

Collective action logic of migrant youth groups in public order conflicts: a case study of the 2020 Stuttgart mass incident

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Abstract. This paper applies the elaborated social identity model of crowds (ESIM) to conduct a political sociological analysis of the 2020 Stuttgart youth mass incident. The study argues that this event emerged as collective action following a dynamic psychological process of “social categorization-social identification-social comparison” among youth groups, triggered by the interaction between specific social spaces and external contextual factors. Specific management practices served as the catalyst for triggering the group's perception of marginalization, causing the incident to evolve from an initial emotional reaction into an identity conflict directed at broader social structures. The paper suggests that immigrant identity should not be treated as the sole explanatory variable. The fundamental solution lies in constructing an equitable and inclusive social environment to resolve deep-seated identity crises and structural integration challenges.

Keywords: migrant youth, collective action, public order conflicts, ESIM

1. Introduction

Sociological analyses of youth riots have long taken the characteristics of age groups as the object of study, and although social psychological research into the discussion of a single age-based division reflects the ease of social categorisation, not all individuals fall into easily identifiable social categories. The implicit issue of migrant integration in Germany has deepened the discussion of social fragmentation and polarisation. As the extent of the challenge becomes increasingly apparent, more discussion has shifted from short-term obstacles to a topic that Germans are sensitive and fearful about: identity. Migration policy seems to confirm that terms such as “cosmopolitanism” and “tolerance” have become national mottos, but this one value cannot conceal the deeper crisis about the integration of the migration. Given the complexity of the social situation in Germany, a sociological analysis of youth riots requires an in-depth study of the interaction between the background, gender and ethnicity of youth groups. A study of the sense of identity of young immigrants in a particular social context will help to deepen the understanding of social disorder.

At midnight on 20 June 2020, the most serious riot in central Stuttgart broke out overnight which was described by the Stuttgart Police Chief as “unheard of and shocking” in his 46 years of police work. The riot was an act of violence by a group of young people, triggered by a police drug check. It had young immigrants as the main participants. When it comes to understanding the underlying motivations of the youth group participants, political motivations have been explicitly excluded. In order to understand why the incident happened, this article uses the Elaborate Social Identity Model (ESIM) as a theoretical framework that attempts to explain how social identity influences individual behaviour and intergroup relations while avoiding irrationalism and narrow rationalism [1]. In this article, by considering the motivations and backgrounds of participants, I address the three stages of perception proposed in the model: social categorisation, social identity, and social comparison. The model helps to bring the emotions of the riot into a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of the riot in terms of social identity and helps to better analyse the impact and consequences of the event so that similar events can be more effectively prevented from happening again.

The essay begins with a brief introduction to the Stuttgart youth riots in June 2020, and then examines the causes of its outbreak. I then move on to examine the shifting character of each stage of identity in the riots and the public debate on the identity crisis in response to the riots. Lastly, I consider the social implications of social instability in the context of identity crises, including the criminal and public policy reflections of the state, in order to draw out perceptions and insights to avoid such events in the future.

2. Introduction to the Stuttgart riots of June 2020

At midnight on 20 June 2020, the city center in Stuttgart experienced a night of “unprecedented” youth unrest. The riot was sparked by police officers conducting a drug check on a 17-year-old German young man suspected of taking drugs. According to the German Ministry of the Interior, an estimated group of 500 people, 85% of whom had a “safe migration background”, were involved in the police attack. Most of them were teenagers or young adults. There are 25 people arrested who were between 14 and 33 years old, 12 of whom had German nationality, and three of them had migrant backgrounds. The remaining 13 were all citizens from Bosnia, Portugal, Iran, Iraq, Croatia, Somalia and Afghanistan.

At around 23:30 on 20 June, in the city's main square, Schlossplatz, the police began a drug check on a 17-year-old German man. Everything escalated after the teenager was searched for drugs, and he tried to run away from police, who chased him. This event then drew a crowd of around 300 party-goers from the nearby area of the main square. They immediately gathered around the young man, intervened “out of solidarity” with the peers and started attacking the police with stones and bottles. These crowds were mainly male youths. At that night, the police mobilized a total of 280 officers to the scene of the incident to maintain the public order, and clashes broke out in front of the Stuttgart State Opera House.

