



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## **Cold comfort at the Magh Mela: Social identity processes and physical hardship**

Pandey, K., Stevenson, C., Shankar, S., Hopkins, N. P., & Reicher, S. D. (2014). Cold comfort at the Magh Mela: Social identity processes and physical hardship. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 53(4), 675-690. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12054>

**Published in:**  
British Journal of Social Psychology

**Document Version:**  
Peer reviewed version

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

### **Publisher rights**

© 2013 The British Psychological Society

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Pandey, K, Stevenson, C, Shankar, S, Hopkins, NP & Reicher, SD 2014, 'Cold comfort at the Magh Mela: Social identity processes and physical hardship' *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol 53, no. 4, pp. 675-690, which has been published in final form at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjso.12054/abstract>.

### **General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

Running head: **Social identity processes and physical hardship**

**Cold Comfort at the Magh Mela: Social identity processes and physical hardship**

Pandey, K.<sup>1</sup>, Stevenson, C.<sup>2</sup>, Shankar, S.<sup>1</sup>, Hopkins, N.P. and Reicher, S.D.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre of Behavioural and Cognitive Sciences, University of Allahabad, India

<sup>2</sup> School of Psychology, Queen's University Belfast, UK

<sup>3</sup> School of Psychology, University of Dundee, UK

<sup>4</sup> School of Psychology, University of St. Andrews, UK

\*Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr Clifford Stevenson, School of Psychology, Queen's University Belfast, UK (e-mail: clifford.stevenson@qub.ac.uk).

**Cold Comfort at the Magh Mela: Social identity processes and physical hardship**

**Abstract**

Humans inhabit environments that are both social and physical, and in this paper we investigate if and how social identity processes shape the experience and negotiation of physically-demanding environmental conditions. Specifically we consider how severe cold can be interpreted and experienced in relation to group member's social identity. Our data comprise ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews with pilgrims attending a month-long winter Hindu religious festival that is characterised by near-freezing conditions. The analysis explores (a) how pilgrims appraise the cold and how these appraisals are shaped by their identity as pilgrims; (b) how shared identity with other pilgrims led to forms of mutual support that made it easier to cope with the cold. Our findings therefore extend theorising on social identity processes to highlight their relevance to physical as well as social conditions.

**Keywords** social identity; appraisal; social influence; hardship; pilgrimage

### **Cold Comfort at the Magh Mela: Social identity processes and physical hardship**

A century ago, Mark Twain described encountering pilgrims travelling to the Magh Mela – an annual month-long Hindu fair held in January and February by the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers at Allahabad (north India). He wrote: “It is wonderful that the power of faith like that can make multitudes of the old and weak and the young and frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys and endure the resultant miseries without repining” (Twain 1897: 497).

We share Twain’s wonder. The pilgrims who live on the banks of the Ganges live in basic tented encampments. Yet, every day they bathe in the Ganges before dawn – the coldest time of the day at the coldest time of the year. Moreover, these pilgrims (known as kalpwasis), many of whom are elderly, seem to relish their experience and report improved well-being as a function of participation (Tewari, Khan, Hopkins, Srinivasan & Reicher, 2012).

How can this be? It has long been understood that hardship is an element of many collective events (van Gennep, 1909/1977) and indeed that a central aspect of pilgrimage in particular is displaying one’s devotion by overcoming physical discomfort (Nordin, 2011; Peters, 1995). But we understand less about how people experience such hardships and how they cope with them. Can we learn from social psychology in addressing these issues. Conversely, can social psychology learn from addressing such issues?

Our answer is based on social identity processes and, in both cases, is in the affirmative. On the one hand we consider how social identities give meaning to the experience of demanding conditions and how group membership provides resources

that equip us to deal with these. On the other hand we use this analysis to stress how social identity is of relevance not simply to group and social phenomena but rather, when salient, it constitutes a prism through which all of our experiences are filtered.

*Social identity and the appraisal process*

The social identity tradition can be described at a number of levels. Most immediately, it provides an account of a range of intergroup and intragroup phenomena such as discrimination, conflict, social influence and stereotyping (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). More generally, though, it seeks to explain how self-processes structure the human mind. Our identities, particularly our group based social identities, provide a perspective from which we view the world, make sense of events and evaluate the significance of events. Whether an event impacts on the group determines whether it is judged relevant or irrelevant; group values are the measuring stick against which we evaluate if something is serious or trivial, good or bad; group interest is a basis for deciding if something is good or not. In sum social identities are bases for appraisal (Reicher, Spears & Haslam, 2010).

One of the advantages of introducing the notion of appraisal is that it alerts us to a key distinction between primary and secondary appraisal processes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Primary appraisal refers to our evaluation of a phenomenon in itself. How good or bad, serious or trivial is it? Secondary appraisal refers to our evaluation of ourselves in relation to the phenomenon. Do we have the capacities to deal with it effectively or not?

This distinction helps us address the different ways in which social identity processes may be related to our evaluation and response to events in the world.

Research thus far has largely concentrated on our responses to the social environment. Thus, as concerns primary appraisal, Kellezi, Reicher & Cassidy (2009) have shown that extreme events which affirm social identity (such as fighting and being injured in a conflict for national liberation) are judged less negatively than extreme events which undermine social identity (such as fleeing and being injured in such a conflict).

