The Role of Subjective Power Dynamics in Far-Right Collective Action: The "Unite the Right" Rally and the Capitol Insurrection

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Abstract

Far-right collective action has previously been explained in terms of collective grievances. However, this does not adequately explain mobilisations after ingroup-relevant successes. Based on the broader collective action literature, we suggest that analysing experiences of subjective power before and during collective action may significantly complement existing explanations of far-right mobilisations. We used secondary data (predominantly videos from YouTube and ProPublica) from the 2017 Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally and the 2021 Washington Capitol insurrection to qualitatively examine the extent to which attendees reported experiencing collective psychological empowerment alongside the perception of collective grievances. The events were connected by the effort to unify the far-right yet were shaped by different immediate contexts. We find that at Charlottesville, attendees arrived already feeling empowered and gained further empowerment from the rally itself. While the Capitol insurrection seemed to be driven by collective grievances, there were some indicators of empowerment experiences mainly deriving from the event itself. Our analysis has implications for disempowering far-right collective action.

Keywords

Non-Technical Summary

Background
Commonly, the reasons that researchers gave as to why people take part in far-right rallies are that these people feel unfairly treated or threatened.

Why was this study done?
We suggest that these reasons cannot explain why sometimes people also rally after events that represent a success for the ingroup. We argue that when the far-right feels powerful (for example because of a favourable election outcome), this could be another reason for far-right rallies.

What did the researchers do and find?
We used videos from YouTube and ProPublica that covered two US far-right events – the 2017 Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally and the 2021 Capitol insurrection – to analyse whether people that attended these events also felt empowered and not only justified their actions in terms of feeling unfairly treated or under threat. The two events were connected by the goal to unify the far-right, yet they took place in different immediate contexts. We found that at Charlottesville, attendees arrived already feeling empowered and further gained energy from the event itself. The Capitol insurrection, in contrast, seemed to be motivated by a narrative of a stolen election. But here too, we found some signs of attendees feeling empowered mainly by the event itself though.

What do these findings mean?
Our work is also important for understanding how to disempower the far-right.

In recent years, the far-right has repeatedly been referred to as "emboldened" (Foran, 2017; Posner & Neiwert, 2016; Potok, 2017) evident in increased (violent) street mobilisations. Several accounts point toward the unexpected victory of Donald Trump in the US 2016 presidential election as one source of such emboldenment (e.g., Edwards & Rushin, 2018; Giani & Méon, 2018). Here, we approach this phenomenon empirically by addressing the question of whether and to what extent *collective psychological empowerment* – a concept derived from collective action research – can help explain far-right mobilisation in the context of Trump's presidency.

Commonly, collective action scholars emphasise the predictive role of perceived collective grievances (e.g., group-based injustices) and related anger in (hostile) collective action (Becker & Tausch, 2015; Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). However, Trump's electoral victory constituted a reason for celebration among the far right (Piggott, 2016). Yet far-right mobilisations increased in the period following his successful election (Miller & Graves, 2020). To explain this, we qualitatively investigated video material from the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally (2017) and the Washington Capitol insurrection (2021) for the occurrence of distal (i.e., from the election result) and proximal (i.e., from the event itself) empowerment experiences (cf. Drury & Reicher, 2009) among attendees alongside perceptions of collective grievances.

Predictors of (Far-Right) Collective Action

We treat far-right extremism as a social movement (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006) which allowed us to apply frameworks from collective action research. These have established three overarching integrative and predictive factors: Identification with the relevant group (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), collective grievances (e.g., Becker, Tausch, & Wagner, 2011; Mackie et al., 2000; Runciman, 1966; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; van Zomeren et al., 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2004; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990), and group efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2004; van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012).

In line with the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), identification with the relevant group mobilises people on the group's behalf (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008; Wright et al., 1990), particularly if the collective identity is politicised (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). This equally applies to far-right extremism (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006). The reason why identification enhances mobilisation is that it informs about where a group is positioned in the social world. Societal relations perceived as illegitimate and unstable can legitimise action-taking because awareness of a disadvantaged position can invoke collective grievances (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; van Zomeren et al., 2004; van Zomeren et al., 2008; Wright et al., 1990). However, it is the resultant group-based anger that leads individuals to take to the streets (Becker et al., 2011; Mackie et al., 2000; van Zomeren et al., 2004; van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Crucially, in line with relative deprivation theory (Runciman, 1966; Smith et al., 2012), those that are not objectively disadvantaged can nonetheless *feel* disadvantaged. When examining far-right extremists across Western Europe,

Klandermans and Mayer (2006) observed that "[extremists] perceived or suspect illegitimate equality between the indigenous and alien minorities [...] and construe this condition as a shared grievance for themselves" (p. 246). Thus, the far-right's collective identity needs to be oriented towards a social reality that portrays the ingroup as the "real" victim (Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017; Reicher & Ulusahin, 2020). Consequently, mobilising against an alleged threat becomes a necessary and virtuous duty (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008). Using the Capitol insurrection as an example, Haslam et al. (2023) showed that this was an interdependent cycle between leader and followers.

