

Collective Mental State and Individual Agency: Qualitative Factors in Social Science Explanation

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Abstract: Recent violent events such as attacks on civilian targets and political assassinations in countries not usually susceptible to these have created a need to revive interest in the ancient concept of *collective consciousness*. In this article, the concept in its current reformulation as *collective mental state*, and the attempts of individual agents to control, shift and otherwise manage it, are examined. It is concluded that allowance for the unmeasurable and unpredictable qualitative factors of the collective mental state and the effect upon it of individual agency is essential in social science explanations.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Historical Formulations of *Collective* Consciousness](#)
- [3. Current Interest](#)
- [4. Identity and Collective Mental State](#)
- [5. Mechanisms of Change in the Collective Mental State](#)
- [6. Condition of the Collective Mental State](#)
- [7. Implications of a Disturbed Collective Mental State](#)
- [8. The Role of Individual Agency in Managing Collective Mental State](#)
- [9. Conclusion: The Management of Collective Mental States](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Introduction

Recent violent events such as attacks on civilian targets and political assassinations in countries not usually susceptible to these have created a need to revive interest in the ancient qualitative concept of *collective consciousness*. In this article, the concept in its current reformulation as *collective mental state*, and the efforts of political actors to control, shift and otherwise manage through various instruments of policy, are examined. The general conclusion will be reached that it is possible to influence collective mental states through policy by: firstly, defining the collectivity boundary, secondly, identifying the collectivity through its prevailing ontology, and thirdly, adjusting feelings, particularly fears, doubts and uncertainties, for selected purposes. Whether a collective mental state has been calmed or disturbed will have implications for order or conflict, and is therefore a major task for qualitative social science research. [1]

2. Historical Formulations of *Collective Consciousness*

The idea of analogy or even identity between individual mental state and collective mental state is very ancient. Thucydides in his account of the Peloponnesian Wars made a generalised state of fear among the Spartans a central component of his explanation of war (HOWARD, 1983). In more recent times, MARX proposed the concept of *class-consciousness* and Marxists have developed the concept of *false consciousness* (ROBERTSON, 1993, pp.69-71). [2]

The concept of *collective behaviour* was proposed by Le BON who theorised that in a crowd, the individual's psychology is subordinated to a *collective mentality* which radically transforms individual behaviour (ABERCOMBIE, HILL & TURNER, 1984, p.42). [3]

DURKHEIM (1964, p.103n) described the concept of *collective consciousness* as "it is something special and it must be designated by a special term, simply because the states which constitute it differ specifically from those which constitute the individual consciousnesses". [4]

JUNG also had a similar concept of *collective unconscious*, and both DURKHEIM and JUNG had in common the idea of collective representations or archetypes, which were typically expressed through religion (GREENWOOD, 1990, p.1). [5]

The concept later fell into neglect, possibly because *collective consciousness* seemed to mean *group mind*, or the idea of a hypothetical collective transcendent consciousness or spirit which was assumed to characterise a group or community (REBER, 1995, p.323). The obvious methodological problem of how such an entity could be tested empirically has been such as to place it outside modern social science discussion, which is predominantly quantitative, and has led one observer to comment that "there has been practically no research directly assessing the reality of collective consciousness" (VARVOGLIS, 1997, p.1). [6]

3. Current Interest

A survey of current social science literature finds reference to *collective dignity* (SMITH, 1991, p.163), *collective fear* (LAKE & ROTHCHILD, 1996), *collective memory* (TAKEI, 1998), and *collective consciousness* (MUNAYYER, 1999). Other disciplines reveal a longer but also intermittent interest. *Collective anxiety neurosis* was hypothesised by the psychiatrist KIEV (1973), *collective habituation to genocide* was discussed by the psychoanalyst SHATAN (1976, p.122), and *collective trauma* from the perspective of health care by MYERS (1999). *Collective responsibility* (HARFF, 1995) has also been discussed as an issue of moral philosophy. Language is a collective phenomenon—"Language expresses the collective experience of a group" (HERDER in SMITH, 1981, p.45)—and is a *collective right* (KYMLICKA, 1995) or *droit collectif* (BRETON, 1997, p.47). Economists in their study of consumer behaviour have identified a state of *collective depression* (TIKKUN, 1997, p.3). *Psycho-politics* and *psychohistory* are also important approaches to collective mental state, in particular the importance

of trauma during childhood (SCHARF, 2000). Organisational theorists have considered *collective organisational anxiety* as an important factor in their subject of interest which is a *collective mental model* (VOYER, GOULD & FORD, 1996). All of these conditions can be grouped under the general category of *collective mental state*. [7]

