Generating constructive disruption
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Generating Constructive Disruption:
How Disadvantaged Groups Can Negotiate Social Change in the
Face of Resistance from the advantaged

Eric Shuman
Generating Constructive Disruption

How Disadvantaged Groups Can Negotiate Social Change in the Face of Resistance from the Advantaged

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the University of Groningen on the authority of the Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga and in accordance with the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on Thursday 7 July 2022 at 16.15 hours

by

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For me as an American, who conducted my PhD in Israel/Palestine though officially at a Dutch university – my PhD experience is inextricably linked with my time building a life abroad in a new and foreign country and thus was a time of intense personal growth, as well as professional development. One of my favorite books says, “If you want to know the truth of who you are walk [or in my case fly] until not a person knows your name. Travel is the great leveler, the great teacher – a long stretch of travel will teach you more about yourself than 100 years of quiet introspection.” This has certainly proven true for myself – and all the more so because my journey was not just one of travel but also of academic training that has profoundly shaped who I am and the way I see the world. None of this growth and development would have been possible without the many families who supported me along the way, both my family that has always been there for me, but also the families that I discovered along the way. So I have many many people to thank for their role in this journey of mine that began not necessarily when I started my PhD in 2018 but rather what I received a Fulbright that brought me to Israel/Palestine in 2014.

First of all, I would like to thank my parents and family for their unwavering support and love. They have always supported me in the pursuit of my passions - no matter what strange requirements it as made of them: whether it was ordering and breeding fruit flies at home for my first real science experiment, or getting up at 4:30 in the morning to drive me to swim practices, or in this case, allowing me to move across the world to a country that most often appears in the news because of wars and violence. Despite the fact that it meant that they only got to see me once a year or so, they enthusiastically supported me in my decision to stay in Tel Aviv for my PhD, because they knew it was a place where could gain unique knowledge and training about the field I was passionate about and they knew I was happy, enjoying my time living and growing abroad.
Next, I am deeply grateful to my advisors: Eran Halperin, Tamar Saguy, and Martijn van Zomeren, without each of whom I would have never completed this PhD, and whose guidance along the way has shaped me into the researcher I am today. Without Eran, this entire journey likely would not have even happened - I reached out to Eran as a young undergrad to see if he would sponsor my Fulbright application. Eran, being unfailingly open and receptive to new people and ideas, accepted my request after just a few short email exchanges. Thanks to this I have had the privilege of working with Eran for 8 years and of growing up in his lab. Eran has always made me feel that our relationship is one between equals, despite my youth and relative inexperience. Even from the beginning he treated any idea I had with respect and when we disagreed, he held an open mind to my arguments and was willing to change his mind. This is not to say our relationship was not also one of teacher and student - through working with Eran I have learned so many invaluable skills for research: how to see and capture the most crucial aspect of a given set of findings, how to design effective psychological interventions, and many more. But most of all Eran has instilled in me how to do research that always has an eye to addressing the problems faced by the societies we live in, a perspective I hope to carry forward into the work I do in the future.

While I initially arrived to the lab via my connection with Eran, the seeds of the ideas that germinated and grew into this thesis started with Tamar. I have clear memories of sitting in Tamar’s office as a part of her small research seminar with just a few other students discussing research on power relations, social change, and identity, and the ideas that would form the basis for this work starting to come together. In fact, the first two studies from this thesis that were ever conducted, were done as a part of that very master’s seminar. Ever since, Tamar has always helped to instill in me a belief in the importance of this work and the
Acknowledgements

perspective it brings. While I learned many things from Tamar’s supervision, I think the most invaluable are the perspectives she gave me to understand power relations and identity, which have shaped not only my work as a researcher but also how I understand myself as someone who holds both privileged and disadvantaged identities.

Finally, I met Martijn through Eran and Tamar and he quickly agreed to become my official PhD advisor at my degree granting university, even though he had only worked with me a little. For this confidence in the future of my work, I am deeply grateful because it gave me the privilege of working with Martijn. Throughout the stresses of the PhD, I have always benefit from Martijn’s relaxed demeanor and unique sense of humor, and beyond this from the keen and penetrating mind he brings to the research questions I raise. Every time I have a conversation with Martijn, I feel like my brain has been stretched and reshaped causing me to see things in a different way. My own work and training have benefited from Martijn always managing to keep the broadest theoretical picture in mind, and helping me find connections in my thinking that I didn’t even realize were there. I hope that I will be able to keep this perspective in my future work, to ensure that my findings help build broader theoretical structures that can help explain human behavior rather than simply provide limited empirical snapshots.

