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**Psychology of subculture: Phenomenology and Contemporary  
Tendencies of Development**

**PRECARITY AS IDENTIFICATION CRITERION OF PROTEST  
SUBCULTURE**

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*Abstract*

The paper identifies predictors of contemporary social movements by analysing the protest movements in Russia. Classical socio-psychological models of social movements consider civil movements from the point of view of collective behaviour and have difficulty explaining a sudden upsurge of popular demonstrations: the Occupy Wall Street, the “Yellow vests” movement, the Snow Revolution in Russia. The contemporary social movements are characterized by the diversity of their participants and by lack of common political demands, what Lo. This article is exploring the identification criterion by referring to the socio-psychological theories of collective action (B. Klandermans, M. van Zomeren). According to new social movements theories, it is necessary to integrate cognitive and affective dimension. This affective dimension is analyzed with the help of the concept of the collective emotional experience, which was elaborated by a great Russian philosopher G. Shpet, and which represents the mechanism of interaction between culture and personality. Our hypothesis suggests that the collective experience of precarity is an identification criterion of the protest subculture. The hypothesis is verified by using the phenomenological analysis of interviews with the activists of social movements.

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## 1. Introduction

Social movements are playing a very important role by accentuating the struggle for the right to livable life (Butler, 2015), against political violence and social inequality. The difference between collective behaviour and social movements lies in their degree of organization. The social movement represents an arranged demonstration which aims to express views on social issues and to undo or to promote social change (Andreeva, 1990; Smelser, 2011).

The theory of social movements contains more than a century of tradition in the area of social sciences, and, nowadays, a new branch of theorizing called new movements theories appears. This approach tends to synthesize different paradigms and to introduce psychological and emotional dimensions into an explanation of new forms of social movements. New social movements have such characteristics as the autonomy of its structural elements, a vague line between the political and the personal, multiplicity of identities (Melucci, 1980). The theorists of social movements consider identity as the main factor of collective action (Klandermans, 2014). Furthermore, sociologists speak about collective identity and psychologists about social identity, from our point of view, referring to equivalent concepts. Thus, this explanation diminishes the valuing of new forms of collective action characterized by heterogenic participation or multiple identities.

The exploration of the protest subculture suggests that this kind of practice will be situated within the social space, once people are on the streets, only then this moment becomes a collecting point of a social movement. Analyzing the theme of the people assembly, Butler (2015) highlights that this collective action is, usually, characterized by the diversity of their participants sharing different demands and interests, linked by a common theme which is struggle for life, and points out that this condition puts to doubt the possibility to produce among them a common identity. However, trying to retain the concept of classic theories, we might suggest a spontaneous nature by forming identities in collective action. The protest subculture represents imagined community (Anderson, 2006), and an identification criterion for this kind of practice cannot be 'pure' social or political, but, rather, psychological. Psychological aspect represents a state of mind shared among the participants of collective action.

## 2. Problem Statement

Let us return to the theories paying particular attention to the social construction of identity and to self-categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The idea of the intergroup perception related to the social identity was developed in the social identity model of collective action which found out that the affective injustice shared by a social group and the politicized identity drive to collective action (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Thus, the perception of injustice (cognitive alternatives in Tajfel's and Turner's terms) refers to the psychological factor of mobilization such as social identity.

As a response to an 'affective turn' in social sciences, Mouffe (2005) suggests referring to the analysis of emotions and affects by considering new forms of political action, due to the inability to reach a rational consensus about social justice in a democratic society. Indeed, the demands for justice, in the context of new social movements, are very abstract, therefore their interpretation by social movements activists and by their opponents varies greatly. Contemporary psychological theories suggest applying

approaches of collective emotions, shared in a group (Von Scheve & Salmela, 2014). One of the predictors of spontaneous collective actions specified as an affective experience in a group (Snow & Moss, 2014).

