Explorations in Social Psychology

QUALITATIVE APPROACHES TO THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF POPULISM

UNMASKING POPULIST APPEAL

Edited by Inari Sakki

Qualitative Approaches to the Social Psychology of Populism

This edited volume presents a social psychological exploration of populism and provides a unique qualitative understanding of the phenomenon's appeal, bringing together an international mix of experts to interrogate populist attraction worldwide.

Featuring contributions from Finland, Greece, and Switzerland, the book offers nuanced theoretical, methodological, and empirical approaches for understanding populism, with chapters investigating topics such as populist communication, lay discourse, social representations of the elite and the people, and the mobilisation of young people. Unmasking the persuasive appeal of populism, the book provides examples of qualitative approaches within social, cultural, and political psychology. It draws from established theoretical traditions such as social representations theory and social identity theory, as well as critical discursive approaches, to demonstrate how to study complex relational phenomena such as populism.

With its novel inclusion of innovative qualitative methods for examining the social psychology of populism – providing a useful toolkit for qualitative research across various societal and political topics – this book will appeal to scholars, postgraduate students, and researchers studying social and political psychology, communication, qualitative research methods, and political behaviour more broadly.

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For my beloved foursome Ines, Elmer, Akseli,
and Hilkka.

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Preface

The rise of populism around the globe has become one of the most significant political phenomena of the 21st century. Academic discussions on populism have been vibrant, inspiring thousands of journal articles and volumes across a variety of fields, including contributions from social psychology. However, despite this extensive body of work, there has been a notable absence of volumes specifically focused on qualitative approaches to studying populism. This volume, titled *Qualitative Approaches to the Social Psychology of Populism: Unmasking Populist Appeal*, seeks to address this gap by drawing on a Finnish qualitative project on the social psychology of populism.

This volume aims to explore the intricate relationship between social psychology and populism, while highlighting the importance of qualitative methods in populist research. Specifically, its first aim is to introduce novel qualitative methods for examining the social psychology of populism, including interviewing, discursive analysis, visual rhetorical analysis, and multimodal discourse analysis. The materials studied range from the discourse of laypeople in different European populist contexts to political campaign videos, campaign images, and TikTok videos. This diversity in qualitative material provides a concrete toolkit for scholars working in qualitative research across various societal and political topics.

The second aim is to give voice to ordinary citizens and explore how they understand and interpret populism and its core tenets – the people and the elite. It examines how lay people assign meanings to populists and non-populists and justify their support or opposition to populist movements. While existing literature on populism has mainly focused on the rhetoric of right-wing populist politicians and quantitative research on the general population, very few studies have empirically explored lay (populist) discourse through in-depth interviews. This volume addresses this gap by presenting empirical studies based on in-depth interviews with populist and non-populist voters in three European countries: Finland, Greece, and Switzerland.

In the following sections, we explore these two goals in greater depth.

Why qualitative methods matter

This volume argues that qualitative research contributes to the understanding of the ways in which populism is experienced, understood, and propagated. Unlike quantitative methods, which often seek to measure and generalise, qualitative approaches allow for an in-depth exploration of meanings, effectively, highlighting the voices and perspectives of individuals who engage with and are affected by populist ideologies. For instance, interviews and focus groups provide a deeper understanding of the beliefs, motivations, and emotions of individuals who support or oppose populist movements. This is especially noteworthy as these psychological processes do not develop in a vacuum, but in complex interplay with other people, groups, and society. For example, the way we perceive ourselves is very much related to how we believe others see us (see Chapters 1 and 10 in this volume).

Qualitative research also allows for the exploration of the specific historical, cultural, and social contexts in which populism arises (see Chapters 7–10 in this volume). Understanding these contextual underpinnings is crucial to exploring why populism resonates with certain groups and how it manifests differently across regions. The constructions of the people and the elite may not differ just across regions or countries, but also within a country (see Chapters 7–9).

Qualitative case studies are important because they can capture the complex dynamics – for example, between leaders, supporters, and opponents – through which populist movements gain support. Qualitative research methods, particularly discursive, visual, and multimodal approaches, are powerful tools for uncovering subtle rhetorical patterns that often remain hidden or require careful navigation in communication. These methods allow researchers to delve into the complex interplay of language, imagery, and various modes of expression, uncovering how these elements work together to construct and convey meaning within different contexts (see Chapters 3–6).

Ultimately, the flexibility and depth of qualitative methods make them indispensable for a comprehensive and holistic understanding of populism.

Why the social psychological approach matters

As populism continues to exert its influence on political landscapes and public discourse, social psychologists have increasingly turned their attention to understanding its appeal, impact, and underlying dynamics. While there is a growing scholarly interest in populism within the field of social psychology, this volume is, to our knowledge, the first to provide a framework for qualitative approaches to this particular field of study. Unlike other social psychological volumes on populism, this book places a societal social psychological perspective at its core.

Societal psychology, first introduced by Himmelweit and Gaskell (1990), explores the interconnections between psychological processes and social contexts. Drawing from various social psychological theories that emphasise the context, such as the social representations approach (SRA), affective-discursive approach, social identity approach (SIA), and critical discursive psychology (CDP), this field allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between psychological and societal dynamics. The societal social psychological approach also acts as a bridge between the individual and the collective, the psychological and the political, and intersects with disciplines such as history, communication, and political science. It addresses the interplay between psychological processes and social contexts, revealing how populist rhetoric and actions gain traction among certain groups while facing resistance from others within diverse societal settings.

This integrated approach enables us to recognise that the appeal of populism is not solely a result of political rhetoric and actions but is deeply intertwined with the lived experiences, emotions, and identity work of its audiences. Social representations, affect, identity, and discourse provide lenses through which we can comprehend populism as a mobilising force that shapes perceptions, moral landscapes, and collective actions (see Chapter 1).

Structure of the book

The book is structured into three sections: theoretical, methodological, and empirical.

The first part of the book establishes the theoretical foundation for a qualitative social psychological exploration of populism. In Chapter 1, Sakki and Hakokõngäs delve into the intricate process through which populist actors, their audiences, and society at large engage in the dynamic construction, negotiation, and mobilisation of social representations, emotions, identities, and discourses to shape a political imagination. The authors argue that the populist imagination as a mobilising force is built upon four assumptions: populism as shared knowledge, populism interpreted through the lens of identity, populism as multimodal practice, and populism as collective action.

The second part of the book focuses on qualitative methodologies for investigating populism exploring populist imagination in diverse textual, visual, and multimodal material. This section aims to provide practical guidelines for scholars working in qualitative research on diverse societal and political topics.

Chapter 2, by Rovamo and Mabrouk, delves into the strengths and challenges of conducting qualitative interviews with supporters of populist parties and movements, offering valuable insights for researchers planning to engage with hard-to-reach populations and sensitive topics.

In Chapter 3, Tormis, Pettersson, and Sakki present a three-step CDP method for analysing the content, form, and function of populist discourse. This approach addresses the methodological challenges of mainstream approaches, allowing for sensitivity to the contextual nuances of discourse and understanding the polarising and politicising social consequences of laypeople's talk.

In Chapter 4, Martikainen and Sakki present a case study exploring the visual rhetorical persuasion of campaign images of the Finnish populist party's presidential candidate, Jussi Halla-aho. This chapter illustrates the power of images in politics and provides a methodological approach for scholars interested in studying visual populist discourse.

Chapter 5, by Pettersson and Martikainen, proposes a multimodal critical discursive psychology (MCDP) approach to analyse identity politics in populist communication, highlighting the increasing importance of MDA due to the spread of populism to online platforms.

In Chapter 6, Jaakkola and Sakki draw from an MCDP approach to examine the mobilisation of shared social identity and leadership in right-wing populist TikTok communication, showcasing how TikTok serves as a platform for crafting social identity and engaging with diverse audiences.

The third part of the volume focuses on empirical studies of lay discourse based on in-depth qualitative interviews in three Western European countries – Finland, Greece, and Switzerland – each with unique populist political landscapes.

In Chapter 7, Droumpali and Chryssochoou utilise SRA to investigate how lay thinkers construct the core notion of populism, the concept of 'the people'. They highlight its connections to the perception of social order, conflict navigation, and politicised identities.

Chapter 8, by Mabrouk and Staerklé, analyses the construction and utilisation of the category of 'the elite' in lay talk across the right- and left-wing populist spectrum in Switzerland, shedding light on its different interpretations and ideological functions.

Chapter 9, by Ntotsikas and Chryssochoou, explores how the concept of populism has been transferred to and (re)negotiated by lay Greek individuals, revealing that for most lay people, populism is seen as a widespread practice.

In Chapter 10, Sakki and Silfver examine the role of moral emotions in shaping lay discourse surrounding the right-wing populist Finns Party (FP), illustrating how these moral constructions around the populist party contribute to the affective polarisation of the public sphere.

Reference

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I am profoundly grateful for the enriching international exchanges that have shaped this work, particularly the insightful discussions held weekly at the outset of the project. These exchanges provided a platform for learning from each other's experiences with the diverse manifestations of populism in our respective countries. To the entire team, thank you for embarking on this journey together.

A heartfelt thank you to all those who played a role in compiling this book. I am extremely grateful to Rika Yamada for her invaluable assistance in commenting on and editing the book, and to the anonymous reviewers who provided invaluable feedback on the chapters.

In conclusion, this book endeavours to unveil the multifaceted appeal of populism through a qualitative and social psychological lens. By integrating theoretical, methodological, and empirical approaches, it aims to serve as a resource for those interested in qualitative methods and as a comprehensive guide for scholars, students, and practitioners exploring the social psychology of populism. We hope this volume will inspire more qualitative research in this field, fostering a deeper understanding of one of the most pressing political challenges of our time.

Part I

Theory

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Chapter 1

Populism as political imagination

Theoretical approaches

Inari Sakki and Eemeli Hakoköngäs

Multifaceted populism

Populism is a controversial concept, giving rise to lively political and social scientific discussions on its definition. It has been defined as an ideology (Mudde, 2004), discourse (Laclau, 2005), rhetorical style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), and a combination of all three (Rooduijn, 2019). Political scientist Cas Mudde (2004, pp. 543–544) described populism as a thin ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups ('the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite') and that views politics as the expression of the general *volonté* of the people. He added that due to its thin nature, populism is a flexible ideology that can be a part of both left- and right-wing ideologies and be linked to other ideologies, such as nationalism, xenophobia, and socialism. Therefore, it can be exclusive or inclusive (Brubaker, 2017).

The same idea was outlined by social psychologists in the populist representations model based on intergroup differentiation along vertical and horizontal dimensions (Staerklé & Green, 2018). The former refers to the gap between the good people and the bad elite, while the latter is about the confrontation between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group' – 'us' and 'them'. Immigrants and refugees, along with members of the community who are thought to violate its core norms (e.g., the unemployed or those living on welfare benefits), are typically regarded as members of the out-group. Based on this model, a combination of high-level vertical and horizontal differentiation best describes national (right-wing) populism. This congruence between dimensions has emerged in many studies on right-wing populism (e.g., Mols & Jetten, 2016). Specifically, the persuasive and mobilising power of right-wing populism has been found to be built on two images: (1) an *outside threat* (e.g., immigrants) is needed to blame society's political, cultural, and academic elite and (2) to portray the in-group (e.g., representatives of the populist movement) as standing up for the general populace as *defenders* of the will of the people (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Sakki et al., 2018). In contrast, social (left-wing) populism possesses a combination of high-level vertical and low-level horizontal differentiation. Left-wing populism is characterised by its focus on economic inequality, advocating for

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wealth redistribution, social justice, and empowering marginalised groups against established elites.

