

## Special Thematic Section on "Societal Change"

### Dramatic Social Change: A Social Psychological Perspective

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#### Abstract

Dramatic social changes, such as the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the ongoing "Arab Spring" uprisings, are present throughout history and continue to affect millions of people every day. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of empirical 'real-world' research due in part to a lack of basic theory that might provide a framework to guide social psychological research. In the present paper, we argue that both psychology generally, and social psychology more specifically, have failed to adequately address the issue of dramatic social change. We argue that there is a need to move towards a new theoretical framework, one that is capable of addressing dramatic societal changes in terms of their impact at the individual level. As a first step toward achieving this goal, the present paper has two main objectives. We first offer a brief review of the extensive literature from the field of sociology, followed by a more in-depth analysis of the more limited psychological literature. Specifically, research on the topics of collective action, relative deprivation, and perceptions of social change are presented. Second, we outline the challenges associated with developing a heuristic framework for the *psychology of social change*.

**Keywords:** collective action, perceptions of social change, psychology of social change, relative deprivation, social change

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Dramatic social change is not merely a distant phenomenon of historical interest; it is one that impacts everyone on a daily basis. Indeed, dramatic social changes affect millions of people, are omnipresent, inevitable, and touch every major and minor societal institution. Recent examples such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Arab Spring, and Hurricane Katrina are reminders that social changes are more frequent than people assume. As Weinstein (2010) eloquently noted: "Rapid change, both peaceful and violent, is a fact of life that virtually everyone on Earth today has come to expect, if not unconditionally accept" (p. 3).

Sociologists, to their credit, have focused a great deal of attention on the study of social change. Their main questions revolve around what catalyzes social change events and behaviors. A variety of sociological theories have been developed to explain what possible overarching factors may have led to the diversity of revolutions

and transitions seen throughout human history. For example, some sociological theories have identified the factors that spurred our social transition from a nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary one (Nolan & Lenski, 2010).

Understanding the factors and patterns that lead to social change in humanity remains a pivotal investigation. Nevertheless, our understanding of social change will remain incomplete until one fundamental question is answered: *How does the individual adapt to, and cope with, dramatic social change?* (see Rogers, 2003). Answering this question is pivotal because it is only by understanding the adaptation process of individuals facing dramatic social change that the scientific community will be able to create tools that will help people and communities during such crises.

Considering how psychology is the study of the individuals' thoughts and behaviour, this discipline, rather than sociology, seems perfectly poised to deepen our understanding of the individual processes at the heart of this research question. Paradoxically, however, the number of genuine 'real-world' psychological studies on dramatic social change has been very limited. This is partly due to the distinct lack of basic theory regarding the psychology of social change currently capable of serving as a framework to guide social scientists. Hence, researchers in psychology have no clear theoretical sense of what social change actually is. Researchers, therefore, have not come to articulate, much less understand, the diversity of consequences that emerge on the individual and communal level. Thus, we argue that both psychology generally and social psychology specifically, have failed to adequately address the issue of social change. Moreover, populations that have lived through dramatic social change remain surprisingly understudied and underrepresented in the current literature (e.g., Subašić, Reynolds, Reicher, & Klandermans, 2012).

The general goal of our paper is to propose that there is an urgent need to move towards a *psychology of social change* (de la Sablonnière, 2013; de la Sablonnière & Usborne, in press). The psychology of social change would offer a new perspective in psychology by allowing researchers to focus on the different ways in which people's adaptation takes form in an unstable environment. In this way, we hope to address the paucity of information on the individual experience of dramatic social change.

As a first step toward developing a psychology of social change, this article (1) reviews the psychological literature associated with social change, and (2) outlines the challenges in moving toward the psychology of social change. By doing this, we give the theoretical foundations for studying social changes from an individual's point of view as well as practical considerations for future research. As the field of sociology has been instrumental in early efforts to pave the way for social change research, it is to sociological theories of change that we must first turn.

## Social Change and Sociology

Social change lies at the heart of sociology as a discipline (e.g., Giddens, Duneier, Appelbaum, & Carr, 2011; Krznaric, 2007; Sztompka, 1998; Weinstein, 2010). Some authors have argued that the study of social change is what defines the field of sociology (Giddens et al., 2011; Nolan & Lenski, 2010). This analysis is echoed by Sztompka (1994) who argues: "The study of social change is at the very core of sociology. Perhaps all sociology is about change" (p. xiii; see also Sztompka, 2004).

Generally, sociologists have conceptualized social change as a global, wide-ranging phenomenon affecting all branches of society. For example, Giddens and colleagues (2011) define social change as "the transformation

over time of the institutions and culture of a society” (p. 606). The central purpose of studying social change has thus been to understand large-scale historical events, from the Bolshevik revolution to modern day globalization. Moreover, several theories of social change in sociology have focused primarily on the macro processes involved in the emergence and progression of social change. For example, *Functionalist Theory* views society as being in a constant struggle to maintain a state of equilibrium. Thus, a change in one sector of society triggers adjustments in other sectors so as to maintain the equilibrium (Parsons, 1964; Rocher, 1992). According to this theoretical framework, a society is undergoing social change when the entire system is disrupted or modified at once. Competing sociological frameworks such as *Evolutionary Theory* and *Conflict Theory* also focus on social change at the macro level (Macionis, Jansson, & Benoit, 2008).

