This special issue contains an exciting and intriguing mixture of various conflicts and contexts about social transformation and violence. Although such diversity is important and intellectually stimulating, it can also be frustrating because a “bigger picture” does not seem within easy reach. I analyze why this may be the case, why this may be a problem, and suggest some first steps toward a potential solution that might move us to a more integrative understanding of social transformation and violence—that is, as processes of relationship regulation embedded in cultural rules and regulations about how to relate to whom. Specifically, I suggest how signs of a cultural-relational perspective on social transformation and violence already are visible from aspects of the special issue contributions themselves, which suggest some potential for scientific integration.

**Public Significance Statement**

This contribution discusses the special issue as a whole. It observes that the special issue contains an exciting and intriguing mixture of various conflicts and contexts about social transformation and violence. It also suggests a more integrative understanding of social transformation and violence—that is, as processes of relationship regulation embedded in cultural rules and regulations about how to relate to whom. This suggests potential for a better understanding of social transformation and violence within and across cultures.

**Keywords:** social transformation, violence, theory, relationships, culture

"The strongest of all warriors are these two—Time and Patience."
—Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace

If there is one thing to appreciate about this special issue on “Social Movements and Political and Social Transformation,” then it is the diversity of the contexts studied across the contributions. Indeed, the various contributions offer unique data from achieved, actual, or anticipated social transformation in Portugal, Northern Ireland, Israel, Turkey, South Africa, and Madagascar. Moreover, these contributions focus on various social movements and political actors, such as Gezi park protesters, Northern Ireland loyalists, different social movements in Israel, police officers and citizens in Portugal, the Fees Must Fall movement in South Africa, and the experience of the recurrence of conflict in Madagascar. As a scholar with a keen interest in social change and thus social transformation, I found this diversity across the contributions intellectually challenging and thought-provoking.

My aim in this commentary is to reflect on this diversity, which also has a different side. This is because diversity implies complexity, and complexity implies no simple answers to questions that can be settled once and for all by an empirical study. In order to further our scientific understanding of any phenomenon, diversity requires some integration of ideas and findings, yet the problem is that, in practice, diversity often invites empirical fragmentation. This means asking smaller and contextualized questions rather than bigger-picture and universal ones, which leads to smaller and contextualized bits of empirical knowledge. Although one can argue that science progresses precisely through the mere accumulation of knowledge, we need to develop theories that connect these different bits (e.g., Ellemers, 2013; Steel & Konig, 2006). For this reason, I found the diversity across the contributions to this special issue not only stimulating but also frustrating. Where, I found myself asking, is the “bigger picture”?

I would like to make absolutely clear that the special issue editors and contributors are not to blame for this—this observation applies not only this special issue but to (social) psychology more broadly. Indeed, social psychology seems to have divorced itself from bigger-picture theorizing (e.g., Kruglanski, 2001), perhaps in
the belief that gathering a lot of fragmented empirical data will somehow provide a better understanding of human behavior than putting effort in developing theories that would actually predict such behavior. This preference is visible in the incentive structure in the academic publication system, which values empirical fragmentation rather than theoretical integration. The problem with this model is that more empirical data will not automatically, through some kind of invisible hand, lead to a better understanding of any phenomenon. Indeed, without “bigger pictures”—that is, proper theories—we cannot interpret our increasingly diverse and expanding psychological database. For this we need the integrative and interpretative tools of theory (van Zomeren, 2016).

Unfortunately big-picture theories do not come out of the blue. It takes Time and Patience—the strongest of all warriors, according to Tolstoy—to develop them. In the remainder of this commentary, I will apply this view to this special issue and its contributions by suggesting two things. First, empirically studying contexts that are “different” from those studied in mainstream psychology (see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) is laudable but not enough—we also need a bigger picture that tells us what “different” means. Can we directly compare findings from the contributions to this special issue? And if not, how should we interpret contributions that are so “different” in light of the process of social transformation? After suggesting that this may a problem for our field, I will also suggest some first steps toward a potential solution—a view of social transformation and violence as processes of relationship regulation embedded in cultural rules and regulations about how to relate to whom. Specifically, I suggest how signs of a cultural-relational perspective on social transformation and violence are already visible from various aspects of the special issue contributions, which enables the scientific integration of diverse ideas and research findings.