At the peak of the conflict, around 400 to 500 people joined in the fighting with police and emergency workers. According to press reports, some of the young rioters took part in the mass riots when they screamed “Allahu Akbar” (a popular phrase considered to be terrorist in the context of the riots), which fuelled the intense atmosphere of the emotion of hatred. As the police fought back against the crowd, the young rioters broke into small groups and rampaged around the city centre, breaking windows and looting shops along the nearby Königstraße, which is a major shopping street. A smaller clash broke out in the city centre between the police and a group of young men, and the police officers added a team of 100 to help maintain the social order. But the scale of the violence was so overwhelming and even worse than expected that the officers were forced to call in reinforcements from other parts of the state. In the end, it took four and a half hours until 4:30 am for police to stop the violence and bring the situation under control. Nineteen officers were injured in the violence on that night. There were no reported injuries to those who were arrested.

Such riots have immediately provoked intense public and academic debate about the essence of the events and their broader social significance. Some politicians and social members condemned this event as an attack on liberal democracy, while some people characterised the events as an uprising of young people of colour against systemic racism.

3. Causes of the unrest

After the dramatic night of violence against the police, Germany sought to find the “root cause of anger” of the violence. The riot erupted in an unpredictable way in a short space of time, as a perfect storm turned a normal night into a powder keg. The “anger” of the large crowd of young people gathered at the party in the square boiled over during the police drug checks. From the emotional origins of the event to the escalation and intensity of the riots that followed the emotional ferment, it is difficult to explain this riot by irrationality. A more in-depth and objective analysis of the rational factors behind the emotional actions is needed. It is also necessary for this analysis to accept the possibility of multiple factors interacting.

It is unprecedented to imagine the scope, intensity and social impact of such a chaotic vandalism in a commercially prosperous central Stuttgart quarter, which is characterised by its practicality and efficiency. Scholars have studied the event from a variety of perspectives, and the studies all reflect the relationship between the riot and youth identity anxiety. Debates from both social and academic perspectives firstly include the quality of treatment received by the public in their interactions with the police. Previous research has argued that unfair, disrespectful and unequal treatment leads to a more negative perception of police legitimacy [2,3]. According to Spiegel, “In the pandemic crisis, young people were to a large extent forgotten.” Both the lockdown during the pandemic and economic instability caused emotional depressive symptoms and post-traumatic stress among youth. As most bars and clubs were closed down during the pandemic, many young people moved their parties outside. Social tensions exacerbated the emotional vulnerability of youth. For less wealthy adolescents of the colour, the only affordable option was to gather in urban public spaces where they were often targeted by the police [4]. Meanwhile, tensions became particularly acute in the light of the protests against police brutality triggered by the killing of George Floyd in the United States in May of the same year.

In reality, the migrant background facing the city of Stuttgart was also fully evident in this riot. The violence has revealed long-brewed tensions among Stuttgart's large migrant communities. The city's proportion of immigrants far exceeds the national average level in Germany as a whole, with 45% of Stuttgart's citizens having a migration background. Due to economic inequalities and experiences of racism, their frustration of being marginalised should be taken seriously [5]. While young people are more likely to be discriminated, a wide range of nationalities and legal statuses indicate that their experiences are far from being homogenous. Many comments on Twitter have questioned and responded to immigration policies. “Years of de-emphasised left-wing extremism, uncontrolled migration and lack of integration are yielding results. The media is often reluctant to describe the perpetrators.” AFD, Germany's right-wing party, said the city's large migrant population was leading to growing

tensions. Yussef, a 19-year-old man who witnessed the riots, explained that many of the young people involved in the conflict, especially those of colour, felt they were often seen as suspects by the police. This anxiety turned into group anger when it was fuelled and incited. Drury & Reicher (2009) called it “collective self-objectification” [6]. Their perception of having the ability to formulate their own identity caused a process of merging their own identity with that of the group and enhanced the individual's sense of self and identity in these collective actions.

Furthermore, the lack of a clear political claim makes it difficult to describe the youth riots in Stuttgart as controversial politics and to explain their causes from a political perspective. However, from the perspective of youth identity, it is possible to understand youth violence as part of a social and cultural youth phenomenon. The sudden character of youth riots can be seen from a historical perspective. This is evident from the “beatnik riots” that broke out in Germany in the 1950s, when young white men across Germany repeatedly clashed with the police for no apparent reason [7]. What brought different categories of German youth together at that time to form a collective consciousness and action was their gender and level of identification with the group, as well as their relatively low social status [8]. Similarly, the youth riots in Stuttgart were rooted in the self's concerns about social recognition and access to social rights, as the complex social environment during the pandemic and sudden intervention from the police all lead to the intensification of identity anxiety.