With regards to secondary appraisals, there is, by now, a range of research which shows that seeing oneself as part of a social group increases one's sense of being able to deal with difficult social circumstances (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Reicher & Haslam, 2010). For example, Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal & Penna (2005) found that those doing challenging jobs were less stressed if they identified highly with their work group. Moreover, this effect of identification was shown to be because their shared social identity encouraged an expectation of support from others.

Intriguingly, however, there is now beginning to accumulate a body of work which suggests that these different appraisal processes may apply to our experience of physical as well as social conditions. Thus, in terms of primary appraisals, Levine and Reicher (1996) examined how female physical education (PE) students evaluated the significance of various health symptoms as a function of which of their various identities was made salient. When gender was stressed, conditions affecting appearance (e.g. facial scarring) were rated more seriously. When PE identity was stressed, conditions affecting sporting activity (e.g. vulnerability to physical impact)

were rated more seriously. Thus, it seems social identity affects how debilitating physical ailments are seen to be.

Moving on to secondary appraisal, Jones and Jetten (2011) report that participants with more group memberships evinced faster heart-rate recovery after bobsleigh or luge activity (Study 1). They also report that the psychological salience of more group memberships led to greater endurance on a cold-pressor task (Study 2). Other research looks more closely at precisely how group memberships impact endurance. Platow et al., (2007) had people put their hands in icy water after being reassured, either by an ingroup or an outgroup member who, allegedly, had just undergone the experience, that the experience would be tolerable. Following reassurance about the pain involved, participants exhibited lower physiological arousal when that reassurance came from a fellow ingroup member than when it came from an outgroup member (or a no reassurance control).

In sum, there is sufficient work to make a prima facie case that social identity processes may, in various ways, be relevant to the way we experience the harsh conditions which Mark Twain described. However this is very different from having actually shown that such processes are an important element in the field, that they account for the way people experience the sustained physical hardship of real world events, that the distinction between primary and secondary processes is of use and that both types of process are simultaneously involved. That is the gap that we hope to fill through this paper.

#### *Kalpvasi identity and sensory experience*

The pilgrims who commit to adopting the kalpvasi identity commit to undertake a number of religious rituals. They must live on the banks of the Ganges

for a month, eat a simple diet, and perform a number of religious rituals so as to develop their spiritual being. This commitment is hinted at in the name 'kalpwasi' which is made up of two words, *kalpa*, denoting transformation of the self through inner resolve and *vas*, denoting the living out of this resolve. The kalpwasis are easily distinguishable (e.g., by their routines and the areas they occupy at the Mela site) and differentiate themselves from non-kalpwasis attending the event. Not surprisingly, then, there is a basis for a strong shared identity with kalpwasis seeing each other as part of a single group (Prayag Magh Mela Research Group, 2007).

The kalpwasis' daily routines – especially the requirement to bathe twice daily in the Ganges (once before dawn) – are made all the more arduous because of the cold weather that characterises north India in January. Although day-time temperatures become increasingly comfortable throughout the Mela, night-time temperatures often remain close to freezing. During the years of our research the night-time temperatures (as recorded in the local Hindi language paper *Dianik Jagrai*) rarely exceeded 10°C (50°F) and dipped to lows of 3°C (37°F) in 2010 and 2°C (36°F) in 2011.

At first sight, identity might appear irrelevant to the experience of such cold. Surely cold is cold. It is unpleasant for anyone regardless of their social identity, and everyone would wish to avoid it. However, historical and anthropological research suggests that pilgrimages in general, and north Indian Hindu pilgrimages in particular, often entail transcending physical and embodied reality in order to, and indeed as a token of, immersing oneself in the spiritual world (Hammoudi, 2006; Nordin, 2011; Peters, 1995). As Preston (1992) argues, for some, pilgrimage without hardship would be considered as more akin to tourism. Such research points to the

importance of identity related meanings in explaining people's apparent equanimity in the face of such hardships. However, it is unclear whether people simply blot out the cold or heat or other difficulty and fail to experience it, or whether they do indeed suffer but are more willing and able to carry on regardless.

It is here that social psychological theorising on identity and appraisal processes can make a unique contribution. Accordingly, we investigate (a) how the values associated with pilgrims' kalpwasi identity impact upon their evaluation of the cold (primary appraisal processes), and (b) the ways in which a sense of shared social identity with other kalpwasis impacts upon participants' ability to endure cold conditions (secondary appraisal process). In order to address these questions we employed two complementary research methods with kalpwasis attending the Mela: interviews and ethnographic observation.

### Method

*Interviews.* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 37 kalpwasis attending the 2010 Magh Mela. Interviewees were strategically sampled from the broader population of kalpwasis so as to span the diversity of age, gender and caste. The resultant sample contained 24 men and 13 women with an age range of 40-83 years ( $M = 63.5$ ). 24 were 'Brahmin' or priestly caste (high caste), 5 'Kshatriya' or warrior caste (high caste) and 8 'other backward caste' (low caste). Their education status varied from uneducated to Ph.D.

The interviews required entry to different kalpwasi camps. Once access was established, either through a gatekeeper (typically the religious leader of the camp), the interviewers explained the purpose of the research and assured participants of their anonymity. Sometimes it was difficult to exclude the participation of the other

kalpwasis. In these cases, the primary respondent's details were taken and the questions addressed primarily to them. Given local cultural norms, females were typically interviewed by a female interviewer and males by a male interviewer (except where multiple participants afforded a mixed gender exchange). The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Hindi or local dialects by two social psychologists. Questions covered kalpwasis' experience of, and practices in, the Mela. Interviews lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. All were recorded, transcribed and translated in English by the interviewer and the rechecked by the second interviewer.

