

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a large crowd of people gathered on a city street at night. The scene is illuminated by streetlights, creating a warm, orange glow. In the foreground, several police officers in dark uniforms and helmets are visible, some standing in a line. The crowd extends far into the background, filling the street and surrounding areas. A street sign is visible in the upper right corner, reading "Queen W".

Van collectief ongenoegeen tot ordeverstoringen

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Summary

Since 2010 there has been a marked worldwide rise in the number of anti-government protests and large scale riots. Such events often have far-reaching consequences for national security and for social and political stability. In the Netherlands this rise has been less acute. But also here we see clear signs of collective discontent and a certain degree of concern about large-scale “unrest”. In this report we analyse the ways in which collective discontent may be expressed, by focusing on four questions:

How does collective discontent lead to large-scale public disorder behaviour?

What factors determine the scale of such disorders and their aftermath?

What can governments do to prevent or reduce the magnitude of large-scale public disorder?

What forms of collective discontent and large-scale public disorder may potentially harm the National security of the Netherlands?

We address these questions by describing and integrating several processes involved. In this we do not just focus on collective conflict, but also include understandings of peaceful protest or other collective behaviours that may result from collective discontent. In order to better comprehend how collective discontent arises and changes over time, we describe current thinking about public opinion dynamics and understandings of what collective emotions are, how they emerge and what their consequences can be. Accordingly, we seek to integrate insights from sociology, psychology, communication science, political science and history. This report brings together insights and empirical results that relate to discontent, collective violence and other forms of collective behaviour, the escalation and de-escalation of large-scale conflict behaviour.

DISCONTENT

Discontent is an affective state that is the antecedent of a range of emotions. It is a negative feeling with a subject (someone who experiences the emotion) and a specific object (someone or something that triggers the emotion). Feelings of discontent demand an interpretation, often referred to as an *appraisal*. An example may clarify this: if someone in the street bumps into you this may give rise to feelings of discontent. You seek an explanation for what happened (he bumped into me on purpose, he is careless) and the explanation shapes the emotion that is experienced (anger, indignation) and that motivates your response (you shout at him, you complain). Characteristic of *appraisals* is that they enable you to tell a story about your emotions.

If there is a shared object for the emotion and if the emotional state (and appraisals) are shared with others, we may speak of collective discontent. A collective emotion can be said to exist when individual members of a group are able to say that we are discontented with our situation. In such a situation, individuals are able to feel, think and act on behalf of a certain group of people (an ingroup), in terms of a shared social identity. This process is more likely to occur when these individuals identify strongly with that group, if there is an us/them divide and if group members believe that it is possible to act as a group. A strong sense of “us” is further reinforced by communication within the group or by a history of cooperative collaboration.

As mentioned above, *appraisals* are “stories” that explain the emotions that a subject feels about an object. When those stories are shared with others who share this discontent or who empathise with the source of the story, this may cause those others to experience similar emotions. This process plays a central role in the spreading of collective discontent.

Collective expressions of discontent may sometimes appear to erupt without any warning. This creates an impression that public opinion has suddenly changed in an unanticipated way (e.g., a “groundswell”). One reason to explain such phenomena is that there often is only limited awareness of the emotions that others feel. We can discern four different types of situation, based on the level of awareness about discontents among *insiders* within the group itself and among *outsiders* (out-group members). If there is high awareness among both insiders and outsiders, then discontent is overtly present to all. If either insiders, outsiders or both have low awareness of the discontents exist within a certain group, then one can conclude that there is an undercurrent of discontent in the sense that those with low awareness will tend to be surprised if these discontents are publicly displayed. Sudden outbursts of discontent thus need not be caused by rapid changes of public opinion, but may simply be due to a lack of awareness. To ameliorate this lack of awareness is difficult: there is not one set way to measure public

opinions and gauging the level of discontent that exists within a certain group of people can be very hard.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of gauging levels of discontent, there is broad consensus in the literature that emotions and discontents play a central role in collective behaviour. One should not infer from this that collective behaviour is emotional, irrational and completely unlike “normal” everyday behaviour. Emotions affect all kinds of behaviours, and are not at all incompatible with “rational” decision making and with social influence processes such as imitation. But knowing and understanding the nature of emotions that people feel is nonetheless important: it helps one to predict the intensity and nature of the behaviour that may follow. Emotions have the ability to translate the rather a-specific discontents that people experience into concrete behavioural motivations. Our literature review suggests that many of the collective emotions that are involved in collective behaviour have a moral component: they are emotions of anger and outrage, contempt, disgust, fear and wrath. The presence of these emotions is diagnostic.

