

Responsibility to Protest: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Motives for Protest Participation in Myanmar

Trude Stapnes, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Erik Carlquist, Bjørknes University College and University of Oslo

Cindy Horst, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Forthcoming in **Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology**

© 2020, American Psychological Association. This paper is not the copy of record and may not exactly replicate the final, authoritative version of the article. Please do not copy or cite without authors' permission. The final article will be available, upon publication, via its DOI: 10.1037/pac0000473

Acknowledgements: We would first of all like to thank the interviewees who participated in this study for sharing their stories. We would also like to thank the interpreter for invaluable assistance during fieldwork in Myanmar. Thank you to Gee Berry and Christopher Butler for language editing, and to the anonymous reviewers for feedback on previous versions of the article. The authors are grateful to the Research Council of Norway [award number 261718], the Fritt Ord Foundation [award number 17-1966], and the Department of Psychology, University of Oslo [award number 2018/5822], for supporting this research.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Trude Stapnes, Peace Research Institute Oslo, PO Box 9229 Grønland, NO-0134 Oslo, Norway. E-mail: trusta@prio.org

Abstract

Why do people protest in contexts known for violent suppression and imprisonment of protesters? There is a lack of psychological research on protest participation in repressive contexts. We address this gap by asking how individuals in Myanmar understand their motives for participating in a 2015 protest march against the enactment of the National Education Law (NEL), which was perceived to limit academic freedom and centralize control over education policy. The movement ended in a violent crackdown, involving the arrests of students, activists, and others. Applying interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to semi-structured interview data from protesters, we identify four main themes in answer to the research question. First, the participants perceived the protest as important for making crucial change in an unjust law. Second, the participants had developed a student activist identity, rooted in a long tradition of student activism in Myanmar. Third, participants expressed a strong sense of responsibility to take part in the protest. And fourth, the participants described an expectation to achieve change, despite considerations of possible repressive and violent responses from authorities. These results add perspectives to existing psychological research and theory on protest participation. The present study also complements conventional deductive research designs, which use pre-existing universal variables to quantitatively test hypotheses. Instead, we offer inductively gained insights into how individuals phenomenologically made sense of their motives for participating in protest within a particular socio-political context. We argue that the strongly felt responsibility to participate that individuals experience is a topic that requires further study.

Keywords: protest, collective action, social change, qualitative study, Myanmar

Responsibility to Protest: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Motives
for Protest Participation in Myanmar

Protesting for social change can, in certain contexts, be dangerous and trigger repressive and violent responses by authorities. Under such conditions, taking part in protest might be considered a risky method for addressing collective grievances. However, history is rife with examples of people who have gathered for protests despite substantial threats to personal safety (Almeida, 2008; Boudreau, 2004; Kurzman, 2004). How do individuals make sense of their motives to participate in protest in contexts known for violent suppression of protests and imprisonment of demonstrators?

For several decades, psychologists have investigated the question of why people protest (see van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2017). However, psychological studies from repressive contexts and settings where structural conditions make participation especially difficult are lacking. Research has been conducted in a number of countries and cultural contexts (van Zomeren & Louis, 2017), but primarily in settings where participation is less likely to involve risk for personal safety. In the present study, we address this gap by asking how individuals in Myanmar understand their motives for participating in protest.

In 2015, students protested against the enactment of a new National Education Law (NEL). The movement culminated in a violent crackdown by the police, followed by the arrest of students, activists, and others (McCarthy, 2016). We adopt a qualitative approach to study individual motives for participating in this protest. Applying interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to semi-structured interviews, we explore in detail how participating individuals account for and make sense of their motives to protest. Our study aspires to add new perspectives to psychological literature on collective action by providing insights from a setting where societal conditions make such

acts especially challenging. To begin, we present key features of the specific political context for the protest examined in this study.

Situating Myanmar

From 1962 until elections in 2010, Myanmar was led by military or military-backed rulers who were known to repress freedom of speech, association, and assembly (Huang, 2013). Predating the military regime, Myanmar citizens have an extensive record of challenging authorities by gathering on the streets, and students have played a large role in many of these protests (Win Min, 2012). On several occasions, demonstrations have been met with riot police violence and the military imprisonment and killing of protesters.

In 2003, the military government introduced a seven-step roadmap to democracy (Nilsen, 2013). This roadmap led to the formation of the much-contested 2008 constitution and the 2010 multi-party election. Even though the organization of the election was viewed as a means of continuing already-established power structures, it nevertheless led to a new semi-civilian government, ending the one-party military dictatorship that had dominated Myanmar for five decades (Skidmore & Wilson, 2012).

From 2011, President Thein Sein introduced liberal and democratic reforms. Several hundred political prisoners were released, media censorship was more relaxed, and unions and civil society organizations experienced more freedom (Huang, 2013). However, individuals who embraced these new freedoms to criticize the government or military were frequently met with arrests and detentions, prosecuted under vague laws that violate internationally protected rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Protest Against the National Education Law

In September 2014, Myanmar's parliament passed the NEL, intending to reform the country's education system. However, critics argued that the law limited academic freedom

and marginalized the role of states and regions in determining academic policy, as well as banning the formation of student and teacher unions, and erasing minority languages, culture, and literature from university syllabi (McCarthy, 2016). In response to these provisions, a student-led movement formed, demanding meetings with government officials and parliamentarians to discuss the situation. The government issued no response to these demands, which incited more than 100 protesters to begin a four-hundred-mile protest march from Mandalay toward Yangon in January 2015. The students also formalized 11 demands for amending the NEL (Lall & South, 2018).