Sociological theories have been extremely useful for understanding social change as a global phenomenon, and, as such, sociology has served as an influential starting point for our own theorizing and research. Specifically, based on the functionalist theory in sociology, we define dramatic social change as the “profound societal transformations that produce a complete rupture in the equilibrium of social structures because their adaptive capacities are surpassed” (de la Sablonnière, Taylor, Perozzo, & Sadykova, 2009, p. 325). The field of sociology has not tended to consider individuals as central to the process of social change nor has it studied how they are affected by social change (de la Sablonnière, 2013; Rogers, 2003). Sociologists have instead approached the study of social change from a macro perspective, which, although crucial, does not make a direct contribution to our understanding of the psychological processes affecting the individuals forced to experience these changes.

## Review of Psychological Research

Traditionally, research in psychology, especially social psychology, was spurred by public and political interest to understand the most prominent social issues of the time, which in the wake of the Second World War included the mechanisms behind violent human behavior, social revolutions, and wars (Hill, 2006; Morawski, 1982).

Social psychologists then became committed to studying social phenomena experimentally (Hill, 2006; Sewell, 1989) in order to isolate the important factors affecting aggression, social influence, negative attitudes and social cognition. A rigorous, laboratory-based methodology was developed and, while slowly enabling an understanding of intra-individual processes, the laboratory paradigm has been judged by critics as being superficial, simplistic and generally lacking external validity (Hill, 2006; Pancer, 1997; see also Billig, 2009; Potter & Edwards, 2001). Some have contended that laboratory experiments are unrepresentative of the social context (Allport, 1968; Oishi, Kesebir, & Snyder, 2009) and tend to be individualistic in focus with little genuine social impact (Hill, 2006; Kruglanski, 2001).

The result is that today’s social psychological research appears to have largely abandoned investigations concerned with precisely *how* individuals are affected by the most salient real-world social issue of our time – namely, the impact of dramatic social change (de la Sablonnière & Osborne, *in press*). Despite the initial impetus of social psychologists to understand the impact of real-world issues, explanations of social change today are quite limited, and fail to adequately account for the processes experienced at the micro or individual level. To our knowledge, only three distinct areas of research in psychology have emerged to address social change issues from an individual perspective: Collective action, relative deprivation, and the investigation of perceptions of social change.

In what follows, we describe each of these research areas in more detail to highlight the current state of the literature and its contributions to our conceptualization of a psychology of social change.

## Collective Action

Based upon the work of seminal social psychologist Henri Tajfel, social psychologists have traditionally viewed social change as an adaptive strategy. Tajfel believed that status differences between groups were the driving force behind social change, and that the adaptive strategies taken by members of a group were designed to maintain or acquire a positive social identity (i.e., favoring the in-group over the out-group; Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996; Tajfel, 1975, 1978, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). The factors that lead individuals to choose collective action as a means to achieve a positive and distinct social identity have become the focus of many research programs designed to understand social change (Subašić et al., 2012). This focus has led some authors to perceive social change as a reactionary phenomenon, or simply the “by-product of our pursuit of other goals and interests” (Subašić et al., 2012, p. 62).

Collective action research has focused primarily on the emergence of social change as a process through which group members can redefine their present and future social identity (Subašić et al., 2012). This view of social change as a product of positive identity pursuits has primarily led to the investigation of conflicts between subgroups within a community or between in-group and out-group members. For instance, research has demonstrated that collective action stems from the dissatisfaction experienced by in-group members in the context of negative comparisons with competing out-groups (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). When a negative social comparison arises, group members develop a feeling of threat that propels them to collective action (e.g., Abeles, 1976; Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983; Isaac, Mutran, & Stryker, 1980; van Zomeren et al., 2008).

This explanatory framework has been applied to incidents of collective action designed to instigate group-based positive social change, including civil violence (Finkel & Rule, 1986), rioting (Caplan & Paige, 1968; Miller, Bolce, & Halligan, 1977) and civil disobedience (Isaac et al., 1980). For example, Isaac and colleagues (1980) empirically identified the perceived inequalities necessary in the mobilization of Black and White adults. This research resonates with the early theorization of intergroup and group-based emotions, whereby anger may form a link between negative appraisal and specific action tendencies (e.g., Mackie & Smith, 2002; Tausch et al., 2011; van Zomeren et al., 2008).

A key challenge to collective action research has been to link psychological and sociological views on member participation in social movements (van Zomeren et al., 2008). By focusing on the key predictors of collective action and agents of change, however, such research assumes a unidirectional conceptualization of social change, whereby the recipients of the social change (e.g., the out-group members) are ignored. In their recent quantitative research synthesis, van Zomeren and colleagues (2008) reviewed socio-psychological perspectives in an effort to establish the magnitude and stability of the effect that social identity, perceived injustice and perceived efficacy have on collective action (see also van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012). According to this perspective, social identity allows individuals to interpret disadvantages as unjust and to challenge those in power.