In Search of a Bigger Picture

Societies, like all social units, are difficult to conceptualize. They are social structures yet they are not static—they change and evolve all the time, and presumably because such change has been going on for a long time, there are staggering amounts of differences within and between societies on economic, political, cultural, and psychological dimensions. This is an important backdrop against which to understand psychology’s recent quest for more diverse research samples (i.e., the people we study), which was triggered by Henrich et al.’s (2010) argument that psychologists grossly oversample individuals in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts. As a consequence, they argued, our knowledge base in psychology is quite limited as it is focused on individuals from, and thus psychological processes that are normative within, WEIRD contexts, which led them to call for research to move beyond WEIRD samples (see also Montiel, 2018) and thus for a more diverse research database.

The current special issue is truly exemplary in this respect as it clearly features studies with samples from non-WEIRD contexts. This helps us to see different bits and pieces of the different processes that may be relevant for different political actors involved in social transformation in different contexts. For instance, studying the Gezi park protests provided a window on different consequences of mobilization in Turkey (Ulaş & Acar, 2018), whereas studying the repression by Portuguese police provided insights into how both the police and civilians experience this (Soares, Barbosa, Matos, & Mendes, 2018). Similarly, Ben David and Rubel-Lifschitz’s (2018) study three Israeli movements helped to see if they were successful for the same reasons (although it remains unclear why this should be the case and whether this should generalize to, let’s say, the Fees Must Fall movement in South Africa as studied by Kiguwa & Ally, 2018). All contributions to the special issue thus provide such intriguing “snapshots” of a given movement or political actor in a given context, but if we zoom out for a moment, we do not yet see an integrated “movie”. In the absence of theoretical integration, we are thus left with empirical fragmentation.

The underlying problem of this state of affairs is that psychology is focused, be it by habit or intention, on studying individuals. As such it has difficulty conceptualizing processes at broader levels of analysis (e.g., the dyad level, the network level, the cultural level, the “macro” level), which is indicated by a lack of theories of “context”. Indeed, in psychology “context” can refer to almost anything external to the individual (e.g., close others, the group, one’s culture, the immediate situation one finds oneself in). The most convenient assumptions in this field, then, are to assume that contexts can be reduced to what happens within individuals. This is convenient because it follows that we can compare samples of individuals from different contexts and that the same psychological processes within individuals will be at play until proven otherwise. This is why we can compare, for example, individuals who are motivated to achieve social change in the Netherlands with those in Madagascar, South Africa, or Turkey.

Of course, the key point of Henrich et al.’s (2010) critique was to emphasize how “different” contexts are when researchers sample individuals from diverse places in the world, suggesting in fact a lack of comparability between samples. Activists in the Netherlands may thus not be motivated to act in the same ways as activists in Madagascar, although from the outside they may appear to be doing the same thing. The same goes for the political actors involved in the transformation processes studied in this special issue: Can we really compare, for instance, the Gezi protesters with the Northern Ireland loyalists? As Montiel (2018) argues, we might not, or at least we might not want to make that assumption automatically, without reflecting on the issue.

Unfortunately, the problem is even worse than this. Even if we do not make those assumptions automatically, do we have an alternative? Do we know how to interpret the findings from all these different contexts, as indicated in the current special issue? Do we know how and why these are “different”? I believe that in most cases the answer to these questions is “no,” and this poses a problem for academic progress, because we see many pieces of the puzzle without clues as to whether and how they fit. Put differently, we seem to be lacking a bigger picture.