4. Dynamics of unrest within the framework of social identity

4.1. Three stages of changes

Since the main driver of the youth unrest that erupted in Stuttgart was intergroup relations, the ESIM can be used to explain normative change during the riots. The seemingly unmotivated, irrational and destructive collective consciousness in the Stuttgart riots actually reflects a more complex psychology of crowd behaviour in terms of intergroup relations. As shown in Figure 1, Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggest that the assessment of others as “we” or “they” (i.e. “in-group” and “out-group”) involves three psychological processes [9]. As shown in Figure 1, these proceed in a specific order (social categorisation, social identification and social comparison).



Figure 1. The three psychological processes of the social identity theory

The perception of group values in the social categorisation of group identity theory first became a key force in mobilising people for social change and collective action. The analysis of social categorisation applies to the dynamics in the interval between the outbreak of unrest and the initial escalation. One of the main reasons for the participation of the riot demonstrators in Stuttgart in the protest actions was the discrimination and exclusion they felt from the police and society, which was related to their social identity. From the factual findings, the majority of the demonstrators among the suspects on the night of the riots in Stuttgart were young people, and 85% of the rioters had a “safe migrant background”.

Before the riots took place in Stuttgart on 20 June 2020, the conditions were already in place for the formation of a public political space on that square. As a result of the epidemic, young people moved their parties outside to the square, which became a gathering place for a youthful crowd of a certain size. Within this gathering space, the young people began to form the identity of the youth group, including immigrants, and this has formed the basis for a clear social classification of identity. At this moment, all those present construct the basis of identity for the social conflict that was to follow.

Around 23:30, the foundation of social categorisation of the crowd present quickly shifts into a perception of social identity. From the moment of the police drug check, the other young people gathered at the party formed a first sense of group risk, which was quickly transformed into a group consciousness. Supported by the space of the gathering place, the young people perceive themselves as “oppressed young people” who are treated unjustly by the government and the police. This identity is triggered and further reinforced when they are subjected to coercive police checks. Social categorisation theory states that when category distinctions are evident, it activates different levels of individual self-concept and allows individuals to perceptually reinforce in-group similarities (“we are all alike”) [10]. Some scholars see “youth” as a special social category characterised by certain psychological behavioural patterns such as “aggressive tendencies”, “opposition tendencies” and “risk-taking impulses” [11]. Based on the value identification with the individual's social classification, the young individuals more readily consider that he belongs to a specific social group and also recognise the emotional and value significance that being a member of a group brings to him [9]. Thus, the intervention of the Stuttgart police created the conditions for the “reactive riots” of the youth riots. The empowerment of the youth rioters to act in reprisal to the ‘drug’ check operation clearly allowed them to address the most immediate proximal issues. They reaffirm group values through emotional response and collective action.

As time passed, such protests began to become more radicalised and violent, with some rioters starting to destroy public facilities, throw stones and burn cars. The escalating riots that occurred at this point were no longer simply emotional reactions,

but a shift from a sense of group identity to a specific identity conflict. The ESIM model theory of changing goals and empowerment examines how identity enables new collective action against out-groups [12]. Around midnight, a group of young men from Oberer Schlossgarten walked through the city centre, smashing shop windows and robbing shops in the Schlossplatz, Königstraße, the main shopping street and Marienstraße. These behaviours show how identity has been transformed into a specific identity conflict, where the rioters targeted their confrontation not only at the police and the government, but also at society as a whole. Dr Alice Weidel, federal spokesperson for the Alternative for Germany party, pointed that excessive violence was brought about by the unsupervised mass migration. There were rioters trying to stir up racist anger. In a video fragment of the riot, the mob smashes up the shop front and chants “Allahu Akbar”, “A.C.A.B”. (“All the police are bastards”). Some of the offenders covered their heads with balaclavas or other clothing. “A dangerous attitude is spreading among young immigrants: there is nothing you can do to ban us! According to researcher Andreas Zick, the Stuttgart rioters came together spontaneously in the sense of “we are against the police” [13]. The psychology of social comparison made the rioters see themselves as victims and regard the police as the enemy, and the authorities were no longer accepted as enforcers of rules. The young Muslims involved in the riots did not see the public space as their own, but as belonging to the hostile territory of the infidels. The relevant rules of public order therefore had no meaning for them and the police did not deserve any respect.