However, to engage in collective action, a group also needs to perceive that it *can* act. Group efficacy describes the belief that one's group can solve a problem. It has been shown conceptually and empirically to predict collective action intentions (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2012) and is understood as a goal-specific element of the power beliefs of actors (Bandura, 1997) (in contrast to empowerment, which describes a broader experience among people in some collective action, as we will discuss below). In the context of far-right extremism, paralleling findings from collective action research (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008), Klandermans and Mayer (2006) established three factors that motivated action-taking: Identity (see above "identification with the relevant group"), ideology (i.e., a way of meaning-making and expressing one's views), and instrumentality as the belief that one can change a specific environment.

Dynamics in (Far-Right) Collective Action

While what we have discussed so far illustrates how (distal) collective grievances can mobilise action-taking, (proximal) perceptions occurring *during* ongoing crowd conflict can legitimise actions too. Examining intergroup contexts involving (riot) police, scholars (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 1999; Stott & Drury, 2000) showed how outgroup action (e.g., the police) can foster the acceptance of violent means among protesters and non-participants (Saavedra & Drury, 2019). By treating (initial) "moderate" protesters with illegitimate force during a protest, the outgroup can legitimise action-taking based on self-defence or retaliation. The elaborated social identity model (ESIM, e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005) of crowd behaviour describes this temporal process by which protesters' identity and perception of power relations can be transformed as a function of outgroup treatment.

Collective Empowerment

Central to ESIM is the power transformative shift among participants, evident in participants' understanding of themselves as being able to (at least temporarily) change societal structures which are perceived as unstable and vulnerable (Drury & Reicher, 2009). The ESIM empowerment model discusses collective empowerment on the one hand as a process and on the other as an experience. As a process, the basis of empowerment is a shared social identity among protesters. In conflictual crowd events, this can arise from (perceived) common fate, for example, from being treated indiscriminately by police who have the power to enact this discrimination on protesters. If participants perceive unity among protesters, values, norms, and goals can align and result in a perceived consensus, and so in expectations of support from fellow protesters for ingroup-normative action. While success deriving from such action can be a moral one, the experience of empowerment requires (unexpected and/ or extraordinary) material success, i.e., success that realises the collective identity over a relevant outgroup (cf. Drury & Reicher, 2005). Conceptualised as "collective self-objectification" (CSO), any achievement in line with the social identity would be experienced as such empowering success (Drury & Reicher, 2005). For example, if an anti-racism counterprotest led a far-right movement to abandon their march, the result is identity-relevant (i.e., fighting back against the far-right) and identity-realising for the counterprotesters (i.e., actually preventing the march).

While empowerment can be described as a process, it is also a lived experience. We previously discussed the role of group efficacy in collective action. Collective empowerment involves the cognition about efficacy but embeds it in a broader experience marked by positive emotions (e.g., joy and excitement), which results from the transformation of intergroup and power relations (cf. societal instability; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and thus from the transformation of the self. Elsewhere (e.g., Tausch & Becker, 2013; van Zomeren, 2021), positive emotions (e.g., pride) have been shown to increase the likelihood of engaging in future collective action. Thus, empowerment can be the consequence of collective action but also inspire the uptake of future action.

We suggest that the ESIM empowerment model is useful to understand far-right crowd empowerment (i.e., empowerment arising from ongoing intergroup conflicts), as well as to investigate the psychological dynamics that underlie an "emboldened" far-right after an election victory (i.e., empowerment distally derived from an election outcome). This phenomenon will be discussed in the next section.

The Current Study

The "emboldened far-right thesis" is a claim about empowerment processes among the far-right after Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election (e.g., Foran, 2017; Posner & Neiwert, 2016; Potok, 2017). It suggests that empowerment can arise from an election result as an indicator of public opinion (cf. Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016; Syfers, Gaffney, Rast, & Estrada, 2022). If the thesis is correct, according to the ESIM empowerment model, the sudden change in existing relations may be interpreted among the far-right as an indicator of a "wider public" now sharing and supporting their values and goals, and actions. The phenomenon is yet to be examined empirically as a factor in far-right mobilisation. The current study aimed to close this gap by explaining the underlying psychological dynamics of an emboldened far-right in electoral contexts. We examined two far-right events that stood out regarding efforts, attendance, and extent of unification: The Charlottesville, Virginia "Unite the Right" rally (August 11-12th, 2017), and the Capitol insurrection, Washington, D.C. (January 6th, 2021).

The Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally attracted an estimated 500-1,500 people and assembled an until then unprecedented number of hate groups and sympathisers. The official aim was to protest the Charlottesville City Council´s plans to remove a Confederate statue. Pictures from the first night gained considerable international attention showing attendees marching with Tikki torches while openly shouting anti-Semitic and nationalist slogans used in Nazi Germany. The march ended with attendees encircling and threatening counterprotesters. Police forces under-responded in intervening and separating the two groups throughout the rally (Maguire, Khade, & Mora, 2020). The permission for the rally was revoked the next day after the City Council judged the threat of repeated violence as too severe. Shortly after that, a rally attendee deliberately drove his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, injuring many and killing one of them.

Although after the "Unite the Right" rally the movement fractured, over three years later some of the same actors and groups that had previously attended and organised the rally made another attempt to unify the far-right (Hughes & Miller-Idriss, 2021). On January 6, 2021, Trump supporters attended the departing president´s speech in Washington D.C. in which Trump urged his supporters to stop the certification of Joe Biden´s victory in the US 2020 election after he claimed that the election victory was "stolen" due to voter fraud. A proportion of Trump supporters and a variety of different hate groups (Program on Extremism, 2021) forcibly entered the Capitol building. Eventually, Capitol police were able to take back control and cleared the area. During the insurrection, five people died (four of them rioters), and several police officers were injured or suffered from racial abuse (Felton, 2021).

