLUSION

A few people may become socially engaged purely as a result of abstract, rational contemplation, but for most people emotion is crucial.<sup>35</sup> A key trigger is people's reactions to what they perceive as injustice or unfairness, which can be described by terms such as outrage, revulsion, disgust, distress or, more mildly,

concern. Whatever the term, an emotional response to injustice frequently underpins and drives participation in social action. Activism often results in greater awareness of and exposure to injustice, thereby fostering continued involvement.

Understanding the psychology of outrage is therefore important for understanding and improving activism. To approach this topic, we looked at the backfire model, a particular framework for understanding the dynamics of outrage. According to this model, powerful perpetrators commonly use five methods to reduce outrage over injustice: covering up the action; devaluing the target; reinterpreting the events; using official channels to give an appearance of justice; and intimidation and bribery. To better understand these methods and corresponding counter-tactics, we examined several psychological theories, including Freudian theory, just-world theory, Bandura's social cognitive explanation of moral disengagement, reactance theory, and balance theory, as well as studies of persuasion. Each of these offers insights into the psychology underlying the expression or inhibition of outrage.

Our examination here is preliminary. We surveyed many psychological theories to find some that seemed especially relevant to the dynamics of outrage; no doubt there are many other theories that offer insight.<sup>36</sup> For example, the concept of identity can help explain why individuals support either the perpetrator or the target: whichever one is seen as part of one's own group is more likely to be defended. Identification appears to underlie the perspectives of the just-world, moral disengagement, and balance theories.<sup>37</sup>

Psychological theories are simply ways of explaining the complexities of the human mind and human behaviour, and there are obviously many frameworks for approaching this task. Some will be more useful than others for understanding the dynamics of outrage. It is possible that psychological theories could be developed specifically for this purpose.

Activists can improve their campaigns through insights into the psychology of outrage. An understanding of defence mechanisms and methods of moral disengagement is crucial when preparing appeals for support.<sup>38</sup> An understanding of just-world beliefs and their complexities can help in raising awareness about injustice, for example by providing positive information about victims and offering people opportunities to support or participate in campaigns. Knowledge of reactance theory can encourage activists to frame campaigns to be about increasing freedom rather than restricting it. Balance theory offers a reminder that people's attitudes are likely to be influenced by the attitudes of those around them. Finally, activists need to be aware of the

dynamics of persuasion, especially when they mount challenges to groups advised by communication specialists.

Outrage, a response to perceived injustice, can be a powerful force for change, which is why powerful groups routinely take steps to minimize it. Understanding the psychological dynamics of outrage can assist activists to be more effective in countering these steps.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Truda Gray and Brian Martin, "Abu Ghraib," in Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 129–41.
- 2 For example, just one of nine chapters in Carol Tavris's *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) deals with "a rage for justice."
- 3 See also V. K. Kool, *The Psychology of Nonviolence and Aggression* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Rachel M. Macnair, ed. and Psychologists for Social Responsibility, *Working for Peace: A Handbook of Practical Psychology and Other Tools* (Atascadero, CA: Impact, 2006).
- 4 Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (London: Macmillan, 1978).
- 5 Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), 657–703. See also Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 2005), 405–13.
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