The complexity of this youth riot lies in the migrant background of the young rioters, with two thirds of the detainees having a migration or foreign citizen background, which has sparked a debate on how migrants and foreigners can truly integrate into the society in Germany. The fear of a parallel society (Parallelgesellschaft) in Germany as a result of migration is reflected in the reality of public order and security disorder. It is quite certain that the psychological defenses and sense of solidarity of the young migrant community are an important factor in the emergence of the riots. Previous surveys have shown that second generation migrants in Germany feel a sense of racial passivity and discrimination of group identity, which instead provides them with a positive collective identity [14]. From a contextual perspective, approximately 60% of children under the age of 18 in Stuttgart are people of colour [15]. Therefore, the presence of young people during the event may partly be a reflection of Stuttgart's diversity [8]. The riots gave the German society an opportunity to discuss the important social issue of how integration works in Germany as a migration society. However, the drawback of the analysis of social identity is that it is overly focused on the group's sense of social identity and sense of belonging to ignore the differences and complexities of individuals, as large amounts of statistics indicate that the young migrants have a wide range of nationalities background and legal statuses, which means that their experiences are far from homogeneous. Thus, a singular emphasis on one explanatory variable may obscure other social factors that may trigger the violence [8].

Furthermore, the concerns of the psychological analysis of riots cannot be an argument for the political context of these events. When the diversity of the perpetrators' ethnic origins is used from a multicultural perspective, it can be concluded that migrant identity itself should not be used as a political explanation for the riots. Multiculturalism is a concept, a descriptive category and a political practice [16]. When it is used excessively to explain the riots, it may create tools for new forms of exclusion and inequality, which can instead exacerbate the tensions between young migrants and the native population and lead to misunderstandings, prejudice and discrimination. The definition of the riots in the centre of Stuttgart as a global movement for racial justice will fall into the narrow issue of racist discrimination. Although some journalists interpreted the events as acts of political resistance, in which violence was the dominant discourse of subversive behaviour, it cannot be fully interpreted as a right explanation for the general perception of the migrant integration in Germany. Germany's Migrant Integration Climate Index, which was derived from a nationwide survey of 15,005 people who assessed immigration and integration in the country, has risen to its highest level since it began in 2015. And the survey found that more than 90 percent of citizens rated their personal contact with people of different origins as very positive. The perception that young people of colour are against systemic racism should not be used to characterise the riot.

Although the short-lived youth riot in Stuttgart can hardly be designated as a “controversial political action” that does not result in an organised political claim, it is important to realise that the riot cannot be dismissed as an “irrational” act and ignored as it happens. This does not mean that one must take the position that it must be completely deprived of its political significance and be regarded as irrational and absurd. On the contrary, the spatial consciousness of the youth groups reflected in the Stuttgart riots deserves attention. The young rioters may not be intentionally expressing the political demands against the government, but they are showing the position for socio-spatial “rights” in a way of collective action.

4.2. Criminal and public policy responses of the state

Among the debates on the explanatory factors of the structural dimension of the June 2020 Stuttgart riots, the debate on the crisis of social identity caused by the “sociological categorization” of rioters in the legal process is perhaps the most worrying. The violent riots in Stuttgart inspired the police to carry out racial profiling and background checks on the structuring of migration status. Franz Lutz, the Chief of the Stuttgart police, reported that the motives for the riots were investigated and that the police, with the help of regional offices across Germany, also obtained information from suspects with German passports about their origins. This has been debated by many German academics and critics. A left-wing German city councilor in Stuttgart was

critical of the investigation into the background of the identity of the rioters, seeing the police statement as an openly conflicting world view (*die Weltanschauung*) with the values of Stuttgart life.

Franz Lutz, the Chief of the Stuttgart police wanted the investigation into the incident not to be interpreted as an attempt to “sociologically categorise” the suspects, because the investigation into the background of the young migrants is in line with the German legal basis. Section 43 of the German Juvenile Court Act, which applies as an independent and specific law to German adolescents and young people, is applicable to the scope of the police investigation. It states that “Once proceedings have been initiated, investigations should be conducted as soon as possible into the accused’s life and family background, his development, his previous conduct and all other circumstances apt to assist in assessing his psychological, emotional and character make-up.” According to this section, “life and family background” as well as the defendant’s previous behavior and all circumstances can be used to assess his or her psychological, mental and character characteristics. This also includes the migrant background. Police headquarters spokesman Jens Lauer defended their actions by citing public concern over the riots and arguing that the basic collection of personal data is measured by the seriousness of the crime. Criminal investigations into the police can have an impact on social identity, particularly in relation to the collection and use of personal data. If the police abuse their powers or carry out excessive surveillance of certain communities, this may cause distrust of the police and fear and rejection of certain communities, further exacerbating problems of social identity.