Located at opposite ends of Trump´s presidency, we suggested that these events may provide fertile ground for answering our research question of whether and to what extent the experience of empowerment contributes to far-right collective action alongside the perception of collective grievances, and why collective action can take place in the context of success as well as injustice. Indicators of empowerment would comprise beliefs and experiences in line with the ESIM empowerment model (Drury & Reicher, 2009), i.e., unity, consensus, perceived support, success that is identity-realising (CSO), group efficacy, perceived societal instability, and positive emotions such as joy, excitement, as well as pride (c.f., Becker et al., 2011; van Zomeren, 2021). Given that the "Unite the Right" rally and Capitol insurrection were crowd events, we expected to find proximal experiences of empowerment. However, since we understand the "Unite the Right" rally as an event that followed an identity-affirmative election result (i.e., ingroup-relevant success), we also expected that the data would reveal evidence of distal experiences of the above. In comparison with the rally, we expected to find more evidence for grievances at the Capitol insurrection, considering that the event took place in the light of (political) loss (i.e., ingroup-relevant defeat). Indicators of such would include perceptions and experiences of group-based injustices (e.g., illegitimacies, threats, victimhood) as well as related anger. However, we also investigated

whether there were experiences of empowerment, given the possibility that participants may have seen aspects of the event as successful (e.g., managing to enter the Capitol Building).

Studying (Far-Right) Collective Action

Researchers previously examining collective empowerment engaged in ethnography or interviews with protesters (e.g., Drury et al., 2005; Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2005). The compatibility between the researchers' and the protest(er)s' identity allowed for direct and open engagement (Drury & Stott, 2011). However, investigating far-right collective action (as left-wing-oriented researchers) posed challenges to us regarding target group accessibility, our safety, and ethics. We, therefore, decided to undertake a thematic analysis of secondary data featuring "interview-like" material. This predominantly encompassed videos from YouTube and ProPublica. The latter is an investigative journalism platform which published over 500 videos from Parler (Groeger, Kao, Shaw, Syed, & Eliahou, 2021), the social media platform that played a crucial role in organising the Capitol insurrection (e.g., Munn, 2021).

Search Strategy and Sources

We used YouTube and ProPublica to collect data. The first author created a new account on the former to minimise the influence of previous search history on video suggestions. We also used Google and considered the Television and Radio Index for Learning and Teaching (TRILT) as an additional source. Our inclusion criteria comprised exhaustive search strings to gather data. We conducted non-probability sampling since we collected data from pre-selected events. We first used YouTube and Google search interchangeably by adding the feature "site:YouTube.com" to the string "Charlottesville (OR Charlottesville rally) + interview + attend*" (August 2017 – July 2018) and to our Google entry. We followed the same procedures in the Capitol case using the string "Capitol (OR Capitol riot) + interview + attend*" (January 2021 – June 2021) and searched for relevant videos on ProPublica. To cross-check this search, we used the same strings on YouTube, followed by looking up people directly that were either known as attending the events, or that were found to potentially provide valuable insights regardless of their attendance (e.g., hate group leaders, formers, on-site journalists etc.). We also considered "suggested" and "related videos".

Search Results

Due to de-platforming efforts undertaken by platform providers and our requirement to collect interview-like material, our dataset was determined by availability (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Thus, while the number of items returning from the queries was substantial, many were unsuitable for our investigation. In total, we found 33 items (predominantly video clips) for the Charlottesville case, and 66 items for the Capitol case that were judged as both suitable and potentially relevant. These items were then subject to subsequent reviews (see "Analytic procedure"). The items varied within and between the two events in number (i.e., 33 vs 66), length (from seconds to minutes-long recordings), and content (from naturally occurring interactions, interviews, to crowd footage). The final datasets contained data from "primary research subjects" – internally defined as members or sympathisers of a hate group and/ or rally attendees –, "experts" – defined as not being a direct member or sympathiser of a hate group but able to provide insider accounts – and "crowd footage". In the case of the Charlottesville dataset, we analysed 69 excerpts ($M_{words/ excerpt}$ = 46.35), covering 16 primary research subjects (including one crowd footage) and five experts. The latter included testimony from an on-site counterprotester, an on-site journalist, a conservative political commentator, and two former neo-Nazis (the latter three did not attend the rally). The final dataset for the Capitol case contained 72 excerpts ($M_{words/ excerpt}$ = 25.88) covering 44[1] primary research subjects.

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1) We found three written items for which we cannot say whether the authors were already considered in our primary research subjects or not, as the items were not attributed. We therefore did not increase the number of subjects.

Analytic Procedure

While collecting potentially relevant material, we assigned each item to "Charlottesville rally 2017" or "Capitol insurrection 2021". In line with procedures from video analysis (cf. Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010), we engaged in a preliminary review in which determined sub-categories per case, i.e., "primary research subjects", "experts", and "crowd footage" – from now on collectively referred to as "research subjects" – to which we assigned each item. Because an item could contain statements from several research subjects, it could be assigned to more than one sub-category. While a small minority of data was already textual, where the item was a video (which was predominantly the case), we conducted substantive reviews by determining specific fragments featuring the previously established research subject[2]. Finally, we decided which fragments were most relevant and transcribed these. We first read through all fragments and highlighted interesting parts, which could range from a half-sentence to an entire paragraph. The relevant information contained in fragments was treated as an "excerpt" and was copied and clustered according to our research question into separate documents (commentaries) to analyse them in the context of the rallies.