4. Identity and Collective Mental State

In individuals a strong and unified sense of identity is seen by psychology as an important part of mental health. Identity can be defined as "... a person's essential, continuous self, the internal subjective concept of oneself as an individual" (REBER, 1995, p.355), though of course there are extensive discussions on identity and similar concepts in psychology and creative works of literature, film and music that are not mentioned here. [8]

Many political scientists, sociologists and others have studied *national identity*. Looking at the impact of national identity on the individual, SMITH saw it as having three functions: firstly, providing a satisfying answer to the fear of oblivion through the identification with a nation, secondly, offering personal renewal and dignity by becoming part of a political "super-family" and third by enabling the realisation of feelings of fraternity, especially through the use of symbols and ceremonies (SMITH, 1991, pp.160-161). In this view, identification is a powerful two-way link between individual and collectivity, and it can be said that a collectivity can have a strong or weak sense of identity. Where the sense of identity is weak or divided, this will have an effect on the collective mental state. [9]

5. Mechanisms of Change in the Collective Mental State

DURKHEIM described the mechanism by which collective consciousness came about as reciprocity: "... men in union can mutually transform one another by their reciprocal influence" (DURKHEIM, 1970, p.124). DURKHEIM saw the process as one of representations being passed by contagion. [10]

More recently KIEV continued with this theme when he saw *collective anxiety neurosis* spread by contagion, analogous to an infectious disease (KIEV, 1973, p.418). [11]

A precipitant of change in collective mental state is that which results from collective trauma, which works by changing the existing ties between survivors (MYERS, 1999, p.2). Among individuals, it has been recognised that stress can be a cause of or trigger for schizophrenia (MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 1999, p.2), so that when stress is widespread throughout a community, a significant change in the collective mental state could be predicted, a point confirmed by CAWTE (1973). At the collective level, it is well known that major traumatic events or continuing conditions of extreme stress such as in ghettos do produce a heightened incidence of suicide and other indicators of mental illness, (though suicide not necessarily the result of these conditions). An important mechanism is the feedback loop. In their study of an industrial plant,

VOYER, GOULD and FORD (1999) found that many efforts to reduce organisational anxiety were counterproductive because of the presence of reinforcing feedback loops between the various elements of collectively held attitude and perception. There were also balancing feedback loops which can have the effect of reducing anxiety and helped the organisation towards achieving equilibrium, that is, its position before a stressful event. The collective mental state of anxiety is therefore increased or decreased through the mechanism of feedback. VOYER, GOULD and FORD (1999, p.3) referred to a Dutch study which showed that in one organisation, the leader's role was in fact the only feedback loop keeping an organisation in equilibrium. This is an early confirmation of the idea that leaders or rulers have an important part to play in the dynamics of the collective mental state, and therefore, qualitative research is necessary to understand this unmeasurable and unpredictable factor. [12]

The common element in the various mechanisms of change in the collective mental state—reciprocity, contagion or feedback loop—is communication, and for this reason, it is possible to believe that language plays an important role in bringing about changes in this state. [13]

6. Condition of the Collective Mental State

Is it possible to accept the concept of a condition of a *collective mental state*, including the possibility of *collective mental illness*? CAWTE considers this problem and concludes that while it is not unthinkable to describe a culture as abnormal or maladapted in a particular diagnostic sense, the risk of cultural bias is such that it is preferable not to refer to a dominant mode of mental abnormality but simple to refer to a society as having "a high proportion of members disordered in various ways" (CAWTE, 1973, p.365). [14]

The organisational theorist ETZIONI recognised society as an *emergent*, or new order of unit greater than its component parts (ETZIONI, 1968, pp.45-47), and accepted the concept of a *societal consciousness* which is "self-reviewing and self-correcting" but felt it necessary to stop short of a "group mind" because of its metaphysical assumption about the latter being able to "hover above" and forcibly control individual minds (ETZIONI, 1968, pp.225-228). [15]

This contrasts with DURKHEIM'S view that *collective consciousness* is a "social fact" or something more than its constituents, and that it must be evaluated in terms of what is normal for that particular type of society, where deviations from this relative state of normality are defined as *crime* (DURKHEIM, 1964, p.70). [16]