*Ethnographic observation.* Over the following year, the interviewers, one male (SS) and one female (KP), identified and contacted several potential participants who would be attending the 2011 Mela. Participants were selected as being most characteristic of the demographic profile of the Mela, being older, rural Brahmins with a long history of attending the event. V was a 75 year old housewife, who lived with her 80 year old farmer husband in a small village 80 miles from Allahabad. P was a 64 year old male graduate who worked as a senior clerk but had retired to live with his wife as a farmer/landlord on the outskirts of another small rural village in the district around Allahabad. Both agreed to have the ethnographers stay with them for periods shortly before (week-long visits in November/December 2010), during (for the full month at the Mela in January/February 2011) and shortly after (week-long visits in February/March 2011) the 2011 Mela. This resulted in a combined total of 115 days of field notes.

The ethnographic approach followed that of Hammersley and Atkinson (2005). The ethnographers did not conceal their motives or attempt to 'pass' as

kalpwasis. Their main data came from observing their nominated participants rather than their own experiences. However, the researchers each took on the roles and obligations of fully-fledged camp members and were treated by others as such. Notes of events at the Mela were taken at the time of their occurrence or as soon as possible thereafter. Elaboration of shorthand, remaining translation and collation of extra information were completed in the two weeks following the final data collection.

*Analysis.* The ethnographic observation provides data on daily routines and how the cold featured in daily life. These data do not allow claims about the ‘typical’ kalpwasi experience (for which quantitative data would be appropriate). However, these data do allow insight into the various ways in which the cold featured in P’s and V’s experiences of the Mela. In a similar manner, the interviews with the larger sample of 37 kalpwasis do not allow claims about the ‘typical’ kalpwasi experience but instead allow insight into the diverse ways in which our interviewees made sense of the cold. Accordingly, we use these two forms of data to examine the different ways in which the cold impacted upon our respondents and the diverse ways in which they evaluated the cold.

Our analysis combines evidence from the interviews (coded as ‘Int’ followed by participant details) and the ethnography (coded as ‘Eth’ followed by details of whether P or V was the principal participant). It is organised around the ways social identity was found to impact on primary and secondary appraisals of cold.

## Analysis

### *Primary appraisals of the cold*

#### Concerns about cold

The harsh conditions at the Mela were a topic that a number of participants raised spontaneously. For example, one grandmother reported that her grandchild feared for her very survival in the extreme cold: (P25: 60 year old female, higher caste):

Extract 1 (Int - P25, 60yrs, Female, Higher Caste)

P25: They ask... 'How did it go? It was so cold. At home it was so chilly, how must it have been there?'

I: Yes.

P25: My grandson,

I: Yes.

P25: 'Oh, grandma! You live in this cloth tent, you will die'!

Such concerns were not limited to close family. Another participant described how: "people from the village would come to meet us. They would ask: 'brother, how did you live?' This year it was very cold, how was it, tell us." (P11: 72 yrs, male, higher caste). In other words these participants do not only indicate a concern with the conditions themselves, they assume them to be a topic of shared collective concern. What is more, as the ethnographic evidence indicates, P11's claims were corroborated by our own observations of what happened when kalpwasis returned to their villages:

Extract 2 (Eth - P. 20th Feb 2011)

Villager 1: How was the Mela?

P: Good

Villager 2: Well, you have done a great deed, living in such harsh conditions and fulfilling the pledge for kalpwas! It is great!  
(Others agree saying 'yes!').

The ethnographic evidence also shows that a concern with hardship (and cold in particular) was expressed in actions as well as words. V regularly confided her apprehensions about how her health would be affected by the conditions, and, early on in the Mela, the cold was a regular topic of conversation for her and also for P. In line with this, both P and V made sure that they had appropriate clothes and blankets. Additionally, P performed dedicated exercises each day throughout the month in order to stop his joints seizing up in the cold. By contrast, V fell ill early on and was largely confined to her bed. This, she attributed to bathing in the chilly Ganges.

In sum, we have widespread evidence, certainly from our ethnographic study, that the cold at the Mela was an issue for kalpwasis. But, as the contrasting stories of P and V indicate, this is not to say that everyone experienced the cold in the same way. There was considerable variation. P15, for instance, explained that 'people are saying that it is so cold, but it is this cold that we like here'. She continued:

Extract 3 (Int - P15, 60 years, female, lower caste)

If the heat starts, like see there is this sun coming, then it will be difficult to stay here. Though in the cold, we are walking slowly, covering ourselves, shivering. But that gives us relief, and if it becomes hot here, there is strange kind of uneasiness – "let's run to our home".

However, others reported that the cold did indeed impact upon them, and complained that it limited their ability to participate fully in the Mela. For example, when one (Int P17, 75 yrs, female, higher caste) was asked 'do you roam around in the Mela?', she

responded that she did not and continued that although she usually visited various temples and holy places at the site, this year the cold had stopped her. For such respondents, then, the cold was not only a topic, but a problem.

