

# Anger And Positive Emotions In Political Protest\*

## Ira y emociones positivas en protestas políticas

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyses the role played by emotions in protest. In the current explanatory models, anger is the sole emotion associated with these actions. But is anger the only emotion capable of mobilising citizens to defend a cause? We believe not. Hence, we postulate that anger, along with other emotions of positive valence, must act jointly to facilitate protest. To test this hypothesis, a questionnaire was applied to 316 university students in a setting of cut-backs in education. The results highlight several interesting aspects. Firstly, anger correlated significantly and positively with the positive emotions. Secondly, the mediation analysis performed showed: a) the relevance of positive emotions for explaining the intention to participate; and b) the influence of anger on the intention to participate is fundamentally through positive emotions. We will also discuss the role of emotions and the need to extend the motives involved in political actions.

### Keywords

Positive emotions; political protest; anger; education cutbacks

### RESUMEN

En este estudio se analiza el papel de las emociones en la protesta política. En los modelos actuales, la ira es la única emoción que se asocia a esas acciones. Sin embargo, los autores creen que no es la única emoción que moviliza a la ciudadanía, por ello afirman que junto a ella deben existir otras de valencia positiva. En este estudio participaron 316 estudiantes universitarios a los que se les preguntó por su intención de movilizarse en contra de los recortes en educación. Los resultados muestran que la ira correlaciona de manera significativa con las emociones positivas. Además el análisis de mediación muestra la relevancia de las emociones positivas para explicar las intenciones de protesta y que la influencia de la ira sobre la intención de participar se realiza fundamentalmente a través de las emociones positivas. Se discute el papel de las emociones y la necesidad de ampliar los motivos de participación.

### Palabras clave

Emociones positivas; ira; protesta política; recortes en educación

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Emotions form part of every human act, and without them there would be no social action (Jasper, 1998). This statement was aimed at supporting the reintroduction of emotions into explanatory theories for human behaviour. The belief that they would interfere in rational thought had led many authors to disregard them or play down their importance (Izard, 1972; Marcus, Neuman, & Mackuen, 2000). The field of political protest was not immune to this approach. In this case, it was thought that resorting to emotions to explain the protest placed their instrumental nature in question (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polleta, 2000).

Despite that intellectual climate against emotions, Gamson (1992) postulated that anger was a key element for collective action, speaking collective action frames as the set of beliefs which legitimated the protest. These frames were those of injustice, identity and efficacy. Anger would be associated with the perception of injustice, one of the most powerful motives behind protest (Turner & Killian, 1987). Anger would play an important motivating role insofar as it “puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul” (Gamson, 1992, p. 32). Accordingly, Gamson is acknowledged with having recognised the role of emotions in the analysis of political protest, although it is true that he focused exclusively on that associated with the injustice frame, disregarding the fact that they may be related with the other two.

Gamson’s proposal on the importance of anger in collective action was widely accepted. Indeed, the current principal explanatory models incorporate this emotion. Van Zomeren, Spears, Fisher, and Leach (2004) and van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and van Dijk (2011) point out that anger has a direct bearing on participation, and Stürmer and Simon (2009) referred to its impact on collective action through identity.

The importance of anger would seem to be beyond question. Thus, the matter that now needs to be addressed is whether the contribution of emotions to collective action must continue to be limited to this emotion, or should we consider the possible role of others. Once the prejudice which associated them with irrational behaviour has been overcome

(Marcus et al., 2000; Marcus, McKuen, Wolak, & Keele, 2006), there is nothing to stop us analysing the influence of other emotions on collective action. But this entails adopting another perspective with regard to emotions and their relationship with behaviour. This is precisely what the Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET; Smith, 1993) did, asserting that emotions play a key role in understanding inter-group behaviour. The IET assumes two important theoretical approaches in social psychology. On one hand, the Social Identity Theory and Self-categorisation Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Killian, 1987), which point out that, on occasions, individuals act in line with the group which they identify; the higher the level of this identification, the more probable a response in group terms will be. On the other hand, the Cognitive Appraisal Theory posits that emotions are the response to a determined evaluation of the setting. This evaluation is obviously not unconnected with the situation in which each group finds itself. In society, inter-group power is asymmetrical and there are groups which find themselves in disadvantaged situations (social, economic, opportunities, etc.) with regard to others. This results in the generation of different interpretations regarding the causes of this situation, of how to react with respect to the same, and of the possibilities of modifying it. That is, individuals assess their setting and the resources they possess to deal with it (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1984); emotions are thus going to depend on the meaning which individuals give to what happens around them.