Following the idea of two antagonistic groups, the discursive strand in populist scholarship, inspired by the work of philosopher Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005), has focused more on how populist antagonism and social categories between the elite and the people are discursively constructed to achieve political aims. Hence, Laclau viewed populism as a discursive strategy employed by political actors to construct a people and mobilise them against an antagonistic other (e.g., elites, foreigners, or an establishment). The discourse-theoretical conceptualisation of populism (De Cleen, 2017) emphasises the need to analyse the constructions and meanings of the people and the elite (see Chapters 7 and 8 in this volume). Thus, it can capture the various forms and expressions of populism without claiming to provide an exhaustive definition thereof.

Populism is generally approached as a logic of articulation composed of three elements: a loosely defined identification with 'us', a separation between 'us' and 'them', and an element that incorporates the audience through passion or an emotional appeal (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Social psychological research has expanded on the populist work outlined above, further shedding light on the contents and meanings of the categories of the people, elite, and immigrant out-group, particularly as articulated in right-wing populist communication. Such research suggests that populist movements construct a loose definition of the people, with malleable borders that depend on the discursive context. Typically this image portrays 'the native people' as virtuous and in need of protection from external threats, such as immigration and globalisation (Mols & Jetten, 2016; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

Meanwhile, in the search for reasons behind the persuasiveness of populism, social and political scientists commonly distinguish between *demand-side* (voters) and *supply-side* (politicians) explanations. Demand-side research aims to uncover socioeconomic conditions explaining populist parties' appeal. Specifically, it highlights grievances such as economic deprivation, rising economic inequality, resistance to immigration, cultural anxiety, and cultural backlash as key factors to the success of populist movements (Mols & Jetten, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rydgren, 2007). However, in certain situations, such as in explaining the popularity of populism in countries with low-income inequality or low immigration levels, these demand-side explanations seem insufficient. Consequently, Mols and Jetten (2020) argued that these demand-side explanations only partially explain the populist appeal and that their relationship is more complex, suggesting a concurrent examination of supply-side factors. This includes focusing on what populist parties and their leaders do to portray their party as the solution to various grievances on the demand side (Mols & Jetten, 2020), suggesting that populist support not only relies on socioeconomic circumstances but also on how populist leaders frame these grievances on the supply side and how supporters interpret them. Previous research

shows that right-wing populist actors often mobilise feelings of injustice and victimhood (Mols & Jetten, 2016), successfully shaping public sentiment on the demand side among laypeople and voters (Mols & Jetten, 2020).

Overall, the need for a more comprehensive approach to the populist appeal – one that views populism as a *dialogic relationship* between populist actors and their audience, between populist supporters and non-supporters, and as an interplay of representation, discourses, emotions, and identities – lays the foundations for our qualitative approach to understanding populism. This chapter consists of two main sections that elaborate on our approach to populism as political imagination. First, we present our perspective on populism as political imagination, focusing on the interplay between social representation, affect, identity, rhetoric, and discourse. Second, we further explore populism as a specific form of mobilising political imagination by approaching political action as dependent on the sociopsychological processes by which our understanding of the world is produced.

Populist appeal as political imagination

Social and political psychology has predominantly approached the populist appeal through motivational, emotional, and cognitive factors as well as human needs and values (Forgas et al., 2021). In this chapter, we shift our attention away from solely focusing on individual political behaviour and its underlying factors. Instead, we propose an approach that centres on the interplay between social psychological and political phenomena, particularly through analysing the politics of social knowledge. As a result of the following literature review, we complement the existing definitions of populism by suggesting that in many cases, particularly when studying lay voters of different parties, populism can be defined as a form of political imagination.

We argue that approaching populism as political imagination provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how it symbolically constructs realities, mobilises emotions and identities, crafts influential narratives, and challenges existing power structures. This perspective helps to uncover the deeper, often imaginative processes that drive populist movements and their appeal. In line with Mols and Jetten's (2020) integrative model of the support for populist radical right parties (PRRPs), which captures the interaction between supply- and demand-side factors, the populist imagination involves a complex interplay among various social actors – populist parties; other parties; the media; and diverse audiences, including supporters, opponents, and those in between – who actively shape this symbolic imagery around politics. This interplay forms the political imagination, wielding symbolic power to establish legitimate social knowledge, emotions, and identities while dismissing, marginalising, or silencing alternative perspectives and ways of being. Populism as political imagination never exists in a vacuum but in relation to other imaginations, some of which legitimise, challenge, or alter it.

In what follows, we present four social psychological approaches that we have found useful for understanding the nature of populism as a form of political imagination, approaching the concept as a social representation, affect, identity, and discourse. While all of these are interlinked and crucial constituents of political imagination, we discuss them separately for clarity.

Populism as social representation

The social representations approach (SRA), pioneered by social psychologist Serge Moscovici (1961), provides a social psychological framework for understanding how knowledge is socially constructed, maintained, and contested by individuals and communities in everyday life. Social representations are 'ways of world making' (Moscovici, 1988, p. 231), a form of localised systems of meaning shaped through communicative practices within and across social groups. These representations help groups to understand their social world and position themselves within it. They are also pervasive across various social and political interactions, from everyday conversations in local settings to media debates, political campaigning, and even legislative frameworks.

Social representations are also inherently political endeavours (Howarth, 2006), influenced by the interests and actions of the groups producing them within specific intergroup contexts (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008). Populist movements often capitalise on these representations to foster a sense of unity and shared identity among their supporters. Power dynamics determine which representations are considered most credible or real, reflecting the dominance of certain groups' perspectives. However, although social representations may seem stable or hegemonic, they still permit resistance and agency through the active representation of existing knowledge and social categories.

In SRA, knowledge is never viewed as the result of simple information processing but as the product of self–other interaction, which, in turn, is influenced by existing intergroup relations. This ego–alter–object interdependence forms the most basic epistemological foundation for the act of representation (Moscovici, 1984). However, it is important to note that these representations coexist with other competing, cooperating, or conflicting dynamic triangular ego–alter–object structures. Populism, as a particular kind of social knowledge, can be understood as connected to various structures, such as those revolving around the meanings of democracy, immigration, nation, and so on.

While many scholars have focused on studying how the social object – populism and its associated themes, such as immigration, climate, and gender – is constructed in interaction and communication, a more interesting question for a social or political psychologist may be how the ego and alter, 'us' and 'them', mutually transform each other in this process of re-presentation (Häkli & Hakokõngäs, 2024; Marková, 2003). These social categories not only become positions from which we understand and make sense of our social reality but are also situated within a system of power relations that afford

some categories more and some less access to defining and contesting this social reality. Hence, examining populism as a social representation allows us to explore how we perceive ourselves, how we view others, our understanding of social and political reality, and our potential actions within it (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Reicher, 2004).

This idea resonated with Elcheroth et al. (2011), who suggested that social representations are inherently linked to how we categorise people in the social world. Our orientation towards social representations depends on how we categorise ourselves in relation to the groups with which those representations are associated. This was demonstrated by Rovamo and Sakki (2024a), who showed how the majority of Finnish lay interviewees supporting different political parties constructed populist supporters as the other. In addition to portraying the actions of populist politicians as deviant and goal-oriented and populist supporters as irrational and emotion-driven, these individuals positioned themselves as better suited to make informed political decisions because they did not find populist rhetoric appealing. Importantly, regarding our point related to the inseparability of ego and alter in the process of representation, it is also worth noting that when interviewees explicitly talked about populist politicians or parties, they simultaneously constructed the social category of populist supporters, albeit implicitly. That is, for instance, when an interviewee portrayed a populist politician as misleading, they simultaneously constructed populist supporters as individuals who had been misled and who, as a result, held incorrect beliefs.

The focus on the representation of social categories is central to understanding political phenomena: before studying intergroup relations, we must first examine how we conceptualise these groups. Additionally, through what we think others believe (meta-representations) and what we think others think of us (meta-meta-representations), we form an idea of what others know. This shapes how we see the world and how we act together as a group (Elcheroth et al., 2011). Recently, Rovamo and Sakki (2024a) studied the meanings given to the term populism among populist and non-populist supporters. They demonstrated how when people discussed what populism means, they considered not only possible arguments against it (Billig, 1987), showing they recognised these ideas about what others think, but also what they knew about what others believed about them. Highlighting the fundamentally social nature of people, these ideas about what others think, along with the thoughts about what others think of us, shape how we see things collectively even more than our personal beliefs do (Elcheroth et al., 2011). The focus on the functions of social, meta-, and meta-meta-representations enables us to approach the populist appeal not just as a 'social object' per se, but as dynamically and dialogically constructed, negotiated, and used to define who others are, who 'we' are, and the boundaries between the two. 'Their' views of 'us' are of importance to understand the emotional dynamics that fuel populist voices.

Populism as affect

Emotional appeal – pathos – is a frequently discussed rhetorical device in populist communication (Bos et al., 2010; Hameleers et al., 2017; Wirz, 2018). While emotionality in populist communication has been extensively studied in relation to the use of fear, anger, or shame (see Rico et al., 2017; Salmela & Von Scheve, 2017), it has been less commonly examined as an affective practice inseparable from meaning making and identity building (see Wetherell, 2012, 2015). Unlike mainstream psychological theories that often treat affect as separate, private, and purely psychological, the study of affective–discursive practice highlights the embodied and semiotic aspects of emotion, focusing on its social, performative, and patterned nature.

To understand the role of affect and its intertwining with the meaning-making process, we approach affect as discursively constructed through language (Wetherell, 2012). For example, Tormis et al. (2024) applied an affective-discursive approach to analyse environmental populist discourse in Finland, demonstrating how, in lay populists' discourse, it was built on social relations and negative affects, such as annoyance, irritation, frustration, and unfairness, but also on national pride, glory, and nostalgia. Participants positioned 'us' and 'them' differently in relation to environmental discourse. For instance, the commonsensical and rational position was constructed for 'us' and claimed through the 'environmental other', who was depicted as ideological, hypocritical, irrational, and a source of annoyance and irritation. In their discourse, ordinary rural people were positioned as victims of constraining climate policies and forced into an unfair position, justifying frustration towards the reality-detached political opponent, the ignorant urban elite. The study suggested that adopting the affective-discursive approach has the potential to offer novel insights into the dynamics involved in the polarisation of populist topics, such as environmental issues in society and their consequences on affective polarisation.

Similarly, Rovamo et al. (2024) examined lay interviews in Finland to reveal how affective polarisation developed as people talk about immigration. The critical discursive psychology (CDP) analysis of lay talk showed how interviewees on both sides of the polarised discussion tended to blame the challenges attributed to immigration on the same groups: Finns or Finnish politicians. Despite blaming the same targets, individuals on each side aligned themselves with differing viewpoints by starting from different assumptions and arriving at different conclusions.