Although collective action research has played an instrumental role in understanding social change, we argue that there are three important limitations to this perspective: (1) only specific types of social change are addressed; (2) individuals are assumed to have control over the events; and (3) the differentiation between structural and incidental disadvantages is largely neglected. In its current form, the study of social change as a consequence of

negative social comparisons is incomplete in that it inherently incorporates a number of limitations that hinder the development of a holistic psychology of social change.

The first limitation of collective action research is that only specific types of social change are addressed. Collective action research approaches the concept of social change in terms of events that impact an entire community simultaneously, and does not consider changes that target a specific sub-group of people. Hence, we argue that social change research should not focus solely on the psychological factors leading to collective action, which may only help to explain actual well-defined intergroup conflicts, usually of a political or economic nature. Rather, social change research needs to explore the full spectrum of events that dramatically affect individuals and societies, such as migration movements, natural disasters, and technological advancements.

Secondly, in the field of collective action research there is an implicit and at times explicit assumption of causality. Social change is interpreted to be a consequence of collective action and as a result is instigated on the basis of individual decisions and behavior (van Zomeren et al., 2008). This assumption has important theoretical implications because it narrows the nature of the psychological process underpinning social change to one that assumes psychological control. By inferring that most individuals have control over the changes that affect their lives, collective action research neglects the vast array of social changes where people have little or no control over the course of the events that changed their lives.

The third limitation of collective action literature pertains to the lack of differentiation between types of disadvantages affecting individuals and groups. Indeed, although "there is considerable variability in the type of disadvantage that collective action seeks to redress" (van Zomeren et al., 2008, p. 509), collective action literature does not systematically differentiate between structural disadvantages, which imply large, pervasive and systemic effects, and incidental disadvantages, which imply suddenly imposed conditions requiring adaptation to a novel situation (for a discussion see van Zomeren et al., 2008). For example, based upon the assumption of control within collective action research, Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, and Mielke (1999) have analyzed group efficacy as the proximal predictor of collective action. The focus on efficacy echoes the sociological construct of individual agency and its potential for shaping and thus controlling the social structure (e.g., Gergen, 1999). However, through distinguishing between structural and incidental disadvantages, van Zomeren et al. (2008) found that group efficacy is a less good predictor of collective action in response to structural disadvantages than to incidental ones. Thus, group-based appraisals and responses in the face of new conditions differ from those in the face of pervasive ones. Moreover, sudden and unpredictable disadvantages require adaptation to a novel set of circumstances (Kutak, 1938; van Zomeren et al., 2008) and must also be included in any thorough and complete psychology of social change. For example, rapid adaptation requires a sense of social identity to be formed anew and one that can incorporate subjective disadvantage into an individual's or a group's psyche (Reicher, 1987). An understanding of this mechanism is important not just within processes associated within collective action, but in helping to understand more generally how individual coping and adjustment mechanisms are formed in a rapid changing context.

In essence, we argue that attempts to understand social change will remain inadequate until we are able to account for the unprecedented occurrence, rate and diversity of dramatic social changes that exists today. Above all, the implications in terms of individual psychological well-being as a *reaction* to social change need to be considered. Collective action research has greatly improved our knowledge of the prerequisites of specific instances of social change and social change behavior, but a holistic account of the individual processes and reactions to various types of social change remains elusive. Relative deprivation theory has offered, and continues to offer, important

insight into the subjective experience of individuals whose psychological well-being arises from group-based comparisons with other socially relevant contexts. Thus, we turn our attention to the role of relative deprivation for understanding social change.

## Relative Deprivation

Relative Deprivation (RD) Theory suggests that resentment, injustice and anger emerge from individuals and groups following disadvantageous comparisons (Crosby, 1976; Runciman, 1966, 1968). Feeling relatively deprived has been negatively associated with well-being (Crosby, 1976). Accordingly, the more one feels dissatisfied following disadvantageous comparisons, the greater the negative impact on well-being. RD is also posited to be a central motivator behind collective action and mobilization towards achieving positive social change for disadvantaged groups.

Traditionally, RD researchers focused on the impact of RD on group movements (Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983; Tyler & Smith, 1998). The majority of research on RD has been performed on the basis of genuine social comparisons, that is, comparing the in-group to a distinct out-group (e.g., Walker, 1999). Researchers would ask disadvantaged group members to compare their current group situation to the situation of a specified out-group and assess the impact of these comparisons on collective action. For example, Mummendey and colleagues (1999) asked a sample of East Germans to compare their material position relative to West Germans in a context following German unification. East German participants perceived their own group as experiencing less favorable conditions than their West Germans counterparts. Feelings of RD, in turn, significantly predicted participants' willingness to engage in collective strategies in order to redress their perceived disadvantage.