Generally, we treated the utterances as accounts of experiences, i.e., what research subjects said they perceived and experienced was understood as actually perceived and experienced. Thus, in some utterances, research subjects reported their experiences. In other utterances, however, they were much more obviously seeking to mobilise others (sometimes strategically, cf. Postmes & Smith, 2009). We, therefore, suggest that the method we applied can be best understood as "contextualist" or "critical realist" (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). For the coding, we used a codebook thematic analysis (TA) inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021b) with codes that we expected to find in the data. Our codebook (see Supplementary Materials) contained definitions and examples of the individual elements discussed in the context of empowerment and collective grievances concepts (see sections "Predictors of (far-right) collective action" and "Dynamics in (far-right) collective action"). Our analysis featured some inductive coding. Codes identified through inductive coding (e.g., "feeling outnumbered", "feeling robbed") were merged to eventually form a broader subordinate theme. However, deductive coding dominated the analysis which meant that we applied the pre-determined codes from our codebook (e.g., "consensus") to our data. Thus, empowerment and collective grievances served as superordinate themes and the individual elements of "empowerment" and "collective grievances" (i.e., "consensus", "anger" etc.) were the subordinated themes. While it could be that in one excerpt, we would identify more than one subordinate theme, we did not use overlapping parts of the same excerpt to identify two themes. In other words, one text passage (which could be a whole paragraph or half a sentence) was only used for one subordinate theme at the time. The initial coding was conducted by the first author. To ensure the stability of coding, this was a repeated process (e.g., Curtis & Curtis, 2011), and was cross-checked by the second author. We decided together whether the content was understood in the same way and whether the label (i.e., subordinate theme) was most suitable.

This study was approved by the University of Sussex Sciences & Technology C-REC committee, certificate no. [ER/CH527/10]. Ethical clearance was contingent on not publishing direct citations of anyone who at the time was not aware of being recorded and/ or could not foresee that their data (e.g., a video) would be made public (cf. National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities [NESH], 2019). In practice, this meant that we here only cite research subjects that either gave a public interview, spoke to a journalist, and/ or spoke to a journalist´s camera. We made exceptions where the research subject was a public figure (Fuchs, 2018; Townsend & Wallace, 2016; University of Sheffield, n.d.). Where individuals were not aware of being recorded or could not foresee that their data would be published, we paraphrase the statements (cf. British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021).

Analysis

The focus of the analysis was to explore the occurrence of perceived proximal and distal empowerment as a motivator for collective action at two far-right events alongside the perception of collective grievances. Table 1 provides an

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2) We could not always establish a person's name – for example, when the identity was unknown. Therefore, the categories "unknown identity" or "identity kept anonymously" – sometimes replaced a specific name.

overview of themes. The analysis is structured to discuss these by the event. We will first discuss the "Unite the Right" rally and then the Capitol insurrection. Presented excerpts were either the most representative of the corpus or the ones we were allowed to present here (see "Ethical Approval").

Table 1

Overview of Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes by Event

Superordinate theme
Subordinate theme
"Unite the Right" rally
Collective grievances
Group-based injustice (n = 11)
Anger (n = 1)
Empowerment
Distal perceived instability (n = 2)
Proximal group efficacy (n = 3)
Proximal excitement and pride (n = 8)
Proximal perceived unity (n = 3)
Distal perceived consensus (n = 1)
Distal and proximal perceived support (n = 9)
Proximal perceived success (identity-realising/ CSO) (n = 9)
Capitol Insurrection
Collective grievances
Group-based injustice (n = 29)
Anger (n = 4)
Empowerment
Proximal excitement and pride (n = 8)
Distal perceived consensus (n = 3)
Proximal perceived support (n = 3)

Note. "Unite the Right" rally: N_{total} = 21; Capitol Insurrection: N_{total} = 44.

Charlottesville "Unite the Right" Rally

Collective Grievances

Group-Based Injustice — Accounts from eleven research subjects showed a victim identity in the form of group-based injustice both, before and during the rally. Speakers said they perceived their (white) ingroup as threatened to be outnumbered and "replaced" due to immigration and globalisation, as controlled by "*the Jews*", or as discriminated against for being white. Linked to this, we found that at the rally, research subjects felt suppressed in their views or unfairly treated. Consequently, research subjects expressed a demand for an "*ethnostate*" and a "*white homeland*". One explained that they saw this demand as neglected by mainstream politics which motivated their attendance at the rally:

Excerpt 1

> "My reason for going down to Charlottesville over the weekend was to demonstrate. It was to show solidarity for a cause which has not been talked about in the mainstream media, which the American people never got to vote on – and that is the fundamental transformation of the composition of our country." [Research subject 8]

Thus, we found that research subjects' victim identity was not just present before and during the rally, but also seemed to motivate participating.

