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Runaway rights: A closer look at different rights visions and entitlement perceptions

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Abstract

We live in an *age of rights* in which individual rights and freedoms are highly prioritized, often overshadowing duties and responsibilities. This makes it increasingly challenging to discern the balance between one's own rights and the protection of the fundamental rights of all individuals. Moghaddam and colleagues (2024) introduced a model illustrating how rights evolve from being contested, to becoming normative, and eventually facing a backlash or exploitation for self-serving interests. In this commentary, we explore differing views on rights and entitlements. From a collective perspective, we identify factors that help distinguish between social movements advocating rights in an individualistic manner and those pursuing them democratically. Social responsibility and moral inclusion serve as key indicators for distinguishing pro-social from anti-social movements. On an individual level, we examine what causes some people to view rights through an individualistic lens, while others ground them in personal and social responsibilities. Specifically, perceptions of equal entitlement (i.e. self-respect) are tied to a focus on universal rights based on shared humanity and dignity, which also includes acknowledging equal rights for others. We discuss how these distinctions are relevant for Moghaddam et al.'s model and how equal entitlement beliefs can be fostered in societies.

Keywords: runaway rights; self-respect; social movements; responsibility; entitlement beliefs

Runaway rights: A Closer Look at Different Rights Visions and Entitlement Perceptions

As various authors (see Finkel & Moghaddam, 2005) have pointed out, reasonable emphasis on the importance of human rights after the tragic events of the 1930s-40s has not been matched by an equal emphasis on individual and collective responsibility to support and promote rights that are not a prelude to the development of further social exclusion, discrimination, or intergroup conflicts. Indeed, as Fathali Moghaddam, Winnifred Louis, and Robin Banks (2024) have remarked, we live in an *age of rights* in which many people tend to attach priority to their individual rights and liberties (i.e., *what is owed to us*) and de-emphasize duties and personal responsibility (i.e., *what we owe to others*), at the risk of going against the protection of the rights of others. While the aftermath of WW2 and more recent times have seen the emergence and often the affirmation of collective movements for the claiming of denied fundamental (equal) rights, recently we have also seen the emergence of a clash between demands for rights, whereby some social groups have felt threatened in their acquired privileges and have claimed the protection of the particularistic rights of their own groups (Passini, 2011). It is, therefore, becoming increasingly difficult to understand where the boundary lies between one's own and others' demands for rights and the protection of the basic fundamental rights of all individuals.

Moghaddam and colleagues (2024) have proposed a model structured on six stages that conduct a right from being recriminated, to becoming normative, to finally being backlashed and countered. The model is very explicative in its observation of all the social psychological principles involved at both the individual and group level, and is quite explanatory in observing the steps that the various rights go through in being accepted and expanded, but also in their being exploited for particularistic interests or opposed in defence of supposedly conflicting rights. As the authors themselves rightly observe, this model is a starting point and may need

further complexification and certainly theorizing as concerns the evolution of duties. In this commentary, we would like to discuss different perceptions of rights and entitlements that play a role in whether a group or an individual claims equal rights applying to everyone or particularistic rights applying only for oneself/one's group. We summarize the literature that has looked at this phenomenon from a collective and an individual perspective, respectively, and delineate central conditions to differentiate between these different rights visions.

Collective Perspective on Claiming and Framing Rights: Pro-Social and Anti-Social Movements

At the collective level, we will analyze which variables can help us recognise when a political and social movement is claiming a right in an individualistic and conflictual way and when it is, instead, demanding it in a more communal and democratic manner. The issue of whether a movement is pursuing universal rights or instead rights only of their own group is indeed a relevant issue as we live in a world in which many political forces, as Moghaddam and colleagues rightly note in their model (2024, see Stage 6), reverse the great battles for human rights in favor of their own group privileges. The slogans *America first*, *Italy first*, and so on, have accompanied many recent populist and often xenophobic political campaigns. Following the analyses of Fromm (1984), Bauman (1989), and Kelman and Hamilton (1989), Passini and Morselli (2009, 2013) have attempted to analyze this issue by proposing the existence of two types of collective movements proposing a social change and investigating the psycho-social variables that characterize them.