Responding to cold

Even those who reported the cold to be a problem did not necessarily see it as detracting from their overall experience. P20 (55yrs, male, lower caste) explained that ‘no one is discouraged with all this, this year in the Mela you can see it’s very cold here, by God that fog and cold is going on regularly (I- Yes it is) but you will not find any lack in *anand* the people have here’ (the Hindu word *anand* refers to an intensely positive spiritual experience akin to 'bliss' in English).

More significantly, perhaps, P20 went on to say that, although ‘we are fed up of cold, no pilgrims would say “now I am going back to home.” There is nothing like this. People will move out only after the month is over’. This claim was corroborated by our data. None of our respondents, even those who complained about the low temperatures, indicated that they would leave the Mela before it ended. Whatever their complaints before the Mela, they still intended to go:

Extract 4 (Eth - P. 25th November, 2010):

[Talk moves to the hardships of kalpwas.]

O5: It is very hard. There are no facilities and also it is very cold there.

P: But Mother Ganga helps.

O3: Yes, mother Ganga is above all.

P: She calls us and we have to go!

What is more, some were explicit that they intended to continue performing their daily rituals, even if these did expose them to considerable discomfort. This is

illustrated by the following interchange between an elderly man and his sister:

Extract 5 (Int - P13, 80yrs, Male, Higher Caste; P13a, 65yrs, Female,

Higher Caste)

P13: My own belief is that always we should use Ganga. I don't know what we will gain from it, but here for one month we get time for Satsang [being in good company with other devotees]

P13a: Well, I am a heart patient, simply I don't go outside from my home but here we are running to take bath so whoever sees me would say that I am fit.

P13: [Referring to P13a] She is my sister, was a teacher. She has heart problem and she should avoid the cold, but despite this she takes bath at 4 or 5 a.m. She walks by foot everywhere. There is no need of vehicles.

This account could be regarded as somewhat overblown: the sister doesn't just bathe in the cold Ganges, she bathes despite her heart condition. So bathing involves surmounting a double adversity: harsh conditions and poor health. However once again we find corroboration in the data. Our ethnographic observations show the lengths to which some kalpwasis will go in order to surmount hardship. Both P and V continued to bathe despite considerable physical difficulties. By the 16th January V was demonstrably in difficulties; shivering, her limbs slow and clumsy. Even so, she still bathed. It was only once virtually bed-ridden that V stopped going down to the Ganges for her daily dip - but even then, in accordance with religious norms, she refused to take medication and she certainly did not contemplate going home.

Endurance as an affirmation of faith

Thus far, we have shown that cold is a concern for kalpwasis but that, even amongst those who clearly suffer from it, it is something to be endured rather than something to be avoided. Now we turn to the social significance of enduring the cold conditions of the Mela.

The first thing to be said is that endurance is not an individual inclination but rather a normative expectation that is applicable to all kalpwasis. That is, as one of our interviewees put it, enduring the cold is ‘doing the right thing’ (P2, 53 years, Male, Lower Caste). This was so taken-for-granted, that, unless we explicitly raised the matter, it only became apparent in the breach. So, when one of our ethnographers suggested missing her dip on a particularly cold day, she was urged on by the participant V.

This is not to say that people did not mitigate against the cold. As we have already seen, P and V prepared meticulously for the conditions, but they did so within the boundaries of normativity - it is legitimate to bring warm clothes. Sometimes, they are more creative. For example, on one occasion we observed a group of kalpwasis who had seated themselves around a fire debating about whether warming one-self in this manner was appropriate (Eth – V. 19th February, 2011). One of the group argued that if the fire was part of religious ceremony then sitting around it was acceptable. Drawing on familiar ritual practices she explained that: ‘if you sprinkle some sesame seeds in the fire then you can warm up with that fire’ (to which the ethnographer replied ‘Oh. You have key for every prohibition!’).

If anything, the degree of inventiveness displayed here - transforming an ordinary fire (where heat is central) into a votive offering (where heat is incidental) before it is allowable - clearly displays that issues of cold are intimately bound up

with issues of belief and faith. If they weren't, one would simply light the flame and get on with it. However it is possible to take the argument a step further. That is, a number of our respondents indicated that the way one deals with the cold is an important sign of faith. To attend the Mela and to observe your obligations (i.e. to bathe) even in the harshest of conditions is to demonstrate the strength of your commitment as a Hindu. This is true in terms of signalling one's credentials to oneself. As interviewee P2 (53 years, Male, Lower Caste) put it: 'Over time, my faith is increasing. Otherwise, if my faith had declined, then in this cold, with bag and baggage, I would have returned to Allahpur, Baghambari Gaddi!' (the latter being a reference to the area of Allahabad where he lives). It is also true in terms of signalling one's credentials to others. Those who endure are seen as having faith, whether that is a matter of specific individuals (recall from extract 2, the plaudits accorded to P on his return home by fellow villagers) or of kalpwasis in general. Thus P12, a 53 year old lower caste male, explained that 'I have seen people here, that, even in this cold - people, old, children, young, everyone, together, in the month of Magh - come to take the dip. By my staying here I have seen that here is huge faith and huge devotion.'

In turn, it becomes possible to relish the hardship because it provides the means by which one becomes demonstrably a kalpwasi. One can see such relish in the behaviour of ethnography participant P and his associates. At one point (19th January), they described bathing in the following terms: 'The water will be very cold. You will feel it like an electric current!'. This suggests that entering the water will give one quite a jolt, painful perhaps, but also invigorating. Such an interpretation is supported by their behaviour. P and company were always eager to reach the Ganges. Once there, they acted with exuberance. They shouted chants, exhorted others to

bathe, joked, bathed energetically themselves, and without complaint. The following extract gives some flavour of this;

Extract 6 (Eth - P. 19th January 2011)

We reach Ganga ji [the Ganges], B shouts “Har-Har Mahadev” [a common chant to the Hindu deity Shiva], many people on ghat [by the waterside] join in, women/men/girls/guys can be seen taking dip.