More recently, researchers have focused on another form of RD, temporal RD, which represents the feeling of dissatisfaction that emerge among group members following disadvantageous comparisons of their group conditions at a given point in time to perceived conditions at another point in time. For example, research participants would be asked to compare the current economic conditions of their group (i.e., at the present time) to its past economic conditions (e.g., two years ago) or to anticipated economic conditions in the future (e.g., in two years from now). It has been proposed that people tend to use temporal comparisons to re-evaluate their status amidst periods of change (Albert, 1977). Indeed, research has shown that temporal comparisons become salient when individuals and groups are forced to adjust to a new reality (e.g., Brown & Middendorf, 1996; de la Sablonnière, Hénault, & Huberdeau, 2009). Temporal comparisons give rise to temporal RD when the contemporary status of an individual or group is evaluated against their subjective status held at another point in time (Redersdorff & Guimond, 2006; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012; Walker & Pettigrew, 1984).

When investigating temporal RD, researchers have used traditional temporal reference points placed at an arbitrary moment in the near past or future of a group's history (e.g., Abeles, 1976; Appelgryn & Bornman, 1996; Dambrun, Taylor, McDonald, Crush, & Méot, 2006; Wilson & Ross, 2001). For example, Dambrun and colleagues (2006) designed items to evaluate temporal RD by asking South African participants to compare their present group situation to what they anticipate their situation to be in one year from that point. This approach, however, has since been criticized (e.g., de la Sablonnière, Taylor, et al., 2009), as it fails to fully appreciate the historical context from which people's reactions emerge. That is, considering that feelings of RD are anchored in a group's history, other time periods might be more appropriate than the arbitrary one's selected by the researchers (e.g., Bougie, Osborne, de la Sablonnière, & Taylor, 2011).

More specifically concerning the standard use of arbitrary temporal reference points for comparison in temporal RD studies, recent research demonstrates that the predictive efficiency, when assessing the impact of temporal RD on outcomes such as well-being, is improved when RD is considered within a historical perspective. Establishing this historical perspective involves considering the entire trajectory of one's group's history, where important historical points are used as temporal references for comparison (see [Bougie et al., 2011](#)). For example, if one was to study the trajectory of RD of Inuit people of Canada, feelings of RD would be assessed for each important period of Inuit history. Specifically, Inuit participants could evaluate their group's conditions throughout many generations. That is, when the first Inuit settled on the Arctic territory of Canada (First generation), when the White colonizers arrived (Great-grandparents generation), when the Inuit transitioned from a nomadic to a sedentary way of life (Grandparents generation), the participants' parents' generation, the current generation (participants' generation) and the future generation of Inuit (see [de la Sablonnière, Pinard St-Pierre, Taylor, & Annahatak, 2011](#)). Measuring RD throughout many historical points would permit to assess how the participants perceive the trajectory of their group's conditions. Such an approach requires a subsequent shift and a reconceptualization of temporal RD methodology in order to understand the impact of various social changes in a group's history.

In order to establish the importance of using an historical perspective, several research projects testing the relationship between outcomes of RD and multiple temporal points of comparison have been undertaken across different social contexts. The first empirical test was conducted in Kyrgyzstan ([de la Sablonnière, Taylor, et al., 2009](#)). Kyrgyzstan is a small country in central Asia where significantly rapid and dramatic social changes were imposed following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, an event from which social repercussions continue to emanate today. A total of 565 Kyrgyzstani participants were recruited in the wake of the 2005 Tulip revolution, a series of popular protests denouncing President Akayev's rise to power ([British Broadcasting Corporation News, 2005](#)). In their research, [de la Sablonnière, Taylor, and colleagues \(2009\)](#) proposed and tested a series of three hypotheses within the context of such dramatic social changes. First, it was hypothesized that the relationship between temporal RD and well-being would be stronger when considering more than one temporal reference point. In support of their claims, temporal reference points exerted a proportional influence upon collective well-being, with the addition of distant past comparisons significantly improving the predictive power of temporal collective RD. Second, the authors hypothesized and found empirical support for the idea that historical periods that participants perceived as important to their group would play a greater role in determining their well-being than periods of lesser significance (see also [Bougie et al., 2011](#)).

Finally, it was hypothesized that the perceived trajectory of temporal RD would influence people's well-being. Results were confirmed as it was found that an increase in collective well-being is observed when participants perceive the RD trajectory of their group to be relatively stable, as opposed to non-stable. The trajectory of RD was also found to have an impact on personal attitudes toward life, an alternative measure of personal well-being ([de la Sablonnière, Auger, Sadykova, & Taylor, 2010](#)). These results were corroborated and extended in a different context similarly associated with dramatic social changes, that is, among a large representative sample of Black and White South Africans ([de la Sablonnière, Auger, Taylor, Crush, & McDonald, in press](#)). Beyond replicating the impact that the different trajectories of temporal RD have on both collective and personal well-being, the different trajectories also influenced interracial attitudes. Thus, our historical approach focusing on not just one, but several key temporal comparisons, seems to have a number of implications beyond collective well-being.