Anger — Our dataset did not include direct quotes from "primary research subjects" (see "Search results") expressing anger motivating the rally. However, a counterprotester (Research subject 13) who was among the crowd that was encircled by rally attendees after the Tikki torch march, made crucial observations of angry behaviour:

Excerpt 2

"You could feel how angry they were, but also how happy they were. You know to be doing this to, to be intimidating people like this and this happy rage [...] They were cheering. They were running through the streets, yelling at people and they walked away, and they got away with it. They're coming in here the next day, ready to do more." [Research subject 13]

Importantly, their comment also draws attention to widespread excitement – that is, evidence of empowerment – existing alongside this anger.

Empowerment

Distal Perceived Instability — Two research subjects stated that Trump's electoral victory would allow for an alternative world in which they could realise their "*ideas*" (i.e., values and goals). The then-leader of the hate group Traditionalist Worker Party and rally attendee Matthew Heimbach explained that Trump had "*opened up a door*" and it was now time for the movement to go through. This was echoed by Richard Spencer (self-proclaimed leader of the Alt-right movement) who perceived societal relations as changing in favour of the Alt-right:

Excerpt 3

"I would never say that 'Richard Spencer has through rational argumentation convinced millions of Americans to vote for Donald Trump' or 'created the Alt-right through rational... I've, I've convinced each and every person', I am riding a wave, too. We´re all riding a wave. This is social change that we're experiencing, and it is collective. And we feel it. I want to get these ideas out in the world." [Richard Spencer]

Although this extract seems to indicate excitement on the part of the speaker, we suggest it predominantly illustrates the unique experience of "social change" in favour of the ingroup (which may be associated with excitement).

Proximal Group Efficacy — During the rally, three research subjects – among them Heimbach – reported perceiving their group as being able to achieve its aims:

Excerpt 4

"The radical left just understood, if the nationalist community can come together, stand together, and fight together, that we are going to be unstoppable." [Matthew Heimbach]

The extract also illustrates how this sense of group efficacy was established in relation to their opponents ("*the radical left*"). Since the "Unite the Right" rally was accompanied by recurring violent clashes between rally attendees and counterprotesters, with a police force widely understood as standing by rather than intervening (e.g., Maguire et al., 2020), being "*unstoppable*" may also refer to external weaknesses to literally stop attendees. Since this could also have contributed to a perception of instability, it is not surprising that this elicited some excitement.

Proximal Excitement and Pride — Eight research subjects appeared to feel excited about the rally. Research subjects explained that they joined it to "*have fun*" (Research subject 17) or to be "*loud and proud*" (Research subject 18). Interestingly, Research subject 13 (see "Anger") observed the protesters to be in a "*happy rage*". We suggest that this indicated a sense of excitement among protesters deriving from imposing themselves on the counterprotesters, also expressed in references to group size (see "Distal and proximal perceived support").

Proximal Perceived Unity — Divisions between hate groups due to disagreements and different ideologies are not uncommon (cf. Hughes & Miller-Idriss, 2021). Thus, an event such as the rally aiming to "unite" is significant. One

activity that was viewed as helping the rally's objective was the Tikki torch march at which rally attendees collectively chanted anti-Semitic slurs ("*Jews will not replace us*") and Nazi-Germany slogans ("*Blood and soil*"):

Excerpt 5

"For instance, last night at the torch walk there were hundreds and hundreds of us. People realize they're not atomized individuals; they are part of a larger whole." [Robert Ray, writer for the Daily Stormer and rally attendee]

The speaker's sense of unity is evidenced by the reference to being "*part of a larger whole*": People were no longer seen as scattered ("*atomized*") but as an entity.

Distal Perceived Consensus — Heimbach stated before the rally that he perceived a "*majority*" to approve of his group's values. In the months leading up to the rally, he argued that Trump spoke for the "*white working class*", "*middle America*" and "*everyday Americans*":

Excerpt 6

"[Donald Trump] has shown us that the majority of everyday Americans support our sort of message." [Matthew Heimbach]

Importantly, the reference to Trump and majority categories creates a link between the election outcome and an understanding of consensus among a broader reference group ("white Americans") for far-right values and aims.

Distal and Proximal Perceived Support — Six research subjects said they felt the white supremacy movement was growing and becoming explicit because President Trump was viewed as supporting its members. Although four of these accounts came from "experts" (see "Analytic Procedure"), Research subjects 15 and 16 were both former neo-Nazis, and their statements, therefore, provide unique insider judgements:

Excerpt 7

"I think that the movement now is much, much bigger than it is, because it has become normalized. It's infected the average American, who normally, you know, would only say things like that behind closed doors or to people that they trusted, now feel very emboldened because of the words and the actions and the policies of the president, that they feel they have a commander-in-chief who gets them, who understands their ideology and is willing to stand up for them and fight for them." [Research subject 15]

Previous research on empowerment (Drury, Cocking, Beale, Hanson, & Rapley, 2005) found that references to "numbers" in the context of crowd events (i.e., group size, turnout etc.) were associated with confidence and expectation of support. Among far-right rallies in the US, Charlottesville was one of the biggest. We found similar references among four research subjects, for example, in the form of references to high turnout ("*We outnumber you! We outnumber you!*", Research subject 21) and numerical superiority over counterprotesters (see "Proximal excitement and pride").