The philosopher and historian BORKENAU went further, using the term *collective madness* (BORKENAU, 1981, p.82) to describe a situation of generalised *paranoia* where there is a "... universal, self-destructive persecutory mania separating man from man" (BORKENAU, 1981, p.77). [17]

Writing on the subject of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the novelist Danilo KIS identified nationalism as a state of collective and individual paranoia,

where *collective paranoia* is a combination of many individual paranoias brought to paroxysm in a group whose goal is "... to solve problems of monumental importance: a survival and prestige of that group's nation" (KIS, 1996, p.1). [18]

As well as the risk of cultural and metaphysical bias, there is also the implication that if one uses clinical terms for which there might be a specific diagnostic test, then one is making a collective diagnosis which can then only be metaphorical. The fact that the aetiology of many mental illnesses remains unknown is an additional reason to eschew medical terminology when considering collective mental states because a collective mental state can only be a metaphor for the mental state of an individual. While remaining within the constraint of a non-clinical terminology, it is possible to develop a repertoire of ordinary (nontechnical) language descriptors for a collective mental state. In addition to those already proposed (fear, anxiety, memory, consciousness, habituation to genocide, trauma, grief, guilt, retribution, paranoia and madness), one could propose a simple five polarity schema of:

1. security or insecurity (drawing on LAKE and ROTHCHILD'S *collective fear of the future* (1996, p.43),
2. elation or depression, that is, an expanding or contracting sense of the future state of key values (with reference to the *pervasive melancholy* referred to by SHATAN (1976, p.113),
3. realism or delusion, noting that although delusion is a symptom of schizophrenia when found in individuals (MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 1999), that does not exclude it from being held by a group or community,
4. inclusion within or exclusion from the collectivity, or what has been called a greater or lesser degree of *accommodation* (SAFRAN, 1994),
5. non-habituation to violence or habituation to violence, noting SHATAN'S *collective habituation to genocide* (SHATAN, 1973). [19]

Thus without using clinical terminology it is possible to describe in ordinary language the collective mental state of a community both relative to other communities and also in terms of changes to itself at an earlier time, and that condition could be summarised as either *adjusted to its circumstances* or *disturbed*. [20]

7. Implications of a Disturbed Collective Mental State

The condition of the collective mental state can be hypothesised as having an essential role in the great questions of human society: order or conflict. The precise nature of the link between mental state and behaviour is an age-old philosophical as well as moral and psychological question, that of *responsibility*, which is likely to remain unresolved. Another way of looking at the same question is to say that antisocial behaviour may be malevolence and not necessarily illness: "... harm to society ... should not be part of the definition of mental illness, because to include it would open the door to saying that, for example, all rapists

and all those who oppose society's aims are mentally ill" (COLLIER, LONGMORE & HARVEY, 1991, p.314). [21]

However, it is obvious that large-scale violence does need large numbers of willing participants and therefore similarity of motivation, ontology, information supply and interpretation must be assumed. [22]

Psychologists and others have long been concerned to explain aggression or the unprovoked act of attack, hostility, exclusion or mental or physical violence, and many theories have been put forward. Firstly there is the instinct theory of aggression, represented among many others by FREUD who recognised a destructively powerful death instinct, and also by LORENZ (1966) in whose view aggression was a survival-enhancing instinct which is present in human beings as well as other animals, and which can be collective as well as individual. A second view is that aggression is a learned response, rationally chosen and dispassionately employed in the furtherance of selected goals by children, adolescents, adults, and groups such as politicians and the military (GURR, 1970, p.32). The third approach is the "frustration-aggression theory" first proposed by DOLLARD (1939). Here aggression is seen as a response to frustration caused by interference in the pursuit of goals or any other disturbance to the collective mental state. The aggressive response to frustration is seen as a biologically inherent tendency in humans and other animals, and is not necessarily incompatible with the other two approaches, and in fact none of the three approaches is exclusive. [23]

Of the three approaches, the latter seems to be the most widely accepted. For example, GURR takes the view that "the primary source of human capacity for violence appears to be the frustration-aggression mechanism" (1970, p.36), but he goes on to include among the sources of frustration the sense of relative deprivation, which can be infinitely diverse in origin, nature and response. Where a large number of people collectively show aggression, one can say that it is a product of the collective mental state. Such a state can be engineered by the controlled supply of information and interpretation, which is used to generate collective anxiety. LAKE and ROTHCHILD expanded on this theme when they wrote