Given that perceptions of RD influence a wide range of variables, and that citizens of the same country may have very different interpretations of historical events ([de la Sablonnière et al., in press; Huang, Liu, & Chang, 2004](#)),

an in-depth understanding of individuals' perspective of their group's history could be used to assess the influence of social change. More specifically, if historically relevant points of an RD trajectory are events involving dramatic social change, then investigating how an individual perceives the trajectory of his or her group's RD would show how much the individual feels such social change impacted negatively on the in-group throughout history. This new trajectory methodology could use social change as an anchor and is thus in line with efforts to fully examine the complexity of the changing social context in order to better understand its effects at the individual level. In the next section, we review perceptions of social change as an important theoretical perspective for investigating individuals in the context of dramatic social change.

## Perceptions of Social Change

The shift in focus towards an individual perspective initiated by RD research has gained additional momentum through another line of research that engages in understanding how individuals perceive the different instances and types of social change that occur. A focus on how individuals actually experience social change, and view the change itself, is desperately needed. The social change literature to date has been based upon the perceptions, feelings and interpretations of participants who are removed from the dramatic events they attempt to understand. Understanding social change requires a focus on the first-hand experience of individuals who have lived through dramatic events, where "live through" involves the entire sudden transformation of their society (Balakrishnan, 1993) including personally suffering from the consequences of social change (Aldwin & Revenson, 1986; Forkel & Silbereisen, 2001), observing first-hand its effects on their group (de la Sablonnière et al., 2010), and ultimately finding a way to make meaning out of the events that influenced their personal and social lives. As a result, incorporating their perceptions and knowledge are the crucial raw material and theoretical building blocks to enable researchers to develop an understanding and framework for what social change represents and of the psychological effects dramatic events may have.

With this in mind, social psychologists have begun to examine the perceptions of individuals who have indeed witnessed and experienced dramatic social change. At this early stage, the focus has been on empirically testing the role played by attributes of social change that have been previously identified by sociologists (e.g., Beaton, Tougas, & Joly, 1996; de la Sablonnière & Tougas, 2008; de la Sablonnière, Tougas, & Lortie-Lussier, 2009; Kanter, 1977; Yoder, 1991). Thus far the *number*, *rapidity* and *valence* of social change are the three attributes most discussed in the literature. Inspired by Kanter's (1977) theory, which suggests that the proportion of minority employees in an organization could influence their perceived status and treatment, the number of social change has been defined in recent literature as the perceived number of life domains affected by a dramatic change (de la Sablonnière, Tougas, et al., 2009). The rapidity of social change corresponds to the perceived speed at which a social change has occurred (Albert & Sabini, 1974; Yoder, 1991). Finally, the valence of social change represents an individual's positive or negative evaluation of the social change (de la Sablonnière, Tougas, et al., 2009).

More recently, two social psychological studies have focused on exploring if additional attributes of dramatic social change could be identified, again from the perspective of individuals who were living through the social change (de la Sablonnière, French Bourgeois, Najih, Perenlei, & Gorborukova, 2013). The research was conducted in Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan, two countries for which major political and economic unrest have become commonplace. The first study involved three focus group discussions in Mongolia where the meaning given by individuals to their experiences with social change were explored. The data was analyzed using the strategies proposed by constructivist grounded theory (see Charmaz, 1990, 2008; Eaves, 2001). The results showed that six different attributes emerged from the focus group discussions. The three previously identified attributes, number, rapidity, and valence,

were important themes. However, three new factors figured prominently: The scope of social change, the effect of social change on the individual, and the effect of social change on society. The scope of social change represents the extent to which an event affects different domains of life, such as the political system, the judicial system, the economy and the health system, to name a few. The effects of social change on the individual and on society are the first attributes to explicitly refer to people's lived experiences with the aftermath of social change. As such, the effect of social change on the individual represents the extent to which a person was affected by the change whereas the effect of social change on society reflects the manner in which the people of a country were touched by the events.

Using a quantitative methodology, the second study, conducted in Kyrgyzstan, examined whether Kyrgyz individuals would identify attributes similar to those that emerged from the data in Mongolia by asking participants to spontaneously generate attributes of dramatic social change. Because *rapidity* is acknowledged as a central attribute of dramatic social change in both the sociology and psychology literature (e.g., Beaton et al., 1996; Nolan & Lenski, 2010), it was given as an example to the participants who were asked to identify and define new attributes of change. This study replicated the first as the same attributes emerged. Moreover, the Kyrgyz participants identified two new attributes that did not emerge from the focus group discussions in Mongolia: The force (i.e., the strength of the changes that occurred and their propensity to instigate other changes) and the duration of social change (i.e., the amount of time during which a social change takes place). Although the rapidity and the duration attributes may seem similar, they differ in one crucial way: The duration may involve more than the period of time during which changes occurred. The participants of the study indicated that the duration could also encompass the time needed to develop the country and the time between changes. Thus, the results of the two studies support the attributes that were previously reported in the sociological and psychological literature (i.e., number, rapidity and valence) and suggest five new attributes for future study (i.e., scope, duration, force, effect on the individual and effect on society).