Proximal Perceived Identity-Realising Success (CSO) — References to numbers were also made in the context of describing the growth of the movement as a success:

Excerpt 8

"[...] just even going back since I've been involved in this movement, it used to be a rally of 50 guys was very successful. Now rallying 1015 hundred people on the streets. Our movement is growing [...]." [Matthew Heimbach]

Heimbach further expressed understanding the event as a "*stunning victory*" that had "*achieved all of* [their] *objectives*". Since the official objective was to "unite the right", the success conveyed here is identity-relevant and, therefore,

possibly empowering. However, the rally also featured violence against opponents. Christopher Cantwell (co-organiser of the rally) described the success of the rally as moral rather than material:

Excerpt 9

"We knew that we were going to meet a lot of resistance, ehm the fact that nobody on our side died, I, I'd go ahead and call that points for us. The fact that none of our people killed anybody unjustly, I think is a plus for us and I think that we showed eh we showed our rivals that we won't be cowed." [Christopher Cantwell]

Nonetheless, the extract incorporates the perception of having shown to the "*rivals*" (i.e., outgroup) that the ingroup was courageous and would not withdraw. Relatedly, nine research subjects said that they had enacted their collective identity successfully over the outgroup (i.e., on-site counterprotesters and those allegedly working against the interests of whites).

Overall, research subjects' accounts evidenced experiences of both, collective grievances and empowerment (distal and proximal) before and during the rally. However, empowerment (before and during the event) was found to be particularly evident, and there was some evidence that empowerment before the rally may have had some influence on participation in the event.

The Capitol Insurrection

Collective Grievances

Group-Based Injustice — Twenty-nine research subjects based action-taking on manifestations of group-based injustice (e.g., "*voter fraud*", "*a stolen country*", "*corruption*"). Their strong conviction was mirrored in their belief in righteousness since the situation was described as "*wrong*" (Research subject 4). Trump's right-wing populist rhetoric picturing "the American people" as victims was evident in these accounts since all accounts were derived from Americans, and were, therefore, self-relevant. Most referred to alleged "*voter fraud*":

Excerpt 10

"We came to protest because the House and the Senate were going to be voting on getting the Electoral College certified and we thought that they should listen to the voter fraud allegations and do an investigation and look into it." [Research subject 8]

Other research subjects based their attendance on a perceived lack of institutional support which left them with "no other choice". Others expressed that the US government had "betrayed" them, Interestingly, at the beginning of the event, research subjects pictured the "traitors" as politicians who turned against Trump. Throughout the insurrection, the perception of betrayal also included references to Capitol police. This was presumably due to protesters experiencing resistance from them when trying to enter the building. Some research subjects' accounts indicated a sense of surprise in response to that evidenced by describing the resistance as an attack on "*their own people*" while protesters were portrayed as having unconditionally supported "*Blue Lives Matter*" (Research subject 25). The perceived indiscriminate treatment from Capitol police also led one research subject to compare themselves with the persecuted Jewish community in a famous Second World War movie (Research subject 18).

Anger — Four research subjects expressed being angry. Research subject 34 reported seeing anger in others, too, suggesting that it was viewed as shared:

Excerpt 11

Interviewer: "Do you think people are angry today?"
Research subject 34: "Absolutely. People are angry and you can feel it. You can feel the rage, the madness."

Empowerment

Proximal Excitement and Pride — Eight research subjects said that they experienced excitement or pride. The sources of excitement were diverse. While some linked the experience to Trump´s speech or being in Washington, others drew the connection to "*moving forward*" as a movement and acting together:

Excerpt 12

"I'm proud that the Patriots came out today to show their support for our president because he is, Donald Trump is our president." [Research subject 44]

In another case, Enrique Tarrio – the then chairman of the Proud Boys – told a news reporter that he was excited about intimidating the government:

Excerpt 13

"I was celebrating, and I'll tell you, I'll celebrate the moment that the government does fear their people." [Enrique Tarrio]

Distal Perceived Consensus — Three research subjects expressed that they acted on behalf of a broader reference group, and their perception of consensus was connected to their intention to act upon it. For example, Research subject 36 who was marching up Capitol Hill said to do so on behalf of "*the American people*", while Research subject 18 declared that "*the United States of America*" would not give in to oppression, reflecting their belief that the country had voted for Trump.

Proximal Perceived Support — Three research subjects referred to high numbers of rally attendees. While experts estimated the crowd at the Capitol insurrection to consist of approximately 10,000 people (Doig, 2021), the estimate made by participants was up to 400 times bigger. As in the previous section on distal perceived consensus, one research subject who referred to numbers and collective anger also referred to their intention to take over the Capitol building:

Excerpt 14

"Make no mistake, we have the guns, and we are now in the streets. […] We are gonna clean this place out, one way or another. You look down there [the Capitol building]. I have 1,000,000 plus people [censored by YouTube] angry, very, very angry people." [Research subject 33]

Overall, we found that at the Capitol insurrection research subjects reported experiencing some distal empowerment but mainly proximal empowerment through the rally itself. However, the motivation to participate in collective action seemed to be grounded predominantly in the perception of group grievances.

Discussion

In this study, we have examined the "emboldened far-right thesis", in which the far-right is understood as "emboldened" by Trump's electoral victory in 2016 (Foran, 2017; Posner & Neiwert, 2016; Potok, 2017). We aimed to show that collective empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 2009) may aid in explaining the underlying psychological dynamics of this phenomenon alongside common approaches to (far-right) collective action focusing on collective grievances. Further, collective empowerment had previously been examined in the dynamics of crowd events (i.e., proximally) and referred to participants' experience of feeling more powerful (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2005, 2009). Here, we have suggested that it may also operate as a state of confidence resulting from an unexpected election result in favour of the ingroup (i.e., distally). We applied both approaches to data from two US-based far-right crowd events that framed Trump's presidency and that were connected by efforts to unite the far-right, yet that were shaped by opposing immediate contexts: Identity-relevant success following Trump's 2016 election victory (Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally) vs his defeat in 2020 (the Washington DC Capitol insurrection).