Forming part of a group considered to be unjustly treated must activate different evaluations, not only with respect to the present situation, but also of what is wished for with regard to the future. Except in case of fatalism (Martín-Baró, 1998), faced with the adverse situation they are experiencing, individuals and groups do not merely sit on the sidelines. On the contrary, they will attempt to modify certain conditions they perceive as illegitimate. This means that not only do they focus on the negative conditions in which they find themselves, but they will also evaluate doing something to change them and the possibility of achieving it. Thus, the IET would not only explain group-based anger (van

Zomeren et al., 2004), but also other group-based emotions associated with other participation-related processes.

Besides stressing that anger is not the only emotion which may be important for explaining collective action, it should also be remembered that emotions are closely related with the tendency towards action (Frijda, 1988; Maitner, Mackie, & Smith, 2006; Taylor, 1995). This means that they are of special interest in political protest, as individuals involved in acts of this type must assume the different types of costs associated to this behavior (Klandermans, 1984). In this case, emotions would help to overcome them.

The inclusion of other emotions into the analysis of political protest may provide us with a new approach to the dynamics and protagonists thereof. Numerous studies have shown that those who protest do so through anger. But is this the only emotion felt by those who decide to take to the streets demanding what they believe is just? Along with anger, there must be other emotions linked to participation.

In the literature on collective action, we find a number of studies alluding to different emotions. Jasper (1998), offers an extensive list in which, in addition to anger and other negative emotions, he also refers to others of a positive nature, including pride and hope. Kemper (1978), in turn, alludes to a series of emotions which derive from the type of power and status relationships existing between groups. On the basis of current perception and on the expectations of these inter-group relations, negative emotions (such as anger) or positive emotions (satisfaction, pride, optimism or hope) would be generated. Hence, it is not only emotions of a negative nature, such as anger, which can encourage protest.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the analysis of positive emotions in group action; one of those which has aroused most interest is hope. According to Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal (2006), hope is related with the expectation that desirable phenomena will happen. The anticipation that the objectives established will be attainable activates hope, and this encourages involvement

in the protest. Thus, an emotional climate of hope may provide support for prolonged, targeted group activity in the future (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007). It should be mentioned that in order for this emotion to come about, there is no need for action or confirmation of success: the mere anticipation of success will suffice. Páez, Javaloy, Włodarczyk, Espelt, and Rimé (2013) stress that this emotion emerges “when the worst is feared, but one trusts in obtaining the best or least worst” (p. 22).

Another of the positive emotions is optimism. Kemper (1978, 1991) alluded to optimism and hope as emotions linked to the anticipation of an improvement in the in-group’s status or power. Culver, Carver, & Scheier (2003) and Librán (2002), associated it with the expectation of obtaining positive results.

Another of the emotions is pride (Goodwin et al., 2000); this emotion can be considered from two perspectives. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that shows us that individuals belonging to aggrieved groups and who feel highly identified with them, will mobilise in order to change that state of affairs. Nonetheless, this mobilisation will be more probable when a politicised (Simon & Klandermans, 2001) or mobilised identity is activated (Sabucedo, Durán, & Alzate; 2010). That is, when individuals assume that their situation depends on their group’s power relations with certain out-groups, and these relations can only be changed through political action.

Pride also appears to be associated with the carrying-out of actions which are, socially, highly valued by individuals and by their setting (Tangey, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007), such as acting in line with the values of the in-group.

It would seem to be clear that positive emotions, such as hope, optimism and pride, can facilitate political protest. These three emotions would be related with the need to act in order to improve the situation of the in-group. In this sense, they are linked to the act of participating itself.