Starting from the analysis of the autobiographic narratives of Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, as three men who are recognized as the leaders of collective movements that achieved egalitarian social changes, Passini and Morselli (2009) first identified the characteristics – from a psycho-social point of view – that characterize the actions

and goals of their movements, and then analyzed how the same variables, in a negative sense, characterize the movements that instead led to individualization and particularization of rights. Specifically, according to these two authors, social responsibility and moral inclusion would help differentiate these types of movements. As Berkowitz and Lutterman (1968) have pointed out, social responsibility is defined as the attitude of being concerned and caring for the well-being of others, and the adoption of attitudes that lead to actions that benefit the collective well-being. Moral inclusion, as opposed to moral exclusion, refers to the perception of individuals and groups as belonging to their own “moral community” (Staub, 1989), and therefore deserving the same moral principles of justice and fairness (Opatow, 1990; Passini, 2010). While moral exclusion is often at the root of destructive intergroup conflicts, moral inclusion fosters peace-building by promoting equality, justice and commitment to the well-being of all (Opatow et al., 2005).

These two variables may help to distinguish between so-called pro-social and anti-social movements (Passini & Morselli, 2009). The term pro-social refers to the fact that the aims of the action and proposals of the group – including those referred to rights – are implemented for the sake of the whole society, including all its different levels and groups. Thus, the social change they propose is addressed to everyone, in the sense that it does not diminish the rights of out-groups. In contrast, the term anti-social refers to aims enacted mostly for the benefit of one's own group, in order to obtain individual and particularistic rights. Thus, the proposed social change is connected to a sense of group entitlement – i.e. the belief that one's ingroup deserves more than other groups (Endevelt et al., 2021) – and is not aimed at society at large, but preserves or reproduces social inequality. As exemplified by Passini and Morselli (2013), if we consider some anti-racist movements – as the civil rights movements of African Americans in the USA in the 1950s – it could be argued that many people in the majority viewed these activists as disruptive or anti-social. In contrast, members of white supremacist

groups may have perceived their actions as pro-social, believing they were promoting a better and safer society. However, looking at them through the lens of moral inclusion and social responsibility theories, we can remark that the goals of white supremacist groups are to prioritise white interests to the detriment of other ethnic groups. In contrast, the civil rights movement did not aim to violate anyone's rights or provoke conflict between groups. Their actions were centred on expanding some rights to all groups, including those who were previously excluded, without reducing the (equal) rights of others. In this sense, understanding the differences in recalling the rhetoric of rights, whether in a pro-social or anti-social way, can help us to understand when runaway rights are backlashed (stage 6) and, in a certain sense, step out of the realm of rights expansion to defend that rights-centeredness disengaged from personal duties and responsibilities.

While so far we have discussed that there are groups who, for personal interests and privileges, exploit in a certain sense the human rights achievements of the past, we have not yet understood how certain people are able to connect their own rights to also include the rights of others. We will try to answer this question in the next section.

An Individual Perspective on Claiming and Framing Rights: Prosocial vs. Egoistic Concerns

While it is important to analyse the reasons that on a social and political level have led to the emergence of the age of rights characterised by such an individualistic worldview and rhetoric of rights, it is equally relevant to investigate the differences on an individual level that lead some people to conceive rights in an individualistic sense and others to root them in their personal and social responsibilities. As we will discuss later, this can be of great importance in being able to create educational interventions that support a communitarian vision and oppose such a disproportionate emphasis on rights. Specifically, in this section we will focus

on different entitlement beliefs that we think can discern people in an individualised or collective vision of rights. In the literature, three entitlement beliefs have been discussed, namely equal entitlement (also referred to as self-respect; Renger & Passini, 2024), exaggerated or over-entitlement (also referred to as psychological entitlement; (Campbell et al., 2004), and restricted or under-entitlement beliefs. Although these beliefs have not always been linked to rights, they can be associated with different visions of rights, namely referring to a sense of possessing the same, more or fewer basic rights as others, respectively (Renger & Passini, 2024). Over-entitlement beliefs, i.e. believing that you deserve more than others, have been associated with aggressiveness, interpersonal hostility and unsocial, unethical behavior (e.g. Anastasio & Rose, 2014; Lee et al., 2019), or in other words with a prioritization of rights over duties. Under-entitlement beliefs, i.e., believing that you deserve less than others, correlate with submissiveness and self-neglect (Moses & Moses-Hrushovski, 1990; Tolmacz et al., 2021), or in other words with a prioritization of duties over rights. Finally, equal entitlement beliefs, i.e., believing that you deserve the same as others, have been connected with both individual assertiveness (Renger, 2018) and with social responsibility, concern for human rights and generativity (such as attention to future generations) (Renger & Passini, 2024), in other words, with concern for *both* rights *and* duties. The presented entitlement beliefs can be investigated to differentiate between people who pursue universalistic rights grounded in equal humanness and dignity, including the consideration of equal rights for others and thus pave the way to social cohesion, and people who follow particularistic visions that ignore others' rights and thus set in motion the idea that rights are growing apart from duties.

It is important to note that these entitlement beliefs are subjective, psychological beliefs. For example, even in a country like Germany, where all the citizens are equal before the law, not every person has internalized their equal basic rights in terms of self-respect (e.g., Renger, 2018). According to Honneth (1996), people only internalize that they possess equal rights if

they are treated as equal counterparts by institutions and other people. Accordingly, individuals who belong to minority groups, who are deprived of equal treatment and chances, have more difficulties in developing self-respect, i.e., equal entitlement beliefs (e.g., Martiny et al., 2024; Renger et al., 2024). So as Moghaddam et al. (2024) note in their model in Stage 5, the interpretation of a right can differ depending on group membership. This reconnects the topic to the collective perspective that we outlined. As minority groups are usually the ones fighting for new or more rights, the scientific analyses should focus on the entitlement beliefs of these groups. When deprived of equal treatment in society, they might more easily run the risk of internalizing non-equal entitlement beliefs which lead to anti-social movements.

Runaway Rights or Privileges?

Both the collective and individual perspective on claiming and framing rights that we have discussed so far can, we believe, partly answer the three main risks and downsides of the phenomenon of runaway rights as discussed by Moghaddam et al. (2024, see pp. 15-17). The first refers to how to address inequalities rooted in past injustices by avoiding a quest for revenge instead of true reconciliation. We think that at the individual level, as we have said, a sense of self-respect should help people to recognize that they are experiencing injustice (Morselli & Passini, 2010) and to fight for equal rights (Renger et al., 2020), but when they succeed in obtaining the expected rights, it should also allow them not to overlay their own rights upon those of others, balancing rights and duties, thus acting in an inclusive rather than exclusive way. In his autobiography Nelson Mandela argued what it means to combine a respect for rights with a sense of responsibility and inclusiveness that involves all people and not just one's own self or one's own restricted group.

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became the hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes

away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. ...The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity (Mandela, 2008, pp. 543–544).

These same thoughts can also explain the second risk and downsides related to the phenomenon of runaway rights suggested by Moghaddam and colleagues. That is, the issue of emergent and contemporary group identities and the risk of inclusive *vs.* exclusive identities, especially where historically conflictual group identities may be detrimental to perceiving others as humans above all else. Also in this case, an individual and collective consideration of rights in an inclusive way, based on a sense of social responsibility and moral inclusion, should avoid the emergence of dis-embedded identities that prioritize one's particular in-group membership at the expense of one's membership in a superordinate group (Paffrath & Simon, 2023), which likely result in interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. Moreover, it should also clearly mark the difference between demands that are linked to a certain cultural relativism, and others that are simply a spoliation of human rights.

Finally, the third risk of runaway rights refers to the issue that they can deflect attention from collective duties and lead to the questioning and even repudiation of society's traditions, making liberal democracies vulnerable to populist and authoritarian social movements. However, as we have discussed, not all social movements base their demands for rights on a rejection of traditions and a desire for retaliation against past injustices. On the contrary, movements defined as a prosocial base their struggles for the claiming of rights on a great respect for the concept of authority and its connection to anteriority (Morselli & Passini, 2010). As Héritier (2002) states, in traditional societies authority was indeed linked to anteriority (i.e., elderliness) and the transmission of culture was based on “what had already been,” that is on the traditions, customs, habits and memory of a society. However, this transmission of values and culture in relation to the authority-anteriority duality does not prevent change, but rather firmly links change and traditions to the emergence of a collective responsibility. The person,

by entering into and accepting the principle of authority, should confirm their belonging to the society as a responsibility, in the sense, as Benasayag and Schmit (2003) put it, of “being able to transform what has been, is and will be, and to be able to challenge the norms, on condition that they respect the continuity of society” (p. 35, our translation).

People who have developed a self-respect that does not oppose individual and collective duties, but rather unites rights and duties in the name of social responsibility (Renger & Passini, 2024), attach relevance to the notion of authority for the benefit of society at large even if they recognise that its demands or norms may be not appropriate in some cases. As Kelman and Hamilton (1989) show, people acting in a pro-social way focus on the legitimacy of demands and not just the legitimacy of authority. This allows them to recognise when even a legitimate and elected authority (such as today's democracies) promote undemocratic demands, and consequently oppose them without delegitimising society at large, with its rules and traditions.

Returning to the model advanced by Moghaddam et al. (2024) and in the light of what has been discussed so far in this commentary, we might ask whether runaway rights are really to be considered *rights* when they become so exclusive and not extended, or whether they should simply be referred to as individual or group privileges. In this sense, we might also try to understand how the proposed model is instead applicable when considering those inclusive rights we should refer to as universalistic rights. That is, in the model we can analyse if demands are to be considered as rights or just privileges. Focusing on universalistic rights might also solve the problem of associated duties, because people who have internalized their equal rights and dignity, have also internalized the equal rights and dignity of others (Renger & Passini, 2024) and thus their duties towards others.

Conclusion

In this commentary we have suggested that in order to better understand “runaway rights” it might be worthwhile taking a closer look at different rights perceptions and visions. On the one hand, we observed that, from a collective perspective, pro-social movements defend the freedoms and rights of all the people by means of moral inclusion and a sense of social responsibility. From an individual perspective, equal entitlement beliefs (i.e., self-respect) enhance a focus on both rights and duties with a consequent assumption of responsibility by the individual. On the other hand, anti-social movements and over-entitlement beliefs emphasize individual (or in-group) rights over duties to the collective with the risk of leaving individuals in a social vacuum (Passini, 2011).

We would like to conclude with some ideas as to how to promote societal cohesion and avoid social disruption. A balanced sense of one’s own and others’ equal entitlement can best be achieved through respectful treatment by others. Equality-based respect has been shown to pave the way to inclusivity and identification with superordinate groups (Renger & Reese, 2017; Simon et al., 2015). Ideally, respect experiences should be made early in life. In educational terms, equal entitlement beliefs are best supported by warmth and love and, at the same time, autonomy-enhancing behavior that allows a child to learn about their rights and limitations, in order to demand what is appropriate with others entitled in the same manner (Candel & Turliuc, 2017). In contrast, parental behaviour that emphasizes control over the child, so-called “helicopter parenting,” and achievement pressure enhance over-entitlement beliefs (Givertz & Segrin, 2014; Greenberger et al., 2008; Nie et al., 2023), and thus foster a disbalance between the perception of rights and duties. Also at school respect experiences are important (Thomas, 2012) and can be fostered, for example, through the implementation of respect norms at school (Shani et al., 2023). The creation of practical intervention programmes in schools could make people understand more clearly how the subject of rights, freedoms, but also personal fulfilment develops through a respect not only for oneself but also for others in

order to create a common space in which one can realise one's ambitions. This is certainly a great future challenge for social psychologists and for all other disciplines related to these issues.

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