Such attributes of social change may enable social psychologists to focus on important issues including the psychological consequences of specific characteristics of social change. Research has already begun to investigate these issues by studying the association between the number, rapidity and valence of social change and feelings of injustice or frustration resulting from unfavorable comparisons (de la Sablonnière & Tougas, 2008; de la Sablonnière, Tougas, et al., 2009). The results of these studies suggest that feelings of RD vary depending on how individuals characterize the social change. For example, participants tended to make temporal comparisons, as opposed to social comparisons, when change was perceived as negative and rapid.

In addition to studying how the perceptions of social change affect the individual, identifying the characteristics of social change also allows researchers to study how individual characteristics affect the different factors involved in social change. For example, Goodwin (n.d., 2009) proposed a theory that examines individuals' adjustment to rapid dramatic social change: The Adjustment to Change Theory (ACT). It proposes that the personal characteristics of individuals, social support and nature of the event are predictors of individuals' and groups' evaluations of social change. Goodwin and colleagues tested components of the ACT model in multiple contexts of rapid dramatic social change, such as Eastern Europe and Hong Kong (see Goodwin, 2006; Goodwin, Nizharadze, Luu, Kosa, & Emelyanova, 2001; Goodwin & Tang, 1998). As an illustration, Goodwin, Willson, and Gaines (2005) conducted two studies at a time where unpredictable terrorist attacks were spreading to all corners of the globe. Results from these studies suggest that personal characteristics (e.g., benevolence, openness, and hedonism) may play a role in the evaluation of social change. For instance, the authors suggested that individuals who

maintained intimate relationships with others (i.e., those high on benevolence) were more likely to perceive change as a threat to their friends and family.

Taken together, the findings linking perceptions of social change to antecedents and consequences at the individual level illustrate potential avenues for future research. Particularly, results indicate that specific attributes, such as rapidity, are central to the manner in which people adapt to dramatic social change. The other attributes that have been identified in the Mongolian and Kyrgyz studies should also be considered in future research. As an example, prospective studies could assess whether certain attributes have a greater influence on adaptation processes than others.

## Toward a Psychology of Social Change

As the frequency and intensity of dramatic social change continue to rise in today's world (Weinstein, 2010), it is increasingly important to understand the psychological impacts of such events on individuals and groups. While social psychology has begun to contribute to social change research and to extend beyond a sociological perspective, we propose that the development of a *psychology of social change* is necessary to account for the individuals who lived through social change, their experiences and adaptation strategies.

As a first step in understanding the psychological consequences associated with dramatic social change through an individual perspective, three areas of research in psychology were reviewed: Collective action, relative deprivation and perceptions of social change. Although researchers have begun investigating social change, the importance of a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social change experiences and individual psychology should not be understated, as auxiliary benefits may emerge from more detailed investigations. For example, it stands to reason that *how* individuals react to the social change that affects them may reciprocally impact upon the course, evolution or severity of the social change itself. Perhaps the Haitian earthquake of 2010 may not have had such a devastating effect had individuals been provided with adequate resources to cope psychologically following the natural disaster. Further investigating the psychological mechanisms implied in a context of social change could enable researchers to better tailor appropriate support before, during and after dramatic social changes when needed. Such research could improve the efficacy of tools and resources available to individuals, thus diminishing the negative impact of social change.

Despite the urgency for the progression of social change research in social psychology, many challenges still remain that hinder its development. Given the novelty of this branch of research, and that the foundations for its theoretical framework are at an early conceptual stage, the following sections will discuss the main hurdles to the study of social change in the hopes of providing a base upon which future research on social change might focus as well as highlighting challenges researchers need to consider. We will first discuss the issue of defining social change, and then the complexities involved in studying social change empirically.

### The Challenge of Defining Social Change

Psychology and sociology alike have failed to consistently define social change within an individual perspective. This failure has severely impeded the cohesion and progression of contemporary empirical research. At present, the concept of social change represents an overly complex umbrella term that encompasses a range of dynamic social contexts, from revolutionary and sudden uprisings to incremental technological transformations.

Two social change examples serve to highlight this complexity: The Arab Spring and the introduction of the cell phone. First, the recent Arab Spring movements were highly politicized, attempting to overturn the presiding autocratic political structures in favor of democracy within a number of North African and Middle Eastern nations. In Egypt however, despite the important changes that were taking place, a faction of the population returned to the streets 12 months following the democratic election of President Morsi to express their discontent ([British Broadcasting Corporation News, 2013](#)). These protests led to a number of changes, including the dissolution of President Morsi's government. In many of the countries that were affected by the Arab Spring, people were dissatisfied with the rate of change, with many even finding themselves in a situation that was worse than prior to the revolution (see [Moghaddam, 2012](#)).

Another example of social change is the introduction of cell phones ([Goggin, 2012](#)). Cell phones profoundly transformed communication all over the world by imposing significant changes to communication at the interpersonal level ([Aoki & Downes, 2003](#); [Turkle, 2007](#); [Wei & Lo, 2006](#)), sparking smaller and more subtle social changes than any political revolution. To label and study Arab Spring events as social change in the same way as the introduction of cell phones seems absurd and reductionist. Yet researchers' inability to pinpoint what exactly these events have in common leaves us with having to do just that, as we lose the subtle complexities of the particular social changes. Should both remain sources of continued investigation into the intricacies of social change?