Above, we asked ourselves whether anger alone was capable of activating and maintaining a collective action. Now we have a possible answer. Anger has this mobilising force, but it undoubt-

edly requires those other positive emotions which we have commented on. These can constructively channel the anger arising from the in-group's adverse situation in an organised action. This means that, despite their different valences, negative and positive emotions need not be incompatible, as Wolpe (1958) and Fredrickson (2001) believed. On the contrary, in the specific case of mobilisation, it is the presence of both types of emotions which may increase the intention to participate.

In order to gain a greater insight into the role played by emotions, the main objective of this study is to analyse the relationship between anger, positive emotions and protest. To this end, we raise two specific questions: a) The relationship between positive emotions and anger must be positive; and both variables will have a significant bearing on the intention to participate in protest actions; b) In addition to the independent, direct effect of each of the variables on intention to participate, anger may have an indirect effect through positive emotions.

The study was conducted between January and February 2012, at which juncture the Spanish political and social setting was strongly affected by the financial crisis. Within the government's policy of cutbacks, various adjustment measures were proposed with regard to education. These included raising university fees, which led to an important mobilisation among university students.

## Method

### *Participants*

The sample for the study comprised 316 Psychology students from the University of Santiago de Compostela. 85.4% were female and 14.6% male, which was similar to the ratio of female to male students registered in the academic course. The average age of participants was 21.26, with a standard deviation of 3.43 years.

### *Procedure*

In class time, prior to commencing classes, students were told that the Social Psychology De-

partment was conducting an investigation and they were being asked to collaborate. To do so they had to respond to a questionnaire in which included, among others, the questions analysed in the present study. The instructions given stressed the voluntary nature of their participation and the anonymity of their responses was guaranteed. All the individuals, except two, agreed to participate in the research. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire was eight minutes.

## *Variables*

The questions were posed in a 7-point Likert scale format: 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*).

### *Anger*

In order to measure anger, we used the four items on the scale used by van Zomeren et al. (2004). The items were: "I feel angry/irritated/furious/displeased by the possible plans to increase registration fees" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

### *Positive emotions*

Three questions we asked about the positive emotions suggested to them by the act of participating. "Participating in acts of protest against raising registrations fees would make me feel proud/optimistic/hopeful" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

### *Intention to participate*

The intention to participate was based on different actions (Tausch et al., 2011; Sabucedo & Arce, 1991). The individuals in the sample were asked to indicate their intention to participate in 5 different actions against the raising of registration fees: to sign a petition against the raising of fees, to participate in assemblies or discussion groups, to support protest acts via the social networks, to participate in demonstrations or concentrations, and to participate in student strikes (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

**Results**

*Results between anger, positive emotions and intention to participate*

Firstly we shall show the descriptive statistics and correlations between these variables (see Table 1).

This table shows us that the mean values for the three variables are fairly high, taking into account that the maximum value is 7. The variable with the highest mean is anger ( $M = 5.3$ ;  $SD = 1.29$ ) and the lowest is for positive emotions ( $M = 4.64$ ;  $SD = 1.28$ ). With regard to the correlations, worthy of note is the positive and high correlation between anger and positive emotions ( $r = 0.43$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). This shows that positive and negative emotions are not incompatible. Also significant are the other two correlations: anger and intention to participate ( $r = 0.44$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and positive emotions and intention to participate ( $r = 0.67$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Given the strong relationship between these last two variables, one could think that both are measuring the same construct. With the objective of clarifying

this question two hierarchical regressions were carried out with the same independent variables (the variables were the three used in this work and the variables of efficacy and identity, which appeared in the questionnaire but have not been used in the present study. Other studies (van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2010; Stürmer & Simon, 2009) have evinced the impact of the latter two variables on collective actions. In one case, the intention to participate was used as a dependent variable, while in the other, positive emotions were used. If it were, in fact, one single construct, the predictors would be very similar in both analyses. The results showed that this was not the case. Thus we concluded that the two variables do not measure the same construct.

In order to examine the impact that anger and positive emotion have on intention to participate, we conducted a regression analysis, the results of which are shown in Table 2.