CONSEQUENCES OF COLLECTIVE DISCONTENT

Collective discontent is but one of many factors that may motivate collective action. In this report we discuss four different types of collective action: protest, violent conflict behaviour, withdrawal and inaction. We should add to this that protest is not uncommon and collective violence is quite rare. In the vast majority of cases, collective discontent tends to result in inaction or some form of withdrawal.

Protest is an attempt at influencing others’ opinions or decisions by manifesting one’s own, perhaps at a demonstration or by a range of alternative actions. Protest need not be confrontational. Participation in protest is predicted by three socio-psychological factors: *social identity, efficacy and feelings of anger or injustice*. Over the years researchers have also investigated whether protest is predicted by all manner of background factors such as poverty, environmental characteristics or individual differences, but none of these tends to be a strong and consistent predictor. Background factors may motivate protest to the extent that they become the focus of discontent, for example because they are debated in communications via (social) media and within social networks.

Violent conflict behaviour occurs only in a small proportion of protests, but it also occurs in situations that have little to do with politicized discontents (e.g., football hooliganism). When violent conflict between police and groups of citizens does occur, prior expectations appear to play a central role. If there are (sub)groups who prepare for conflict, for example because there have been frictions in the past or because one fears violence from the other side, then the risk of collective

violence increases. The emotions that play a role in the emergence of violent conflict are somewhat different than the emotions involved in protest: disgust, contempt and wrath are associated with violence. Looting can be one way in which collective conflict behaviour is expressed. If looting occurs in the context of collective violence (which happens only very rarely) then research suggests that the predictors of looting show considerable similarity with those of other forms of violence. But there appear to be many cases in which group-based looting does not have a collective origin and is unrelated to collective discontent. If the opportunity arises to commit theft with impunity then this can lead to the formation of ad-hoc coalitions of multiple individuals who act out of private motives such as self-interest or some private grudge or discontent.

A third, more common, response to collective discontent is migration or self-segregation: people choose to extract themselves from an unpleasant or undesirable situation by moving away or withdrawing into their own community. Mass migration can occur for multiple reasons. Collective discontent is but one of several causes of mass migration, but for the Netherlands it appears to be a relevant one. Research suggests that emigration out of the Netherlands is strongly affected by discontent with the public domain. Migration into the Netherlands appears to be economically motivated in many cases. Self-segregation in the Netherlands is predominately driven by the wish of the majority (white Dutch) to reduce the amount of contact with ethnic minorities and other minority groups.

A final consequence of experiencing collective discontent can be that people accommodate: they display inaction. Inaction should not be equated with apathy or indifference, because inaction can be a motivated choice. The decision to accommodate and resign oneself can be made on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis that leads one to conclude that the efficacy of action is limited or that the costs involved are too high. Inaction is also a probable outcome in situations in which negative outcomes are unavoidable or perceived to be “natural”. Other reasons for inaction are that there are limited resources or abilities for protest (e.g., a lack of power, organization or opportunity). Finally, there are certain ideologies or convictions that may become obstacles to protest. In cases where inaction is the result, people are likely to seek to reduce their discontent and negative emotions in other ways than through protest.

THE ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE AS A PROCESS

It is hard to predict when and where collective violence will break out, and how long it will last. Overall, we note that collective violence is very rare, and tends to be very short-lived. But sometimes it does occur and occasionally it may carry on for days or weeks (or even longer). One reason for

this unpredictability is that collective violence is a dynamic process in which multiple groups are involved. Often, it is the changing relationship between these groups that plays a key role in the eruption of violence. Many different processes play a role in this escalation. When violence does occur, this is often in a context where negative prior expectations about the other party existed beforehand. Negative prior expectations are often based on stereotypes that paint a caricatured and overly negative image of the out-group. But feelings of wrath are also a risk factor: Violence can further be inferred from the nature of the event and the level of legitimation of violence within the groups involved.

During protests all kinds of incidents may occur and misunderstandings can arise over the intentions of other parties involved. Such incidents have the potential to trigger an escalation. In many cases incidents are responded to with restraint: they might be ignored or there might be attempts to restrain those who use violence or who display antinormative behaviour. In some circumstances, however, escalation does occur. What one side may see as a bit of fun, may be perceived as an us/them confrontation, deliberate challenge or insult by the other side.

The violent exchanges between two or more parties sometimes result in prolonged collective conflict. Even though this is rare, it is useful to ask why this sometimes happens. Conflict tends to last longer when levels of collective discontent remain high (or even increase) after an initial episode of violence. Conflict may also carry on because participating in collective action (even if violent) can be an intrinsically rewarding. Collective action may fill participants with a sense of power, a strong sense of community and personal agency. If participants feel that they are setting things right this may fill them with pride. As long as the action remains pleasurable, it may continue. There are also pragmatic reasons why prolonged conflict may occur: there have to be sufficient resources, an adequate level of (self)organisation and often there are authorities who sanction or encourage violence.