In fact, Germany has yet to confront its own police racism. Germany lacks a systematic collection of racial profiling cases and clearly defined jurisdictions and compliant structures. The lack of a systematic collection of racial profiling cases means that the German government does not have enough data to know the true extent of racial discrimination. “Genealogical research” (*die Stammbaumforschung*) is seen as being based on the police having a special or isolated interest in immigrant backgrounds. And this can leave people who are discriminated against feeling isolated and helpless, which in turn exacerbates their identity crisis. The immediate resistance to police supervision by young people in Stuttgart has already demonstrated the negative impact and the underlying pressure that surveillance and prohibition as a form of maintaining security and freedom in public space can have on young people’s sense of self-identity and self-worth. These realities make it impossible to stop discussing incidents related to racial profiling.

4.3. Policy recommendations for social cohesion

In a statistical sense, the vandalism in Stuttgart is not part of a larger trend. Youth crime has been declining since the mid-2000s and has remained relatively stable since 2015 [17]. It is simply not of the scale we are witnessing around the world. However, in response to the status quo of identity conflicts inherent in the riot response in Stuttgart and the remaining police racism, the aim of politicians, journalists and social scientists in response to the disorder should then be aimed at creating a more equal society [8]. The youth riots in Stuttgart confirm the emergence of politics in the public space of the street. State surveillance and prohibition, if they cannot on their own eliminate multiple forms of oppression, policy implementation and change will only undermine the foundations of equality and exacerbate social tensions and mistrust, rather than reduce violence and crime. The democratic state’s monopoly on the use of force can only be respected by all in the long term if prevention and integration are not merely instruments of state control. As the German philosopher Hannah Arendt said, for cities to remain public spaces, it is necessary to ensure that eventually “freedom can emerge” without the use of violence and coercion.

Moreover, to avoid the risk of the same kind of riots in the future, it is crucial not only to anticipate migration management issues in order to prevent the transformation of the sense of identity of specific vulnerable social groups into concrete identity conflicts, but also to take care to reduce the multiple forms of oppression in the management of sociological analysis itself and to reduce the ideological identity crisis brought about by social tensions.

The sources used in this article include independent reports from Stuttgart, Germany, academic publications on the study of the riots, as well as written and video reports from local and national media. In order to achieve scientific accuracy and avoid bias, the sources used in this article are based on objective data and direct quotations from witness testimonies, witness opinions and commentary. The specific sources of information are divided into three main categories: Firstly, the article uses cross-references to media news, police and witness testimonies, as well as online videos and numerous photographic sources to identify and accurately describe the location, time and events. Secondly, additional temporal and spatial evidence was provided through the collection of Twitter messages, and real-time reports created during and after the unrest. These sources were cross-referenced with comprehensive data provided by the Stuttgart City Police on the location, time and type of crime investigated in relation to the occurrence of the riots in Stuttgart. Most of the participants’ testimonies came from large newspapers. Thirdly, the information also includes other second-hand witness testimonies that can be found in official reports, newspapers and academic literature, including those of police officers. A full list of sources is provided in the supporting information.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of identity theory in the case of the Stuttgart riots in Germany revealed that the analysis of interactive factors such as age, race, gender and environment play an important role in understanding the psychology of rioters' participation in group behaviour. By applying the identity theory model of social categorisation, social identification and social comparison to the dynamics of the Stuttgart riots between the outbreak and the escalation of the riots, this paper reveals the psychological vulnerability and strong sense of social solidarity of the young migrant community in Germany. The youth group is based on a socially categorised value identity of the individual, where the young individual more easily perceives himself as belonging to a specific social group and also recognises the emotional and value significance that being a member of a group brings to him. The migrant youth in the group are more likely to have "aggressive tendencies", "opposition tendencies" and "risk-taking impulses". The phenomenon of the Stuttgart riots deserves attention in terms of the spatial awareness of the social identity of the youth group, which expresses the demand for "rights" in social space. The state's specific investigation into the migrant backgrounds of the young people involved in the riots may have contributed to the isolation and helplessness of those discriminated against, thus exacerbating their identity crisis.

Research on the identity of young immigrant groups cannot deepen the debate on systemic racism in Germany. Group identity vulnerability cannot represent a homogenization of individual experiences. Group behavior therefore does not imply the adoption of politically meaningful positions. On the contrary, although the youth riot in Stuttgart is not on the scale as imagined, it reveals the inherent status quo of identity conflict and the remaining police racism as an indication of the danger of fostering social identity antagonism. "Create, don't destroy" was the sign used to cover up the broken glass in the many shops that were damaged after the riots in Stuttgart. This demonstrates the power of promoting social identity in a positive way while stabilizing youth and migrant sentiment in the aftermath of the riots. Germany aims to create a more egalitarian society by strengthening migration management while also maintaining equitable public space within the city and laying the foundations for a more constructive public discussion on racial justice. It is only on this basis that the control of prevention and integration and the use of force in a democratic state can be respected by all people in the long term.

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