Overall, we found that at Charlottesville, distal and proximal empowerment were predominant whereby the former seemed to be crucial for the motivation to attend the rally. At the Capitol insurrection, collective grievances seemed to motivate the event; however, there was some evidence of distal and proximal empowerment, too.

Collective Grievances at the "Unite the Right" Rally vs the Capitol Insurrection

In line with previous research, (e.g., Becker & Tausch, 2015; van Zomeren et al., 2012; van Zomeren et al., 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2004), we found indicators of action-taking based on the perception of collective grievances. Although we had data from more research subjects at the Capitol insurrection than for Charlottesville, we suggest that finding fewer accounts of collective grievances and anger at Charlottesville is meaningful and not necessarily due to the data. The rally happened in August 2017 shortly after Trump had been elected and inaugurated as US president. This had been celebrated by the far-right (Piggott, 2016) due to the nationalist and xenophobic values Trump had embodied during his campaign. Thus, despite the immediate context of protesting the removal of a Confederate statue, the "Unite the Right" rally took place in an identity-affirmative context. We were, therefore, not surprised to find fewer accounts of grievances among research subjects. In contrast, the Capitol insurrection was preceded by Trump's right-wing populist narrative that the 2020 election had been "stolen" (cf. Haslam et al., 2023). This narrative seemed to resonate with research subjects since we found accounts of anger and injustice conveying a strong "victim" identity, as well as the conviction that protesting against the alleged steal was the "right thing" to do (cf. Reicher et al., 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2018). The category of "traitors" (i.e., initially only politicians that had turned against Trump) also incorporated Capitol police. Research subjects' accounts showed that this was the result of their surprise at facing unexpected resistance from a group formerly understood as part of the ingroup.

Empowerment at the "Unite the Right" Rally vs the Capitol Insurrection

We argued that if the "emboldened far-right" hypothesis was correct, far-right views of public opinion would be associated with an enhanced sense of unity, consensus, and expectations of support for ingroup-normative action. Before the "Unite the Right" rally, research subjects expressed that they saw Trump's victory as changing society in favour of the Alt-right and that a majority of US society (as well as Trump himself) supported their aims. At the rally itself, research subjects seemed to be excited about attending it. A perception of unity among rally attendees derived from the Tikki torch march at which attendees openly shouted anti-Semitic slurs and Nazi-Germany slogans. Support from fellow protesters was evidenced by references to high numbers present, particularly regarding numerical superiority over on-site counterprotesters. Considering that some of these accounts were found among impactful far-right political figures, the reference to numbers may also have been rhetorical and strategic (e.g., Durrheim, 2020; Reicher, 2012). For example, Matthew Heimbach refers to consensus among "*the* [American] *white working class*" which is an important ingroup category for the movement since its social identity is constructed through an understanding of representing a majority. At the rally itself, referring to numbers (e.g., high turnout) may have established the perception of movement potential, i.e., support from (large numbers of) fellow rally attendees for ingroup-normative action (e.g., attacking counterprotesters).

Controlling public spaces has historically been important for far-right actors (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019; Reichard, 2007). Previous research on empowerment in collective action has shown that occupying (public) spaces of identity relevance can elicit the feeling of enacting one´s group´s values (Drury & Reicher, 2005). In line with this, some research subjects experienced the rally as an identity-relevant success, either by achieving its goal or by demonstrating the strength and presence of the ingroup to an outgroup. Despite the decline and fragmentation of the Alt-Right movement after the "Unite the Right" rally (Thompson & Hawley, 2020), we conclude that leading up to the rally and during the rally, research subjects showed indicators of distal empowerment deriving from Trump's electoral victory, and perceived themselves as strong and united against their opponents as a result of the event. In contrast, we found fewer accounts of empowerment when investigating the Capitol insurrection. Nonetheless, some research subjects expressed perceiving consensus among a broader reference group for coming to the Capitol, and some based their intention to "storm" it on this consensus or on the perception of high turnout of protesters (although, here too, references to numbers may have been strategic). We further know from previous research on crowd conflict (e.g.,

Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005; Stott & Drury, 2000) that the experience of illegitimate action from police forces can lead to feeling legitimised to undertake (violent) counteraction and empowered to do so. For some research subjects, the unexpected resistance of Capitol Police may have contributed to feeling legitimized and empowered to overcome barriers that sought to keep protesters out of the Capitol. Finally, we found that the insurrection was accompanied by feelings of joy and pride regarding being in Washington DC, showing ingroup strength and moving forward as a movement. Overall, we find fewer indicators of distal empowerment than at Charlottesville – which is not surprising considering that the immediate context was one of alleged illegitimacy – and instead, indicators that protesters felt supported and able to occupy a federal building deriving from the event itself (i.e., proximal empowerment).