Meanwhile, in another study, Sakki and Martikainen (2021) analysed affective–discursive reactions to a populist Finns Party (FP) campaign video on YouTube. The results showed how the populist message fostered social anger and polarisation between populist supporters and their opponents. For example, the opposing comments expressed overt hostility towards those deemed foolish enough to vote for the populist party, portraying FP supporters as

fascists, racists, and uneducated (sometimes rural) individuals. This once again demonstrates how populist appeal does not develop in a vacuum but rather as an interplay between different actors. Their expected negative representations of 'us' (as foolish, racist, or uneducated) and their negative emotions (such as disgust, mockery, contempt) directed towards 'us' (which we above called meta-representations) may serve as fuel for populist actors to be used in the mobilisation of a shared sense of humiliation and victimhood (Rovamo & Sakki, 2024b).

Populism as identity

While in-group–out-group thinking is considered an elementary social psychological process (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), populism can be seen as a concrete manifestation of it, dividing society into 'us' and 'them' and into 'good' and 'bad' (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2019; Mols & Jetten, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Obradović et al., 2020). In line with the social identity approach (SIA), populist rhetoric invites people to identify with an in-group based on positive emotions and evaluations while distinguishing themselves from out-groups associated with negative qualities and emotions (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Uysal et al., 2022). The in-group favours its members and assigns them superior status, contrasting with the negative image attributed to the out-group, perceived as threatening and evil. Consequently, the task of populism is to answer the basic questions of social identity: who we are, what we are about, and what we are not about (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This classic SIA strongly aligns with Laclau's (2005) conceptualisation of populism as an antagonistic political logic that constructs the people and mobilises them against an enemy, the other.

As outlined by Mols and Jetten (2016), the success of populist actors lies in uniting supporters under a common identity overcoming economic and cultural divides. This identity is often defined by shared (sometimes imagined) grievances faced by the in-group, enabling populist actors to scapegoat perceived others, typically the urban elite, immigrants, and other minorities, as responsible for these grievances (Bos et al., 2020; Breeze, 2019; Hameleers, 2021; Moffitt, 2016; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Uysal et al., 2022). Hameleers et al. (2017) argued that this moral division between opposing groups, the core idea of populism, finds expression in attributing blame and responsibility for societal problems. Previous studies on populist reasoning have found that blame may be attributed to the elite (Hameleers et al., 2017), societal out-groups such as immigrants (Hirsch et al., 2021), or internal enemies such as feminists or sexual minorities (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

It is important to note that some citizens are more prone to populist identity frameworks than others (Bos et al., 2020). Those feeling desperate or threatened, struggling to find a positive social identity (Spruyt et al., 2016), are more likely to resonate with a populist message. Drawing on uncertainty-identity theory, Hogg (2021) argued that aversive self-related uncertainty about

oneself and one's social identity, caused by structural flux, drives support for populism. Such uncertainty necessitates management, effectively achieved by identifying with a distinctive, clearly defined identity echoing populist ideology, conspiracy theories, and victimhood narratives. Self-uncertainty creates a need for leadership, particularly leaders who are populist, autocratic, and toxic.

The role of populist leaders is central to understanding how populism attracts and mobilises voters. Reicher and Hopkins (2001), representing SIA, described political leaders as identity entrepreneurs who define and mobilise groups using self-categorisation and social identity processes (see also Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Identity entrepreneurs capture and present the target audience as a specific social category, defining what it means to belong to that group. The mobilisation of a populist message depends on the construction and performance of social categories (Reicher et al., 2005). The extent of mobilisation depends on who belongs to the category (*category boundaries*), the direction of mobilisation depends on what it means to be a category member (*category content*), and mobilisation leadership depends on who best represents the category (*category prototypes*; Reicher et al., 2005). For example, Portice and Reicher (2018), analysing anti-immigration speeches of British political leaders, found that the primary purpose was to convince the audience that the speaker served national interests and thus deserved to represent the nation as a whole.

Generally, the SIA model of populist leadership aligns with the antagonistic logic of populism, suggesting that creating an in-group, the people, and uniting them by promoting a positive shared sense of 'we' while positioning against various out-groups, often blaming them as enemies, is crucial (Laclau, 2005; Mols & Jetten, 2016). The narrative of a threatened nation and a humiliated and victimised 'us' is necessary for fostering a shared sense of being unjustly treated among populist supporters (Moffitt, 2016; Mols & Jetten, 2014; Reicher & Uluşahin, 2020), serving as a catalyst for collective action (Elcheroth et al., 2011). For example, in their analysis of the UK Independence Party's campaign against immigrants, Durrheim et al. (2018) showed how the tripolar dynamics in hybrid media between populist leaders, mainstream parties and politicians, and ordinary people allowed populist leaders to exploit disapproval and criticism of the political opponent to mobilise a shared sense of victimhood among the public, the ordinary people.

Populism as rhetoric

We discuss the final social psychological approach concerning political imagination that views populism as rhetoric and a discursive act. While this approach is inherent with all the previous approaches that focus on populism as representation, affect, and identity, we believe it deserves its own discussion due to its intersecting and dominant nature.

Compared to other political communication, populist communication can be defined as a type of political discourse that frames political issues in terms

of a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', emphasising a moral division between the ordinary people and the corrupt elite (see Laclau, 2005; Rovamo & Sakki, 2024b). As discussed above, in their rhetoric, populist actors seek to identify public sentiments and cultivate shared grievances to create a sense of shared victimhood, uniting followers under a common identity (Mols & Jetten, 2020). Previous research has outlined some common characteristics of populist rhetoric, including negativity, which involves combining negative qualities with elites and dangerous others (Block & Negrine, 2017; Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Engesser et al., 2017).

Another characteristic is focusing on crisis rhetoric, which utilises various terminologies and images related to war, scandals, and immorality. Populist politicians often use harsh, belligerent, direct, and simple language to connect with the dissatisfied public and to present themselves as having a solution to existing and continuing problems. Simplified argumentation and vagueness of rhetoric may serve to distance populists from the established political elite (Bos & Brants, 2014; Engesser et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2009). By appealing to common sense and using colloquial language, populist politicians stress their authenticity and construct themselves as prototypical members of the populace, who, in contrast to mainstream politicians, act on behalf of the people (Rapley, 1998; Rooyackers & Verkuyten, 2012; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). In addition to the threatening images associated with the future, populist rhetoric invokes nostalgic memories centred around the ideals of the past and better times (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Mols & Jetten, 2014; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

A significant body of research in the field of political social psychology has focused on the PRRP's hostile language towards immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Durrheim et al., 2018; Mols & Jetten, 2014; Pettersson, 2019; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Saresma & Tulonen, 2020). As has been suggested, this talk often requires complex rhetorical work that enables the speakers to 'dodge the identity of prejudice' (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 211). These discursive resources include discursive deracialisation, using liberal arguments for illiberal ends, positive self and negative other presentation, basing views on reason and rationality, as well as denial of racism and individualisation of immigration decisions (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Gibson & Booth, 2017; Pettersson & Augoustinos, 2021; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

Populist movements have shown remarkable skill in leveraging online communication for mobilisation (see Moffitt, 2016). This avenue of research has deepened our understanding of the discursive tools and strategies employed by radical right movements on social media platforms such as blogs, X, and Facebook, particularly in their discursive othering of ethnic and religious minorities and in mobilising voters (e.g., Burke, 2018; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Online platforms serve as fertile ground for constructing antagonistic divisions between 'us' and 'them', facilitating the dissemination of hate speech, conspiracy theories, and fake news (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020; Sakki & Castrén,

2022; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Forceful language, coupled with the camouflage of derogatory messages behind visual images, hyperlinks, humour, and sarcasm, contributes to this phenomenon (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2017; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021).

Furthermore, there is a growing focus on multimodality in research on populist rhetoric. Recent studies have delved into multimodal discourse across various digital platforms, revealing how visual and digital elements enhance the persuasive power of populist messages (Kilby & Lennon, 2021; Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Pettersson & Sakki, 2020, 2024; Salojärvi et al., 2023). They have demonstrated, among other things, how racist messages can be subtly conveyed through a combination of verbal, visual, and auditory tools. Multimodal critical discursive psychology (MCDP) has proved particularly useful in exploring how different discursive and multimodal components can come together to coproduce meaning (Pettersson & Sakki, 2020, 2024; see Chapters 5 and 6 of this volume). This approach, informed by work in CDP (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998), enables the researcher to both explore the detailed rhetorical construction of populist appeal at a microlevel and consider its broader social and political implications, for instance, for societal power relations at the macrolevel. This double characteristic makes it particularly well-suited for studying the populist appeal, especially on social media, as embedded in its surrounding social and political environment (Pettersson & Sakki, 2020).

Mobilising populist imagination

Above, we outlined our approach to political imagination, drawing from SRA (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Moscovici, 1961, SIA (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), affect theory (Wetherell, 2012), and critical and rhetorical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998). In what follows, we further elaborate on the interplay between these approaches in the context of populism as a mobilising force. In this line of research, political action is seen as dependent on the sociopsychological processes by which our understanding of the world is produced. Drawing inspiration from Elcheroth et al.'s (2011) theorisation, our approach to mobilising populist imagination builds upon four key assumptions: (1) populism as shared knowledge, (2) populism interpreted through the lens of identity, (3) populism as multimodal practice, and (4) populism as mobilising imagination.

Populism as shared knowledge

The first assumption suggests that populism should be approached as shared knowledge. The ideas of populism are constructed and transformed through social interaction and communication among individuals and groups. Social representations can be seen as sets of meanings that are practically real and

make sense because people act accordingly (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008, p. 345). In the SRA, people are not considered passive receptors of social knowledge but individuals with the agency who actively accept, resist, or reimagine this knowledge. This implies that people are motivated to articulate their own understanding with that of others. Instead of being stable collections of ideas that influence political behaviour in predetermined ways, social representations are viewed as dynamic structures, knowledge-making practices, and actions that have the power to change social reality – suggesting that shared knowledge shapes action.

In the literature on populism, demand-side explanations have emphasised the role of a particular kind of shared knowledge – shared grievances, such as economic insecurity or status decline – which fuel populist appeal. However, research also suggests that it is merely the *expectations* of status decline, rather than actual experiences, that drive support for the radical right (Im et al., 2022). Populist actors trigger this shared political imagination by reinforcing the 'politics of fear' (Wodak, 2015), composed of affective discourses aimed at generating fear and anger towards the so-called others. Mobilising narratives that evoke shared grievances and a sense of shared victimhood enable populist leaders to differentiate virtuous people from perceived others, typically the leftist urban elite, immigrants, and other minorities (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2021; Moffitt, 2016; Mols & Jetten, 2020; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Uysal et al., 2022).

Populism interpreted through the lens of identity

The second assumption stems from the idea of representations being shared and implies that the act of representation is inherently linked to identity. Two questions arise: Whose knowledge matters, and whose does not? Here is where identities are important to consider, as in political imagination they become lenses through which we interpret the world and whether we embrace or reject meanings shared by others. Shared meaning is interpreted through the lens of identity; what others think and do inform our thoughts and behaviours. The mass media plays a crucial role in shaping social representations (Moscovici, 1961/2008) as individuals construct meta-representations – ideas that many others are thinking or doing (e.g., voting) in a certain way – when consuming media content. These meta-representations can influence their perceptions, even if people remain sceptical towards the goal of action. This influence then shapes how we see the world and how we act together as a group (Elcheroth et al., 2011).