The Problem of Lacking a Bigger Picture

In the absence of a bigger picture, there are two dangers in interpreting findings from fragmented research, in this case on social transformation. First, we can interpret social transformation in, let’s say Madagascar, from a WEIRD perspective. For instance, we can test whether specific motivations for social protest, of which we know from previous research that they are relevant for individuals in WEIRD contexts, apply to individuals from Mada-
gaspar as well. In this way we connect WEIRD with non-WEIRD contexts (which is good) by restricting the latter to the former (which is problematic; this is known as imposed-etic research; Smith, Fischer, Vignoles, & Bond, 2013). The first danger, then, is what Montiel (2018) and of course Henrich et al. (2010) observed—that in doing so we exclude most of the world’s population from our psychological database.

The second danger appears when we interpret social transformation in Madagascar from within (also known as emic research; Smith et al., 2013), often aided by local researchers who provide meaning to their own context of social transformation. In this way we do not restrict non-WEIRD contexts to what we know about WEIRD contexts (which is good), but unfortunately we also do not connect them any longer (which is problematic)—we simply set them apart as “different.” As a consequence, we contribute to empirical fragmentation.

The key underlying question to answer is this: Do WEIRD and non-WEIRD contexts reflect apples and oranges, or do they reflect different yet comparable pieces of fruit? Put differently, should we conceptualize them as being different in degree, or different in kind? Note that this is not just an academic question. Choosing which assumption we use to guide our research questions on social transformation has important practical implications as well. If we would want to support social change toward democracy in developing countries, for example, do we conveniently assume that we can copy-and-paste what we know about social change in Western countries, for example, do we conveniently assume that we can copy-and-paste what we know about social change in Western democracies to these countries? Or do we need to study each country in detail first (because we assume massive differences between the countries)? But if we opt for the latter assumption, how do we know what to look out for? We do not have an alternative as long as we do not have theories that tell us what to look out for. For this reason, psychology’s problem is often not the data but the lack of bigger pictures. And so it goes, I believe, for the psychology of social transformation and violence.

**Zooming in on Social Transformation and Violence**

The road toward understanding the role of violence in repressing or fuelling social transformation (see for instance Ayamin & Tausch, 2016) is an intriguing one, which is paved with similar theoretical obstacles as described above more generally. If researchers from WEIRD contexts want to study violence in non-WEIRD contexts, then which assumptions will they choose about the role of violence in social transformation? Will they see violence as a rare outburst of powerless destruction, or as another tool in the human toolkit to instrumentally achieve social change?

A recent book by Fiske and Rai (2014) argued that although individuals from WEIRD contexts may not like violence, such dislike may stand in the way of understanding why people use it, particularly if it is about people in contexts that they are unfamiliar with. For example, it may be difficult for people from WEIRD contexts to imagine other contexts in which violence may be perceived, which I apply to the focus of this special issue.

**A Cultural-Relational Perspective**

It is easy to call out for a bigger-picture theory that will explain it all, and then say goodbye and leave it at that. I will therefore take a more difficult and challenging road that outlines some first steps toward a theory that helps to understand the role of violence in social transformation, hopefully in a more integrative fashion. This is based in my recently developed cultural-relational theory of motivation, called *selvations theory* (van Zomeren, 2015, 2016), which I apply to the focus of this special issue.

**Some first steps.** Selvations theory is a theory of motivation (and thus of individuals) as much as it is a theory of social structure (and thus of larger social units). As such it applies to direct as well as structural and cultural violence, although I will focus on direct violence in my analysis. The theory specifies how
individuals are embedded in cultures (defined as systems of shared meaning in terms of how to regulate which relationships) through their network of social relationships, which implies that we cannot understand individuals' behavior (such as violence, or collective action) without knowing about his or her social relationships and the broader culture in which these are embedded. The theory assumes that individuals are similar across the globe in their need for and enactment of social relationships, and thus need to be hypersensitive to any anticipated, perceived, or actual changes in their social networks, in order to maintain inclusion and avoid exclusion. As a consequence, individuals are assumed to be similar in their basic motivation for relationship regulation.1

