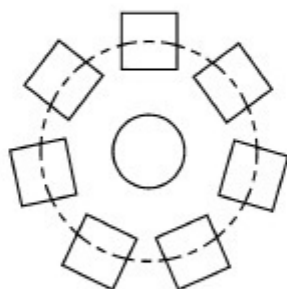


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Papers From the London GASi Symposium 2011

The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 as a Group Process Mohamed Taha

Abstract

The 2011 Egyptian revolution (Revolution of 25 January) took place following a popular uprising that began on 25 January 2011. Millions of protesters from a variety of socio-economic and religious backgrounds demanded the overthrow of the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. On 11 February, following weeks of determined popular protest and pressure, Mubarak resigned from office.

As an Egyptian person who works in the field of group therapy, the author thought that the best scope to view and analyse the Egyptian revolution is the scope of groups.

The article will examine the idea of the revolution and how it came to light, and what the motivation(s) for it were. Then it will analyse the revolutionary processes and dynamics from different perspectives; starting from Gustave Le Bon to Foulkes and Bion. This will be followed by exploring some factors behind the success of the revolution, and a trial to correlate some of the revolutionary phenomena with recent data from neurobiological knowledge. Lastly, it will look at some unique aspects of this revolution.

Introduction

The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 is one of the largest and most comprehensive peaceful revolutions in history. Twenty million people took to the streets in a period of 18 days to oust a 30 year autocratic president and a 60 year entrenched regime. The Egypt revolution was non-ideological, non-partisan, and non-sectarian, and as thus represents a case study in the psychology, process, and dynamics of groups.

It is difficult to comprehend the whole picture of such a revolution, how did it start? Why did silent people decide to speak loudly at this specific time? How could this large a number of people gather? As someone who works in the field of group therapy, I thought that the

best scope to view and analyse the Egyptian revolution is the scope of groups.

To me, any group starts with an idea (let's make a new group) supported by a motivation (both from therapist and patients). Recruitment of group members follows, and then the group process begins. Ongoing group dynamics can then be seen from different perspectives, and the role of therapeutic/success factors is in action all the way through. Additionally, recent neurobiological knowledge has added new dimensions to our understanding of groups.

That is exactly how this article will go. First, it will look at the idea of the revolution and how it came to light, and the motivation(s) for it. Then it will analyse the revolutionary processes and dynamics from different perspectives; starting from Gustave Le Bon to Foulkes and Bion. This will be followed by exploring some factors behind the success of the revolution, and a trial to correlate some of the revolutionary phenomena with recent data from neurobiological knowledge. Lastly, we will look at some unique aspects of this revolution.

It is important to note that this article only refers to the period between 25th January and 11th February 2011 (the 18 days of the core revolution).

I – Idea of the revolution

It may be surprising to realize that the Egyptian revolution of 2011 was not planned to be a revolution in the sense it went on to be. During the few weeks prior to 25th January, some invitations on Facebook were talking about a big protest on the National Police Day. The major demands of the supposed protest were a series of reforms concerning justice, political freedom, economic status, employment plans, etc. One of the wall-writings on Facebook on 24th January was “We need termination of the emergency law, putting in upper and lower salary limits, the resignation of the minister of internal affairs, and a new law for presidential elections”. Another wall-writing said: “We need dignity, freedom and bread.”

However, the idea of a revolution was developed as a consequence of the government's aggressive reaction to the protest in its early phases. The protesters were brutally attacked by the police with tear gas, rubber and even live bullets. The police used indiscriminate force to try to disperse the crowds, whatever it took (thousands killed and injured), but the masses – who mostly have very little to lose, put up an enormous fight, that rapidly stirred up into a revolution.

II – Motivation(s)

One of the big questions of the Egyptian 2011 revolution is: what has motivated Egyptian people to rise up in this specific point in time?

Egyptian people are known to be extremely tolerant. In the past few decades, they could tolerate the worst living conditions ever, without even thinking of making a revolution.

As an Egyptian person, I can tell you that the immediate motivation for the revolution was not poverty, unemployment or usual police brutality, although these were chronic motivating factors which at their utmost have led to some small protests in the past few years.

In my view, the immediate motivation for the revolution was the severe injury to Egyptian people's dignity in the early days of the protest (police aggressive reaction) which has deeply reactivated all the latent wounds in the Egyptian body to reach its threshold. A sub-conscious message was being conducted from people to police: "We have been patient all these years, but if you are going to play like this, then it will be your end".