Populists often struggle to convey their messages through mainstream media, especially when relying on unverified and socially provocative content. Online communication resolves this issue, providing unfiltered access to their audience (Moffitt, 2016). Moreover, populists frequently criticise mainstream media as part of the elite, claiming to represent the people directly. Thus,

social media facilitates in-group communication and out-group demonisation, fuelling affective polarisation. Specifically, its features foster echo chambers, reinforcing 'our' beliefs and filtering out 'their' opinions. This selective exposure then fortifies the populist antagonism between 'us' and 'them', promoting the rejection of expertise and mistrust in the political establishment. This allows people to choose their own online echo chamber to validate their worldview and social identity. As Hogg (2023) explained, it is the uncertainty, perceived as a threat, that prompts individuals to adopt more protective behaviours, such as seeking refuge in identity echo chambers to safeguard their sense of self.

Populism as multimodal practice

The third assumption suggests that populist imagination is both communicated and embedded in social practice. It is present in the social world in multiple ways – on TV; in newspapers; at events; and especially on different social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. It takes various forms, appearing as speech, behaviour, images, videos, and music.

SRA places a key emphasis on communication as the vehicle through which meaning is shared and contested. Communication is understood not only as verbal discourse, such as conversations, speeches, and different texts, but also as social practices, including images, rituals, events, or any other representational act. People's interactions in the physical and social world are inherently multimodal. Within this social context, various multimodal elements – such as particular voices, sounds, and tastes – become intertwined with the process of assigning meaning to them, thus creating a shared understanding of what all images, voices, sounds, and tastes mean for us (Martikainen & Sakki, 2023). Taking Finland as an example, the scent of fresh birch leaves or forest conifers, the smoky aroma after a sauna, or the smell of freshly baked rye bread and cinnamon buns can evoke strong and nostalgic feelings, connecting Finns to their natural environment and traditional way of life. These are not merely individual sensory experiences but are regarded as part of a collective sensory landscape that binds those who share these experiences to a unified national narrative. Such images and sensory experiences are often utilised in populist persuasion, expanding the association of positive or nostalgic sentiments with the populist message (Rovamo & Sakki, 2024b; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Tormis et al., 2024).

As discussed above, right-wing populist movements have been particularly skilful and successful in their online communication and mobilisation (Moffitt, 2016; see Chapters 4–6 in this volume). Online communication is inherently multimodal, incorporating verbal, sonic, digital, and (audio)visual elements. This multimodality matters as images, sounds, and music may have a greater influence than mere words in evoking emotional responses in audiences (van Leeuwen, 2012). Previous research shows how visual and digital affordances provided by the online environment strengthen the persuasive power of populist messages (Pettersson & Sakki, 2017, 2020). For example, multimodal

memes and political campaign videos provide a means to unveil messages hostile to minorities and the political establishment in humorous and politically correct ways (Pettersson et al., 2023; Pettersson et al., 2024; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). This can be achieved through a blend of humour, intertextual references, open-ended messaging, and various interactive elements (Askanius, 2021; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Pettersson et al., 2024). Therefore, it becomes evident that the success of right-wing populist movements in the digital era relies not only on the content of their messages but also significantly on their strategic use of multimodal communication to resonate with, engage, and ultimately expand their audience.

Populism as mobilising imagination

The fourth premise of our model underscores the significance of social representations in shaping and constructing social reality through collective practices. This viewpoint suggests that shared experiences of misrecognition and victimhood can spur political action more effectively than individual mistreatment (Elcheroth, 2006; Elcheroth et al., 2011). In line with this notion, numerous studies have highlighted the narrative of a threatened nation and its victimised people as central to the populist appeal (e.g., Mols & Jetten, 2014; Reicher & Uluşahin, 2020). Laclau (2005) contended that the political mobilisation process stems from unmet demands and grievances, evoking a diverse range of moral emotions among the electorate. This discursive construction of moral boundaries between 'us' and 'them' and the mobilisation of shared grievances resonate with the core tenets of the social identity model of collective action, suggesting that individuals engage in collective actions to address group-based inequalities (van Zomeren et al., 2018). The social identity model of collective action posits that identification with a populist group, coupled with moral beliefs, is pivotal for collective action (see Chapter 6 in this volume).

Right-wing populist rhetoric often mobilises a politicised identity founded on a moral us-versus-them dichotomy, portraying the virtuous people as unjustly treated and deprived while framing the corrupt elite and dangerous immigrants as scapegoats (Mols & Jetten, 2016). A positive self-representation is created by extending the category boundaries of both the out-group (consisting of immigrants and the elite) and the in-group (consisting of the populist party and the people; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Sakki et al., 2017). By moralising group relations, in-groups are portrayed as good and out-groups as evil, justifying discriminatory behaviours as acts of virtue (Haslam et al., 2020). Previous research on Finnish populist campaign videos demonstrated how the use of such in-group virtue threatened by out-group rhetoric could be justified to promote hate and discrimination against minorities and call for collective action (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Viewing certain groups as enemies may lead to behaviours that reinforce their categorisation as such (Elcheroth et al., 2011). Approaching populism as a political

imagination enables the examination not only of populism itself but also, more crucially, of how we perceive ourselves; others; social reality; and our potential, opportunities, and even responsibilities for action within it (Elcheroth et al., 2011). This dynamic illustrates the power of the populist appeal in not only shaping social identities but also in cultivating the social and moral landscapes within which societies operate, often with profound implications for collective action and intergroup relations.

Conclusions

The study of populism from a social psychological perspective sheds light on the complex interplay between the appeal of populism and the underlying social, identity, emotional, and discursive processes. This chapter approached populism as political imagination deeply rooted in social interaction and communication. The complexity of populism reflects both supply-side factors, such as the rhetoric and actions of populist parties and leaders, and demand-side factors, such as the lived experiences and emotions of supporters. This underscores the need for an integrative approach to comprehending how populist messages resonate with the public, considering the interplay of representation, discourse, emotion, and identity as both distinct and intersecting dimensions.

As we discussed, social representations emphasise the co-construction and contestation of knowledge, suggesting that populism is not only a set of ideas influencing political behaviour but also a practice embedded in actions capable of altering social reality. Affective–discursive practice enriches our understanding of populism by acknowledging that emotions are not just private, psychological experiences but public, performative acts that intertwine with meaning-making and identity construction. The SIA highlights the centrality of in-group identification and the delineation from out-group categories within populist rhetoric. Political leaders function as identity entrepreneurs, able to define, embody, and mobilise group identities, often under the banner of addressing societal grievances and threats. Discourse and rhetoric are essential vehicles for populist communication, serving to frame political issues in morally dichotomous terms and to mobilise supporters through a blend of simplified, emotional, and often antagonistic language.

In this chapter, we adopted an integrated social psychological standpoint to examine populist imagination as an interplay between four main approaches: social representations, affect, identity, and discourse. Together, these frameworks provide insights into populist imagination as a mobilising force that is not only shaped by shared knowledge, social identity, emotional engagement, and discursive practices but is also inherently connected to political action, impacting how individuals perceive themselves, others, and their roles within society. This, in turn, shapes social and moral landscapes and influences collective actions and intergroup relations. Only by grasping these processes can we fully understand populism's enduring, widespread, and dynamic presence in modern societies.

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Part II

Methods

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Chapter 2

Qualitative interviewing

Strengths and challenges of interviewing lay populists

Helena Rovamo and Mariman Mabrouk

Introduction: Interviewing on a politically sensitive topic

While there has been a substantial amount of research on populism, demand-side research (i.e., why the public is attracted to populist parties) has mostly focused on quantitatively identifying an unmediated link between the electoral appeal of populist parties and objective socioeconomic conditions. As a result, there has been less attention to building a more comprehensive qualitative understanding of how populist supporters explain their voting decisions. To make matters worse, such individuals are considered a potentially challenging group to reach about participating in research as they are often critical towards scientists and scholarly institutions. Specifically, they may be sceptical about the intentions of researchers approaching them to participate in interviews (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2018). This is largely due to the anti-elitist sentiment present among populist parties that is not limited to the political elite but also to other representatives of the alleged establishment (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). In fact, studies have shown that populism is associated with negative connotations in public debate (Hatakka & Herkman, 2022) and lay discourse (Rovamo & Sakki, 2023).

Through qualitative interviews, this chapter conducts social psychological research on populism. It addresses the challenges and solutions of recruiting interviewees from a population potentially sceptical of academic research as well as innovative methodologies for fostering discussions on politically sensitive topics. We demonstrate these methodological strengths and challenges with examples of an international research project on populist appeal. As a part of the project, we interviewed 69 supporters of populist parties and movements (i.e., the Finns Party [FP], the Swiss People's Party [SVP], the Swiss Workers Party [POP], the National Rally [NR] the French Communist Party [CP], and the Yellow Vests) in Finland, Switzerland, and France in 2021–2023.

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Qualitative interviewing

Qualitative interviewing is one of the primary methods used in social sciences and many other related fields (e.g., psychology; Brinkmann, 2022). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), qualitative interviews are a particularly practical method for studying people's meaning-making and lived experiences because they open the door for detailed data that reflect the participants' personal narratives and interpretations of complex phenomena. For instance, interviews can be used to explore how people conceptualise social and political changes or the perceived implications of these changes. Through this approach, researchers aim to understand the interviewees' experiences and the meanings they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2006). Therefore, interviewees' talk is not considered evidence of truth or generalisable beyond the specific context in which the research was conducted (Crotty, 1998). Instead, it is viewed as insight into the subjective experience of a unique social world (Davies, 2007). Given its multidisciplinary use, interviews may take on a variety of forms depending on the researchers' objectives, differing in form (from structured to unstructured interviews), the number of interviewees (from individual to group interviews), and mediums (from face-to-face to remote interviews; Brinkmann, 2022).

Furthermore, interviewing is an interactional process that the interviewer and interviewee jointly construct for particular purposes (Ruusuvuori & Tiittula, 2017). Consequently, their personalities, prior experiences, motives, and future expectations may influence the kind of interaction that takes place in interviews (Taylor, 2015; Warren, 2012). This may result in either interviewers or interviewees holding expectations that the other would react in a certain way to their talk, potentially priming them to become more defensive or hesitant to express their opinions openly out of fear of being criticised (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Additionally, beyond factors within the interview setting, interviews are also influenced by the context of the larger social and cultural environment related to, for instance, the interviewees' social relations and topical issues in public debate (Warren, 2012). Such conversations may also be influenced by absent individuals (Marková, 2003, 2006), as speakers may bring 'other' voices into the discussion through metaphors, quotations, or phrases (Marková et al., 2007). Therefore, when analysing interview material, the researcher is advised to focus on the interaction – rather than the content – of the interview, primarily on how and why the interviewee describes their experiences at particular points in the interview (Brinkmann, 2022; Goodman & Speer, 2015).

In this chapter, we base our insights on semi-structured individual interviews from the research project. They were conducted remotely via Zoom, as the data were collected in 2021 when avoiding face-to-face contact was recommended to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As technology has become more efficient and access to the internet has become widely available,

videoconferencing has gained increasing attention as a way of conducting qualitative interviews. In contrast to its face-to-face counterpart, remote interviewing is often considered more cost-effective as it eliminates the researchers' need to travel to the interviewees. It also allows researchers to reach potential interviewees from broader geographical areas (Braun et al., 2017; Irani, 2019).