Relationship regulation can take many forms, however, and this is where larger social units such as culture kick in. For instance, I teach my children not to fight with each other, and I generally assume other parents to do the same. However, perhaps I would have taught my children to regulate their relationships differently in contexts where children need to be able to defend themselves before all else. Similarly, I strongly prefer to live in harmony with others around me rather than attack them, which probably makes me a fairly likable person but probably also a fairly lousy professional boxer. In either case, however, I am regulating relationships within a culture that sets clear rules for relationship regulation. So when real estate agents are fiercely negotiating, or when politicians attack each other vehemently in a public debate, selvations theory interprets this as culturally appropriate ways of relationship regulation. This implies that even violence can be viewed as a way of regulating relationships, which raises the question which relationships is being regulated.

The diversity in how to regulate relationships is not endless, however. Borrowing from Fiske (1992) and Rai and Fiske (2011), selvations theory differentiates four universal and qualitatively different ways to regulate relationship, called relational models, which are culturally learned, developed, and applied through social interaction and, when shared by those involved, facilitate coordinated social interaction. All individuals thus are assumed to intuitively know how to use each relational model, but in different networks and cultures they will have learned different rules about when to apply and value them.

These four relational models thus provide different “relational rulebooks” for how to go about which relationship within a culture. Communal sharing, for example, is a relational model defined by unity, oneness, and solidarity (e.g., between family), whereas authority ranking is defined by mutual acceptance of a power differential (i.e., respect). Equality matching is defined by reciprocity, equality and balance, whereas market pricing is defined by proportionality and transaction. As an illustration, parents’ relationship with their infant is typically communal, but when the child gets older an authority relationship develops. Similarly, one can relate to a colleague through equality matching because of a reciprocal activity (e.g., taking turns in cooking a meal for the other), or through market pricing because each has something unique that the other can benefit from (e.g., skills or expertise, such as writing lyrics and composing music).

Selvations theory proposes that these models both reflect and constitute an important part of social structure because individuals need to stick to the culturally relevant relational rulebooks, or else risk social exclusion or a lack of belonging. Culture thus reflects the dominant relational rulebook within a broader set of social networks (which is what people typically refer to when they describe a culture, for instance, as “collectivist” or “authoritarian”). As such, selvations theory differentiates two types of context within which individuals’ relationship regulation is embedded—an individual’s network of social relationships, and the broader culture within which one’s network is embedded. The former is based on relationship regulation through social interaction, whereas the latter one requires a more abstract set of cultural norms about how to regulate which relationships. So when we talk of “context,” selvations theory differentiates between one’s network of social relationship, and the more abstract social unit around it that reflects a more general relational rulebook.

Application to special issue contributions. Selvations theory provides an integrative tool for analyzing how violence and social transformation are related. First, the theory conceptualizes violence as one way to regulate relationships, for instance with fellow activists, or against the authorities. Second, the theory conceptualizes violence differently as a function of which relational model is applied through violence. This is important because violence may violate or affirm the relational model applied. For instance, violence may violate a communal sharing relationship with one’s partner, yet affirm an authority ranking relationship with this very same partner. Similarly, police violence may violate an equality matching relationship with civilians who act peacefully (for related views see Drury & Reicher, 2009), yet affirm an equality matching relationship with civilians who use violence against the police. As such, selvations theory suggests that individuals and contexts can only be compared if we know about individuals’ social relationships and the cultural relational rulebooks they perceive and apply.

Interestingly, glimpses of such different relational models are also visible in the contributions to the current special issue. For example, Ulug & Acar (2018) suggest that participating in the Gezi protests created stronger communal relationships, both among protesters and between different groups of protesters that previously excluded each other. Similarly, across three different Israeli social movements, Ben David and Rubel-Lifschitz’s (2018) contribution suggests that stimulating small symbolic acts allowed individuals to come together and feel stronger together, which is again indicative of emerging communal relationships. Moreover, they found indications of strategic coalition-building between groups, which is associated with building equality matching relationships.