Beyond my advisors, there are many more people who helped me along the way to my PhD. When I arrived in Tel Aviv, I discovered that the lab I had come to join was not just a group of people working together, but rather a tight-knit community that welcomed me with open arms, and thus became one of the many families away from home that supported me in my time here. I quickly came to consider my fellow PhD students as something more akin to siblings, who were a constant source of both professional and personal support and advice, particularly those who began and finished their doctorates alongside me: Siwar, Shira, Hanna, and Inga.

I clearly remember my first meeting with Siwar: she clearly viewed me with a bit of
skepticism – who was this random American who had showed up to study “conflict resolution”? So it was lucky that she needed help understanding some of her mediation models and invited me to join her for debke: what better things to bond over than statistics and traditional Palestinian dance. Without them, I might have missed out on the privilege of becoming her friend and collaborator – and what a loss that would have been. Siwar is always there to challenge my thinking – if I tend to focus on the perspective of the advantaged, she reminds me of the perspective of the disadvantaged. She catches me when my own western American cultural assumptions are having too strong of an influence on my work. And she make me consider questions I never would have entertained otherwise. I wouldn’t be the researcher I am today without her. Beyond this she has always been there to support me during whatever struggles I might be going through, and I was always welcome to spend the weekend in her home. This might sound like a small thing, but when you are living far from family, there is deep value in the sense that you have an older sister whose home you can run away to for the weekend.

Shira and I initially bonded over being the “babies” of the lab (that is - its two youngest members – although Shira was quite excited when I arrived and she was no longer the youngest). Despite our youth, we soon became the two lab managers, handling the operations of a lab of over 30 people, which sometimes required making the impossible happen. Whether it was through impossible missions for the lab, early morning drives to campus, or our shared love of Harry Potter, we quickly became best friends. Friends that would rely on each other to overcome the challenges of completing a PhD – whether they were struggles of actually doing a PhD or simply the hard times that come over the course of five years during such a formative period of one’s life.

Hanna and Inga were both only physically in the lab for short times with me, but despite that I became fast friends with both of them. Hanna was one of my first friends who was also living in Tel Aviv, and helped show me the ropes and find my way in the city. In addition, much of the initial development of my thinking as a researcher came from late
Acknowledgements

evening discussions in the lab between Hanna, Siwar, and I and many others. Even after she returned to Hungary, she still was always reaching out and looking out for me. Inga actually only spent a year in the lab but during that time we developed a close friendship and collaboration. This collaboration has since lasted the entire course of our PhDs and the friendship has only grown as well, through adventures in Alpine snowstorms and many WhatsApp calls once COVID prevented us from meeting. To all of you, who walked this PhD journey side by side with me I am so grateful for your friendship and support.

In addition to those who started their PhD with me, when I arrived at the lab there were many people who were more advanced in their careers: Ruthie, Boaz, Aharon, Yossi, Amit, Smadar, Roni, Nechumi, Liat, Nevin, Noa: who were in many ways responsible for creating the stimulating and engaging community that I feel in love with at the lab. And all of whom were constantly available to provide advice, guidance, and encouragement. In particular, I owe a great debt to Ruthie and Boaz. Ever since I arrived in Tel Aviv, Ruthie went out of her way to make sure that I had everything that I needed, whether it was somewhere to spend my first Passover seder, a couch to crash on, or help deciphering any of the hopelessly complex Israeli bureaucracy. Even after she left Tel Aviv and moved on to her post-doc and job, she has always been willing to selflessly provide any kind of help she can offer, whether it was advice about my visit in Groningen, my post-doc at NYU, or serving as my paranymph and helping me to organize my defense. In addition, through many collaborations, Ruthie contributed greatly to my initial training as a researcher. Boaz also quickly became a source of advice and guidance. While we still have not gotten to work together as much as we would like, Boaz became sort of an unofficial advisor - someone I could always turn to with questions, no matter how small, or for advice on whatever thorny problem I was stuck on. In addition, with his calm steady demeanor he was always able help me calm down when I was stressed out about something and keep things in perspective.
Without the advice and encouragement, I received from all of you and the foundation you helped build in the lab, my PhD experience wouldn’t have been at all the same.