Such examples raise a series of questions that highlight the complex nature surrounding the concept of social change: When might dynamic situations qualify for inclusion within a context of dramatic social change? If people adapt to an innovation soon after it is introduced, such as the cell phone, should that innovation still be considered to have enacted a social change? Should periods of stability or stagnation when people endure extreme poverty and suffering be included as examples of ongoing social change? Each of these questions highlights the complex nature of addressing what can and cannot be considered a social change. Though the challenge may seem daunting, it is worth reiterating an oft forgotten tenet of theoretical progress. As identified by [Waltz \(1990\)](#), "complexity, ... does not work against theory. Rather, theory is a means of dealing with complexity" (p. 27).

The fact that social change is not consistently defined in the psychological literature thus represents the first main challenge for those interested in studying social change and its psychological impact. The difficulty of defining social change is due to the lack of a consensus regarding what its key prerequisite components indeed consist of ([de la Sablonnière, 2013](#)). In response, we advocate for the development of a clear and functional definition of social change that is capable of facilitating the design of future field and laboratory research. To achieve this goal, we propose that a systematic review of the sociological and psychological literature is required in order to identify the conditions needed to instigate dramatic social change. In doing so, it is hoped that other similar yet distinct appraisals of social change may be studied, such as the incremental social changes illustrated by the introduction of cell phones (see [de la Sablonnière, 2013](#)). In addition, by extending the work reviewed on individuals' perceptions of social change, psychology might be able to associate the prerequisites of dramatic social changes with the key attributes of change based upon the perceptions of the very people that have experienced them.

## The Challenges of Studying Social Change Empirically

Conducting empirical research on social change represents the second challenge in moving toward a psychology of social change. Once a definition of social change is developed and a focus has been given to the discipline, researchers will begin to conduct studies to provide empirical data in support of their theories on social change. To date, some researchers have proposed a link between social change and different psychological outcomes.

However, there is presently little or no empirical support for their theories. For example, it has been argued that one important effect of dramatic social change is the destruction of the existing functional group identity that provides the values and norms for all group members. The result is that group members are left to cope with an unclear and confused group identity because of the dramatic social change (Taylor, 1997, 2002). A lack of cultural or group identity clarity, in turn, will negatively impact the well-being of all group members (Usborne & Taylor, 2010), in the form of depression, anxiety and reduced motivation following social change (Taylor, 1997, 2002). Specifically, Taylor (2002) hypothesizes that colonization, a form of dramatic social change that continues to deeply afflict Aboriginal Peoples all over North America, had a negative impact on cultural identity clarity and, consequently, individual well-being. Thus far, however, theories linking dramatic social change to cultural identity clarity have not been put to a systematic empirical test. Hopefully, a functional framework for the psychology of social change can serve as an empirical guide to systematically testing theories linking social change to predictable outcomes.

In order to fully understand social change, both laboratory and field-based research need to complement one another, a norm that is already present, but rarely practiced, in social psychology. Laboratory experiments enable researchers to carefully control variables; however, they lack the ecological validity provided by studies conducted in the field. Field studies allow researchers a firsthand examination of social changes and their effects on individuals, yet are limited to correlational designs at best, thereby increasing the difficulty of isolating the precise role of the variables under investigation. The only realistic resolution in terms of a methodological strategy for the study of social change is a program of research which complements the precision of the laboratory-based research with the ecological validity of genuine field research.

### **Conducting Laboratory Experiments on Social Change**

Laboratory experiments have become a tradition in social psychology and may seem easier to execute in comparison to field research. However, research on social change raises a unique set of challenges that warrant discussion. The difficulty in designing laboratory experiments emerges largely in attempting to reproduce the actual conditions of social change in an artificial setting. One must consider the elements that social change normally entails, such as the historical processes, collective perspectives and cultural cues, before attempting to replicate a social change in any controlled environment (Moghaddam, 1997). For example, the impact of Hurricane Katrina or the breakdown of the Soviet Union could not be simulated in their entirety within a laboratory setting. Moreover, it would be difficult to take into consideration all the attributes of social change within a laboratory design to comprehensively assess the impact of social change on individuals.

Experimental manipulations of dramatic social change are also virtually impossible, given that obtaining ethics approval and consent from a university is difficult even for the most mundane of manipulations. For example, an increasing number of universities do not allow for the goal of a study to be concealed from participants. To our knowledge, there are no other effective experimental alternatives to deception (Kimmel, 2009), especially when studying social change. Researchers are thus left with having to ask participants to imagine that a dramatic social change has occurred. However, this practice may be an ineffective way to study dramatic social change as it does not allow investigating participants' spontaneous reactions to a changing context. Finally, merely asking participants to imagine their reactions to dramatic social change would only offer a limited insight since few participants can imagine the drama associated with genuine social change, let alone predict their own reactions to it.