Furthermore, compared to other remote methods for qualitative interviewing (e.g., email, phone), videoconferencing resembles face-to-face qualitative interviewing more closely (Tuttas, 2015). However, this medium is not without challenges. Videoconferencing includes the possibility of technical challenges, such as dropped calls, pauses, and poor audio or video quality (Archibald et al., 2019). It may also limit some people's ability to participate since everyone does not have the necessary skills or equipment to participate through videoconferencing devices. Literature has also raised concerns related to establishing rapport when conducting remote interviews (e.g., Cater, 2011), though other studies have noted that participants in remote interviews often build rapport more quickly than those interviewed face to face (e.g., Tuttas, 2015). We elaborate on these outlined opportunities and challenges throughout this chapter as we share our experiences conducting remote interviews in Finland, France, and Switzerland.

Recruitment of the interviewees

Recruitment of interviewees is an essential part of the overall success of a research study (Manohar et al., 2019). However, when recruiting interviewees, there are several factors that the researcher needs to consider before and during the recruitment process.

First, the researcher must ensure that the selected potential interviewees accurately represent the population of interest (Patton, 2015). Second, once the potential interviewees have been selected, the researcher needs to identify the environment and ways to gain access to the intended population. Robinson (2014) categorised sampling strategies into convenience sampling strategies and purposive sampling strategies. The former refers to locating convenient cases that meet the required criteria, such as those of library users, newspaper readers, or university students, and advertising the research among those populations and their social milieus. The latter refers to strategies in which the researcher directly contacts appropriate representatives of the population of interest. Third, the researcher needs to establish the potential interviewees' interest in taking part in the proposed study as well as make sure that their decision to participate is an informed one (Manohar et al., 2019).

Lastly, when planning the recruitment process, the researcher needs to decide on an appropriate sample size for the study (Robinson, 2014). This is influenced by both theoretical and practical needs, such as the type and number of research questions and the researchers' resources (Merriam, 2009).

However, it is important to note that this provisional sample size may change as data collection proceeds due to practical reasons (Robinson, 2014). For instance, the recruitment of interviewees might prove to be more difficult and time-consuming than anticipated, which might require a reduction in the target sample size (Mason, 2002). Indeed, Emmel (2013) noted that, in qualitative research, choosing a proper sample size should be assessed continuously throughout the research journey to ensure that the researchers can adequately interpret and explain the phenomenon being studied.

In this research project, we used several recruitment strategies to reach people who had voted for populist parties or supported populist movements. First, we advertised the possibility of taking part in a qualitative interview study on political issues as a part of a quantitative study on populism using social media (i.e., Facebook) and in local newspapers in areas where populist parties have enjoyed high electoral support in previous elections. Initially, the advertisements on social media and the prior quantitative study seemed promising, as many potential interviewees left their contact information. However, when the interviewers began arranging the practicalities for the interviews, many of the recruits stopped answering emails or did not show up. It seemed that while it was easy for these individuals to respond to these advertisements on social media, commitment to them was low. In contrast, only a few contacts were received from advertisements in local newspapers. However, the majority of these resulted in a successful interview, demonstrating a stronger commitment from these particular interviewees. Nonetheless, given the high cost of the press advertisements and the low number of contacts received, we did not continue with this strategy beyond three advertisements.

Overall, these recruitment strategies provided only a limited number of interviewees, and we needed to increase this number by other means. We aimed to better target the recruitment of populist supporters in relevant online communities around populist topics. For instance, we sent invitations to the research project to individuals who left populist comments on newspaper articles posted on Facebook. These comments typically expressed anti-vaccination or anti-immigration stances or opinions on fiscal policies, such as taxing the wealthy to alleviate the burden on regular citizens. However, this recruitment strategy also had limited success, partly due to the nature of social media, where messages from unknown contacts often end up unseen in the recipients' junk folders.

Finally, we began making direct contact with individuals affiliated with populist parties via email taken mostly from party websites. Although the non-response rate was still relatively high, this method proved to be the most productive recruitment strategy of all. Direct contact may have felt more personal than a public advertisement, which may have increased recipients' motivation to take part in the study. Additionally, an email may have appeared more trustworthy than a social media message, where the researchers' messages may be more easily misinterpreted as spam or a scam.

Overall, our experience of recruiting populist supporters in three countries supports the idea that recruiting populist supporters and/or voters for interview studies is particularly challenging. A considerable amount of effort was needed to recruit and send invitations to potential interviewees to reach a sufficient number of completed interviews. Additionally, although less direct online recruiting – such as Facebook advertising – has proved promising in some study settings (e.g., King et al., 2014), direct contact seemed the most productive approach for this population.

Experiences of mistrust and hostility

In the literature, the connection between populism and the belief in conspiracy theories has been well-established (see Staerklé et al., 2024). Thielmann and Hilbig (2023) suggested viewing generalised dispositional mistrust as a common foundation between populism and a conspiratorial mindset. This common core is strongly associated with personality and can be explained by beliefs related to mistrust, such as cynicism or a dangerous and competitive social worldview. Such propensity for mistrust also manifested at various levels in our research. As part of the recruitment process, we encountered some suspicion about our research and its purpose. One example of this involved the use of cameras during the interview. In France, 14 out of 30 interviewees agreed to participate only on the condition that they could keep their cameras off during the interview, which we agreed to. Similarly, several Finnish interviewees also decided not to turn on their cameras during the interviews. This preference for anonymity might suggest a higher level of mistrust or discomfort with the interview process. However, on a positive note, remote interviewing made this anonymity possible and, thus, enabled the researchers to conduct the studies with people who would not have agreed otherwise.

Furthermore, individuals possessing sensitive information, who concurrently or have previously occupied public positions of authority, may exhibit caution in disclosing information susceptible to misinterpretation (Petkov & Kaoullas, 2015). This reticence stems from a fear of tarnishing their public image or concerns that their statements could be used as grounds for political or legal sanctions against them. Consequently, they often exhibit distrust and heightened emotions, leading to incomplete responses or outright rejection of the interview. Political opinion is considered a sensitive and private matter, and our sampling also extended to politically active individuals, so concrete examples appeared during the research process. In Switzerland, particularly among right-wing populist women, there was a noticeable reluctance to participate in the study. An illustrative incident involved a woman affiliated with the Swiss People's Party who initially agreed to participate but requested the presence of a male party member during the interview to potentially 'supervise' it – raising questions about trust and comfort in the interview setting. Additionally, potential interviewees often expressed their willingness to engage with the study

only if they could respond to the questions in writing, which we eventually declined. This preference might reflect a concern about being misinterpreted or trapped into saying something spontaneously that could be misconstrued.

This issue of suspicion was sometimes intertwined with a hint of hostility in the responses of potential participants during the recruitment phase. Responses such as 'Merci, j'adore les arnaques, bisous sur ton front' ('Thanks, I love scams, kiss on your forehead') or inquiries about the researchers' background and intentions were not uncommon. These interactions highlighted the need for clear communication about the study's academic nature. Additionally, the public perception of academia as leaning towards the left presented a challenge when approaching individuals with right-leaning views. For instance, one potential interviewee withdrew her consent upon learning of the research's background in psychology and social psychology, suspecting a possible bias against her right-wing stance. Conversely, during interviews, when questions about far-right themes were posed, interviewees with left-wing political views sometimes expressed discomfort. They would question the purpose of the study, seeking reassurance that it did not aim to support the far right.

Lastly, as Potter and Hepburn (2005) observed, interviewees are typically recruited as members of specific categories (in our case, populist voters). This can lead participants belonging to the aforementioned category to believe that the interviewer has specific expectations regarding their answers. For instance, in France, the recruitment process often led to this misconception among potential interviewees that they were entering a political debate rather than an academic interview. Thus, interviewees and potential interviewees felt the need to justify their views more as if they were questioned about their belongingness. It was therefore crucial to continually clarify and reiterate the academic nature of the study, emphasising that our approach was not about challenging or contradicting their views as might be expected in a journalistic setting.

To address these different challenges, reiterating the framework of academic work is an essential first step. Transparency and repeated clarification of the study's purpose and academic integrity were required. Ethical considerations also necessitated respect for the wishes of both actual and potential interviewees, acknowledging their right to control their level of engagement with the research. Within the realm of academic research, researchers are bound by the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence towards participants and are committed to safeguarding their anonymity (Pietilä et al., 2019). Informing participants about these aspects is therefore the minimum requirement, regardless of the sensitivity of the research topic.

However, due to the distrustful nature of the populist mentality, it is important to recognise that such efforts might not always yield the intended results. Moreover, in the context of populism, where academia may be viewed as part of the corrupt elite (Mede & Schäfer, 2020), attempts to reassure participants of our good intentions by highlighting academic standards could prove

ineffective or even counterproductive. Another important step is to ensure positive closures for both the participant and the researcher (Dempsey et al., 2016). This can be achieved, for instance, by debriefing with the participant after the interview has ended. In the case of interviewing populist voters, this debriefing was especially crucial to clarify any remaining questions.

Adapting to changing circumstances

Conducting qualitative interviews necessitates a degree of adaptability and flexibility due to the unpredictable nature of human behaviour and varying living conditions (Roulston & Choi, 2018). For example, unexpected events, such as interruptions or cancellations, might occur. In our study, several potential interviewees across all three countries cancelled their participation without rescheduling, while others confirmed their participation but did not show up for the scheduled meeting. These kinds of unpredictable events required a readiness to accommodate such eventualities without compromising the research timeline or objectives. Moreover, we also faced instances where interviews had to be conducted in two parts due to the interviewees' work or other commitments. Lastly, there were also some cases where the expectations of the interviewer and the interviewee did not match. For instance, in France, there was an occasion where more than one person appeared on camera for a scheduled interview, turning what was intended to be an individual interview into an impromptu focus group. This required action to reiterate the study's purpose to the interviewees, emphasising the need for individual responses in line with the research methodology.

As mentioned previously, remote interviewing can bring some additional challenges to interviews. This may include technical challenges related to the equipment or internet connection used, potentially affecting the clarity of the voice or the quality of the audio-recorded file (Irani, 2019). While we were able to solve some of these challenges in our study through guidance before and during the interviews, others required more creative solutions. In particular, not all interviewees had access to the internet from their homes, and none possessed the necessary equipment for videoconferencing. To overcome these challenges, we decided to conduct some interviews by phone and deliver the necessary materials (i.e., images and other stimulus material) to the interviewees either by email or post in printed form before the interviews. This solution allowed us to enable the participation of all those interested in the study without limiting anyone by their technical abilities or possessions.

Fostering discussion on sensitive topics

The success of interviews involves both practical and interpersonal elements. The former consists of piloting, careful selection of interviewees, as well as good planning and preparation of the research questions (Seidman, 2006),

while the latter involves good rapport and trust (Nathan et al., 2019). We explore both elements in depth in the following sections.

Practical elements of successful interviews

As the study aimed to deepen the existing knowledge about the appeal of populist parties among their voters, we planned for the interviews to deal with themes that have been previously found to be central to populist voting decisions, including anti-elitism (e.g., Mudde, 2004), nostalgia (e.g., Smeekes et al., 2018), cultural grievances (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2019), and experiences of relative deprivation (e.g., Hameleers, 2019). Thus, we included questions in the interview scheme concerning the concepts of the elite, populism, and nostalgia; the interviewees' views of the current situation of their home country; and their perceptions of topical subjects such as immigration, equality-promoting social movements, and climate change.