In February, meetings led to a text of a revised education law fulfilling the students' demands. Waiting for the parliament's decision on how to handle the amended law, the students broke off their march in Letpadan, a town 90 miles from Yangon, and announced that they would resume their march after 10 days if the parliament did not pass the revised bill. On the date the students had declared they would continue their march, they woke up surrounded by a police blockade. After several days surrounded by police, the students attempted to move past the blockade. The police responded by violently cracking down on the protesters using excessive force, and arresting over 100 students, supporters, and others (McCarthy, 2016).

Psychological Drivers for Protest Participation

There is a large literature investigating the psychological factors that predict participation in collective action (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2017) and several theoretical frameworks have been developed (Stürmer & Simon, 2004; van Stekelenburg, 2013; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). The literature has focused on the predictive role of variables such as identity (Simon et al., 1998), efficacy (Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Saguy, & van Zomeren, 2014), emotions (Tausch et al., 2011), and morality (Sabucedo, Dono, Alzate, & Seoane, 2018) to explain why people protest.

Social psychological research has consistently shown that participation in collective action correlates with group identification (Klandermans, Sabucedo, & Rodriguez, 2004; Stürmer, Simon, Loewy, & Jörger, 2003). Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2017) argued that identities must politicize to mobilize people for social change. Politicization of group identity entails that the group develops an awareness of shared grievances, blames an external enemy for these grievances, and attempts to win support for their cause from a third party such as the general public (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Accordingly, the more people identify with a group, the more likely it is that they protest on behalf of this group, but only to the extent that identification is transformed into a more politicized form of activist identity (Simon et al., 1998; van Zomeren et al., 2008). A politicized identity connects people to the group's grievances, and results in a perceived sense of obligation to participate in collective action on behalf of the group (Stürmer & Simon, 2004; Stürmer et al., 2003).

Group efficacy has been reported as another key predictor for why people participate in collective action (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). Group efficacy refers to the belief that the group is able to achieve its goals through a unified effort and has been found to predict collective action across different contexts and disadvantaged groups (Cohen-Chen et al., 2014; Corcoran, Pettinicchio, & Young, 2011). This means that the stronger the subjective sense of group efficacy, the more likely people are to engage in collective action (Mummendey et al., 1999). Moreover, van Stekelenburg (2013) highlighted the importance of including political efficacy to explain why people do or do not participate in collective action. Political efficacy denotes the belief that a protest can have an impact on the political process and that government officials are responsive to the concerns of the people.

The study of emotions has become prevalent in psychological research on collective action. When group-based deprivation or inequality is perceived as unjust, shared emotions such as anger have been found to motivate collective action (Miller, Cronin, Garcia, &

Branscombe, 2009; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Furthermore, there appears to be a striking difference between activists and non-activists regarding whether anger predicts their collective action intentions (van Zomeren, 2015). Perceived group-based unfairness and felt group-based anger has been found to motivate non-activists to participate in collective action (Miller et al., 2009; Tausch et al., 2011). However, emotional experiences do not seem to explain engagement in collective action for activists (Stürmer & Simon, 2004).

Another line of research has focused on the moral constructs of individuals. This research has explored how moral motivation is grounded in the personal self (Skitka, 2010), and has found that the violation of personal moral standards encourages individuals to act collectively (Sabucedo et al., 2018; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012; Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012). Further, Power (2018) argued that moral appraisals in collective action are informed by how individuals remember the past and imagine the future. A study on protest participation in Ireland emphasized how protesters “articulate immoral futures to galvanize, motivate, and justify actions in the present—always steeped in historical and remembered contexts—to create more moral and utopic societies” (Power, 2018, p. 233).

Despite extensive psychological research on protest participation, studies from repressive contexts are scarce. In societies with an authoritarian form of government, people’s lives involve high degrees of obedience and conformity (Moghaddam, 2013, 2016). Engaging in collective action for social change in such contexts requires disobedience that may be met with brutal reactions by authorities. Thus, an individual’s decision to protest in a context where the act can lead to violent responses entails profoundly different considerations than making a similar decision in a context with no expected risk to personal safety. This means that current psychological research may be oblivious to motives that exist in repressive contexts.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that most existing psychological studies on collective action tend to be quantitative, aiming to identify independent and dependent variables that lead to protest participation and to model relationships between these variables. In line with a growing body of literature, we argue that some types of behavior are not effectively explained using a pre-determined causal model of behavior (see Harré & Moghaddam, 2012). Studying how persons construct meaning is central to understanding motives for behavior. To explore what motivates the individual to protest despite the risk of violent responses and arrest, we must therefore study how protesters make sense of their specific personal and social worlds.

Aiming to explore why people participate in protest in highly repressive contexts, this study attempts to answer the following question: How do individuals in Myanmar understand their motives to participate in protest against the NEL? To answer this question, the study applies IPA (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009) to semi-structured interview data from protesters. This method offers an appropriate methodological approach for describing how individuals perceive and make sense of their current social circumstances (Smith et al., 2009).

Furthermore, through detailed and phenomenological examination of individuals' motives to participate in protest, the present study allows the emergence of new and unanticipated themes not covered by extant theoretical models. It is important to analyze detailed descriptions of how the phenomenon is understood by protesters themselves because components of current hypothetico-deductive models of protest behavior may not correspond to subjectively experienced motives. As the present study has been conducted in a severely understudied context, new themes not previously discussed in the protest literature are likely to appear in the data. The qualitative analysis of this material can therefore provide new

insights about psychological drivers in initiatives for social change in repressive contexts (Wagoner, Moghaddam, & Valsiner, 2018).