Just as there was an older generation above me when I arrived at the lab, as the years passed new people joined and helped to keep this family and community alive: Anat, Tal, Lee, Daan, Shira Hebel, and many many others. All of you quickly become my close friends and another support system – one that was critical for getting through the past few years as COVID turned all of our lives and routines upside down. You also gave me the privilege of being able to step into the shoes of the people I admired when I joined the lab and pass on the many things I had learned from them on to you. Whether through car ride sing-alongs on the way to Jerusalem, or celebratory drinks and dinners, or just quiet moments with each of you to talk and share and vent, you have continued to provide me with that sense of family that has been so important to me.

Another community and family, I had the privilege to be a part of and learn from during my PhD was aChord, an applied center that seeks to bring findings and tools from the world of social psychology to the field where they can be used to make real advances towards a more equal and tolerant society. I learned so much from everyone I work with there about the practical needs of the field, and about how to better translate research and theory into a form that is truly applicable. In particular, I learned so much from Inbal, my closest friend and colleague at aChord – Inbal more than anyone I know embodies the mission of Achord: being a bridge between research-based knowledge and practical impact, and so I was able to learn so much from you about how to apply social psychology. At the same time, I gained another close friend, who provided me with support during particularly challenging times.

Beyond the family I found through my professional life, I wouldn’t have been able to complete this PhD journey without my Tel Aviv family. First, Aviv, one of my first friends in Tel Aviv and one of the only friends who has been with me here for this entire time. You
Acknowledgements

have been a constant source of encouragement and support and I don’t know what I would have done without our friendship. You’ve simply always been there – a constant and loyal friend for whatever I might need: a night out, a night in, advice, a shoulder to lean on, and everything in between. In addition, all the other members of our little Tel Aviv family, Harris, Rachel, Zeev, Oren, Aurelia, Rayeq, my roommates Yoni and Henrik, have given me a home here in Tel Aviv. Through Shabbat dinners, camping trips and adventures, pride celebrations, you helped me make this place feel truly like my home.

In addition to the families I found in Tel Aviv, I could always count on my families of friends that I formed in the states for support from afar. The Five Guys: Seth, David, Tim, Harrison, Anna, and MKJ – I could always turn to you for a friendly phone call and a taste of home and look forward to our monthly Rose’n Thorn newsletters. I especially depended on the friendship of Seth and CrysAne who were a bit closer and always welcomed me for a retreat to their Swiss paradise or to join them on some adventure in a new country. And my Doubleshot swim crew: Gio, Forrest, and Hesser who have kept our college friendship alive for almost 10 years now, despite the fact that I’m on the other side of the world.

Another privilege of completing a PhD has been all the wonderful people I’ve gotten to meet and bond with over research at conferences and my short stay in Groningen. To all the people that have made these experiences fun, enriching, and welcoming – I am deeply grateful: Maja, Maarten, Julia, Rianna, Lucia, Ana, Lisa, Chantal, Frank, Gonneke, Tasse, Jannis, Max, Eline, Felix, Hakan. In addition, I had the special opportunity of beginning this journey as a Fulbright Fellow, and am forever grateful for the companionship and friendship of my other Fulbrighters who arrived to Israel/Palestine with me: Jeremy, Nick, Casey, Emily, Allison, Eli, and many others.

Finally, I would like to thank my three undergraduate honors thesis advisors: Dan Johnson, Julie Woodzicka, and Karla Murdock. The excellent training and education I
received from you and many other during my time at Washington and Lee prepared me so well for PhD and this experience. Because of the invaluable training I received from you, I arrived on my Fulbright ready to make the most of the experience, and this set the stage for me being able to succeed during my PhD.

Lastly, and most importantly I would like to thank the many cafes of Tel Aviv, that let me spend my days working there: Kiosko, Boke, Café Lucia and many others. Much of the work of this thesis was done in these cafes - in fact, I am writing these very words in Kiosko. Thank you for giving me an office outside of how, greeting me with a smile every morning, and remembering my name even though after 8 years I still can’t give it a proper Hebrew pronunciation.
# Table of Contents

**CHAPTER 1**  General Introduction  

**CHAPTER 2**  Protest movements involving limited violence can sometimes be effective: Evidence from the 2020 BlackLivesMatter Protests  

**CHAPTER 3**  Disrupting the System Constructively: Testing the Effectiveness of Nonnormative Nonviolent Collective Action  

**CHAPTER 4**  Defend, Deny, Distance, & Dismantle: A New Conceptualization and Measure of Advantaged Identity Management  

**CHAPTER 5**  General Discussion  

References