However, talking about such sensitive topics requires careful planning of the structure of the interview scheme. Specifically, the first questions should provide an acceptable comfort level for the interviewee (Nathan et al., 2019). This can be done by avoiding intrusive questions on overly sensitive topics and focusing on matters that the interviewee is almost sure to know about (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). At the beginning of our interviews, we asked the interviewees to introduce themselves in their own words and to describe how they feel about the current situation in their respective countries. These open-ended questions not only helped establish a comfortable environment for the interviewees but also provided the interviewers with useful information about the interviewees' conversational style (e.g., talkative vs. reserved; short vs. long answers). This information helped the interviewers to adapt their interviewing styles accordingly and to further maintain focus on the pragmatic aspects of the interview, such as keeping track of the time, regulating the length of answers, and ensuring that the conversation stayed on topic. As the interviews progressed and trust began to develop between the interviewer and interviewee, the interviewer moved on to more challenging questions relating to political opinions and other potentially provocative themes. We tested this scheme across three pilot interviews to ensure that the questions were understandable and the interviews fluent and to get feedback on how the questions were perceived.

Another way to encourage interviewees to talk about sensitive and commonly hidden topics is by using stimulus material (Banks, 2001; Törrönen, 2002). According to Törrönen (2002), stimulus material 'bring "not now" moments and "not here" events to the interview's "here and now" interaction' (p. 348), thus allowing the interviewer to bring events or topics that concern larger society or cultural reality into the interview. For instance, the interviewees might be asked to draw pictures, tell stories, or react to impulses (Krueger,

1997) or to interpret material such as images, videos, news articles, or research diagrams (Crilly et al., 2006; Gaskell, 2000).

As a part of our interviews, we used a wide range of stimulus materials for different questions. For questions related to interviewees' representations of Finnishness/Swissness/Frenchness, we used the photo-elicitation technique (Fawns, 2023; Harper, 2002). Here, we presented photographs depicting each nationality and asked the interviewees to select the five most representative pictures. For questions on immigration, we presented short extracts from studies on the topic, which served as a stimulus for the discussion in Finnish interviews. Similarly, in France, interviewees were presented with an article discussing a presumed over-representation of foreigners in French prisons, aiming to further deepen the dialogue on topical and contextual sociopolitical issues. Meanwhile, in Switzerland, interviewees were shown a TV news image concerning the latest Swiss federal elections. This visual aid facilitated discussions on the participants' perspectives regarding the current political landscape. On the same note, a newspaper article reflecting on the previous presidential election and the rivalry between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen was utilised in France to enrich conversations about the participants' views on the political landscape. This included discussions on the roles of dominant and opposition parties and political figures and the emotions tied to these entities. Finally, in each interview, the interviewers read aloud sentences relating to climate change, asylum-seeking, and gender issues from each country's populist party program and encouraged the interviewees to share their opinions on such issues. By examining how the audience responds (demand) to populist party communication (supply), this approach addresses calls to combine supply- and demand-side research on populism (Mols & Jetten, 2020).

Overall, questions accompanied by pictures were particularly well-received by the interviewees, as they seemed to facilitate more extensive and in-depth discussions. Interviewees also expressed appreciation for these questions, specifically noting the refreshing deviation they offered from traditional interview formats. This response aligns with the concept that visual stimuli can create a more interactive and dynamic interview environment, effectively encouraging interviewees to articulate their thoughts and feelings by offering a more tangible and relatable point of reference (Collier, 1987; Harper, 2002). Additionally, image-based methods have been argued to help interviewees connect with their lived experiences (Barsalou, 2005, 2008; Ignatow, 2007), providing a practical way to activate people's sensory knowledge (Martikainen & Sakki, 2023).

Interpersonal elements of successful interviews

Rapport makes the interviewee feel comfortable and at ease with the interviewer. Although there is no simple way to build rapport, the interviewee can facilitate it with verbal and body language, such as maintaining open body

language, making eye contact, smiling, and offering verbal reassurance to the interviewee (Nathan et al., 2019). Being seen as honest, fair, and accepting also helps create a confidential atmosphere (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Thus, it is crucial for the interviewer to communicate openly about the research and the interviewee's rights (Seidman, 2006).

In our study, building rapport was done from the very beginning of the interview meeting. Interviewers began by sharing something about themselves at the beginning of the interviews, such as their position in the research and the reasons for conducting the interviews. The anonymity of the participants was emphasised, and the contents of the interview were discussed even though the interviewees had received an information leaflet beforehand. In addition, the interviewers stressed that they were interested in the interviewees' opinions and encouraged them to ask further questions about the interviews or the research project. Lastly, the interviewers reminded the interviewees that participation in the study was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without any obligation to justify their decision.

Furthermore, the interviewer must encourage and support the interviewee as they provide their answers throughout the interview. One way to do this is through active and attentive listening (Seidman, 2006). Active listening is not limited to listening silently to the interviewee's response; it also involves reflective work to ensure that the interviewer understands the interviewee's perspective (Lillrank, 2012). This can be done by summarising the interviewee's answers, asking for clarifications, responding to the interviewee's stories, and showing empathy, among others (Lillrank, 2012; Talmage, 2012). The interviewer can convey active listening through words and non-verbal gestures, such as nods and facial expressions. They can also use probes and follow-up questions to encourage the interviewee to share their experiences, clarify answers, or expand on their answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). However, at the same time, the interviewer must give the interviewee enough space and quiet moments to reflect and respond (Nathan et al., 2019; Seidman, 2006). Additionally, the interviewer should not pressure the interviewee to answer every question but rather respect their right to answer only to the extent they wish.

Overall, while interviewing requires simultaneous concentration on several factors, it also requires maintaining focus on the interviewee. Moreover, as it is impossible to predict the length of an interview in advance, conducting too many interviews in one day is not advisable. The mean duration of our interviews was slightly under two hours, varying from just under an hour to three hours. The length of the interviews was influenced both by the interviewee's talkativeness and their individual schedules. To control the length of the interviews, the interviewers attempted to vary the number of follow-up questions or, if necessary, skip some questions that were less relevant. In some situations, interviews were conducted in two parts.

Discussion

In this chapter, we discussed our experiences with conducting qualitative interviews with supporters of populist parties in Finland, Switzerland, and France. We described the recruitment of interviewees, the challenges encountered in interviewing people traditionally sceptical of academic research, and the methodologies used to encourage these individuals to talk about sensitive topics. As an outcome of these outlined means, we successfully conducted 69 interviews that were rich in content and of high quality, where every participant described their experience as positive. Specifically, many interviewees stated that they were content with the questions asked and pleased with the opportunity to express their views on political matters. For instance, a Finnish interviewee expressed how she had looked forward to the interview as it allowed her to express her political thoughts freely, particularly as the negative reputation of the FP has made some acquaintances hesitant to admit having voted for the party. Potentially, this experience also contributed to building trust in academia.

In a similar vein, the discomfort among participants in admitting their voting choices for radical right parties was occasionally palpable. For example, when questioned about her views on power distribution in France, one French participant pre-emptively stated, 'Well, I voted for Marine Le Pen. I'm not ashamed to say it, and I don't hide it'. This declaration of shamelessness underscores the pervasive influence of an absent 'other' in the discourse (Marková, 2003), as the interviewer did not precedingly suggest that such a stance should be considered shameful. It suggests that the interviewees have likely confronted stereotypes associated with right-wing voters, leading them to internalise a societal judgment that compels a pre-emptive defence of their political choices. It also suggests that the interviewee was aware that they were perceived as a member of a particular social category (i.e., a supporter of a populist party) by the researchers and a potentially broader audience, such as the readers of the study (see Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

Furthermore, such confessions of voting for the radical right often prompted immediate clarifications like 'but I'm not a racist because…', with one participant emphasising that his best friend 'is Moroccan' after nearly every statement that one could interpret as controversial. These instances underscored the need among interviewees to justify their electoral decisions or their views on society, striving to separate these choices from racism (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; van Dijk, 1992). This reflection reveals the complexities inherent in discussing political affiliations and illustrates the nuanced ways individuals navigate societal perceptions and personal identity within political discourse.

As mentioned, we faced some challenges when conducting remote interviews but successfully overcame them. In some cases, small technical challenges even seemed to help break the ice, as they acted as a shared experience that momentarily removed the institutional position between the interviewer

and the interviewee. However, we cannot know for certain the impact that remote interviewing had on the total number of interviewees. While some potential interviewees may have refused to participate due to preferences against remote interviews, concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19 at the time may have lowered people's threshold for participating in a remote interview. Nonetheless, remote interviewing enabled us to reach participants from a broader geographic area, which might not have been possible with face-to-face interviews. It also provided more flexibility, allowing interviewees to participate from a location that suited them best. Lastly, remote interviewing offers security to both interviewers and interviewees. Indeed, there can be concerns about safety for both parties, as being in a closed room together might lead to discomfort or perceived threat. By conducting interviews remotely, both interviewers and interviewees can feel more secure, knowing they are in their own controlled environments. Thus, we conclude that the benefits of remote interviewing outweighed the challenges encountered, as it enhanced accessibility, flexibility, and safety for all involved.

Concluding remarks

As interviewers, we successfully established confidential and open dialogue with our interviewees. The stimulation materials used fuelled the conversations and helped the interviewees to articulate abstract topics, such as their outlooks on Finnishness/Swissness/Frenchness. They also encouraged the interviewees to share their opinions on politically controversial themes related to, for instance, immigration and climate change. Additionally, the variability between questions made it easier to maintain focus and motivation during the interviews.

Qualitative interviewing is a time-consuming method that requires commitment from both the researcher(s) and the interviewees, particularly when conducting research with hard-to-reach populations (e.g., populist supporters; Mede & Schäfer, 2020). However, as studies and interview material on populist supporters demonstrate (see, e.g., Chapters 3 and 7–10 in this volume), studying hard-to-reach populations can yield rich and unique material for research. When considering research that explicitly aims to explain the appeal of populist parties, our experience suggests that qualitative interviews can increase the understanding of how populist voters explain their voting decisions. As this approach does not reduce the populist voting decision to a single individual characteristic or a consequence of objective circumstances, it can offer an understanding of the life experiences, associated meanings, and intergroup relations that underlie such decisions. Moreover, failing to explore perceived hard-to-reach populations can potentially further stigmatise these groups (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2018). Froonjian and Garnett (2013) also argued that labelling certain groups as hard to reach may reflect the researchers' preconceptions

about these groups. Thus, hard-to-reach populations play an essential role in closing the widening gap between voters and academia (see Mede & Schäfer, 2020) by including populist voters from various studies despite methodological challenges.

Overall, despite the methodological challenges, we encourage future scholars aiming to explain the populist appeal to conduct qualitative interviews with populist supporters. This chapter provided potential solutions to overcome some of these challenges as well as the benefits that come with such an approach. Specifically, studying hard-to-reach populations can yield rich and unique material for research and provide information on people's experiences and meaning-making. To be successful, it is essential that researchers spend sufficient time planning the interviews as well as establishing and maintaining an open and confidential relationship between researcher(s) and interviewees. With careful planning and creativity in recruitment and interviewing, the voices of hard-to-reach people can finally be heard in research.