Method

Participants

We conducted in-depth interviews with 16 individuals who participated in the protest against the NEL. Eight participants were male and eight were female. Fourteen of the interviewees were student union members at the time of the protest, one was an ex-student union member due to graduation, and one was a member of a youth political party. Some of the interviewees had never marched in protest before, whereas others had been involved in previous demonstrations. Five of the participants reported having been imprisoned as a result of participating in previous demonstrations.

The number of participants followed IPA recommendations of utilizing small, purposively-selected samples in order to commit to detailed analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were recruited through the first author's network and by contacting representatives from student unions by e-mail or telephone, and furthermore by snowball sampling. Using multiple sources for recruitment enabled the researcher to interview people from several student unions at different universities, thus providing a diversity of respondents.

Interviews

The first author conducted interviews in Myanmar in November and December 2017. Two interviews were held in English, and the remaining 14 were conducted in Burmese with assistance from an interpreter. The interviewer worked with the same experienced interpreter throughout the fieldwork. The interviewer met with the interpreter in advance to clarify roles and interpreting style, and to ensure that the interpreter understood the interview form and aims of the study (Skjelsbæk, 2016). Participants were encouraged to suggest locations for

the interview. Some took place at participants' offices, but most were conducted in public cafés. The interview duration varied between one and three hours, with most lasting approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The participants were given oral information about the project, treatment of data and the right to withdraw from the study before the interview started. Each interview began by asking the participant to describe what happened from the time he or she first became involved in acting against the NEL until the protest march was finished, and to describe a day in the march from beginning to end. These narrative questions aimed to make the participants comfortable talking in detail about their own experiences and created an awareness of the level of detailed, personal experiences relevant for this study.

After these opening questions, the interview followed a topical guide developed based on relevant literature (see Appendix). Themes covered in the interviews included experienced grievances; goals of participating; types of emotions felt; perceived possibility of achieving change; social relations and identification with other protesters; and thoughts about how the authorities would react to the protest. Although structured along these thematic lines, the interviews were nevertheless open to topical flexibility and to adjusting focus. This interviewing approach made it possible to explore already-established psychological components for participation by asking focused questions, while the narrative questions provided opportunity for the interviewees to offer potentially new perspectives not yet discussed in the literature.

Analysis

IPA is an appropriate method for examining experiences of major significance for an individual, and suitable for analyzing how individuals perceive situations, how they make sense of their personal and social world, and how they make important decisions (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). A major strength of IPA is that it is unconstrained by

predetermined categorical systems, in contrast to most hypothesis-testing approaches that dominate social psychological research. The phenomenological approach allows a close investigation of the personal worlds of people relating to their real-life contexts.

The first author analyzed the interviews drawing on procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009). First, the author read and re-read each transcript and annotated comprehensive exploratory comments varying from strictly descriptive to more conceptual. The descriptive comments had a phenomenological focus and were grounded in the participant's own explicit meanings. The conceptual comments were interpretative and had an interrogative form. Second, the author developed emergent themes based on the exploratory comments. These themes aimed to capture important features of the various comments attached to a piece of transcript. Third, the author looked for relationships, connections, and patterns between the emergent themes from a specific transcript and clustered themes together using abstraction. During this data organization process, the researcher continuously referred back to the transcripts to ensure that the themes selected were representative of each participant's accounts. This process resulted in a list of distinct themes for each transcript. In order to commit to IPA's idiographic focus, each interview was analyzed on its own terms, and the researcher attempted to prevent themes from one interview affecting the construction of themes for subsequent transcripts. Fourth, the author used the lists of themes for each transcript to look for patterns and recurrent themes across cases, and eventually developed four superordinate master themes. The end result is an account of how the first author has interpreted the participants' motives to participate in protest, based on the participants' own interpretations of their motives.

Results

In response to the research question "How do individuals in Myanmar understand their motives to participate in protest against the NEL?," four main themes were identified

through the analytical process: *importance of the march, student activist identity, sense of responsibility, and expectation to achieve change*. In this section, we will use quotes from the transcripts to illustrate the narrative accounts of different individuals and to elucidate how our interpretations were reached. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

Importance of the March

Each of the interviewees offered distinct accounts about how they perceived the NEL to be unjust and what they wished to change by participating in the protest. Most participants focused on the need to improve the education system in Myanmar to create important changes in society. To be taught critical thinking skills through education was seen as essential. Most participants expressed distress at the way the law had been enacted, and saw the protest as the final strategy available to oppose this legislation and create change.

A call for critical thinking. A central topic discussed in the majority of the interviews was how participants experienced the quality of education as poor. One respondent, Ko Ko Maung, said: “You know, maybe you know, our university system, education system, it really sucks. They cannot give us critical thinking. They cannot give us what we want.” Many respondents articulated a desire to have space to debate and express their own opinions, instead of learning to repeat what the teacher said. Yu Myint described her educational experience this way:

It's a rote learning system. We just learn everything by heart. . . . Since our childhood, we have had to memorize everything, so we don't know how to learn for ourselves. Outside too, we try to rote memorize. Memorizing has a big limit. We can't memorize everything.

Similarly, Khin Maung described the education system as a “parrot learning system.” Such statements illustrate the educational dissatisfaction felt by the participants. Instead, they desire to learn critical thinking skills, as expressed by Zayar Naing:

We have to think, we have to decide independently. So, that kind of independent thinking skill, either when you accept or reject something, that independent thinking seems to only come from education. That's why I think that education is most important for our country.

The majority of the participants made connections between what was being taught at school and broader issues located at the societal level. They expressed their concerns that the current education system that emphasized rote learning had led to a situation where decisions in society were not based on critical thinking. Thus, the participants presented their protest participation as a fight for better education that would ultimately contribute to broader societal change in Myanmar.