Especially young people (girls/guys) are talking about the cold water. We are inside water,

P: there is no water, you will have to sit and take a dip.

P & B are in water, some distance from us.

P: you have height, you lie in water (laughs) [this refers to the fact that the ethnographer was relatively tall].

If endurance is taken as an attestation of faith, and valued as such, then the corollary also applies: lack of endurance denotes a failure of faith and is condemned as such. Such reasoning underlies the statements of P7 who was reflecting on the beggars who attend the Mela in order to receive alms, but who do not participate in bathing and other rituals. She related how, in their previous lives, these people had been degenerate and selfish, had never read the holy texts or undertaken religious devotions and who god, as a result, had ensured they were reborn in a destitute state. And she went on:

Extract 7: (P7, 60 yrs, Female, lower caste)

It is so cold, they shiver... The Gods and Goddesses of pilgrimages who have come here, they are the ones who will make us live or make us die.

They could make them die immediately, but they don't, because if they

did then they will be reborn and who will suffer for their deeds? So we have to undergo the fruits of karma.

In other words, the Gods punish lack of faith to the extent that they won't even let beggars die as a release from their suffering from the cold! This dramatic narrative serves to underline the moral stakes involved in endurance. Those who pass the ordeal by cold are confirmed as people of faith and this serves to add a positive dimension to the experience. Those who fail the ordeal are excluded from the faithful and this adds to the negativity of their experience (or at least, is assumed to do so by those who observe them).

In this way, the link between enduring cold and Hindu social identity serves to moderate the primary appraisals of kalpwasis. Endurance is identity affirming and this mitigates the negativity of cold. Lack of endurance is identity undermining and this exacerbates the negativity of cold.

#### *Secondary appraisals of cold*

Turning from how people evaluate the conditions to the way that they evaluate their own capacity to deal with them, our data implicate three different types of social identity process involved in secondary appraisals of the cold. First, participants infer their ability to cope with the cold from the observation of others. Second, participants actively apply influence in order to persuade others that they can cope. Third, participants both provide and expect practical help from others in dealing with the cold. We shall consider each of these in turn.

#### Inferring from the observation of others

In our earlier discussions we pointed to the normativity of enduring cold. P2 was quoted as saying 'we people are doing the right thing' and here continues:

Extract 8 (Int - P2, 53 yrs, male, lower caste)

Yes, faith increases on its own. Hey look, we people are doing the right thing! When people came, with children and the whole family, they do not have the concern that their children would get ill or that something would happen, especially in this cold. You come and see for yourself at 4 am there will be a crowd there. There are so many people who start bathing at 4 am only, even people who are around 60 or 70. They would arrive before us. Your feelings would be affected, I'm sure they would be.

P2 is not just arguing that it is normative to bathe in the Ganges, he is also arguing that no harm will come of it - the act is endurable. His evidence for that is watching other bathers (who, by virtue of this act, are fellow devotees). On the one hand parents would not let children in the water if it would do them harm. On the other hand, one can see people, even the elderly, bathing without problem - and the numbers indicate that they are not an exceptional few.

The extract finishes with a claim that watching the crowd of bathers affects one's own feelings. In this case, the feelings that are referred to are a sense of faith, of normativity and endurability. But these are not the only feelings that are referred to. P18, a 60 year old higher caste woman, explains how watching the bathers gave her a sense that the experience could be not only bearable but even pleasurable: "it was so crowded, so crowded and it wasn't even feeling cold. Everyone enjoyed it".

Feelings were also demonstrably affected by stories about the endurance of others. So, in the ethnographic notes relating to V (Eth V 3rd February 2011) there is a debate about whether, given the intensity of the cold, V should bathe. In response

one of V's friends interjected 'Oh, what cold? Are you mad? Come. People come from so far-off places. You know there was one woman, who cannot walk. She crawls with her hands but each day she comes to have a dip. And we people, despite hands and feet, think like this?'. But, as is clear in this example, 'endurability' is not always a chance by-product of story-telling. Instead, the stories are told and retold deliberately in order to encourage others that they can cope with the conditions. That is, we are passing from observation and inference to direct social influence.

#### Active social influence

In addressing issues of social influence we face both a problem and a paradox. The problem lies in knowing what constitutes an act of influence. When, for instance P and his friends cavort in the Ganges (see extract 7) are they simply having fun, or are they also displaying the fact that bathing is fun for the benefit of others. In other words, is their behaviour performative (Goffman, 1959)? It is hard to tell. The paradox is that overt influence is generally only observed in the breach - when people deviate or seem likely to. For kalpwasis, to forgo bathing because simply because it is cold would be unthinkable and so any suggestion of such behaviour elicits an active response. This is illustrated by an incident in the ethnography where P woke complaining of the cold. The researcher responded by saying 'so you are not going?' (to bathe), to which P rapidly retorted "Oh are you mad? Why would we not go? We will just go in a bit?".