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Chapter 3

A three-step approach to the critical discursive psychological analysis of prejudice in populist gender and sexuality discourse

Helenor Tormis, Katarina Pettersson, and Inari Sakki

Introduction

The 2024 Finnish presidential elections caused national turmoil, featuring Pekka Haavisto, a former Finnish foreign minister and Green Party member, as one of the final two candidates. Haavisto, renowned for his UN peacebuilding work, made history as Finland's first openly gay presidential candidate in 2012. Running again in 2024, the media scrutiny during the campaign focused on Haavisto's sexual orientation, including speculation about public acceptance of a gay presidential couple. A pivotal moment came when *Helsingin Sanomat*, a leading Finnish news outlet, reported a week before the election that 'Sexual orientation is a reason for 40% of Stubb's [the second candidate's] voters not to vote for Haavisto' (Sutinen, 2024), prompting widespread public debate. On the one hand, the debate criticised the media for emphasising sexuality, and on the other hand, it made salient the enduring prejudices against gender and sexual minorities in Finland.

Finland and other Nordic countries are often seen as models of equal rights and non-discrimination based on gender and sexuality. However, the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals show that there is still room for improvement (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). In right-wing populist political discourse, gender – including issues concerning women, feminism, and sexuality – is an ambivalent topic that, according to Spierings (2020, p. 42), plays a trivial yet pivotal role. While gender is not at the ideological core of right-wing populism, it is still perceived as influencing social hierarchies and relations within society. Saresma (2018) coined the term *gender populism* to refer to the idea of two complementary genders (men and women) and the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality that is intertwined with ideologies, such as homophobia, xenophobia, and anti-feminism in the populist right. The Finns Party (FP; in Finnish: Perussuomalaiset), a populist radical right party (PRRP) in Finland, draws on the Finnish hegemonic discourse of gender equality being 'achieved', thus requiring no further action (Pettersson, 2017). At the same time, the party embraces the notion of the heterosexual nuclear family where women are limited to the role of mothers and caregivers (Ylä-Anttila

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& Luhtakallio, 2017). However, gender issues are not straightforward or simple for PRRPs; indeed, previous discursive studies (e.g., Pettersson, 2017; Pettersson & Sakki, 2023) have shown the dilemmatic, complex, and nuanced ways in which gender is negotiated vis-à-vis the traditional, patriarchal ideology of these parties.

Critical discursive psychology (CDP; Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998) integrates discourse and rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1987; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), serving as a methodological framework for qualitatively analysing political communication and rhetoric among both politicians and voters. Several scholars have analysed how laypeople understand concepts such as prejudice, race, and immigration (e.g., Andreouli et al., 2020; Figgou & Condor, 2006; Rapley, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), and more recently, hate speech (Pettersson & Norocel, 2024), populism, and gender (Pettersson & Sakki, 2023) using a discursive approach. These empirical studies share three commonalities: they focus on the language used by the people, they view people as reflective and agentic users of language, and they perceive people's talk as functional in achieving specific interactional goals.

This chapter has two aims. First, it offers a pragmatic three-step approach for conducting CDP analysis of laypeople's talk, particularly relevant for scholars and students researching populism. Although the approach may initially appear difficult to grasp, it allows for a nuanced examination of individuals' constructions of social reality that other methodological approaches may not adequately capture. Second, the chapter utilises empirical interview data to illustrate how categorisation and particularisation are used discursively to negotiate prejudice in populist gender and sexuality discourse. We hope to highlight the value of a CDP approach, in contrast with more mainstream approaches, for studying the flexible ways in which people unite (categorise) or separate/distinguish (particularise) specific stimuli or aspects of the social world in populist communication.

A (C)DP approach

Discursive psychology, a theoretical and methodological framework within political and social psychology studies, emerged in the 1980s as a response to the limitations of realist, positivist, and experimental social psychology paradigms, which often disregarded the significance of language as constructed by individuals themselves. Since then, the influential works of Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Billig (1987) have laid the groundwork for this approach. Over time, these two approaches have been intertwined and applied simultaneously in empirical studies, giving rise to refined approaches such as the affective-discursive approach (Wetherell, 2012) and CDP (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). CDP has much in common with discursive psychology; however, it expands the focus from immediate social interaction to also consider the role of macro discursive dimensions, such as culture, history, and power relations,

in the discursive construction of meaning (Edley, 2001; Pettersson & Sakki, 2020). This makes it a particularly useful perspective for studying (populist) political discourse and the interplay between elite and lay perspectives.

Traditional social psychological research has relied on classic theories, such as the theory of authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), to explain social issues like racism, homophobia, and discrimination. Consequently, the examination of how laypeople negotiate and understand these issues has often been overlooked. However, to fully understand the complexity of these societal concerns within specific sociopolitical contexts, it is important to incorporate the perspectives of laypeople. Discursive psychological approaches enable us to study how lay people engage in nuanced argumentation, negotiation, and reasoning about complex sociopolitical issues (Pettersson & Norocel, 2024; Pettersson & Sakki, 2023). Thus, it allows for the challenging of pre-defined concepts, such as attitudes, prejudice, racism, and hate speech.

In contrast to the cognitivist paradigm in mainstream social psychology, discursive psychology adopts a constructionist or a 'non-mentalistic approach' (Rapley, 2001, p. 234), which underscores the key role of language in shaping categories, such as race, prejudice, and attitudes (Billig, 1987; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). These categories are not neatly defined by external authorities, such as social scientists. Rather, they are dynamically constituted through language – the spoken, written, and other communicative practices of individuals (Potter, 1998). A poignant example of the potency of categorisation lies in historical instances such as the criminalisation of homosexual acts and the classification of homosexuality as a disease. Although legislative reforms, such as those in Finland in 1971 and 1981, have abolished such laws, homosexuality remains criminalised in numerous regions globally, underscoring the enduring influence of culturally and socially constructed discursive categories.

(C)DP is interested in language *itself*, rather than considering it as reflecting the objective world or providing access to the inner psychological attitudes and emotions of individuals (Potter, 1998). Potter and Wetherell (1987) also emphasised the importance of language as a performative and action-orientated medium that allows for achieving particular social functions or consequences. As Edley (2001) noted, language is 'used to *do* things' (p. 192). This means that our words are treated independently from our external behaviour or internal mind rather than indicating a direct pathway to accurately revealing our genuine unbiased set of opinions or attitudes (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 160). For example, instead of trying to define who is and who is not prejudiced or homophobic, discursive psychology focuses on how prejudice is negotiated, avoided, or justified in a given context. The core idea is that language, including particular word choices, rhetorical tools, and expressions, can be used to accomplish a variety of social actions, such as appearing tolerant.

Categorisation and particularisation

Categorisation and particularisation are central concepts in discursive research (Billig, 1987). Categorisation refers to the process of uniting certain stimuli and emphasising similarities (Billig, 1985). Initially developed within the framework of the social identity approach (SIA), categorisation serves as a way to comprehend, manage, and make sense of our social world (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel et al., 1971). While categorisation is central in SIA, it has become a fundamental concept for the whole field of social psychology and is also widely applied within discursive and rhetorical psychology. Whereas SIA assumes that categorisation and self-categorisation are rather mechanical cognitive processes, the discursive approach is interested in how categorisation is done discursively in communication. In sum, both SIA and (C)DP stress the importance of the social context in understanding categorisation but differ in how categories are approached: as models derived from perceptual processes or as discursively constructed in talk for certain purposes (Billig, 2002). The discursive approach thus allows for a richer, more nuanced, and flexible understanding of taken-for-granted social categories (Rapley, 2001), such as sexual minorities or women (Wetherell, 1998).

Categorisation has been extensively studied in relation to stereotyping and prejudice. According to Billig (1985), stereotyping and prejudiced thinking are presented in traditional psychology as normal, inevitable, and an inherent part of everyday thinking to simplify and reduce differences. However, it is problematic to associate categorisation with simplified and prejudiced thinking, as this suggests that the mere existence of these categories allows individuals to express prejudiced thoughts. In reality, categories can be also used for expressing tolerant thought (Billig, 1985).

In addition to categorisation, language allows us to *also* particularise. Billig (1985) outlined particularisation as 'the process by which a particular stimulus is distinguished from a general category or from other stimuli' (p. 82). Essentially, particularisation serves to argue for exceptions within categories or to distinguish a certain feature, dimension, or category as deviant or special. For example, Wiggins and Potter (2003) examined the notion of particularisation in the context of food evaluations, where instead of evaluating a category (e.g., 'I like carrots'; categorisation), individuals may evaluate and single out a specific item by marking it with grammatical clues, such as 'this' or 'these' items (e.g., 'I don't like *these* carrots'; particularisation). Such discursive moves between the general and the particular have important interactional consequences, such as turning down an offer or criticising someone or something (Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Additionally, particularisation can be also used to justify certain actions related to particular category members rather than the category as a whole (Wiggins & Potter, 2003). For example, populist radical right politicians with immigrant or other ethnic minority backgrounds may flexibly emphasise or distinguish certain categorical features in their talk to position themselves as either an ethnic

minority or national majority members (Pettersson et al., 2016). Importantly, categorisation and particularisation are inherently interrelated processes. This means that a selection of certain features from a general category cannot occur without categorising first, which then allows one to argue for a special case or exception to this very category (Billig, 1985).

Doing CDP analysis in practice: The content, form, and function of lay discourse

Numerous practical guides exist for conducting discourse analysis. The pioneering work of Potter and Wetherell (1987) presented the process of discourse analysis in 10 stages, while one of the most recent guides by Locke and Budds (2020) outlined 6. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) comprehensive framework begins with the formulation of research questions, principles for collecting and evaluating different research material, and transcription. In the discursive psychological approach, emphasis is placed on quality over quantity, prioritising the examination of 'language *use* rather than the people generating the language' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 161). In stage 6, out of the 10 stages, the researchers transition to a more concrete analytical procedure, starting with coding – a preliminary step aimed at condensing the material into a more manageable form. This is primarily for pragmatic reasons rather than yielding significant analytical value. Stages 7–10 are analysis, validation, reporting, and application, demonstrating the relevance of discursive psychology as a broad theoretical framework.

While all stages outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987) are integral for any discourse analysis, they do not delve deeply into the practicalities of *doing* the analysis. Moreover, authored in 1987, the seminal work lacks discussion on some of the recent advancements in the discursive field, such as critical discursive analysis (Locke & Budds, 2020) and visual rhetorical analysis (for the analytical phases, see Pettersson & Sakki, 2020; and Chapter 4, this volume), alongside modern technological innovations that enable more precise, secure, and sophisticated analyses. Although technology may facilitate the mechanical phases of the analysis, such as transcriptions, it is less useful during the most laborious phase, like the analysis itself.

The six stages for conducting CDP analysis suggested by Locke and Budds (2020) dive directly into the analytical procedure and thus align more with the structured method we aim to propose. The six stages are familiarisation with the data and initial coding, followed by analysis of discursive constructions, interpretative repertoires, subject positions, discursive accomplishments, and practice. However, stages 3 and 4 in Locke and Budd's (2020) conceptualisation suggest that subject positions (introduced in Chapter 5 of this volume) are necessarily incorporated within interpretative repertoires. Therein lies an assumption that discursive analysis entails identifying interpretive repertoires first, and only then subject positions within them. Even though this approach is appropriate and has been widely applied, we argue that the identification of interpretive repertoires

and subject positions can also be done independently from each other, for example, by identifying only subject positions (Pettersson et al., 2023).