The regression analysis shows that if both variables have a significant impact on the proportion of variance explained in the intention to participate, the inclusion of positive emotions decreases the B

**TABLE 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations: Anger, Positive Emotion and Intention to Participate*

	M	SD	1	2
Anger	5.3	1.29		
Positive emotions	4.53	1.32	0.43**	
Intention to participate	5.28	1.2	0.44**	0.67**

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.001$ .  
Source: own work

**TABLE 2**  
*Regression Analysis with Anger and Positive Emotions Bearing on Intention to Participate*

	Model 1 $\beta$	Model 2 $\beta$
Anger	0.44**	0.19**
Positive Emotions		0.59**
F	76.82**	142.04**
DF	(1, 311)	(2, 310)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.2	0.47

Notes. DV: intention to participate, \*\* $p < 0.001$ .  
Source: own work

value of anger. For this reason, we shall conduct a mediation analysis with these variables.

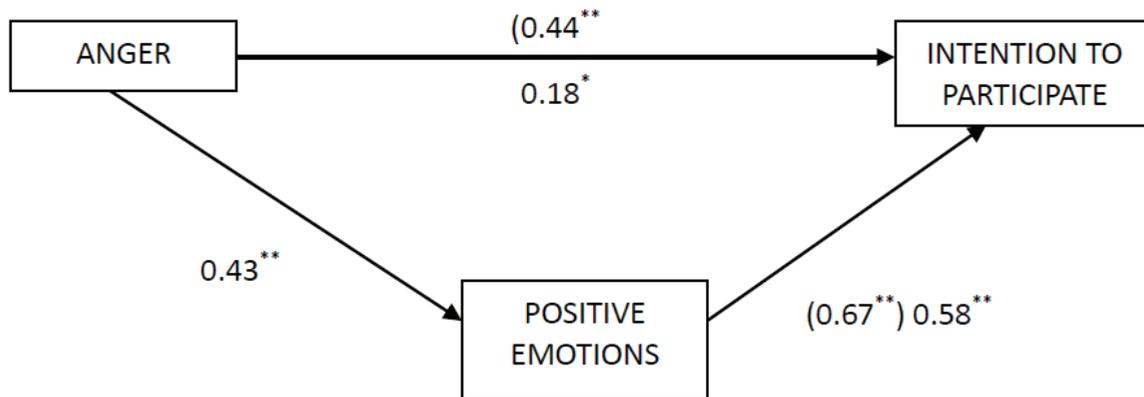
*Mediation analysis*

With the aim of verifying the influence of anger and positive emotions on the intention to participate in collective actions, and the mediating role of some of these emotional variables, a mediation analysis was conducted. Firstly, considering the previous results, a model was explored in which positive emotions mediated between anger and intention to participate (Fig. 1), adhering to the procedure proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986).

The first step was to perform a linear regression analysis taking the intention to participate as DV and anger as the predictor variable. The result of the regression analysis was significant ( $R^2 = 0.19, F = 73.36, p = 0$ ), with a significant beta ( $\beta = 0.44; p < 0.001$ ). In the second step, the effect of anger on positive emotions was analysed, taking anger as the predictor variable and the positive emotions as the dependent variable. The results show that anger significantly predicts the positive emotions ( $R^2 =$

$0.19, F = 73.15, p = .000$ ) with a significant beta ( $\beta = 0.43; p < 0.001$ ). In the third and final step, we examined how the mediator variable, the positive emotions, affected the intention to participate, when anger is controlled. In this case, the positive emotions exercised a significant, positive influence on the intention to participate ( $\beta = 0.58; p < .001$ ), and the model was shown to be significant ( $R^2 = 0.52, F = 253.90, p = 0$ ). Moreover, anger continued to be significant ( $\beta = 0.19; p < 0.001$ ), although its effect on intention to participate fell from  $\beta = 0.44$  to  $\beta = 0.19$ . But as zero is not reached, mediation is partial; hence, there is a regression of a partial nature. The Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) confirmed the significant effect of this mediation ( $Z_{sobel} = 7.65, p < 0.001$ ). The mediation analysis tells us that 58% of the variance in the relationship between anger and intention to participate can be explained by the positive emotions.

A second mediation analysis was subsequently performed with the aim of ruling out the possibility of the alternative model, in which anger acted as the mediating variable, having a greater explanatory capacity. In this alternative model, only 13%



$(Z_{sobel} = 7.65, p < 0.001)$

**\*\***  $p < 0.001$ .

Figure 1. Mediation model of anger, positive emotions and the intention to participate.