Protest as final strategy to create change. Many of the participants highlighted the way the law was enacted as another important reason for participating in the march. They emphasized that the government passed the law unilaterally despite heavy criticism from many sources, including the students. The fact that the government took no suggestions into consideration was expressed as unreasonable and thus they described their participation as a final strategy for creating change:

Before the protest, we tried to promote a lot of awareness and we tried to express that we disagreed, we don't like this National Education Law. We used all the means to reach the government. . . . Even before the protest, we organized a protest at each of the universities. Although we tried all the means to reach the government, they passed the bill anyway. So, we have no other choice.

Yee Mon Shwe's statement illustrates the growing frustration at the government's actions. By participating in the march, the students engaged in the critical thinking they were calling for in the education system. Due to their voices not being heard, participants understood protest to be the only means of addressing their grievances. As Yu Myint put it: "The protest was our last and only weapon."

Student Activist Identity

The interviewees consistently represented themselves as acting as part of a long tradition of student activists. Having developed this student activist identity, they felt an obligation to act as a member of this group.

Being part of a long tradition of student activism. The interviewees tended to describe how previous generations of students fought against injustice before them, and that now, as student activists, it was their turn to fight for future generations. Thus, the protestors expressed a perceived obligation to stand up against injustice as embedded in a historical context of student activism. Ko Ko Maung said:

At that time, we, all the student union people, we got some power from our seniors' generation. They fought for democratic education, democracy, liberty. They fought, they gave their life, you know, for our country. So, it is our time now, it is our generation now.

Similarly, Khaing Lin explained:

This is a chance for me to get involved in that. . . . It is not a kind of event that could happen every year. So, after 2007, this is the biggest strike. And if you specifically talk about the student strikes, after 1962 and 1996, this is the biggest. People say that this is the fourth student demonstration in the history. So, you know, I took part in that and I tried my best to do my job. To complete my duties.

While Khaing Lin described his participation in the protest as the responsibility of a student activist, his narration also suggests that he perceived the march as an opportunity. He described the protest as a “chance” to be involved, and his invocation of historical strikes may be interpreted to mean that he saw the march not only as his duty, but also as an opportunity to take part in something he regarded as important. Thus, for Khaing Lin, taking part in the protest march seems to symbolize the opportunity to become a student protester who marches when he is needed. Joining a movement with a long tradition, he perceives a common identity with current, but also past and perhaps future generations of student activists.

Shared identity with others in the protest. All the interviewees highlighted a sense of shared identity with the other participants in the protest. An example of how this common student activist identity was expressed during the protest march was through the use of student union symbols and songs. The police demanded the protesters stop using these symbols. Thiri Thin recounted:

We have banners, flags and patches that we wear on our arms and on our foreheads. Some also wear t-shirts. [The police] don't want all of these things. They don't want any symbols of student unions. We also have an information car. This car usually plays songs, especially student union songs. They said: “You have to stop everything,” and they said: “There will be no more songs.” But for us, they try to break our dignity, yeah? . . . What they said, made us kind of prisoners. We became prisoners. There is no more shouting our motto or shouting our demands, and no more symbols of student unions. So, we cannot accept that kind of order.

The description of feeling like “prisoners” because of not being allowed to use student union symbols is a representation of how Thiri Thin felt connected to the protest group. Participants

tended to describe not having other options than to continue to march, which might suggest that many experienced an obligation to fight on behalf of the group. Thet Htun described:

The reason why we are able to walk this far every day is that we have a mission. As well as we are seeing our friends who are walking with us, we have our fellow students who are walking alongside. So, if we stop, that will be a betrayal. So that is why we decided to walk no matter what it takes.

Thet Htun's representation is that stopping his involvement in the march would have been perceived as a disloyal act towards the other members of the group. This sense of connectedness and fighting together for a common cause suggests that the protesters had developed a shared group identity as student activists and perceived an obligation to fight on behalf of the group.

Sense of Responsibility

"I think it is my duty. . . . In my mind, I always think that if my country needs me, if something happens, I should participate." This quote illustrates how Ei Phyu Aung made sense of her protest involvement based on feeling a responsibility to take part. All the interviewees' accounts suggest a perceived sense of responsibility to act against the NEL. Among the interviewees, we found this sense of responsibility was developed through a variety of processes, relating to socialization in the family, reading books, and significant experiences with injustice.

Political awareness from a young age. Most interviewees explained having come to political consciousness at a young age. Some participants had close family members who were involved in political activism, while others described finding inspiration from reading books during childhood or youth. When asked about why she wanted to participate in the march, Yu Myint replied:

To participate in this kind of movement, or to be an activist, it's not a very strange thing for me. In my mind, it has kind of become my responsibility as a citizen. My father was arrested for participating in the 1988 uprising for democracy. . . . He did good things, so it's not shameful to tell my friends that my father was arrested because he participated in a democratic movement. So, for me that's not a very strange thing. It's quite easy. It's just a thing we have to do, a thing we should do.

Yu Myint later compared her story with other students and said she understood that not all current students had heard about uprisings, prison, and democracy as she had in her youth. It appears she was attempting to make sense of why not everyone feels the same obligation to act as she does. She attributed her feelings of responsibility to be involved in political activities to the environment she grew up in. By referring to her upbringing as the explanation for the responsibility she feels, she is able to make sense of her own feeling of obligation while at the same time justifying why others do not act.