To circumvent the issues regarding experimental research, future studies must lean toward the development and utilization of increasingly creative methods to conduct laboratory research. Designing laboratory studies requires a great amount of creativity in order to experimentally reproduce some of the conditions associated with social change. One possibility might involve creating a small group, such as a sports team or work group in the laboratory, and then experimentally introduce a major structural change within the group. For example, the experimental manipulation could involve switching the rules by which the team members have learned to play a board game, or video game, to a completely new set of rules. The modification of those rules, to parallel the context of social change, could be performed according to different attributes of social change, such as the rapidity and valence of change events. The psychological coping processes adopted by team members to adapt to this structural change could be examined, as well as the specific aspects of social change and their subsequent effects.

### **Conducting Field Research on Social Change**

Field research can provide essential information on social change and enables researchers to both stimulate new and verify established theoretical propositions. However, researchers face a set of barriers when attempting to conduct fieldwork of this kind. Specifically, an intimate knowledge of the culture under study, including the traditions and language, is required in combination with a good standing relationship with partners in the areas afflicted by the social change.

It is especially crucial that Western-based researchers gain an understanding of the culture and context of the region that underwent or is undergoing social change in order to comprehensively grasp the meaning and complexity of each situation. Such an understanding can only come from having direct contact with experts from the region who have some comprehension of the subtleties of both the situation and the people, and is necessary to fully appreciate how social change affects individuals.

Studying social change in the field is further complicated by the fact that it requires long-term contact with local inhabitants. Having contacts in afflicted region is particularly important within unstable social contexts which bring about inherent dangers as each new situation unfolds. Often, there is an ever-present threat of sudden political conflict, revolutions or wars that may evolve quickly into life-threatening situations. Furthermore, as social changes can arise rapidly and without notice, having contacts in the region becomes important in order to respond to novel situations quickly and efficiently. Quite often foreign workers, including professors and researchers, are caught up in political and social unrest while studying abroad; the recent uprisings in Egypt are prime examples of why strong connections with locals are essential when widespread discontent escalates to a form of collective action. Knowing where to go, what to say, and even what areas to avoid in a volatile context is crucial information that cannot be provided by anyone but a local inhabitant.

Even if researchers spend significant time in a society undergoing change and develop strong collaborations with colleagues and students at local universities, they could ultimately find that maintaining long-term contacts is a challenging and on-going process. With the 'brain drain' (Pang, Lansang, & Haines, 2002) occurring in many countries around the world, many qualified students and faculty members are leaving their home country for the opportunity to improve their own quality of life or to find favorable employment in the private sector. Thus, the prospect of losing one's contacts and relationships is an ongoing concern. This, among other factors, makes it challenging to maintain strong and consistent working relationships with local residents, despite the inherent need to do so in order to benefit social change research.

In order to address the complexities of conducting field research, we suggest the formation of a network of researchers who study social change and who can reduce the financial and temporal constraints involved in such research by sharing resources and expertise. Recent technological developments have improved methods of communication among researchers and partners around the world, and have thereby already facilitated such a collaboration. Tools such as Skype, or a service for instant messaging, are inexpensive and easy to use and thus countries that are greatly affected by social change need not be deemed as inaccessible. However, constructing this communicative network requires important time commitments and it may be necessary to train local researchers and invest in 'capacity building' (Eade, 1997) to ensure that communities who are the focus of social change research actually benefit from the research process and more broadly from their association with Western-based social scientists. Our experience with such time commitments and obstacles, however, is that they are an inconsequential price to pay, an investment from which researchers can receive enormous gains in both personal and academic growth.

## Conclusion

The present paper was motivated by the need to advocate for a more thorough understanding of the concept of social change, and for social change to be considered as a central topic within the field of psychology. We began our review by noting that social change as a legitimate topic has had a rich theoretical history arising mainly from the field of sociology. Only a few social psychologists have begun to take an interest in the topic of dramatic social change. Specifically, the study of social change in psychology has evolved from three main domains of research. First, social change has been conceptualized as the result of negative social comparisons leading to collective action. Second, the consequences of dramatic social change on individual group members have been measured through their historical trajectory of temporal relative deprivation. Third, a more "bottom up" individual perspective of social change has been taken where social changes were conceptualized through the eyes of those that have lived through dramatic events.

The review presented here reflects the emerging stage of social change research. Since we live in a time where social change impacts much of the world's population on a daily basis, social change must become a central topic in psychology in order to contribute to relief efforts for the millions struggling with social changes. However, current research in psychology has placed little emphasis on how individuals adapt to dramatic social change and important questions remain unanswered. Importantly, the different coping mechanisms used by individuals in situations of dramatic social change are still largely unknown due to the lack of a coherent definition of social change, and the failure to adopt a psychological focus on the topic of social change. Until a comprehensive psychology of social change is realized, efforts to understand why some individuals recover psychologically after having faced adversity while others do not will remain a mystery (Bonanno, 2004; Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999; Luthar, 2006; Oreg, 2006; Wanberg & Banas, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001). It is thus imperative that we move toward establishing the first solid theoretical framework on social change in psychology. Such a framework will need to have a psychological focus in order to complement sociological theory. A psychological framework capable of accounting for an individual perspective may provide the lens through which social scientists can actively engage with one of the most pressing social issues today.

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