We also suggest applying the term 'collective emotional experience' ('perezhivanye' in Russian) used by Soviet and Russian psychologists and developed by an eminent philosopher and phenomenologist Shpet (1927) in his work on Ethical Psychology in the 1920s. His epistemological works remained a long time unknown due to their condemnation by the Soviet government. Firstly, collective emotional experience represents the process of the identification with a group (a concept containing a meaning about the group and its intentional element). Secondly, it refers to the attitude of people toward their culture and society. And, finally, collective experience is viewed as a sign of the language or a construction, indirectly referring to social cognition and behaviour, what can be advantageous by using qualitative research methods such as interpretative phenomenology or narrative and discourse analysis (Martsinkovskaya, 2009; Stefanenko, 2014; Khoroshilov, 2018).

Thus, taking into consideration the socio-psychological theories and results of the analysis of our empirical data (see below), one of the identification criteria of new social movements is the collective experience of precariousness, which can be considered as a factor of group identification, also as a mark of the protest subculture. This criterion unites people all around the world, regardless their gender, race or class. Precarity can be viewed as a political situation where some groups suffer more than others without necessary social support and where some people are subjects to violence, abuse and subsequent death (Butler, 2015). Precarity creates a social group without permanent employment or guarantees, without social security, which can lead to erosion of identity. And in this case, each of us might be affected by resentment, anomie and anxiety (Standing, 2011).

However, psychologists consider that the precarity is not a criterion of a new class (speaking about migrants, freelancers etc.) but more a broad political and existential characteristic of modern societies. Precarity is a situation where social capital (including the body) of any person, regardless his resources and opportunities, might be offset by unpredictable change and accidental events. This characteristic discovers 'sociality' as the interdependence of people, originally, very sensitive to each other, seeking to preserve the relation to other, because without this relation or without this ethics human beings are becoming meaningless (Butler, 2015). Likewise, precarity uncovers not only the natural vulnerability of our existence but also represents a performative practice of setting symbolic borders of differentiation of social groups and subcultures.

Butler (2015) believes that this kind of hegemony, by producing and distributing precarity, is becoming performative, what makes possible a collective response. The sudden appearance of people in a public space becomes an articulation of demand for livable life, which cannot be reduced to bare life denying the social prospects of the individual (Agamben, 1998). On the contrary, human existence from her point of view is politically and culturally relevant. Thus, vulnerability is productive and enables collective resistance. That is to say, the producing of precarity marks in political context challenges existing social structure and makes way for new democratic forms of social life. Therefore, we are considering precarity as a collective emotional experience, which becomes the main identification structure for protest subculture.

### 3. Research Questions

In this paper, we suppose that the collective experience of precariousness, representing the people's vulnerability in existing social and political order, might be an identification criterion of protest subculture and a predictor which leads to collective action. This hypothesis explains a spontaneous character of mobilization of new social movements and solves the difficulties on the level of the methodology by explaining the building identity by the participants of contemporary civil movements in Russia, which was to abstract and declaratory (Erpyleva & Magun, 2014). We refer in our research to the experience lived by the participants of Russian social movements occurred in the 2010s.

### 4. Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to describe the collective emotional experience ('perezhivanye') of the activists of the Russian social movements and to analyze their experience, considering the building of a collective identity in the context of such social phenomenon as precarity. This article shows that precarity is a possible criterion of the identification with the protest subculture. This phenomenon contains both cognitive and emotional aspects of the experience lived by a group of people, which are difficult to articulate in the discourse.

### 5. Research Methods

In the research, we subjected the data of semi-structured interviews to the Jonathan A. Smith's method of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The target sample of the study is 7 semi-structured interviews with the participants of the mass demonstration in Russia in the 2010s. The attractiveness of the method lies in the possibility of observation of the sense-making process for people who share an experience of collective action. The point is also that emotional experience is a complex phenomenon which is difficult to articulate in discourse and the method aids to elicit its conscious process. The IPA is adopted here as an ideographic method which is interested in particular details of unique experience.

### 6. Findings

As a result of the phenomenological analysis of the interviews, the main themes were identified. These themes represent the manifestation of the collective experience of precariousness, seen through the prism of the personal experience lived by the activists of civil movements in Russia.