"As groups begin to fear for their safety, dangerous and difficult-to-resolve strategic dilemmas arise that contain within them the potential for tremendous violence ... Ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs, operating within groups, build upon these fears of insecurity and polarise society" (LAKE & ROTHCHILD, 1996, p.41). [24]

BORKENAU relates the mental state to the effect of severe changes to the social and political milieu

"Once the carapace of custom is disrupted, the process acquires the characteristics of a chain reaction. Every rift opened by the devaluation of rules widens automatically and produces new rifts in other places ... conduct becomes more and more irrational, the area of moral uncertainty is constantly widening, until the typical situation of the

'dark ages,' a situation of total insecurity and universal crime, is reached"
(BORKENAU, 1981, p.385). [25]

In the light of this discussion, it is possible to hypothesise that the impulse to aggressive behaviours, and therefore social disorder, is a product of a disturbed collective mental state. [26]

8. The Role of Individual Agency in Managing Collective Mental State

An *agent* is a person or thing, which produces effect, and many individual agents and small groups of individual agents have throughout history affected collective mental states. While this is stock in trade for historians, it has been problematic for the social sciences, because a science should have predictive capability. The answer is likely to be a qualitative approach such as that typically used by the members of the Psycho-politics Research Committee of the International Political Science Association (PSYCHO-POLITICS, 2002), or psychohistorians (SCHARF, 2000). [27]

Several examples will make this clearer. The first concerns how a performing artist of African-American background could use her international standing and acclaim to reduce the burden of racist legislation and custom present in the United States at that time (with some remnants still in existence today) not only against herself but against all people. That person, Josephine Baker (1906-1975), experienced institutionalised discrimination not only in her childhood in Missouri while growing up, but even on a ship taking her to Paris in 1925. In France she found artistic freedom but also an unwritten rule of exclusion in a prospective marital relationship. During World War 2, Josephine Baker became an officer of the Resistance and a friend of General de Gaulle. She had refused to perform before segregated audiences, and on return to USA after World War 2, she became politically active and worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was consequently labelled a communist and suffered renewed discrimination. However, her growing friendship with the Kennedys, John and Robert, enabled her to make a major input into achieving the rolling back of racist legislation in the United States and a major readjustment of ethno-racial boundaries (BLACK HISTORY, 2002). [28]

A second example is provided by South Africa. Writing of the Apartheid policy (1948-1994), one observer wrote that as "... an exercise in ambitious and brutal social engineering, it had few parallels in human history" (MCLEAN, 1999, p.12). [29]

It is possible to interpret South African policy under minority rule as an attempt to influence collective mental state by division into a multiplicity of separate collective mental states, with an overall aim of securing and enhancing the future of one group at the expense of the others, to a major or minor degree. For blacks it sought through the "mother tongue education" and the non-offering of English, to create a collective mental state of insecurity, depression, dampened sense of realism, exclusion and habituation to violence. For South Africans of British background it aimed to create some feelings of insecurity, depression, and

through the hint of the likelihood of violence it offered the possibility of inclusion in the Afrikaner collectivity as a shelter. Among Afrikaners, it sought to create a mental state of a secure future, and a mood of elation through the delusion of a God-given destiny based on an unrealistic belief in the sustainable viability of a policy of exclusion of Africans, underlain with a habituation to a putative ever-present threat of violence. [30]

An explanation of the highly complex political process that has been called "surrender without defeat" must include the significant role of three individuals: de Klerk, Mandela and Tutu. De Klerk's role, after what has been described as his "remarkable change of heart" (LAKE & ROTHCHILD, 1996, p.66), was one of bringing to the Afrikaner mental state some acceptance of the reality of an untenable situation, though he was not entirely successful in this. It is reported that in a meeting one of his ministers angrily hurled at him the words "What have you done?! You have given South Africa away!!" (GILIOME, 1997, p.140) [31]

Mandela's contribution was to see the new South Africa as a larger collectivity through the inclusion of all groups in the new collective mental state where there would be a place and a role for even his former persecutors. It has been said of leadership that "... the fundamental process is a more elusive one; it is, in large part, *to make conscious what lies unconscious among followers*" (BURNS, 1978, p.40). [32]

The third significant individual was Archbishop Tutu whose promotion of *ubuntu*, a traditional African communal practice of common humanity (JAFFREY, 1998), as embodied in the proposed and now realised Truth and Reconciliation Commission, provided a mechanism for the grief work necessary before the possibility of inclusion in the new collective mental state. [33]