Social media enable the rapid mobilisation of large groups via personal networks even in the absence of a formal movement organization. Social media probably also play a role in the formation of collective discontent and in the formation of shared social identity, for example through the circulation of iconic images that frame the protest in such a way that it increases the number of sympathisers. Systematic research of the role played by social media in the escalation of protest and violence is currently rare, however.

PREVENTION AND DE-ESCALATION

We have noted above that the presence of a shared social identity is an important predictor of collective expressions of discontent. But even where such discontents are expressed by collectives gathered in person or online, this does not mean that crowds will behave uniformly on the basis of the sentiments that are expressed: individual members in the crowd tend to remain in full control of their senses and are capable of making autonomous choices even if emotions run high and violence occurs. It is often the process of a dynamic exchange between groups in which the use of violence comes to be seen as legitimate. In this process, government and police actions are party to the escalation of violence, particularly where their actions come to be seen as disproportionately or indiscriminately violent. On the basis of such a dynamic process approach to the escalation of inter-group violence, one can identify several core principles for the prevention and de-escalation of collective violence. These principles have all been applied in practice and have proven their worth.

Successful prevention and de-escalation rests on adequate levels of knowledge and understanding about the groups involved. This should take into account both the relationships within groups and between them. Adequate understanding is important to nuance the stereotypes that may exist of a group among outsiders, and will thus contribute to forming accurate expectations about any inter-group encounters. It is advisable to build knowledge through the development of social relations and ongoing dialogue with representatives of the groups involved. Contacts and dialogue are useful in the process of signalling and preventing collective discontent, but also in the de-escalation of small or budding conflicts. The maintenance of relationships with a particular group should not just focus on (self-assigned) leaders of the community, but on different levels and networks within the group with a special emphasis on strategically placed individuals who have the capacity to negotiate and influence others within their community at the moment that conflicts arise. In the maintenance of contacts and dialogue special attention should be devoted to signalling moral commotion. Moral emotions are, as mentioned, involved in predicting protest and conflict behaviours. It is therefore important to assess how strong these emotions are, how broadly they are shared, and if their expression is seen as legitimate or even normative.

Good communication is essential in situations in which collective emotions flourish. If there appears to be a risk of disturbances, dialogue teams, community officers or trained negotiators can all engage with those who express and experience these emotions at an early stage—typically this will de-escalate tensions. Good communication is also essential when the police or government decide to intervene. It is crucial to avoid misunderstandings about the intentions and desired outcome of police actions, and there is a heightened risk of such misunderstandings in inter-group situations. In such communications it is important to listen and comprehend the others' perspective.

Those who do not feel heard or taken seriously may raise their voice or disengage. Both responses further disturb good relations between groups and thus form a basis for the escalation of conflict further down the line.

A good starting point in policies that aim to prevent conflict from arising is that government and police strive to facilitate the legitimate goals of the people with whom they interact. This creates a situation in which citizens take responsibility for the events that they organise and stimulates cooperative intentions among all involved. Citizens and police can thus become jointly involved in the maintenance of public order. This approach has the added benefit of marginalising group members who are keen to disrupt or disturb gatherings for whatever reason.

In situations in which police do feel it is necessary to intervene, it is essential to do so in a targeted and proportional fashion. If an individual or small group display some kind of undesirable behaviour then an undifferentiated intervention will often meet with incomprehension, anger and resistance of peaceful bystanders. Undifferentiated police action can be a successful way of uniting an heterogeneous mass of people, against the police. During these targeted and proportional interventions it is important to communicate well with organisers, those directly affected by the intervention and with bystanders in order to explain the nature and intentions of the action. If those affected understand the intentions of the action, the chances of resistance or hostile responses are reduced.

The final section of the report is concerned with the question to what extent large-scale disturbances can threaten national security. The answer depends on many things, including the nature of the disturbance. It is certainly the case that certain forms of unrest can undermine and harm national security. In the Netherlands there appears to be a heightened vigilance for disturbances in deprived areas or involving ethnic minorities. Indeed large-scale riots such as those in London (2011) or Paris (2005) are not irrelevant for the Netherlands. But internationally the most prevalent disturbances are of a very different kind. We see many protests in which younger people assert the rights of their generation and many protests against governments accused of corruption. Participants in these protests tend to be middle class and highly educated. In assessing the risk of such disturbances we warn against the idea that large-scale protests and violence would be a thing of the past. Although the exact moment that the Netherlands will experience another wave of intense protesting cannot be predicted, historically such waves have always occurred. We can therefore be certain that another protest wave is coming our way, too. If one wishes to minimise the risk posed by large-scale escalations, the subject of this report will continue to be relevant.