Notably, overt influence was more likely to be found in relation to marginal group members. Our researchers fit this description well, both because of their age and their basis for attending the Mela. The next extract comes from field notes taken by our male ethnographer (the individual we have just cited):

Extract 9 (Eth - P. 4th February, 2011)

An interesting thing is that I am always the last to take the dip amongst P, B, and Me. I take at least a minute or a bit more to take the dip. Usually, people around me would either have a look at me and go back, but mostly there would be someone who would always say that the first (dip) is the coldest one and then the cold goes away. Today there were three ladies (all in their 60's) taking a dip near me (3-4 paces away). They smiled at me.

Lady 1: Young guys feel the cold.

Lady 2: Just take the dip son. Don't worry about the cold.

Lady 3: We also used to feel the cold when we were young. Now, it has gone.

Here, the influence is couched in personal terms - we can deal with the cold, so can you. In other cases, endurance is couched more in identity related terms. Our other ethnographer observed one incident involving a young girl who was shivering and resisting bathing:

Extract 10 (Eth - V. 16th January, 2011)

The cold wind is blowing strong. It is really feeling chilled. R (fellow camp member) asks the kid to go and take dip. She is a girl around nine years of age. She was feeling cold. As R told her to go and take dip, she replied- 'I don't feel like taking bath in this cold'.

R -Oh, so you don't want to take dip.

V - Come on, take off your sweater and go and take dip. Be fast.

Girl-It is very cold

We hear a voice- 'it's not cold dear'. We turn around and see that he is an

adult of around 45-55 yrs. He continues 'It's just now. Once you go there, it's not cold'. I notice he has just come out of the water and is changing clothes. I also encourage / try to motivate the child 'It's not that cold. The sun is also there, it won't be cold'. The girl finally starts taking off her sweater. She is shivering. Slowly she moves towards water....

Man- Don't be scared. When you are scared of anything it will get over you. Don't let your fear dominate on you. Say to mother Ganga, 'oh mother, I am coming. I am not fearful of the cold I am coming to take dip'.

First, then, there is a simple instruction from V to bathe. When this fails, a number of others give assurances that the cold is bearable. As this begins to bear fruit and the girl cautiously enters the water, further voices assure the girl she can overcome her fears. These culminate in an injunction to have faith in the sacred (Mother Ganga) and to consign herself to the deity. Through such faith the girl will be able to overcome the fearful conditions.

A further aspect of this incident (and of the previous one in extract 9) is the way that strangers join in, seeing it as their responsibility to help others do their devotions. Sometimes, though, the help is more practical.

#### Providing practical help

Helping in the Mela took many forms. Our ethnographers noted how people would shield each other from the cold winds and help each other undress and dress quickly before and after their dip in the Ganges. Our interviews help clarify the extent and the basis of such mutual support. It is not limited to known intimates, but at the

same time it does not extend to just anybody in just any crowd. Rather, it is a function of the shared identity which emerges between kalpwasis by the Ganges.

In order to get at this last issue, in our interview study we asked participants to compare crowds at the railway station, when they arrived for the Mela, to crowds in the Mela itself. P11 made a general contrast between unhelpful crowds in the former location and helpful crowds in the latter. This help in the Mela was exemplified by one incident:

Extract 11 (Int - P11, 72 yrs, male, higher caste)

At the railway station people do not care for one another... here people do take care of each other. I saw one day that when people came back after bathing, one old lady was there. She was quite old and I don't know whether she survived or not! When she came out of the water she felt sick because it was very cold weather. Her heart was weak and she was having difficulty breathing. People stepped aside and she fell over. Then people came and covered her with towels. One policeman came and said "What is it? How - do this, do that". Everybody started helping her. Two or three people picked her up and covered her in a blanket. They dried her off.

When all was done, then the ambulance arrived and took her. This is the way that people help here brother.

While the extent of the support provided here might be rarer and involve more effort than that observed routinely by the ethnographers, it is presented as something unexceptional, as simply what you would expect 'here' in the Mela. The important implication is that kalpwasis not only provide support to others but also can count on receiving help were they to need it. That is, the crowd of devotees becomes a 'social

safety net' which allow one to brave the conditions, knowing that if you get into trouble, others will be there to rescue you.

### Discussion

In this paper we set out to explore the often noted capacity of pilgrims and others to endure the physical hardships of collective events with equanimity and even with relish. We posed two questions. Can a social psychological analysis (and, more specifically, an analysis based on social identity processes) shed some light on how this is possible? Conversely, can an analysis of these phenomena help develop our social psychological understanding?

In regard to the first of these questions, we suggest that it is helpful to base our analysis on an integration between social identity and appraisal theories whereby group memberships become the basis through which we make sense of phenomena in the world and how to respond to them (Reicher, Spears & Haslam, 2010). In particular, our analysis confirms the value of drawing a distinction between primary and secondary appraisals – that is, between our sense of the phenomena themselves and our sense of how equipped we are to deal with them. As concerns primary appraisal, we find that the conditions at the Mela – notably the cold which is the focus of this analysis – are a highly salient issue for kalpwasis and moreover that they are highly identity relevant, in that they affirm identity. Hence, however unpleasant and painful the experience may be at one level, there are also strongly positive elements involved in going through the experience and surmounting the challenge.