To take a third and final example, one could consider the reunification of Germany. The aftermath of Hitler's war was a divided Germany, symbolised by a wall in Berlin. In January 1989 the East German leader Honecker stated that the Wall will "... still be there 50, 100 years from now." Yet on November the 8th of the same year it was breached by between 50 and 70 thousand people on foot who met no attempt to stop them by military or police. Three weeks later West German Chancellor Kohl presented a Ten Point Plan to create a confederation of both German states and on March 15, 1991 a Two Plus Four Treaty came into being, creating a unified German state with unrestricted sovereignty. [34]

The precise causality of this event may never be fully known, but the role of Kohl was undoubtedly crucial. This was achieved by a skilful exploitation of the ideological ambivalence of the Soviet leader and the staunch anticommunism of the three major Western leaders. We now know from several observers that Kohl's 10 point plan initially angered Gorbachev and was deeply opposed by the three main Western leaders: Mitterrand, who perceived it as a "surprise attack", Thatcher, who was aggravated and stated bluntly that German unification was "not on the agenda", and Bush, who was taken completely by surprise but then decided to back it while pretending to have prior knowledge, which he did not,

according to observers present during the process (ELBE & KIESSLER, 1996, pp.48-54). But the USSR was gravely weakened by its costly and unsuccessful engagement in Afghanistan and the appeal of market-driven economics which lay at the basis of liberalisation throughout the Eastern bloc including the GDR. [35]

Justification by the GDR regime of the Tianamen massacre in China further heightened the hostility of the population. In 1990 a conference of NATO and Warsaw Pact states reached agreement that discussion between the two Germanys and the four Occupying Powers (Britain, France, USA and USSR) should commence on the subject of German unification. The main points of contention were membership of NATO by reunified Germany, the presence of foreign troops on German soil, and the border with Poland. In late 1990 the United States ratified the Treaty, followed by Britain, and in 1991 by France and then the Soviet Union. The Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* wrote "... the balance needs to be freshly adjusted, not only in Europe but in the whole world" (ELBE & KIESSLER, 1996, p.204). [36]

The difficult decision to make Berlin and not Bonn the capital of reunified Germany was another example of Kohl's personal input. Opposition was strong, but in the Bundestag Chancellor Kohl emphasised the need for the inhabitants of the former GDR to have sense of belonging in the new state, that is, a sense of inclusion in the new collective consciousness, and when the final vote when taken in the Bundestag on June 20, 1991, a small majority of 337 to 320 deputies agreed to move parliament and government from Bonn to Berlin. [37]

Kohl was right to see former GDR citizens as being in need of support: his seemingly generous offer of exchange of one Deutschmark for one GDR Mark was in fact a death-sentence for GDR business whose products instantly became grossly overvalued but Kohl's realism saw that a politically and psychologically unified Germany would come at an economic cost. Kohl is a controversial figure, not only for his methods in achieving reunification, such as with the breaking of his promise to raise no further taxes, but also over the misappropriation of party funds. As a result, boundaries were redefined, a new collectivity created (or recreated), and a new collective mental state brought into existence. [38]

9. Conclusion: The Management of Collective Mental States

Thus the many and varied collective attitudes, beliefs, feelings and practices, which can be together called a collective mental state, are qualitative, nuanced, unmeasurable and unpredictable, and are therefore outside the scope of quantitative social science. This creates a weakness in much social science, because an understanding of collective mental states is at the basis of the explanation of many actions and events. Individuals and groups try, and often succeed, to control, shift or otherwise manage collective mental states by attempting to: firstly, define or redefine the collectivity, secondly, identify the collectivity through its prevailing ontology, and thirdly, manipulate feelings, particularly by reducing (or sometimes increasing) the level of fear, doubt and uncertainty. Thus individuals and groups of individuals can become a major

agency of social and political change. Several examples of this factor at work, both of which were unpredicted by governments, government agencies and mainstream academia, were the ending of minority rule in South Africa and the reunification of Germany. It is in analysing the relationship between collective mental state and individual and group agency, and by asserting the omnipresence of a resultant unmeasurable, unpredictable, qualitative factor, that qualitative social science has an important role to play. Assessing whether a collective mental state is calmed or disturbed is a major task for research into order and conflict, and one that can only be approached qualitatively. [39]

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