Note: the value between brackets indicates the  $\beta$  of the relationships before introducing the mediating variable.  
Source: own work

of the variance between the positive emotions and intention to participate is explained by anger. On the contrary, in the previous analysis, 58% of the variance in the relationship between anger and intention to participate can be explained by the positive emotions.

## Conclusions

After having been marginalised for many years, studies on protest are once again considering the role of emotions. Nonetheless, despite this recognition, it is true that emotions still play a secondary role in some of the principal explanatory models for political activity, such as those by Stürmer and Simon (2009), van Stekelenburg et al. (2011), and van Zomeren et al. (2004). All three models incorporate anger as the sole emotion, an emotion which had already incorporated into Gamson's model for frames of collective action (1992). Thus, there would seem to be a degree of contradiction between the statement on the importance of emotions in collective action, and the fact that the principal explanatory models allude to just one. If emotions truly are important, it needs to be verified whether there are others in addition to the aforesaid one, and with different valence.

Our analysis was based on the confirmation that, just as anger is associated to the frame of injustice in collective action, participation is linked with positive emotions. This allows the negative and positive emotions to act jointly towards on single objective. The anger shown by participants is not the result of impotence; it reflects the experience of an unjust situation, but one which is perceived as modifiable. There is, then, no resignation. This was clearly reflected in one of the placards shown during the demonstration of the "indignados" staged in Madrid on 15 May: "Yesterday angry, today hopeful." That is, anger had mobilised them, but feeling part of a larger group sharing the same objectives and in believing that their action may be effective. It activated pride in fighting for something they feel is just and hope in the possibility of change.

Our results show that anger, as it appears in classic and current theoretical models of protest,

plays an important role in protest. Up to this point, there is nothing new. The interesting thing, however, is its relationship with positive emotions and the effect of the latter on intention to participate. Both anger and positive emotions have a significant direct bearing on intention to participate, although the weight of positive emotions is greater than that of anger. But more important than this is the fact that anger has an important influence on positive emotions, which confirms our earlier argument that these emotions cannot be understood in isolation. In accordance with our results, anger stokes the positive emotions and both jointly influence on students' intention to protest. Anger appears when a group considers that it is being treated unfairly. And this anger demands that the situation be redressed. To do so, it is necessary to activate positive emotions, like pride and hope which encourage participation. Jasper (1998) pointed out that it is the desire for justice that unleashes anger. This affirmation is true, but perhaps somewhat incomplete. Turning to our results, one would have to say that the desire for justice unleashes anger owing to the grievances suffered, but it also activates pride in fighting against the same as well as the hope of remedying an adverse situation.

The above results clearly show the meaning of positive emotions for collective action. But these data also encourage the reconsideration of the classic motives in collective action and suggest other possible ones. The former case would entail extending the concept of instrumentality, which has traditionally been associated with a cost-benefit analysis or the expectation of the success thereof. But if hope is one of the emotions that encourage protest, we may possibly need to approach this dimension from a broader temporal perspective, one that is not limited to a specific action and to immediate benefits. That is, individuals may participate in a political mobilisation even though they believe that that specific action and at a specific moment in time is not going to be efficacious or profitable in cost-benefit terms. Notwithstanding, this participation would be equally instrumental, as they can assume that the possible failure and cost of today is the first step towards success tomorrow. In this

sense, studies on collective action need to modify the concept of instrumentality, by incorporating a long-term temporal perspective.

The second case would entail incorporating other motives which could be related with another of the emotions analysed herein – pride. The pride may be derived from doing what one sees as being morally correct. In this case, we would not be speaking of an obligation with the group, rather of a moral obligation. This element would lead individuals to act in line with their principles, irrespective of the stance maintained by their group and the efficacy of their actions (Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012). This moral dimension would seem to be especially significant when analysing protests against situations that are considered unfair.

It can be deduced that the study of emotions in collective action not only enables us to re-introduce a substantial aspect of human conduct, which up until now has forced to take a back seat, but also to allow new forms of understanding a dynamics that is key for social change. In this times of prevailing uncertainty and crisis, in the Gramscian sense of the term, this task would acquire even greater interest.

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