The role of the Tunisian revolution few weeks earlier could not be denied. It acted like a trigger which has fuelled the hope: "Yes we can".

III – Recruitment (and readiness of Egyptian people to recruit)

How could this extremely large number of people gather so spontaneously and strikingly? Another logical question looking for a logical answer!

In the past few years, Egyptian people have trained themselves to collect, gather and recruit if they find a good-enough motivating factor. The following are some instances of such factors which could make Egyptian people ready to recruit in the past few years, and to reach a maximum (of readiness and recruitment) by the time of the revolution:

- **Large social campaigns organized by popular figures:** These could gather millions of Egyptians and made them ready to be recruited and motivated towards the same goal. One of those figures was Amr Khaled (a modern Islamic activist and television preacher who has recently been chosen as number 13 of the world's most influential people by Time Magazine (2007) and sixth most influential intellectual in the world by Prospect magazine (2008)). Amr has held numerous campaigns in the fields of personal development, addiction

management, accepting others, etc. He had a very wide public base that could be motivated in times of activism.

- **Big national events:** Some recent national events have very much shared in stirring people's readiness for gathering in large numbers around similar goals. Celebrating Egypt's winning of the African Football League (2010) for the third consecutive time was such a major event. On this day, Egyptian people roamed streets in all cities in a wonderful, amazing and yet striking view. People who have never shared in any public event (like myself) found themselves motivated to go out and run like crazy with much happiness and with the highest level of self esteem! In this event, Egyptian flags, posters and face-drawings appeared as a public phenomenon. Flags were being sold in huge numbers for the first time in decades.
- **Social networks:** The growing role of social networks especially Facebook and twitter in Egypt and the world cannot be denied. Several online groups and communities could recruit thousands and millions of Egyptians in the past few years. The largest and most motivating group-in regard to the revolution-was called "We are all Khaled Saeed" after the name of an Egyptian young man who was recently tortured to death by the police. This group had more than one million and a half members just before the revolution.
- **Anti-government movements:** During the last few years, many anti-government movements were formed and could recruit thousands of Egyptian people around their goals. "Enough", "6 April Youth Movement" and "The National Association for Change" were some of the latest movements (the latter was led by Nobel Prize winner for peace: Dr. Mohamed El-Baradei). These movements have played a major role in collecting and motivating people before and during the revolution.

IV – Stages

It seems to me that the stages of the Egyptian 2011 revolution might be correlated successfully with Bruce Tuckman's (1965) model of group development, as follows:

1. Forming: Tuckman assumed that this stage is characterized by getting on or getting along with others. This is a stage of organization; who does what, when to meet, etc. Individuals gather

information and impressions about each other and about the scope of their task and how to approach it. In Egypt, this stage started some weeks before the revolution, where many anti-government movements announced their intention for a big protest on the police national day. They specified the date, the places of gathering, the directions of marching and the list of reforms they ask for (justice, political freedom, economic reforms, employment plans....etc). The government has made every effort to abort this stage (cutting off mobile phones and internet, police aggressive treatment...etc). This stage ended by occupying Tahrir (liberation) square by the protesters on the night of 25th January.

2. Storming: One major feature of this stage, according to Tuckman (1965), is that the group decides what leadership model it will accept. The protesters were formed of many movements, groups, syndicates, professions and social levels. The leadership model that evolved from their subconscious and conscious interactions was to be leaderless, with the minimal help of some voluntary conductors. Protesters were only led by their intuition. In fact, this was a point of power rather than weakness. If there was a specific leader, he might be killed, kidnapped or even jeopardized by the government in the early stages of the revolution, a matter that could abort it so easily. In this stage, the government's reaction was violent. Hence all the storming potential of the protesters was directed outwards (towards government and police) rather than inwards (to compete and develop a leader). This stage ended by marshal intervention after the police had collapsed (the police forces decided to withdraw and evacuate all police stations and prisons around the country in order to spread fear and terror between people, which it was hoped would oblige protesters to stop and get back to protect their families and homes from criminals who were freed and ordered to threaten and even kill people randomly). The army forces when they ruled the streets were very much welcome and completely natural. They promised not to direct a single bullet to any Egyptian person whatever happened.
3. Norming. This is a stage of lying down of the group norms, according to Tuckman (1965). In this stage, Tahrir square turned to be a special community of its own, which had its own norms, rules and values. During the eighteen days of the

revolution, Tahrir community had all essential living requirements. People could eat, drink, pray, sleep, joke, create, read, medicate, entertain, mourn, and even have their hair cut. They could also love and marry (two weddings were held in the square between two couples of protesters). Tuckman (1965) assumes that in this stage, the group manages to have one goal and come to a mutual plan. The ultimate goal in the Egyptian case was the stepping down of the president and the regime. In this stage, Tuckman (1965) also assumes that some members may have to give up their own ideas in order to make the group function and all members take responsibility and have the ambition to work for the success of the goal. This has exactly happened in the Egyptian case, where all religious, ideological, partisan divisions have given up their own agendas and only worked for the success of the revolution's ultimate goal.