To use a term we have used elsewhere in the study of collective action, successful endurance is an act of collective self-realisation (Reicher & Haslam, 2006, Reicher, 2012 - see also Thomas, McGarty & Mavor, 2009). Moreover, as we have

also argued, collective self-realisation is experienced very positively (Reicher, 2012; Reicher & Stott, 2011). What we see here in addition is that, where there is an expectation of collective self-realisation (for instance, of completing one's duty to bathe in the cold Ganges waters), then the pleasure and relish can extend to the challenge itself and not only to the outcome.

This takes us to secondary appraisals: what is it that leads people to believe that they can deal with the cold, even if elderly and frail? We have pointed to three processes: the observation of others doing their devotions, direct social influence and the provision/expectation of help if difficulties arise. It is important to stress that, as with primary appraisals, these various processes are identity related. Those who are being observed and those who exert influence are clearly ingroup members by the fact that they are performing Hindu devotions. They show what is right and what is possible for pilgrims to do. What is more, it is notable both when people describe what they have seen others do and when they seek to persuade others that they frequently stress how even the frailest of pilgrims is able to fulfil their religious obligations despite the cold. Extract 8 is a case in point: it is stressed how the crowd of the faithful in the Ganges includes both children and elderly people.

When it comes to the provision of help, the relevance of the group and of shared identity is made even more explicit: it is not that one can rely on the support of others just anywhere. In a railway station one might be ignored, but in the Mela things are different. What makes this contrast, as expressed in extract 11, particularly striking is that both sites contain the same people: pilgrims travelling to the Mela and pilgrims at the Mela. So the contrast is not demographic. It is more that pilgrims

(though notably, only pilgrims) come to see and treat each-other as such when they are by the banks of the Ganges.

Altogether, then, we suggest that an understanding of the links between appraisal and social identity, and of the different types of appraisal process involved in the experience of physical conditions, provides considerable richness and depth in explaining the phenomenon of collective endurance. It provides a specifically social psychological level of understanding that both draws upon and complements existing anthropological observations.

What, then, of our second question? What does this analysis add to existing social psychological understanding? At a general level, the most important point about this analysis for us is that it helps underpin a broad interpretation of social identity processes and indeed of social psychology as a whole. These are not limited in relevance to specific 'social' phenomena: how people perceive or behave towards others in groups, social attitudes, beliefs and feelings. Rather, social identity frames the understanding of self-in-the-world and hence is of relevance to all the phenomena we experience in the world, whether they are to do with our social or our physical environment. Social identity is as relevant to what we think of the weather as to what we think of our neighbours.

More immediately, our analysis shows that the social identity processes impacting appraisal, for which we have laboratory evidence, do indeed operate in the field. Moreover, it shows how multiple such processes may operate together. Thus, for instance, we confirm that seemingly pernicious physical phenomena are viewed less negatively when they are identity affirming (cf. Levine & Reicher, 1996), that ingroup influence can make extreme cold seem more bearable (Platow et al., 2007)

and that expectation of social support in group also makes people feel better able to deal with challenging conditions (Haslam et al., 2005). Indeed elsewhere our survey research demonstrates that pilgrims experience a benefit to their wellbeing relative to non-pilgrims over the course of the Mela (Tewari et al., 2012)

We find all of these processes operating simultaneously in making people feel that cold is less of a problem which they are more able to deal with. In addition, we demonstrate the importance of observing the behaviour of fellow ingroup members even in the absence of overt influence attempts. Right from the early days of social identity theory, it has been understood that people can infer group norms from the behaviour of typical members (what Tajfel, 1978, called the ‘inductive’ aspect of categorization) and that this is especially important in crowds where formal agreement about group norms can be hard to achieve (Reicher, 1984). But here we show that such induction is important not only in inferring norms but also in inferring one’s capabilities as a group member.

The obvious question, though, is how far we can generalise from our findings and make general claims. The answer depends upon understanding the social identity perspective as an analysis of how social factors shape the psychological field (Tajfel, 1982). Thus, while it makes generic claims about the nature of group processes, it equally insists that the way that these processes operate depends upon cultural and contextual factors (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011). In relation to present claims, our argument is that where physical hardship connects to the meaning of a social identity it will impact on the way that this hardship is experienced. This will certainly not be true of all groups, but nor is it restricted to kalpwasis at the Magh Mela. Hardship is an integral part of other pilgrimages, both Hindu and non-Hindu (Nordin, 2011;

Preston, 1992; Stanley, 1992). It is also part of many other types of collective event (van Gennep, 1977). To use a very different example, Neville (2007) shows how football supporters focus on miserable trips to pointless games in far-off places to exemplify their authenticity and commitment as fans. The apparent relish with which they underwent such hardship seems to have something in common with the *kalpwasis* and it is plausible to argue that this commonality stems from the way that, for both, overcoming hardship constitutes collective self-realisation.

When it comes to coping, our argument is that group members will generally be supportive of each-other and will help each-other achieve their desired ends. When it comes to the reactive forms of helping we describe, we would expect that to happen amongst ingroup members for any group (Levine, Prosser, Evans, D. & Reicher, 2005). When it comes to the more pro-active forms of help (e.g. urging others on to submit themselves to hardship), we again would only expect that to occur in groups where hardship is an aspect of group identity and hence members would assume that undergoing hardship is in indeed achieving something that is desired.

For now, these are hypotheses awaiting confirmation. The key point is that we suggest neither that our findings are true of all groups, nor that they are restricted to the very particular circumstances we have examined. Rather, generalisability at the empirical level will be moderated by the content of group identity. It will be a function of what hardship means for the group. And only when it relates to the group identity will the group processes that we have described come into play.