In Razakamaharavo’s (2018) contribution, the importance of understanding how individuals regulate relationships becomes even more visible. For instance, the paper mentions the Malagasy ideal of fihavanana, which “comes from “havana” (kin). It encompasses multiple values including goodwill, friendship, kinship, love, fraternity” (p. x), all of which are associated with communal relationships. Furthermore, “If there is no fihavanana, the Malagasy believe they commit taboo: manota fady. It is a powerful cultural element regulating the functioning of the social structures.

1 As Fiske (1992) wrote: “The relational models theory explains social life as a process of seeking, making, sustaining, repairing, adjusting, judging, construing, and sanctioning relationships. It postulates that people are oriented to relationships as such, that people generally want to relate to each other, feel committed to the basic types of relationships, regard themselves as obligated to abide by them, and impose them on other people (including third parties).”
It can define boundaries regarding what can or cannot be done by the individual or the group. The fihavanana was used to convince the actors to come to the table, collaborate and preserve peace at any cost” (p. 11). This notion makes very clear that relationship regulation is absolutely essential to recognize in contexts of conflict as well as peace, and during social transformations between them.

Kiguwa and Ally’s (2018) contribution about the “Fees Must Fall” movement in South Africa also makes clear that violence can be a way to regulate relationships. For instance, beliefs that student protesters are criminals that are inherently violent and thus only understand violence reflect equality matching (i.e., reciprocity-based) relationships between enemies (see also Adams, 2005), which demands violence to be returned in kind. Such a cycle of reciprocal violence justifies the use of it and imprisons both groups into this type of relationship. In fact, such a cycle can only be broken if people stop the violence, thus breaking the obligation that comes with equality matching relationships. As Ferguson, McDaid, and McAuley’s (2018) contribution suggests, stopping the violence, and thus effectively violating the relational rulebook that developed between groups, is one of the key challenges toward conflict transformation.

Finally, Soares et al.’s (2018) contribution seems to reveal authority relationships at work within the police, which justifies the use of violence and leads to “moral disengagement”. It is important to understand that, among the police, remaining loyal to the police is the relevant motive for that type of relationship, which will therefore have priority over motives that resonate more with other relational models. As such, the use of violence comes with regulating an authority relationship.

Application to social transformation and violence. Social transformation, when viewed through the lens of selvations theory, can occur in at least two different ways. First, social transformation can be interpreted as change in whether and how an individual relates to another person in one’s network. Second, it can be interpreted as change in broader cultural norms. Whereas affirmations of relational models will not change them, violations of them do have this potential because they put the relationship at stake. For instance, violence within a communal sharing relationship might be sanctioned through ending the relationship, or by changing the relational model.

Moreover, given that individuals are embedded in social networks, others in the social network may also perceive this violation and end or otherwise change the relationship with the perpetrator. Such “ripple” effects can even change broader norms about how to regulate which relationship, which implies the potential for changes in relationships within social network to affect changes at the broader cultural level. Furthermore, selvations theory allows for changes at the cultural level to affect changes at the relational level. An example of the latter is that seeing children hurt by police violence may make one question the cultural relational rulebook to respect the authority of the police, and instead makes one respond in kind.

These illustrations are meant to communicate that selvations theory provides both a motivational (or agentic; Bandura, 1997) and structural account of human behavior as embedded in networks of social relationships that, in turn, are embedded in culture. This implies that social transformation can be understood through understanding how individuals regulate which relationship, even when they do so through violence. Fiske’s (1992) relational models then provide unique analytical tools to interpret the diversity of data on violence and social transformation, as these offer both comparability (in terms of relationship regulation) and incompatibility (in terms of the qualitatively different models). As such, selvations theory provides a glimpse of a bigger picture on violence and social transformation, or at least some first steps toward identifying such a bigger picture.