4. Performing: Here, the group has a shared vision and is able to stand on its own feet. Group identity, loyalty and morale are all high in this stage, as Tuckman (1965) suggests. Here, identity was Tahrir, loyalty was Egyptian, and morale was Utopian (see below). In this stage-as Tuckman assumes- all energy of the group was directed towards the task in hand and Members worked on a highly efficient and cooperative basis. The most influential tool in this stage was increased Public Pressure.
5. Adjourning: This is the stage of completion of the task of the group. The ex-president has resigned and the army took the responsibility for protecting the transition to a new civilian regime. The first thing done by the army representative was to salute the thousands killed and injured offering their souls for the welfare of their country. This stage, according to Tuckman (1965), is characterized by termination of roles, disengagement and dissolution of group members after they have achieved their goals. It was surprising that revolutionists had cleaned Tahrir square before disengagement. As Tuckman (1965) has noticed, mourning the loss is sometimes felt by former participants in this stage. What has typically happened is that some protesters have refused to leave Tahrir square and had to be forced to move. Individuals were proud of having achieved much, and glad to have been part of such an enjoyable group. And they have recognized what they had done. They had gathered again on the next Friday for celebration.

V- Dynamics:

A – Mainly unconscious dynamics:

1. From the perspective of Gustave Le Bon's (Psychology of revolution, 1913): It seems that the Egyptian revolution didn't follow most of Le Bon's views about the psychology of revolution! First, in his famous book, Le Bon divided revolutions into two types, either scientific or political. It was clear that the Egyptian revolution was neither scientific nor political (although it had transcended both). The millions of Egyptians that turned out in the streets were not political activists and they didn't demand the replacement of a political party by a specific other. They only demanded justice and free choice. Secondly, Gustave Le Bon has also said in his book: "*Revolution is easy when the leaders are very influential...The people will create a revolution because they are persuaded to do so, but they do not understand very much of the ideas of their leaders*" (p. 35). Surprisingly, the Egyptian revolution had no leader at all. Thirdly, in his book too, Le Bon wrote: "*man in the crowd descends to a very low degree in the scale of civilization*" (p. 58). The opposite was entirely true in the case of the Egyptian revolution. Values of politeness, altruism, etiquette, respect, acceptance, containment, and many others were predominant in the crowd's behaviour at the time of the Egyptian revolution. Fourthly, he wrote also: "*The new laws and institutions will depend on the interests of the triumphant party and of the classes which have assisted it...the soldiers, the radicals, or the conservatives...*" (p. 16). This was not true in the Egyptian revolution which has resulted only in activation of the law; the already present inactive law. Persons of the old regime were subjected to ordinary civil courts (not military ones) and justified according to the current Egyptian law. The role of the army was only to protect the transition of the regime through people's own free choice and the activation of justice according to the present laws.
2. From the perspective of Freud's (Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego, 1922): In the Egyptian society, family roles tend to be highly structured and obligations to parents are respected throughout one's life. *Parents* are afforded a great deal of respect that might reach some grade of holiness,

and this respect governs all interpersonal relationships of the individuals. The ex-president was once seen (even unconsciously) as a father who shall be respected, idealized and never devalued. But it seems that it was time for the Egyptians to give up that patriarchal structure *in dealing with their presidents* and move on to a new structure, with them having equal rights. An approximate actualization of Freud's words: "*the scientific myth of the father of the primal horde...he was the ideal of each one of them, at once feared and honoured... These many individuals eventually banded together, killed him and cut him to pieces...They then formed the totemic community of brothers, all with equal rights...*" (p. 135).