**Participation in demonstrations as identification with the country.** The respondents comment on their impulse, their sentiments and sense of belonging. They compare the demonstration with a big celebration, highlighting its cohesion: *'You understand, that there are so many people around you but they will not push you or will not knock you down...You just walk in the company of like-minded people, on which our community is based.'* One of the respondents says that this feeling of safety did not leave them even at the moment of arrests. He felt the hope for rebirth of Russia (referring to association with 'perestoyka' at the time of Gorbachev) and for building of civil cohesion of these people, the citizens of

one country (*'this energy, all on the same wavelength, a kind of incredible cohesion, happiness, that all things are not so bad in Russia'*).

**Experience of injustice as stepping out comfort zone.** The respondents point out that despite their favorable conditions of life (some of them do not need to apply for social support and they prefer using private sector of services, some of them live in another country), they cannot ignore the extreme poverty of people: *'a lot of people suffer, the life they have, I cannot call it a life'*. The economic situation is related here with the freedom of expression or active citizenship: *'nobody is interested in your opinion, nobody cares...'* People are concerned with different issues: electoral fraud, show trials, threat of war. An eloquent medical metaphor was expressed by one of the respondents that people begin to *'getting sick'* of corruption. The future of young people is in question: *'the authorities' mayhem that people face every day, I cannot see it anymore, they just cut off wings to this people'*.

**Intention to change social order.** The multiple unresolved problems *'exhausted'* the country, one of the activists says: *'we are dying left and right'*. The young people *'have nothing to lose, they understood that they won't get a piece of oil cake'*. Meanwhile, the quantity of protesters is not so important: *'one protester in a totalitarian society amounted to a million in a democratic one'*.

**Handling the fear of punishment.** Participation in mass demonstrations and internet forwards might drive to arrests and provoke the fear. One of the respondents was afraid to participate in unauthorized demonstrations but was convinced by his friends to follow them, another decided to watch demonstrations on television, and one brave girl went to a meeting with her new-born child: *'I was proud to do this, but I also had to hide this act from my parents.'* Gradually, people begin to be afraid to take risks and a lot of them were *'discarded'*. The activists say that they did not expect violence and wanted a peaceful protest, but they agree that they obtained only strengthening. Therefore, the fear of punishment is becoming a melancholic memory of lost illusions.

**Deception and lost illusions.** A lot of respondents speak about the end of the celebration after February 2012, the period when mass demonstrations reached their highest point: *'and the recession began, like it was slipping away, through the fingers, and you can't stop it.'* The expectations related to social change and the building of civil nation were replaced by deception: *'before we had a feeling that there were people who cared. When we understood that nobody needed it, and even more, people thought that we were bad persons, then I had rejection'*. The demands of protesters were not heard: *'they tried to shut us up, to reverse people' actions. Then the inspiration was gone, 'our heartfelt impulse wasn't appreciated'...*

It is important to point out that lost illusions about social and political achievements of civil movements do not represent their defeat or their end, the civil movements in Russia are going through a latent period. The protest potential in the country is significant, according to the results of the sociological surveys (Krasin, Weber, & Galkin, 2017). From the psychological point of view, a subculture has not necessarily an explicit form, it is mostly enough an existing emotional experience as a mechanism of building identification with a certain community, sharing a similar lifestyle and the way of thinking (Martsinkovskaya, 2014). Deception about social change (the cognitive alternative of social change) is probably a very important element of preciousness, then the experience of injustice or unequal

distribution of livable life. Finally, it remains the possibility of spontaneous mobilization of contemporary civil movements.

## 7. Conclusion

Recent psychological models of social movements are trying to integrate cognitive and affective aspects of the analysis of collective action, thus we apply the concept of collective emotional experience, developed by a great Russian philosopher Gustav Shpet. This term refers to a dynamic unit containing both cognitive and emotional characteristics.

The collective experience of precariousness (vulnerability of each person to the violation of the right to life) in the contemporary society represents an identification criterion with the protest subculture (or an imagined community) and the factor of mobilization leading to political action. Precarity unites people, regardless their gender, race and class. It is important to point out that a formal affiliation to the precariat class is not enough for collective mobilization. The precarity leads to a collective action only if it becomes a lived emotional or affective experience of a certain community or subculture.

The approach of interpretative phenomenology allows the exploration of collective emotional experience and its features in a specific group. The interpretative phenomenological analysis refers to an ideographic method which is interested in particular details of unique collective experience.

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