It is, however, the corollary of this statement which we want to stress in closing. Mark Twain was struck with wonder at the endurance of pilgrims to the Magh Mela. It is indeed a remarkable accomplishment and there is no way in which

we would wish to diminish the achievement of those individuals who succeed. But perhaps what is most remarkable for us as social psychologists is that this individual and physical act of endurance is a social and collective accomplishment. It is possible because of the social significance of the ordeal for group membership and through the active support of the group.

References

- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2005). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3rd Ed. New York: Routledge.
- Hammoudi, A. (2006). *A Season in Mecca*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Haslam, S.A., O'Brien, A., Jetten, J., Vormedal, K., & Penna, S. (2005). Taking the strain: Social identity, social support and the experience of stress. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *44*, 355–370. doi: 10.1348/01466605X37468
- Haslam, S.A., & Reicher, S.D. (2006). Stressing the group: Social identity and the unfolding dynamics of stress. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *91*, 1037–1052. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.91.5.1037
- Hopkins, N. & Reicher, S. (2011) Identity, Culture and Contestation: Social Identity as Cross-Cultural Theory. *Psychological Studies*, *56*, 36-43. doi: 10.1007/s12646-011-0068-z
- Jones, J. & Jetten, J. (2011). Recovering From Strain and Enduring Pain Multiple Group Memberships Promote Resilience in the Face of Physical Challenges. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *2*, 239-244. doi: 10.1177/1948550610386806
- Kellezi, B., Reicher, S. and Cassidy, C.(2009), Surviving the Kosovo Conflict: A Study of Social Identity, Appraisal of Extreme Events, and Mental Well-Being. *Applied Psychology*, *58*: 59–83. doi: 10.1111/j.1464-0597.2008.00382.x
- Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal and coping*. New York. Springer Publishing Company.
- Levine, R.M., Prosser, A., Evans, D., & Reicher, S.D. (2005). Identity and emergency

- intervention: How social group membership and inclusiveness of group boundaries shapes helping behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 443–453. doi: 10.1177/0146167204271651.
- Levine, R.M., & Reicher, S.D. (1996). Making sense of symptoms: Self-categorization and the meaning of illness and injury. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 35, 245–256. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8309.1996.tb01095.x
- Neville, F. (2007). Positive collective experience: an exploratory study of antecedents and consequents (sic). Unpublished M.Res thesis. University of St. Andrews.
- Nordin, A. (2011). The Cognition of Hardship Experience in Himalayan Pilgrimage. *Numen*, 58, 632-673. doi: 10.1163/156852711X593287
- Peters, F.E. (1994) *The Hajj*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Platow, M. J., Voudouris, N. J., Coulson, M., Gilford, N., Jamieson, R., Najdovski, L., (2007). In-group reassurance in a pain setting produces lower levels of physiological arousal: direct support for a self-categorization analysis of social influence. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 37, 649–660. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.381
- Prayag Magh Mela Research Group (2007). Experiencing the Magh Mela at Prayag: Crowds, categories and social relations. *Psychological Studies*, 52, 311-319.
- Preston, J. J. (1992). “Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage” In A. Morinis (Ed) *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (pp. 31–46). Westport: Greenwood Press,
- Reicher, S. D. (1984). The St-Pauls Riot - an Explanation of the Limits of Crowd Action in Terms of a Social Identity Model. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 14(1), 1-21. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.2420140102

- Reicher, S.D. (2012) Crowds, agency and passion: reconsidering the roots of the social bond. In R. Parkin-Gounelas (Ed.) *The Psychology and Politics of the Collective*. London: Routledge.
- Reicher, S. D., & Haslam, S. A. (2010). Beyond help: A social psychology of collective solidarity and social cohesion. In S. Stürmer and M. Snyder (Eds.), *The psychology of pro-social behavior: Group processes, intergroup relations, and helping* (pp.289-309). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Reicher, S. D., Spears, R., & Haslam, S. A. (2010). *The social identity approach in social psychology*. In M. S. Wetherell & C. T. Mohanty (Eds.) *Sage Handbook of Identities* (pp.45- 62). London: Sage.
- Reicher, S.D. & Stott, C. (2011) *Mad Mobs and Englishmen? Myths and Realities of the 2011 riots*. London: Constable & Robinson.
- Stanley, J. M. (1992). The Great Maharashtrian Pilgrimage: Pandharpur and Alandi. In A. Morinis, (Ed.) *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (pp. 65-87). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Tajfel, H. (1978) *Differentiation Between Social Groups*. London: Academic Press.
- Tajfel, H. (1982). *Social identity and intergroup behaviour*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Tewari, S. Khan, S., Hopkins, N., Srinivasan, N. & Reicher, S. D. (2012). Participation in mass gatherings can benefit well-being: Longitudinal and control data from a North Indian Hindu pilgrimage event. *PLoS ONE* 7(10):e47291.
- Thomas, E., McGarty, C. & Mavor, K. (2009) Aligning Identities, Emotions, and Beliefs to Create Commitment to Sustainable Social and Political Action.

*Personality & Social Psychology Review*, 13, 194-218. doi:

10.1177/1088868309341563

Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987).

*Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell.

Twain, M. (1897). *Following the Equator*. Hartford: Doubleday and McClure

Van Gennep, A. (1977). *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge.