# A Study of Occupy D.C.: The Global Psychology Perspective

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**Abstract**

The Occupy Movement in the U.S. was a reflection of globalization inspired by the Arab Spring and grounded in Ghandi's model of non-violent protestation. However, it was largely ineffective at significantly shifting public policy.  This study was conducted during the heart of the movement, spring 2012, and utilized a qualitative phenomenological design from an international psychology perspective to explore the meaning, perception, change, and motivation of Occupy members at one of the most prominent Occupy Movement locations, Washington, D.C.'s McPherson Square Park. Additionally, the study explored the understanding of, attitudes toward, and willingness to assist the Occupy Movement of students and faculty at a professional psychology school located in one of the buildings overlooking McPherson Square Park.  Semi-structured and online interviews of Occupy members (N=10) and psychology school students (N=10) and faculty (N=3) were conducted.  An online survey was also utilized for each group, Occupy members (N=8) and students (N=40).  The results indicate that Occupy DC members valued diversity of opinion, goals, and viewpoints; however the acceptance and promotion of varying viewpoints appears to have disjointed occupiers' vision and the professional psychology school's student and faculty knowledge of the meaning and reason behind Occupy in DC.  The first signs of the reasons for the eventual decline of Occupy DC were identified, such as a loss of coherent vision and forced removal from the park for environmental and health reasons. These signs also acted as barriers that

kept the neighboring professional psychology students and faculty from providing assistance to the occupiers.

**Introduction**

In the spring and summer of 2011 the world witnessed political upheavals of historical magnitude after watching the toppling of repressive regimes in the Arab countries of Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere on the continent of Africa, elements of which continued to spread to the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. These political movements became known as the Arab spring, or the Arab awakening, as its nonviolent events unfolded (Gelderloos, 2011; Critchley, 2012).  However, these peaceful protests track their ancestry to Ghandi's movements in India.  The topic of social and economic inequality was at the heart of his movement to free India from British rule (Beck, 2005).  Moreover, he employed the tactic of documenting and media outlets to share the plight of those standing in opposition (Beck, 2005).

According the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) webpage in 2012, they identify as "…using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants." The Occupy movement, however, presents at least one significant difference:  the disenfranchised represented by the protesting participants have expanded. The Occupy movement began with Occupy Wall Street (OWS). According to the OWS website, Occupy Wall Street (2012) is a leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions.  Occupy Wall Street is a people-powered movement that began on September 17, 2011 in Liberty Square in Manhattan's Financial District and by October 11, Occupy DC, began to set up in Freedom Park, followed by an encampment in McPherson Square.

Occupy DC (2012) appears to promote a range of movement goals, which are stated throughout their website. Their goals included bringing awareness and resolution to the "economic inequality and political disempowerment," standing up to "massive financial inequalities," "separating money from politics and improving the country's infrastructure to fix healthcare, education, environment and the economy," and "unjust and growing political inequalities" as well as to "no longer accept the social inequalities being created by our current economic system."  The website also stated that Occupy DC does not have, nor will they ever have one spokesperson and are a people's movement and not affiliated with a political party, which is inherently different from its ancestry in Ghandi's movement that had a clearly defined leader and spokesperson (Beck, 2005).  Occupiers

had yet to give up their cause even when faced with difficult circumstances, including weather factors, such as freezing nights, snow, rain, cold windy days, and health risks due to a lack of access to showers and running water (Gowen, 2012). The researchers in this study felt it would be valuable to understand the protesters' motivation, thoughts, convictions, reasons for maintaining their protest, what enabled them to overcome the obstacles faced on a daily basis, the change the occupiers are seeking, and when the occupiers will feel the desired change has been accomplished.

Given the Chicago School of Professional Psychology - DC campus is located across the street from McPherson Square, one of the two Occupy DC encampments, the researchers also wanted to explore the interaction of TCSPP faculty and students with Occupy DC members. The researchers wanted to investigate the roles budding and professional psychologists could play in political and social movements, in particular Occupy DC. Therefore, researchers developed a plan to engage Occupiers and TCSPP students and faculty in a research project.

**Method**
**Instruments**

Three interviews were created with a combination of demographic, open-ended, and follow up questions in order to collect data: a semi-structured in-person Occupy DC interview, an in-person student and faculty interview and online survey, and an online Occupy DC interview. The in-person Occupy DC interview had five demographic questions and eight open-ended questions, with five follow-up questions.  The non-demographic questions were: (I) How would you describe the meaning of the Occupy movement?  (II) How did you come to the decision to join the Movement? (IIa) What has kept you involved with Occupy DC? (III) How do you think being a part of the Occupy D.C. has affected or will affect your future? (IV) What do you find rewarding about being a part of Occupy D.C.? (V) Throughout the movement experience, what has been the most challenging experience? (Va) How have you overcome the challenge? (VI) What has been your experience with people connected to the DC Occupy movement? (Via) What has been your experience with people *not* connected to the DC Occupy movement? (VII) What changes have you experienced since becoming a part of the Occupy movement? (VIIa) Since you have been a part of the occupy DC movement, how has it changed? (VIII) For this movement to be successful, what are the changes you are looking for? (VIIIa) What changes are you looking for personally? (VIIIb) What political outcomes are you looking for? (VIIIc) How do the changes *you* personally want align with the group as a whole?

The finalized in person student and faculty interview and online survey comprised four demographic questions and six open ended questions. The open ended questions were: (I) What role should mental health professionals or those in training play in political movements? (II) What if anything do you know about the Occupy DC Movement? (III) What if any impact has the Occupy DC movement had on you? (IV) Please describe your interactions with Occupy DC and its members. Please describe your interactions with Occupy DC and its members. (V) What role or interactions do you believe The Chicago School of Professional Psychology DC-Campus should play with the Occupy DC Movement and its members? (VI) What role or interactions would you like to have with the Occupy DC Movement and its members?

Lastly, the finalized online Occupy DC interview includes and 5 demographic questions and six of open-ended questions. The online interviews were intentionally made as short as possible to help ensure that individuals would respond to a majority of the questions by eliminating follow-up questions and paring down the number of open ended questions. The open ended questions were: (I) How would you describe the meaning of the Occupy movement? (II) How did you come to the conclusion to join the movement? (III) What do you find rewarding about being a part of Occupy DC? (IV) Can you describe in what way (s) your thinking changed about the movement from you first became involved? (V) Throughout the movement experience, what has been the most challenging experience? (VI) What personal and/or political outcome (s) do you hope to achieve through involvement in the occupy movement?

**Online Student Interviews**

Student participants (32 females, 8 males, age range: 18-60) were recruited by email. The link to the online student survey was distributed to all DC campus Chicago School of Professional Psychology students through an email by a third party TCSPP employee. The link to the student online survey was emailed to all students and told the survey time would end in one week. By the final day, 17 students had completed the student online survey. The same TCSPP employee was asked to resend the online survey to all students in an attempt to increase the number of participants. The survey closed with 40 students having participated.

**Online Occupy Interviews**

Occupy participants (8 males, age range 21- over 60; with the 21-29 age range most prevalent) were recruited by email. The link to the online occupy was distributed through an affiliated listserv through contact with the Occupy DC press media. The request was made to the press office via

telephone call and follow-up email on with the survey remaining open 3 weeks. Originally, the survey was set to close in one week; but after no responses it was resent and extended.

**In-person student and faculty interviews**

Student participants (8 female, 2 male, age range: 18-40) and faculty (2 male, 1 female, age range 26-60) were recruited from TCSPP Washington, DC campus. Students were the initial intended participants, however after completing several student interviews, researchers agreed that faculty members could provide further insightful information into the study. Therefore, faculty members were included into the in-person interview process.

Data was collected on three separate days spanning a one-week period. Participants were approached on the TCSPP campus during high volume class hours by two groups of interviewers. Prior to the in-person interviews, an email was sent out to the entire campus with a link to the online student survey. Therefore, the researchers referred to the email when approaching student participants for further clarification as well as to avoid obtaining data from the same participant twice. Students who participated in the in-person interview did not complete the online survey and the same was true for the opposite. Participants were taken to small private rooms during the interview process.

**In-person Occupy interviews**

Participants (8 male, 2 female, age range: 18-60) in this study were recruited from McPherson Square, which is one of two prominent Occupy DC sites, after confirming their membership in the Occupy movement. Data was collected during two consecutive afternoons using the semi structured Occupy DC interview. Occupy DC participants were approached in McPherson Square park by three groups of researchers. Upon the researchers' return to school it was discovered that questions six and seven from the semi-structured in person Occupy DC survey were unintentionally excluded from the printed and copied versions used during the first three interviews. Researchers discussed the situation and determined that the integrity of the survey was not harmed by the exclusion of unasked questions because they were sufficiently covered by the remaining questions. Therefore the remaining interviews also excluded questions six and seven.
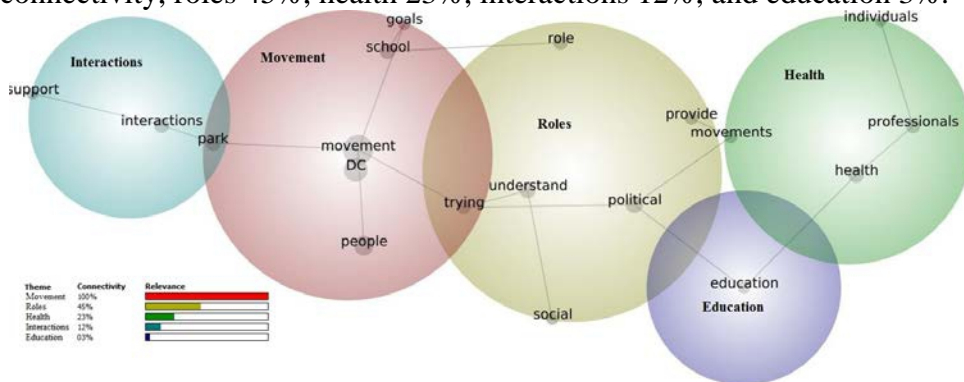
**Results**

**Analysis**

Using the qualitative analysis software Leximancer, the researchers were able to obtain results for the online student and occupier interviews. Lemixmancer identifies levels of connectivity, reported in percentage, for

each concept map by taking into account the frequency of each concept word in each theme and the occurrence of words and concepts within larger concepts. The major and significant line of connectivity runs through the concept words until a concept map is generated for visual display.  Running the analysis without cleaning the data brought up many concepts themes that had no significant meaning. Therefore, the researchers went back to the concept list editor window to remove the concept words that were of no significance. In addition to removing words from the concept list, some concept words were merged together as these concept words were used interchangeably throughout the interviews. These merged concepts also had similar meanings.
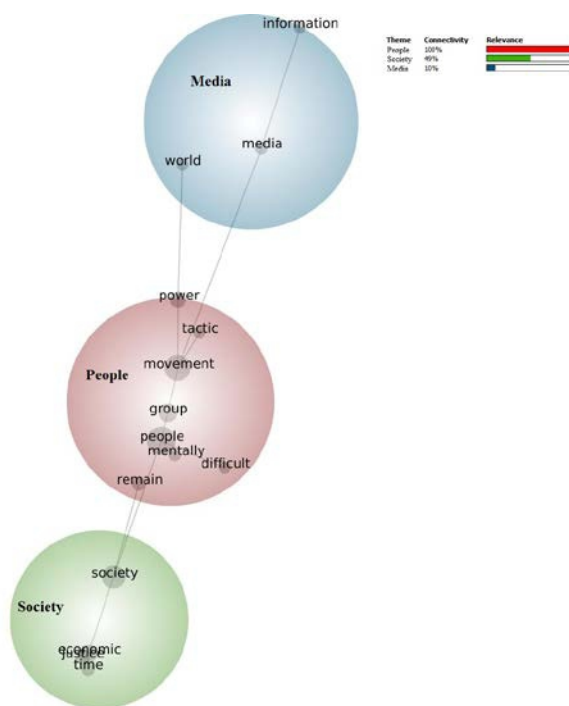
**Online Interviews: Students**
        Of the 40 participants, eight only responded to demographic information, therefore were excluded from the data analysis process.  The finalized concept map involved five themes: movement, roles, health, interactions, and education (Figure 1).  The theme of movement had a 100% connectivity, roles 45%, health 23%, interactions 12%, and education 3%.



**Figure 1:** Student Online Theme and Concept Map

        In the movement theme, students describe the interaction with the movement using park as the intermediary the movement as, "It was a little unpleasant to have to go through the park when they were there because they smelled", "…park deterioration, though harmless", "McPherson Square became an unsafe place to walk through when they were in full bloom", "…ruination of the park".  In the interactions theme, the concept words were all related to students' interaction with the occupy movement.  All those interacting with the movement reported negative experiences and a disinterest in supporting the movement.  Interestingly, some students had not had interaction with the movement and showed support for the movement through statements like "I'd like to help support their efforts in some way."

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Under the roles theme, participants discussed the role of psychologists in political movements through statements like "They should be trying to understand the movement and raise awareness of the goals of the movement". Lastly, the concept words in the health theme were related to how mental health professionals should take a role in the political movements. Most participants mentioned that mental health professionals should take a neutral role or participate in movement related to mental health through statements like "It would be extremely inappropriate for mental health professionals to advocate either for or against a particular political party, or a group that has a political agenda. Mental health professionals should remain "neutral", unless related to or influential towards or by mental health professions."



**Figure 2:** Occupy Online Theme and Concept Map

## Online Interviews
## Occupy

For the Occupy online interview results, the finalized concept map involved three themes: people, society and media. The "people" theme illustrated 100% connectivity, society with economics and justice 49%, and media 10%. The people theme spoke to the comradery within the movement around the mission (society theme) and the tactics (media theme). The society theme is best understood by listing the words that are connected within it "Economic," "Justice," "Time," and "Society."  The media theme

reflected the strategy of the movement as well as its signals outside the close knit group, with statements such as "We will not succeed if we remain a fringe movement, we must reach out through the media to effect world change."

**Faculty in-person interviews**

      The faculty interviews generated 5 main themes: occupy movement, mental, issues, and social justice (see Figure 3). Occupy movement had 100% connectivity, mental 59%, social justice 22%, issues 8%, and problem 4%. The occupy movement theme was connected on one side to mental and problems and on the other side to social justice and issues, showing two clearly delineated paths for the commentary. In the mental theme, concepts words were all related to providing some kind mental services to community and the movement. A closer look at the concept shows it was significantly attributed to the movement concept (darker line) but was also connected to community, homeless, problems, and issues.

      The word concept of justice was in general talking about the responsibilities of the profession, such as "…since social justice — especially with the counseling profession, social justice is a major focus of the profession as a whole." The theme "problems" has a negative connotation and spoke to how the movement impacted the faculty, such as "For a while, I changed my way I was getting into work. I avoided it because it started becoming a problem…" However, the theme "issues" has a more neutral connotation and was related to spreading the word of what the movement stands for such as "…(the) more I think about the movement, a lot of the issues were the recent news."



**Figure 3:** Faculty Theme and Concept Map

**Student in-person interviews**

      The in-person student interviews yielded 4 main themes: People, Occupy, Role, and Park (see Figure 4). The connectivity was 100% for

people, 52% for occupy, 33% for role, and 14% for park.  The word concept theme of people had the highest connectivity and can be best understood through this quote from one student, "But I mean there's a purpose to what they're doing.  You know what I mean.  So I feel like you could gain a better perspective of other people's ideals and beliefs..." The second most connected word concept theme was Occupy, which appeared to speak mainly to the involvement of psychologists in the movement such as "I think that, again the larger goal of psychologists need to be lobbying for the acceptance of mental illness and supplying better mental health services and making them more affordable, probably plays in to some of the Occupy D.C. goals, but I don't know about specific way in which I felt like psychologist should be getting involved in Occupy D.C."

The third identified theme was role, which was heavily connected to the political aspects of the movement such as in this quote "I'm not a very political person so I don't really-I think maybe their role should just be the same as every else's role.  They're political movements by politicians to see or what they should do, I think that maybe the mental health professional should be consulted..."  Lastly, the concept park was associated a lot of negative statements linking to an apparent lack of understanding for some students with comments like "It looks like, again not to be taken offensively, bunch of hippies just hanging out in the park.  I don't really even know what it's about anymore."
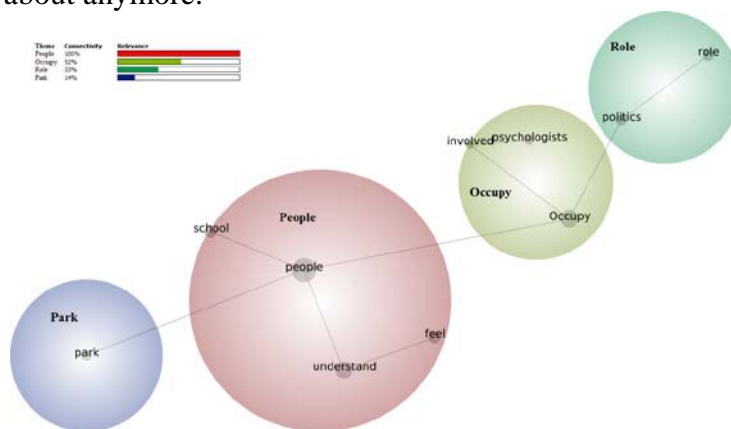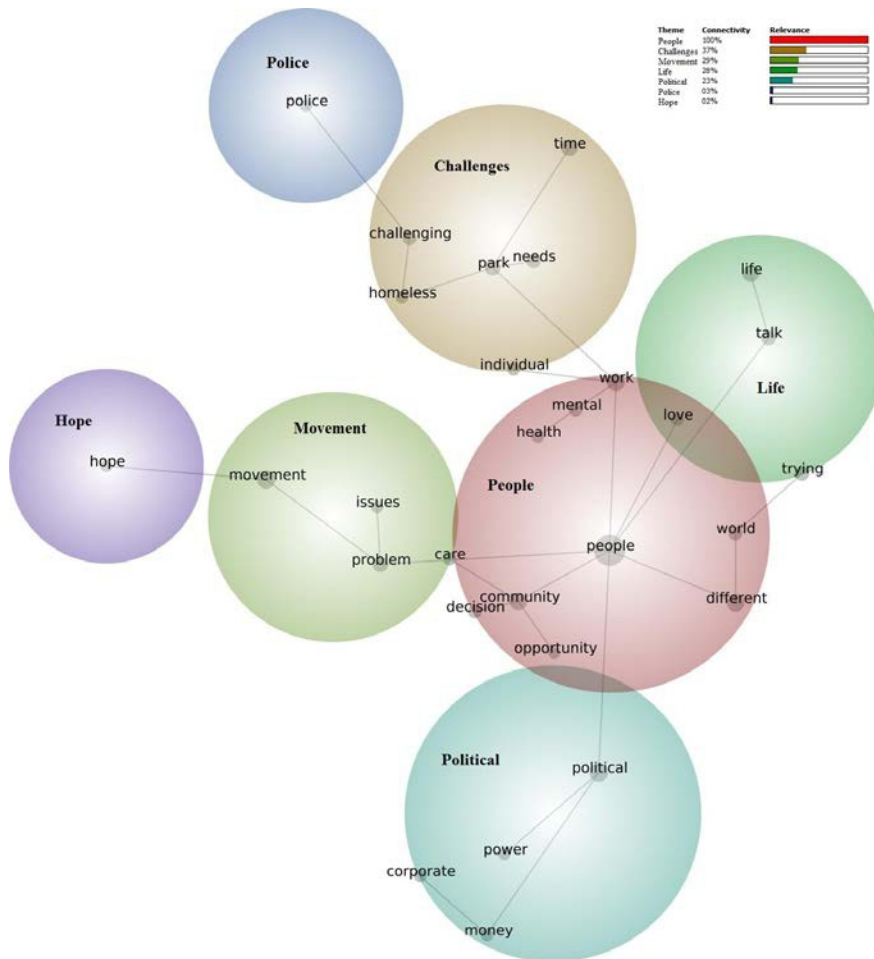


**Figure 4:** In-person Student Theme and Concept Map

**Occupiers in-person interviews**

The Occupy movement participants identified 7 main themes during the in-person interviews:  People, Challenges, Occupy Movement, Life, Political, Police, and Hope (see Figure 5).  The people theme had 100%, 37% for challenges, 29% for occupy movement, 28% for life, 23% for

political, 03% for Police, and 02% for hope. A good understanding of the word concept people, which was the most connected, can be witnessed in a quote like this one from an occupier, "The meaning of the Occupation is to communicate to people just how bad things are in this country and how much we need to start fighting back."  The second most connected word concept was challenges that referred to the difficulties with being a part of the movement such as "And there are times that I get very, very discouraged. I mean I'm not asking for sympathy but it takes a lot of us to live outdoors, in a park and to sleep on the streets and to fight every day and there are times where I feel like we've done nothing and I'm ready to give up."
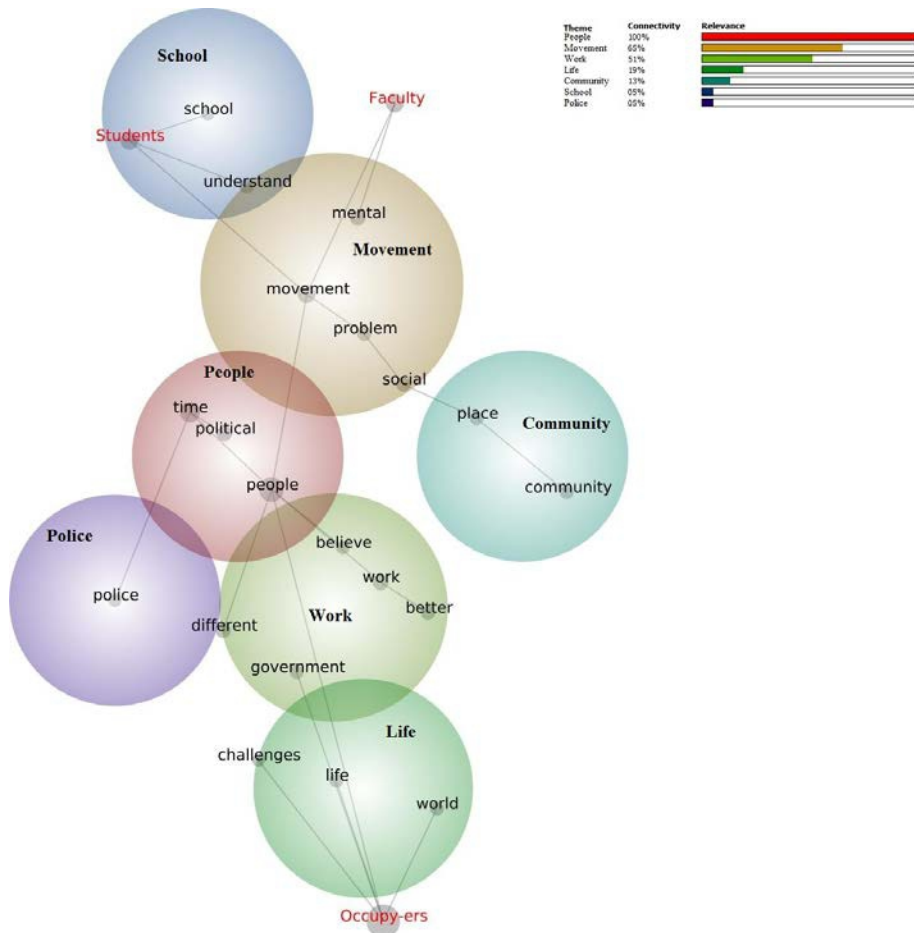
Movement, referring to the Occupy Movement, was the next most connected and referred to what the occupiers identify the goals of the movement such as "It's an opportunity for everybody to contribute to the society and you are making that initiative to come up with a solution in our problem than you are not responsible on destruction of the social frame that we have right now.  And sometimes we realize that we are like that, not participating in movements or any type of movement, Occupy and non-Occupy and expect the government to do all the solution making for us." Going further down the connectivity list we have the concept theme of life, and gain insight from this quote, "I feel in touch with the things in life that matter."  Political is the next theme down the ladder, and is adequately summed up by one occupier saying, "So that the American people have the attitude of participation necessary to eventually reclaim the power that we're losing to big government and big corporations."  The final two concept themes are police, best covered by one occupier saying "You know, I guess the police and the homeless is the worst thing." which makes a lot of sense since it branches out from challenges, and hope, stated by another occupier quite simply as, "I have hope now."

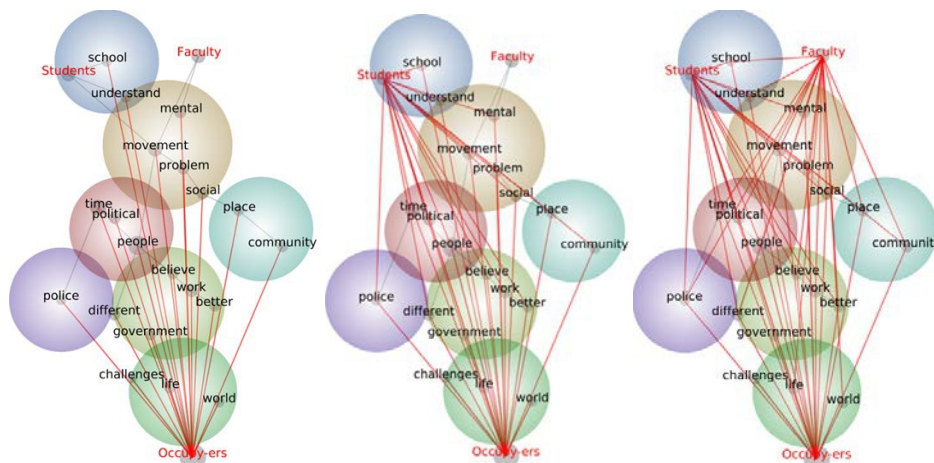**Figure 5:** In-person Occupy Theme and Concept Map

**Three group comparison**

The results the analysis of all the groups combined interviews resulted in 7 themes:  People, Movement, Work, Life, Community, School, and Police (see Figure 6). The connectivity for people was 100%, 65% for movement, 51% for work, 19% for life, 13% for community, 05% for school, and 05% for police.

**Figure 6:** Three Group Comparison Theme and Concept Map

The contrast between the three groups is evident beyond the main connection line that bypasses two themes closest to occupiers and is better shown in figure 7.  The red lines branching out from occupiers show how the organization of themes are connected with occupiers.  Also, the red lines are branching out from students as well, showing the proximity of themes and overlap with Occupiers.  Lastly, the same red lines branching out from faculty giving understanding of what themes are connected to all 3 by placing them in the middle, with the themes more important to each group and less important to the others being located closer to the group because of strength of connectivity.