The Generalisability of Empowerment Experiences

Collective empowerment has initially been researched among "subordinate groups who overturn [...] existing relations of dominance" (Drury & Reicher, 2009, p. 708). And yet, in this study, we found evidence of it among groups that campaign against equality and whose members are societally and politically advantaged. Thus, the experience of empowerment seems to be generic. Consequently, although we applied the empowerment model to US-based far-right groups, we would predict that the empowerment experience is substantially similar across different contexts, i.e., groups and other nations. However, we argue that the manifestation of empowerment is dependent on social norms. In other words, while empowerment may be generic, behavioural outcomes (what people do when they feel empowered) are not. They are contingent on the identity of the group that is empowered (c.f., Badea, Binning, Sherman, Boza, & Kende, 2021; Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002). For example, three major militia groups (the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers) were reportedly present at the Capitol insurrection (Program on Extremism, 2021). In the US, distrust in government has a longstanding history among militia groups (cf. Miller-Idriss, 2022; Neiwert, 2019) and recently there have been increasing attempts to accelerate the collapse of liberal democracy (Beauchamp, 2019). Thus, the behavioural outcomes (i.e., targeting US politicians and storming the Capitol building) are in line with the identities of these groups.

Wider Implications

The current study found that Trump's victory and his political messaging were linked to perceiving society as changing in the favour of the far-right (Alt-right). It further illustrated that perceived consensus for (ingroup) values and aims and support expectations from others (including from the US President) seemed to motivate action-taking. To counteract this, we advocate for an unambiguous disavowal of far-right agendas and narratives among politicians which leaves no room for double meanings (Lytvynenko & Miller, 2020; Wang, 2017) which often was a way how Trump conveyed his approval of white supremacist aims. By avoiding this, perceptions and interpretations among the far-right of support and consensus could be undermined. We also advocate for active resistance to open mobilisation (not just from counterprotesters but also from authorities). This can actively undermine the far-right from gaining ground and putting their identity into practice. This may also be important for perceptions of the legitimacy of radical groups and agendas among the public. Previous research found that among non-participants, the perceived efficacy of a movement predicts its legitimacy (Jiménez-Moya, Miranda, Drury, Saavedra, & González, 2019). Thus, a powerful presence on the streets may lead others to perceive a political group as credible which may foster its growth. After the Charlottesville rally pollsters found that nine per cent of Americans approved of white-supremacist views (Beirich & Buchanan, 2018), and after the Capitol Insurrection, 45% of Republicans were found to approve of storming the Capitol (Sanders, Smith, & Ballard, 2021). Although both polls were cross-sectional and therefore cannot determine whether approval actually changed, it shows how crucial it is to combat far-right street mobilisation. Open (unchallenged) mobilisation can empower its attendees and influence others.

Strengths and Limitations

One advantage of the present design is that most of the statements by research subjects were contemporaneous rather than post hoc. We have some confidence in our data and conclusions since we found themes recurring across various

sources. We further believe that our codebook provides a useful analytical tool for other scholars to identify these socio-psychological constructs. However, there are limitations: The "emboldened far-right thesis" assumes causality. Although we have shown that empowerment was a crucial experience among research subjects, we cannot claim causality with these data, and we suggest that future research may examine this further, perhaps through experimental designs. Further, data collection may have been biased by platform algorithms and by the first author alone deciding which items were potentially relevant. The (physical and attitudinal) position of the camera operator further determined what we saw, and excerpts were often short. Our sample may only represent some opinions. Applying a codebook TA further meant that we paid attention to already-known themes while other emerging material was given less focus. Research subjects´ statements might have also been influenced by the presence of the media (i.e., interviewers). Thus, some statements could have been given *because* of talking to the media, for example, to avoid legal prosecution or reputational damage. A discursive re-analysis of our dataset may, therefore, be a useful complement to this study.

Conclusion

This study offered a first step towards the empirical investigation of the "emboldened far-right thesis" by applying the collective empowerment concept. We qualitatively investigated two US-based far-right rallies – the 2017 Charlottesville "Unite the Rally" and the 2021 Capitol insurrection – for the experience of collective empowerment alongside common approaches to collective action focusing on the perceptions of collective grievances among the far-right. Overall, we found that at the "Unite the Right" rally, research subjects' accounts showed indicators of proximal (i.e., from the rally deriving) as well as distal (i.e., from Trump's electoral victory) empowerment. In contrast, the Capitol insurrection seemed to be motivated by collective grievances. However, here too we found some (albeit less) indicators of distal empowerment as well as some proximal empowerment deriving from support perceptions and possibly also from conflict with Capitol police. The fact that attendees of both events were able to mobilise freely and (at least temporarily) occupy public spaces of relevance may have crucial consequences for public approval of such actions and their actors.

With our study, we contributed to the question of what enables far-right mobilisation. To *dis*empower mobilisation, insights from our study suggest that we must not only consider perceptions of grievances when we explain far-right collective action but also developments before and during the events that may be empowering.

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the following items (for access see Index of Supplementary Materials below):

- A de-identified and numeric overview of the data
- The codebooks for the analysis:
  - Codebook (empowerment)
  - Codebook (collective grievances)

Index of Supplementary Materials

Hoerst, C., & Drury, J. (2022). *Supplementary materials to "The role of subjective power dynamics in far-right collective action: The 'Unite the Right' rally and the Capitol insurrection"* [Anonymized research data and codebooks]. OSF. https://osf.io/4evqm/

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