3. From the perspective of Kurt Lewin's Field Theory: People come together from Lewin's view if they have:
 1. a. Interdependence of fate (Brown, 1988): Before the revolution, most of the Egyptian people shared the same fate (unemployment, poverty, illiteracy,...) and all of them shared political suppression, police brutality and humiliation of their human rights. In the early stages of the revolution, people felt that they would all share a new fate, which would inevitably be the fate of the group of protesters. This might have helped (among different other factors) in increasing the number of protesters engaging with the revolution. Numbers increased, reaching twenty million in all Egyptian squares! People come together from Lewin's view if they have:
 2. b. Interdependence of task: Where there is interdependence in the goals of group members (Brown, 1988). In the Egyptian case, members had only one task/goal. So, they had all gathered.
4. From the perspective of Bion's group dynamics: The central position in group dynamics, *according to Bion* (1961), is occupied by the more primitive mechanisms which Melanie Klein has described as peculiar to the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. In the early days of the revolution, the predominant mentality within the protesters was the *paranoid-schizoid mentality*. They had to feel persecuted by the police (which was true), they had to be *aggressive* (which was necessary). They had to make *splits* (who is with us, who is against us; which was essential). They had to *fight and flight* (which was

- protective). In this stage, protesters have shown extraordinary heroism. “I will be back with freedom, or die with dignity”, a father of a young child said just before joining the revolution (he died). Alternating with this paranoid-schizoid mentality, and in the following stages of the revolution, some features of the *depressive mentality* have appeared. People have shown much *creativity*, and *integration* (mostly of inner splits). In addition, all the time, people have tried their best to keep the group a *work group*, not a *basic assumption* one (no dependency on any potential leader, no internal fight or flight and no twinship between any members/ subgroups).
5. From the perspective of Foulkes (group analysis): The protesters might be thought of as forming a very (or let’s say extremely) large group which share some principles with group analysis, e.g.,:
 1. *a. Leadership style*: The revolutionary group was directing itself by itself, with very minimal help of some conductors/organizers.
 2. *b. Group matrix*: In Tahrir square, there were many instances supporting the presence of a shared ground of this extremely large group, in which every person/subgroup was a ‘nodal point’. This ground/matrix had the functions of *receiving, containing and transforming* each individual’s contributions in a manner that was both integrating and ultimately *helping*
 3. *c. Communication*: Every event that took place within the Tahrir group’s boundary was meaningful as a communication. Sometimes the communications occurred so rapidly, anonymously and non-verbally, especially in response to government’s efforts to abort the revolution.
 6. From the perspective of Haim Weinberg’s definition of Social unconscious (2005): The social unconscious, as Weinberg (2005) defines it, is the co-constructed shared unconscious of members of a certain social system such as community, society, nation or culture. Its building bricks are made of chosen traumas and chosen glories. It includes shared anxieties, fantasies, defences, myths, and memories. Weinberg’s definition was very clear about the contents of the social unconscious and the repressed material it might contain. However, it, as well as other definitions of the social unconscious, did not provide any

clues on how to process that content and how to work through such material. In Tahrir square, I could see with my own eyes social unconscious traumas and conflicts being worked through, unconscious memories being processed and unconscious myths and glories being relived. Building on that, we can conclude that such revolution might be one way to access, process and work through social unconscious repressed material, maybe to heal them or at least to modify them. But actually, we need to find more clues for that process of accessing and working through social unconscious material, as we don't have a revolution everyday in every society!!

7. Other perspectives: The revolutionary group process and dynamics can be viewed from many other perspectives; of them gestalt group psychology, self psychology, Ego State psychology and Existential psychology. However, there might be more space and time for these correlations in the book being prepared now about the dynamics of the Egyptian revolution.

B – Mainly conscious dynamics (role of collective awareness):

1. Before the revolution: In the past few years, many factors have enriched Egyptian people's *collective awareness* with much knowledge about the crimes that were being made against them by their governing regime on the one hand and about their rights, choices and potentialities on the other hand. Of those factors: media (press, TV...), internet (social networks, blogs...), mobile technology (Twitter, SMS...). This process had cumulative intellectual, emotional and behavioural effects that were stirring up and getting closer to explosion one day after another, until the sudden strike had hit.
2. During the revolution: The collective awareness of Egyptians has taken a big leap in terms of the development of civilization opposite to Le Bon's theory on crowd dynamics. This collective awareness could think, decide and respond wisely to the ex-regimes every effort to weasel its way out of complying to the people's demands.
3. After the revolution: We are all "...concerned with the aspect of capturing the essence of the revolution & restructuring Egyptian society around this new-found collective awareness & mentality, or, in the Egyptian strategic thinker Dr. El Mostafa Higazy's words, "to institutionalize the revolution". To use this

revolutionary essence as the foundation for a strong & effective public front.” (Al Samargy, 2011).