**Figure 7:** Three Group Comparison Breakdown Theme and Concept Map

## Conclusion

The Occupiers' results revolved around the concept of people. The occupy participants described some of the hardships faced in regards to their affiliation within the movement. Online occupiers described challenges in terms of mental difficulty, while in-person occupiers discussed physical hardships such as sleeping on the streets and living outdoors. Despite these challenges the occupiers remain committed to their cause. The people within the movement and the acceptance of the community developed among Occupiers were described as reasons for their commitment.

Acceptance appeared important to the Occupiers. The occupiers mentioned their desire for diverse people among the movement, all with differing points of views. Consistent with the Occupy DC (2012) commitment to not having one spokesperson, the occupy participants described the cause as a leaderless movement, one in which there is not one single viewpoint or goal. The value placed on diversity and acceptance of varying views could be a main cause for the disconnect between occupiers vision and the public's knowledge of the meaning and reason behind Occupy DC.

Students and faculty both discussed limited interaction with the Occupy DC members. Participants who discussed their interaction, identified walking through the park as their main source of contact with occupiers. The contact appeared indirect and was described in the majority of cases as a negative experience rather than positive. One of the main negative experiences was the environmental impact. Research on social and political movements throughout different societies has demonstrated a negative impact on the environment (Xie & Van der Heijden, 2010; Staggenborg, 2001). Countries such as China, Burma, and Thailand have been negatively

affected by political movements in relation to the destruction of the local environment (Xie and Van der Heijden, 2010).

Both students and faculty explained the environmental impact in relation to the deterioration of McPherson Square Park: a place once described as pleasant, public, and beautiful. Students and faculty were adamant about not participating in the Occupy DC movement because of the noticeable change in the condition of the park. Based on the responses of the students and faculty if public property is being harmed as collateral damage than they would not be willing to participate in a cause. Students and faculty participants made contradictory statements on their desire for further interaction with occupiers beyond walking through the park. Some mentioned supporting the occupiers' cause while others desired no further interaction. In addition, the research team witnessed the forced displacement of the occupiers later that year. Over the course of an hour various members of the research team walked through the park, asked questions of the occupiers, took note of the interactions between the occupiers and police and the removal of what appeared to be bio-hazardous material from the tents.

Uncertainty of the meaning and purpose of the Occupy DC movement was also identified by students and faculty, which impacted their desire for further interaction. Although many described the movement in terms of the "99%" and the "1%" little was known beyond this. Furthermore, students and faculty expressed uncertainty in the cause of the movement due to too many goals. This could be seen in the accumulation of goals listed throughout the Occupy Dc website. Based on the results, if Occupiers were able to specify main goals and attempt to protect the environment, psychologist would be more willing take a role in the movement.

Students and faculty identified several roles for psychologists within the Occupy DC movement or in political movements in general. Some student and faculty participants believe psychologists should play a neutral role in political or social movements, while others expressed strong feelings against a psychologist playing any role in political movements, including Occupy DC. However, students and faculty discussed multiple active roles including: understanding the movement, providing mental health, increasing awareness, or promoting social justice. If psychologists took the role of understanding the Occupy DC movement, they could increase awareness through education on effective means of articulating a purpose. Psychologists can also be a mediator between a movement's goals and providing this information to the public.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to the current study. All of the in-person interviews were conducted during the day. This could have prevented a truly randomized sampling. Many of the students interviewed were in the same program, same classes, and therefore had similar experiences in their interactions with occupiers. In addition, interviewing in daytime hours may have prevented students and occupiers who had full time jobs from participating in the in-person research process. This could have impacted the results. Responses may have varied depending on the person's employment status. Furthermore, online occupy participants were self-selected and influenced by the researchers' Occupy DC contact. The Occupiers who participated in the online surveys had to have access to a computer, internet, and have the time and computer skills to complete the survey. These Occupiers may not reflect the same circumstances as those interviewed in McPherson Square. In addition, several participants mentioned having mental health problems. The mental health status and psychological functioning of the participants may have impacted the results.

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