Not all interviewees described growing up in politically involved families. These participants described other sources to explain their political awareness, which often included reading. Ko Ko Maung said his parents never talked about politics and that they tried to force him to study at the military academy. He denied their wishes and moved away from home to enroll at university. When asked why he wanted to be involved in political issues, he said:

My generation, they are not interested in reading. But for me, I am interested in reading. I think I am more curious than other young people. And luckily, my mom and dad opened a book store. I went to the store and stole some books [laughs]. So, since my childhood I read some novels, translated novels, local novels, and because of reading, I got more critical thinking than others.

It appears that Ko Ko Maung is trying to make sense of his own motivation to be involved in the protest by going back to his upbringing and referring to the books he read. By comparing

himself to other people who did not take part in the protest, he expresses a belief that reading books when growing up led him to develop critical thinking and eventually to political activism.

Significant experiences leading to action. Many participants described the role of experiencing or witnessing injustice as inspiring their commitment to political engagement. Zayar Naing's memory from the 1988 pro-democracy movement provides a compelling example of the force of bearing witness to important events:

So, [this older student I knew] got into medical school. But in 1988 he was arrested and not allowed to go back to school. He ended up as a drug addict. Right before my eyes, his life was destroyed. He was a very smart student, but he became a drug addict. So, what I understood was that these people, the government, the soldiers, they are the bad people. I was too young to know how democracy works, but I understood that these people are bad.

This story can be interpreted as an existential experience that contributed to Zayar Naing becoming deeply and personally committed to challenging injustice.

Several of the interviewees had been direct victims of injustice and oppression before the protest against the NEL, and some had been imprisoned for taking part in pro-democracy uprisings during the Saffron Revolution in 2007. Thiha Thet described his prison experience, which only strengthened his dedication to political activism:

Actually, I studied more politics during my prison time. You know, I got a chance to meet with senior activists and politicians in prison. So, before I got arrested, I got involved in politics all because of emotions. But now I got the chance to learn from them, from their experiences, and I had more time to read books about politics. . . .

The prison became a university of political science to me. I got more confidence and

made up my mind to get into politics after I was released. So, entering the prison was more like entering into politics, for real.

This statement illustrates how Thiha Thet appears to be distancing himself from his earlier emotional motivations, as his political engagement after prison is referred to as “real.” His newfound reasons, informed and inspired by the prison experience, are thereby perceived as more legitimate than his previous motives. The other interviewees who had served time in prison offered stories that reflected Thiha Thet’s. They understood their time in prison as a significant personal experience that has galvanized their fight against oppression and inspired political action.

Expectation to Achieve Change

Prior to their protest participation, most interviewees had reflected on the capacity of protest for achieving change. They had also considered the likelihood of violent response to that protest. Many of the participants expressed a determination to fight through repressive responses from authorities and expected that marching would lead to desired change.

Preparing for repression. Even though the government was no longer a military regime at the time of the protest against the NEL, all the interviewees described the possibility of repressive responses to their protest. Khin Maung described:

From 1962 until now, there are three things in our country if we do politics. If we do politics in our country, the first is death. We can die. And the second thing is, we can go to jail. And the third thing is, our life can be totally destroyed.

Khin Maung's perceptions of the context for being involved in politics is embedded in a history of repressive responses from the Myanmar authorities. Similarly, Thet Htun stated: “Throughout the history of the student unions, there is no such thing that the government easily follows the demands. So, we anticipated the worst scenario. Either that we got killed, or we spent our time in the prison.” These accounts illustrate how the participants prepared

for great risk when deciding to participate in the protest. At the same time, all participants described an expectation that the march would result in change. Ei Phyu Aung stated:

Since I am doing these things, I can always get arrested and sent to prison. But what happened to me is that I cannot tolerate the injustice. So, when I see injustice, I cannot help but, you know, we need to fight against it. That's what I believe. . . . Of course, I hoped that some things are going to happen. Like teacher unions supported us. And most of the student populations all over the country agreed with us. So, we thought that the government would not neglect our demands this time. But it turned out differently.

Ei Phyu Aung's understanding of the possibility for the march to lead to change is articulated as something she "hoped" for, and she "thought" the government would act differently than they did. The choice of words suggests that she believed the protest had the potential to create desired change. While other words, such as "I cannot help but" illustrate her deep-seated sense of responsibility to act out against perceived injustice.

Surprisingly violent crackdown. While all participants described preparing for repressive responses from the authorities, some also expressed surprise at the level of violence during the crackdown. Khaing Lin said: "This is a new government. So, we didn't expect that the crackdown would be that brutal." Thiha Thet echoed:

The previous time is a military regime. So, during that time, there is a martial law and soldiers would shoot you at the day time in the middle of the streets. That's what happened in the past. But in this period, Thein Sein government is trying to get legitimacy as a democratic government. So, we didn't expect that the demonstrations would be cracked down that quick. You know, we didn't expect that the government would use that much force.

These examples of how the interviewees described being surprised by the level of violence used by authorities suggests that some participants considered that they would be able to participate without risks like bodily harm and imprisonment.

Discussion

This study offers important insights into how individuals make sense of their motives to take part in a protest despite a context of possible threat to their personal safety. We found that the participants' motives included having an understanding of the protest as important, a student activist identity, a sense of responsibility to participate, and an expectation to achieve change despite considerations of possible repressive responses from authorities. These results resonate with and add new insights to concepts discussed in current psychological research on collective action. Notably, our results show that every participant in this study perceived a sense of responsibility to participate. To our knowledge, this aspect is not conceptually included or discussed in current social psychological frameworks on collective protest action. We will next discuss each of the four themes in turn.