Of course, some might feel uneasy when considering the idea that violence is just another relationship regulation strategy, or just another instrumental tool toward social change. Some might even wonder whether such assumptions do not, implicitly or explicitly, justify such violence. To assuage such concerns, let me specify what I believe are two conditions under which violence is most likely to function as a form of relationship regulation.

First, violence can only regulate relationships when the relevant relational model is shared. For instance, within mutually shared authority ranking relationships, violence is the privilege of the authority and thus should be deferred to. A parent beating a child, for instance, can be interpreted as a form of relationship regulation if both share the same relational model. In fact, if they do not share the same relational model, we need to understand each actor’s behavior from the different relational models they apply.

Now, although I am personally horrified by the image of a child beaten by a parent, as a scholar I want to explain and understand such behavior accurately and correctly. If science is about finding truth, then my views on how the world should be (and thus how others should relate) are unlikely to help me see the bigger picture.

As a scholar, selvations theory suggests that it is possible for people to relate in a violent way for the same reasons that others relate in a nonviolent way, and the only path forward, then, is to test this line of thought empirically.

A second condition for violence to be interpreted as just another form of relationship regulation is that it fits with the broader cultural-relational rulebook about how to regulate which relationship. In theory and research on honor killings, for example, the emerging insight has been that those who endorse a “culture of honor” perceive violence as a way to respond in kind to a threat to one’s reputation (e.g., Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996). Such cultural norms, which I conceptualize as being part of a broader cultural-relational rulebook, can thus encourage or discourage the use of violence as a way to relate certain relationships within a given culture.

Again, one can be horrified by the notion of an honor killing, and one can wonder whether even considering to conceptualize such behavior as part of “normal” human functioning does not, implicitly or explicitly, justify or excuse it. The key point here is that honor killings exist, that some parents do beat their children, and that violence is perhaps more common in human affairs than the average pacifist would like to see (Fiske & Rai, 2014). As such, it requires and deserves an explanation—an explanation that derives from a bigger picture.

Indeed, a cultural-relational perspective on violence and social transformation would apply this framework to the different contexts and conflicts studied, as these would provide the framework of conceptual comparison. That is, we might be able to compare activists from the Netherlands and Madagascar when they apply the same relational model with respect to their activist group, for example; and when the overarching cultural relational rulebook is
similar. If this is not the case, then the theory still provides an alternative, that is, an interpretative lens to analyze “different” individuals and contexts through different (constellations of) relational models. If anything, these ideas reflect some first steps toward meaningful comparisons between very diverse individuals and contexts in the study of social transformation and violence, which is precisely what enables the scientific integration of diverse ideas and findings.

Conclusion

This commentary calls for a need to avoid further empirical fragmentation of our field by focusing on theoretical integration in a more directive fashion than the current academic system appears to incentivize. To put my money where my mouth is, I not only observe this need for a bigger picture for the contributions to this special issue, but also provided a potential solution in terms of a cultural-relational perspective that includes both a theory of motivation (or agency) and context (or structure). These elements are required, I believe, for any theory that seeks to explain social transformation, particularly in cases where violence may be used to achieve that. It is my hope that this commentary helps to stimulate interest in developing such theories and testing them empirically.

I realize that the current academic publication system may not provide incentives in this direction. As such, a stronger focus on integrative theorizing may not be rewarded by the system in the short run. At the same time, it is important to remind ourselves that “the system” is us—our culture of networks of researchers who interact with and relate to one another. In fact, we are the researchers, the authors, the reviewers, the editors, and so on. Changing the norms of the culture implies changing our relational rulebooks, and one way to do that is to practice what you preach—and who knows what “ripple” effects can follow. As Tolstoy already knew, Time and Patience are the strongest warriors indeed. But they need a little help from ourselves, especially when it comes to social transformation.

References