VI – Some factors of success (applying some therapeutic group factors to the revolutionary process):

One patient in one of my colleagues’ groups said: “Tahrir was like a very large therapy group”. Actually, this saying was the trigger behind my idea of looking at the revolution from the perspective of groups. It has also inspired me that most of the factors of success of the Egyptian revolution are in fact therapeutic group factors. Tahrir square was more of an inspiring, healing, creative and integrative place than anyone could ever imagine. Examples of those factors:

- **Cohesiveness:** Feelings of trust, belonging and togetherness that are experienced by the group members (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005). These feelings were felt between protesters themselves, their various entities (e.g., Muslims and Christians) and between people and the army.
- **Contagion:** The process of emotions (and ideas), expressed by somebody, stimulate the awareness of similar emotions (and ideas) in another. In time of the revolution, emotions and ideas were floating between people, not only in Tahrir square, but all over the country. Maybe contagion had a transpersonal dimension here!
- **Universality:** Members recognized that other members share similar feelings, thoughts and problems (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005).
- **Altruism:** Members gained a boost to self concept through extending help to other group members (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005). Some people have chosen to guard the safety of the others, especially in times when police collapsed and criminals were set free.
- **Instillation of hope:** Members developed optimism for their own improvement (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005). In fact, Egyptians had nothing but hope.
- **Imitative behaviour:** Members expanded their personal knowledge and skills through the observation of other group members (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005). In time of the revolution, you could see people doing similar actions all the time, from similar face drawings to similar courage and heroism.

- **Empathy:** The capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person (Kaplan and Sadock, 1983). Protesters have shown much empathy towards injured fellows, old people, tired soldiers, young children and each other.
- **Existential factors:** Members accepted the responsibility for their life decisions (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005) even if they had to face death, which was a very common choice.

VII – Neurobiological understanding (mirror neurons as an example):

Mirror neurons are brain neurons that fire both when we perform an action and when we see someone else doing it. Mirror neurons, are the organic underpinnings of empathy, and perhaps also of familiarity and intimacy (Preston and de Waal, 2002). Mirror neurons have dissolved the dichotomy between self and other (When I observe you, I become you). In the revolution, mirror neurons and interpersonal neurobiology might have had a significant role in explaining some phenomena like contagion, spread of hope, universality, empathy and imitative behaviour. As if mirror neurons were the couriers of ideas, emotions and actions.

VIII – Some aspects of uniqueness.

Every group (therapeutic, educational, teamwork...) has its uniqueness. Having looked at the Egyptian revolution from the scope of group psychology, therapy and neurobiology, it might be suitable here to address – in brief – some aspects of uniqueness of this group/revolution:

- **Initiators:** Unlike most revolutions, the initiators of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 were the high social class citizens.
- **Tools:** For the first time in history, revolutions used the most recent and end-line communication technology as their tools. Tools were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, laptops and mobile phones!! And believe it or not that in the meantime in Egypt, the armed forces, the Egyptian cabinet and the attorney general communicated with people through Facebook (you might wake up in the morning finding a message from the Prime Minister in your Facebook inbox!)
- **Leadership:** Unlike most revolutions, the Egyptian revolution of 2011 had no leader at all (only intuition).

- **Duration:** A relatively very short duration (eighteen days!!).
- **Goals:** Only justice. People of the ex-regime are now in front of their ordinary civil courts.
- **Nature:** Relatively peaceful (from the side of protesters of course!)
- **Places:** Only squares, all over the country. And protesters were forming a big protest every Friday only (the national weekend holiday in Egypt) not to stop any usual day work.
- **On finishing:** Protesters, and for the first time in history, have cleaned the squares, the streets and the surrounding buildings. They have even re-painted the scratched walls.
- **Effect:** Worldwide effect. Different Egypt = Different Middle East = Different World.
- **After-effect:** Similar protests around the world have followed the example of the Egyptian revolution, where protesters have exemplified most of its characters (squares, peaceful terms, face drawings, even Egyptian words). Lybia, Yemen, Syria, UK, Spain, Italy and Israel are some countries to mention.

Finally, I hope that the readers forgive me for my revolutionary narcissism that appeared in every line of this article. But there are few moments in life where you can witness history taking place. What do you think if you find yourself sharing (not only witnessing) in a history making place?! I am really proud to be Egyptian.

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