First, our results suggest that the participants perceived participating in the march as important. Participants pointed to different aspects of why the NEL was important to fight. Most interviewees described improvement to the education system as a prerequisite for creating much-needed change at the societal level, while at the same time articulating grievances regarding the way the law was imposed by the government. Social justice theory provides a helpful lens through which to observe this phenomenon of grievances and protests (Tyler & Smith, 1998). Social justice theory has distinguished between distributive justice, referring to the fairness of outcomes, and procedural justice, referring to the fairness of decision-making processes. According to some studies, people are more often aggrieved when procedures, rather than outcomes, are experienced as unfair (van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). In the present study, the participants tended to express concerns

about distributive injustice and procedural injustice simultaneously. All participants expressed perceived distributive unfairness in that the new law itself was seen as unjust and detrimental to the education system, while many also described procedural injustice evident in the government's unwillingness to take the students' and others' discontent into account before enacting the law.

Second, participants represented themselves as student activists, sharing a common group identity with other protesters in the march, and a behavioral commitment to the group. This finding is in accordance with psychological research that has found politicized group identification to be an important predictive variable for protest participation (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer & Simon, 2004; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Van Zomeren (2015) argued that individuals develop a politicized form of activist identity because of social interactions that violate established relational models. Participants in our study had developed a critical consciousness based on different socialization experiences which may have led to a change in their relationship with the authorities. Witnessing a friend or parent wrongfully arrested may have led the individual to reject a previously perceived obligation to comply with government authorities, and rather feel committed to those who fight for change (Stürmer et al., 2003).

Moreover, the present study indicates that participants represented themselves not only as part of a group with a shared identity, but also as part of a long tradition of student activists. Thus, the results demonstrate how the participants identify with movements going generations back in time, suggesting that they perceived an inner obligation to act not only on behalf of current, but also past and future generations of student activists. This is a notable finding that suggests how contextual and historical factors may contribute to protesters' understanding of their motivations to act. This finding corresponds with research on how the past and collective memories can have implications for how people act in the present

(Wagoner & Brescó, 2016). Wertsch (1997) argued that collective memory is linked to group identification. The way participants remember previous generations of student activists impacts how they represent themselves. Collective remembering supplies individuals and groups with a sense of identity because “we can’t know who we are if we don’t know where we have been” (Wertsch, 1997, p. 5).

Third, individuals in our study described a strongly felt responsibility to protest. We argue that this sense of responsibility is conceptually different from the perceived obligation to act on behalf of student activists as discussed in the previous paragraphs. The sense of responsibility refers to a deep commitment to fight against injustice that has developed through personal socialization processes and life experiences. Nasie, Bar-Tal and Shnaidman’s (2014) study on radical peace activists in Israel demonstrated how certain sociopolitical socialization processes during childhood and youth, including socialization in the family, early social and political activities, exposure to alternative information and major life experiences, accounted for decisions to join activist groups. Participants in our study shared stories about growing up in politically-involved families, reading books, or experiencing oppressive or unjust events, which sparked their political interest. The accounts showed how participants then continued to expand their political engagement by becoming members of a student union or through experiences from prison, eventually participating in collective action on the streets as a means to foment social change. The protesters’ stories suggest that they had undergone a long process of developing a critical awareness, which culminated in a strong sense of responsibility to fight for a more just society. When the NEL was enacted, protesting this legislation became part of a larger project of opposing injustice.

Such an interpretation of findings resonates with research in community and liberation psychology that has focused on how people develop critical consciousness directed towards social change (Burton & Kagan, 2005; Montero, 2009). Through socio-culturally mediated

processes of developing critical consciousness, people begin to question and criticize conditions of injustice and oppression. When critical consciousness is mobilized, people move away from uncritically accepted versions of “reality” towards considering the possibility of transformation (Freire, 1970; Martín-Baró, 1996). In this regard, Grabe and Dutt (2015) found that experiencing a sense of duty to act was central to the narratives of Nicaraguan activists, and suggested that this duty developed precisely from a process whereby growing awareness of injustices led to broader understanding and the development of a critical consciousness, thus culminating in an obligation to act. This chain of reasoning is consistent with findings in the present study, which suggest that significant experiences of injustice were perceived by the protestors to have inspired their commitment to action.

The strongly felt responsibility to protest that participants described also speaks to research that has explored how moral feelings motivate collective action (Sabucedo et al., 2018; Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012). Having developed a critical consciousness, participants described that they felt no other choice than to participate in the protest. It is possible to interpret these statements as a perceived inner moral drive to take part in the protest. Sabucedo et al. (2018) argued that moral obligation by definition takes priority over personal costs. Thus, it may be such an inner moral conviction that enables individuals to challenge authorities despite potential risks to personal safety.

Finally, the participants in our study perceived their group as strong and able to create change. These observations are in line with previous studies that have suggested that group efficacy is necessary for the individual to perceive that changing the situation for their group is possible (Cohen-Chen et al., 2014; Corcoran et al., 2011). The results further suggest that the participants’ motives were influenced by their perception of political efficacy—the possibility for impacting political processes. The findings indicate that the participants expected the protest to achieve change while at the same time representing the political

context as uncertain. All participants explained that they had prepared for repressive responses, but many also described being surprised by the level of violence used by authorities. These perceptions were contextually situated and embedded in the history of violent crackdowns of political uprisings in Myanmar. Deciding to take part in collective action in this context, where the act may or may not lead to violent responses and arrest, is fundamentally different from making such a decision in a context with no expected risk to personal safety. Thus, our results provide a more nuanced picture of how protesters perceive political efficacy than studies set in more democratic societies.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study should be discussed. The political situation may have constrained the interviewees' willingness to openly discuss their protest participation. Although Myanmar has seen democratic changes in recent years, a considerable number of persons have been arrested for criticizing government and the military. Furthermore, the status of the interviewer as an "outsider" is likely to have had an impact on the interview setting. Although this may have enabled interviewees to talk more freely about a sensitive topic in a space ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, it may also have led some to adapt their narratives to the presumed expectations of the interviewer.

The use of an interpreter may also have affected the interview situation. Inaccuracies in translation may have caused ambiguities during the conversation, as well as some loss of detail in the eventually transcribed data. Perceiving the interpreter as a "local" might have led interviewees to withhold sensitive information that they otherwise would have been willing to share with the interviewer. It is nevertheless of note that the interviewees disclosed detailed descriptions of their experiences as well as critical thoughts about the government and military. The oral format and conversational nature of the research setting allowed for

ample time for the interviewees to narrate, enabling participants to gradually open up and express their views.

The method applied in this study was chosen with the aim of gaining deeper insight into the lives of a small sample of protest participants in Myanmar. Due to the qualitative, phenomenological nature of this study, generalizing findings to wider populations was not a goal. The findings can nevertheless indicate future research directions and point towards hypotheses. In order to gain further understanding of why people participate in protest in contexts of risk, we recommend that future research into motives for protest participation is carried out by applying similarly detailed and contextually-situated qualitative investigations to a number of other politically repressive contexts. Moreover, we suggest that research should direct more attention to exploring sense of responsibility as a motive for protest participation in wider contexts. Variables that operationalize the concept of responsibility could furthermore be included in quantitative studies to test hypotheses pertaining to protest motivation and behavior.

References

- Almeida, P. D. (2008). *Waves of protest: Popular struggle in El Salvador, 1925–2005*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Boudreau, V. (2004). *Resisting dictatorship: Repression and protest in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Burton, M., & Kagan, C. (2005). Liberation social psychology: Learning from Latin America. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 15*, 63–78.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.786>
- Cohen-Chen, S., Halperin, E., Saguy, T., & van Zomeren, M. (2014). Beliefs about the malleability of immoral groups facilitate collective action. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 5*, 203–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550613491292>
- Corcoran, K. E., Pettinicchio, D., & Young, D. T. N. (2011). The context of control: A cross-national investigation of the link between political institutions, efficacy, and collective action. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 50*, 575–605.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2011.02076.x>
- Eatough, V., & Smith, J. A. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 193–211). London, UK: Sage.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Grabe, S., & Dutt, A. (2015). Counter narratives, the psychology of liberation, and the evolution of a women's social movement in Nicaragua. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 21*, 89–105. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pac0000080>
- Harré, R., & Moghaddam, F. M. (Eds.). (2012). *Psychology for the third millennium: Integrating cultural and neuroscience perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Huang, R. L. (2013). Re-thinking Myanmar's political regime: Military rule in Myanmar and

- implications for current reforms. *Contemporary Politics*, 19, 247–261.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2013.804149>
- Human Rights Watch. (2016). *“They can arrest you at any time”: The criminalization of peaceful expression in Burma*. New York, NY: Human Rights Watch.
- Klandermans, B., Sabucedo, J. M., & Rodriguez, M. (2004). Inclusiveness of identification among farmers in The Netherlands and Galicia (Spain). *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 34, 279–295. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.197>
- Kurzman, C. (2004). *The unthinkable revolution in Iran*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lall, M., & South, A. (2018). Power dynamics of language and education policy in Myanmar’s contested transition. *Comparative Education Review*, 62, 482–502.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/699655>
- Martín-Baró, I. (1996). *Writings for a liberation psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McCarthy, S. (2016). Myanmar in 2015. An election year. *Asian Survey*, 56, 138–147.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2016.56.1.138>
- Miller, D. A., Cronin, T., Garcia, A. L., & Branscombe, N. R. (2009). The relative impact of anger and efficacy on collective action is affected by feelings of fear. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 12, 445–462.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430209105046>
- Moghaddam, F. M. (2013). *The psychology of dictatorship*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Moghaddam, F. M. (2016). *The psychology of democracy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Montero, M. (2009). Methods for liberation: Critical consciousness in action. In M. Montero & C. Sonn (Eds.), *Psychology of liberation* (pp. 73–92). New York, NY: Springer.
- Mummendey, A., Kessler, T., Klink, A., & Mielke, R. (1999). Strategies to cope with negative social identity: Predictions by social identity theory and relative deprivation theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76*, 229–245.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.76.2.229>
- Nasie, M., Bar-Tal, D., & Shnaidman, O. (2014). Activists in Israeli radical peace organizations: Their personal stories about joining and taking part in these organizations. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 20*, 313–329.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pac0000040>
- Nilsen, M. (2013). Will democracy bring peace to Myanmar? *International Area Studies Review, 16*, 115–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865913492961>
- Power, S. A. (2018). Remembering and imagining in human development: Fairness and social movements in Ireland. In C. de Saint Laurent, S. Obradović, & K. R. Carriere (Eds.), *Imagining collective futures: Perspectives from social, cultural, and political psychology* (pp. 221–235). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sabucedo, J. M., Dono, M., Alzate, M., & Seoane, G. (2018). The importance of protesters' morals: Moral obligation as a key variable to understand collective action. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*, 418. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00418>
- Simon, B., & Klandermans, B. (2001). Politicized collective identity: A social-psychological analysis. *American Psychologist, 56*, 319–331. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.4.319>
- Simon, B., Loewy, M., Stürmer, S., Weber, U., Freytag, P., Habig, C., ... Spahlinger, P. (1998). Collective identification and social movement participation. *Journal of*

- Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 646–658. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.3.646>
- Skidmore, M., & Wilson, T. (2012). Interpreting the transition in Myanmar. In N. Cheesman, M. Skidmore & T. Wilson (Eds.), *Myanmar's transition: Openings, obstacles and opportunities* (pp. 3–22). Singapore, SG: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Skitka, L. J. (2010). The psychology of moral conviction. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4, 267–281. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00254.x>
- Skjelsbæk, I. (2016). Interpreting the interpreter: Navigating translation, interpretation, and mediation. *Culture & Psychology*, 22, 502–519. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X16650830>
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis. Theory, method and research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Stürmer, S., & Simon, B. (2004). Collective action: Towards a dual-pathway. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 15, 59–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463280340000117>
- Stürmer, S., Simon, B., Loewy, M., & Jörger, H. (2003). The dual-pathway model of social movement participation: The case of the fat acceptance movement. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 66, 71–82. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3090142>
- Tausch, N., Becker, J. C., Spears, R., Christ, O., Saab, R., Singh, P., & Siddiqui, R. N. (2011). Explaining radical group behavior: Developing emotion and efficacy routes to normative and nonnormative collective action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101, 129–148. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a002272>
- Tyler, T. R., & Smith, H. J. (1998). Social justice and social movements. In D. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 595–629). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

- van Stekelenburg, J. (2013). The political psychology of protest: Sacrificing for a cause. *European Psychologist, 18*, 224–234. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000156>
- van Stekelenburg, J., & Klandermans, B. (2017). Individuals in movements: A social psychology of contention. In C. Roggeband & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Handbook of social movements across disciplines* (pp. 103–139). New York, NY: Springer.
- van Zomeren, M. (2015). Collective action as relational interaction: A new relational hypothesis on how non-activists become activists. *New Ideas in Psychology, 39*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2015.04.001>
- van Zomeren, M., & Louis, W. R. (2017). Culture meets collective action: Exciting synergies and some lessons to learn for the future. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 20*, 277–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430217690238>
- van Zomeren, M., Postmes, T., & Spears, R. (2008). Toward an integrative social identity model of collective action: A quantitative research synthesis of three socio-psychological perspectives. *Psychological Bulletin, 134*, 504–535. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.4.504>
- van Zomeren, M., Postmes, T., & Spears, R. (2012). On conviction's collective consequences: Integrating moral conviction with the social identity model of collective action. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 51*, 52–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02000.x>
- van Zomeren, M., Spears, R., Fischer, A. H., & Leach, C. W. (2004). Put your money where your mouth is! Explaining collective action tendencies through group-based anger and group efficacy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*, 649–664. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.5.649>

- Vilas, X., & Sabucedo, J. M. (2012). Moral obligation: A forgotten dimension in the analysis of collective action. *Revista de Psicología Social: International Journal of Social Psychology*, 27, 369–375. <https://doi.org/10.1174/021347412802845577>
- Wagoner, B., & Brescó, I. (2016). Conflict and memory: The past in the present. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 22, 3–4.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pac0000147>
- Wagoner, B., Moghaddam, F. M., & Valsiner, J. (Eds.). (2018). *The psychology of radical social change: From rage to revolution*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1997). Narrative tools of history and identity. *Culture and Psychology*, 3, 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X9700300101>
- Win Min. (2012). Burma: A historic force, forcefully met. In M. Weiss & E. Aspinall (Eds.), *Student activism in Asia: Between protest and powerlessness* (pp. 181–204). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

Appendix

Interview Guide**Narrative Questions**

- Please tell me about your experiences from the protest against the National Education Law, starting from when you first became involved in acting against the law, right up until the protest march was finished?
- Could you describe a day in the march starting from the moment you woke up?

Follow-up questions:

- Do you remember how you felt about...?
- Did I understand you correctly when you said...?
- You told me that you..., could you tell me more about this?
- When you tell me you felt..., what about the situation made you feel like this?
- If we go back to the point when you..., could you tell me more about that?

Grievances and Goals

- Could you tell me what you were you protesting about?
 - Would you say there was one specific reason for the protest, or many reasons?
- What were the goals of the protest?
 - What did you want to change?
- When you think back, what were the most important reasons for participating in the protest for you personally?
- Do you remember the specific point at which you decided to join the protest?
- Was it a difficult choice for you to decide to participate?
 - Why/why not?

Emotions

- What emotions did you experience when you made the choice to be a part of the protest?

- What kind of emotions did you experience during the protest?
- What kind of emotions did you experience when the protest march was finished?

Efficacy

- Did you think it would be possible to make a change by protesting?
 - Why/why not?
- How did you think the authorities would respond to the protest?
- Do you feel like the protest led to the changes you wanted?
 - In what way?

Social Embeddedness

- Could you tell me about how you got to know about the protest?
 - How did the information about the protest spread?
- Were you a part of deciding that the protest would take place?
 - If yes, where did you do this planning?
 - At your homes? At university? In tea houses?

Collective Identity

- Who were the other people who participated in the protest?
 - Were they people you already knew?
 - Did you have friends who participated in the protest? Colleagues? Family? Other?
- How would you describe the other protesters?
 - Similar to you? Different from you?
 - Would you describe these as people who were specifically interested in the cause, or as the general population more broadly?
- To what extent did you make friends during the protest or during the planning of the protest?
- How do you feel about those people who did not participate in the protest?

- Do you think that some of the people who didn't take part in the protest had the same opinions as you?
- If so, what do you think were the biggest obstacles for participation for these people?
- Why do you think you made the choice to join the protest, when many people chose not to participate?
 - What makes you different from them?

Final Questions

- In your opinion, what were the most important motives for your participation in the protest?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?