In outlining the separate phases of discursive psychological analysis, it is commonly acknowledged that these steps need not be followed strictly like in recipes. Instead, they serve as a valuable framework for guiding the analytical procedure. Accordingly, in this chapter, we propose a pragmatic three-step model for doing CDP analysis. This model, initially outlined by Sakki and Pettersson (2016), includes the analysis of content (what is being said), form (how something is being said using discursive strategies and rhetorical devices), and function (why it is said, that is, what the possible social and political consequences of the talk are). The utility and applicability of these steps have been demonstrated in the examination of (populist) political communication and discourse (see Hakokõngäs et al., 2020; Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Pettersson et al., 2022; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

The first step – *the analysis of content* (not to be confused with content analysis; see, e.g., Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) – focuses on the content of discourse and answers the question of what is being said or talked about. This phase requires active reading and rereading of the data and thus aligns with Potter and Wetherell's (1987) first step of analysis. This data-driven analytic phase resembles other inductive qualitative analyses, such as the procedures of (reflexive) thematic analysis ([R]TA) outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). Although TA allows for the analysis of underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations, and ideologies, it lacks sufficient theorisation and grounding in prior literature that discursive psychology offers. Some studies utilised TA to explore the content of lay discourse and then analysed this content using the concepts of discursive psychology (e.g., Andreouli et al., 2020; Rovamo & Sakki, 2024). Whereas the identification of the relevant themes in the research material may already be sufficient as the results of TA, the CDP approach uses the analysis of content as a starting point to further deepen the analysis of form and function concerning the relevant theme or topic. However, the analysis of content may be informative as such in more explorative studies, where the research goal focuses on contents (e.g., the content of memes of far-right groups on social media; Hakokõngäs et al., 2020).

In the first phase of this study, we began by reading the material as a whole. In our present case, the material comprised 38 interviews with Finnish voters who had shown agreement with an anti-gender statement from the FP programme. We then identified talk related to gender identity, sexuality, feminism, and LGBTQ+ minorities using coding – marking and highlighting the material to distinguish what is talked about or what topics are related to or associated with this talk in the interviews. For example, participants often talked about the Pride movement, media, gender roles, gender equality, children, economic resources, Islam, homosexuals, minorities, etc. regarding gender. These instances were highlighted and noted using Excel or other helpful software, such as ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti, Berlin, Germany).

These contents may take various forms depending on *how* they are constructed in talk. For example, the instances of talk on gender equality may be constructed as already achieved, discriminating against men, or something still in progress. Therefore, in the second phase, *the analysis of form*, we went beyond descriptive accounts of participants' talk and considered the linguistic, discursive, or rhetorical resources and strategies used in talk that allowed us to delve deeper into the nuances of discourse. Relying on previous theoretical and empirical discursive research, the analysis of form answers the question of how a discursive practice is constructed through various rhetorical and discursive resources. In practice, categorisation and particularisation, as well as their particular discursive use in the material, can be analysed. Alternatively, the analysis of form may include identifying the use of discursive resources, such as liberal-practical arguments (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; e.g., 'Everyone should be treated equally'), and various rhetorical tools or devices, such as concessions (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999; e.g., 'I fully accept gay people, but…') or negating disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; e.g., 'I'm not homophobic, but…').

In the third phase, *the analysis of function*, we moved beyond the mere identification of these various rhetorical and discursive strategies and examined them in their specific interactional, social, and political contexts. This entailed analysing the social (and political) functions of the discourse, such as strengthening one's argument, appearing rational, blaming, constructing otherness, condemning the other, and justifying or avoiding prejudiced accounts. In other words, these discursive and rhetorical tools are considered socially meaningful and are deployed for certain interactional goals. In practice, for example, the vast use of concession may function to manage the speaker's stake or interest in or the disputability of a claim around gender issues (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999).

Although the analytic procedure outlined here comprises distinct stages, it is crucial to emphasise their interconnectedness. To gain a meaningful understanding of each stage, they must be considered in relation to each other. For instance, while marking and highlighting the different contents (i.e., topics) in the research material (analysis of content), one may simultaneously notice similar or recurring rhetorical devices, such as metaphors, used in talk (analysis of form). Furthermore, the analysis of form is essential to identifying functions, and thus, the analysis of function is best conducted in close relation to the analysis of form. According to Potter and Wetherell (1987), a systematic pattern often emerges only after 'long hours of struggling with the data and many false starts' (p. 168), which describes the persistent and long-term character of the analysis. Figure 3.1 illustrates these phases.

Next, using examples from interview material among Finnish populist supporters (see Chapter 2), we demonstrate in practice how this pragmatic three-step model is applied. As part of these in-depth interviews, we asked the interviewees to reflect on issues related to gender using various facilitating means, such as visual material and stimulus statements. We paid particular attention to the discursive use of categorisation and particularisation as strategies for negotiating prejudice in the discourse around gender.

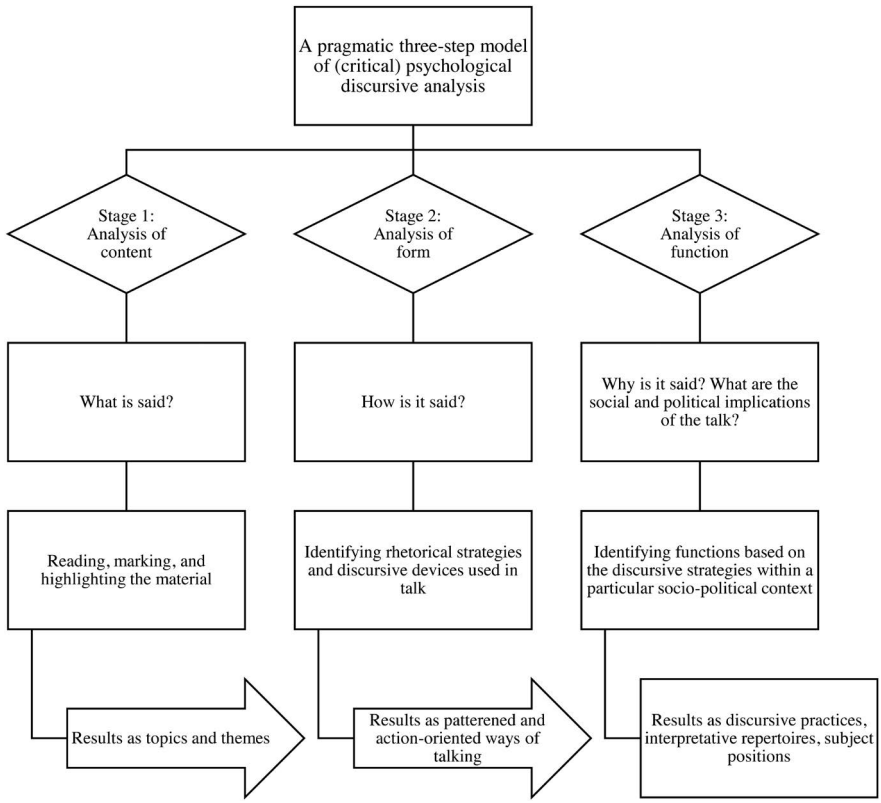

Figure 3.1 The pragmatic three-step CDP analysis

The analysis of content, form, and function in action

We begin our demonstration of the pragmatic three-step CDP analysis with an example from our interview material in which the participant discussed the meaning of Finnishness.

1 I think this is like, this has become this cause so hhh, it's become so, so like [sighs]
2 this Pride – Pride theme that well, as if we heterosexuals have no rights and
3 somehow it's emphasised too much that I am someone, um someone [laughs]
4 someone like from a sexual minority. I have also a lot of friends, gays, and lesbians
5 and everyone. I can be friends with them, and we are good friends, but no one
6 emphasises that, they don't go to the market square to shout that 'I'm gay or lesbian'

7 or somehow emphasise it with what they're wearing. So, I think we all should have
8 that, the human dignity like regardless of if we go to wave the Pride flag, so that
9 in the same way, we heterosexuals could go out there with some flags [laughs] so
10 if we wanted to highlight our own excellence, that is, it's like, fairness in everything.

At the level of *content*, this example is related to the common theme of Pride (lines 1–2, 6–9). For our research goal – to understand how prejudice is negotiated, avoided, or justified in populist gender discourse – it is also useful to code instances in which the participant talks about different social groups: heterosexuals (lines 2, 9–10) and homosexuals (lines 3–7). As outlined in the previous section, from a (C)DP perspective, merely coding these instances is insufficient due to their multiple meaning potentials. Nevertheless, this first step provided us with a descriptive understanding of what participants discussed around gender issues and allowed us to proceed to the next analytic step: to analyse more systematically *how* these different groups are constructed discursively.

In the *analysis of form*, we paid attention to how these different categories were used in the talk, illustrating categorisation and particularisation as central discursive tools. In the example above, the participant constructs Pride as a 'cause' (line 1) that seems to deprive the rights of heterosexuals as an in-group: 'as if we heterosexuals have no rights' (line 2). This constructs the majority as targets of unfair treatment: 'in the same way we heterosexuals could go out there with some flags [laughs]… fairness in everything' (lines 9–10). Comparing the Pride movement to the rights and entitlements of heterosexuals allows the speaker to construct the majority as unfairly weakened by the sexual minority members. This is not done directly but indirectly through the construction of the majority position as the underdog, which allows the speaker to *recategorise* the sexual minority as unfairly receiving entitlements in the context of Pride, which paradoxically aims to promote equality and visibility for LGBTQ+ people. This recategorisation illustrates a similar discursive strategy of reversing that is common in the talk about racism, allowing the speaker to portray the 'other' as discriminating and racist (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Van Dijk, 1992). In this context, a type of reversing is done by constructing sexual minorities as threatening the position of the heterosexual majority.

The extract also shows how *particularisation* is used to avoid accusations of prejudice and claim a tolerant position. Particularisation is used to distinguish certain individuals from the stereotypical category of publicly celebrating and manifesting gender and sexual minority members. This is done by constructing exceptions as friends – 'I have also a lot of friends, gays and lesbians and everyone' (lines 4–5) – and including them as part of the modest and average majority through a script formulation and dispositional action (Edwards,

1995): 'they don't go to the market square to shout that "I'm gay or lesbian" or somehow emphasise it with what they're wearing' (lines 6–7). Rhetorically, drawing on personal narratives serves as 'living proof' and protects the speaker from accusations of prejudice, and even positions the speaker as a supporter of minority members (Pettersson, 2020).

In the *analysis of function*, we analysed the interactional functions of discursive recategorisation and particularisation, or in other words, what is being achieved with this way of talking. Recategorising sexual minorities as privileged rather than vulnerable, weak, and disadvantaged functions to delegitimise the rights of sexual minorities and justify prejudice. At the same time, particularising certain sexual minority members as friends or 'exceptions' serves to position the speaker as tolerant and nonprejudiced. Here, the analysis of function enables examining how this instance of particularisation allows the speaker to appear more inclusive and rational vis-à-vis gender and sexual minorities, whilst nevertheless expressing negative views about them.

In our second example, the *analysis of content* demonstrates how Finnish society (line 3) and the media (line 6) are highlighted in populist gender discourse. Furthermore, as in the previous example, it is possible to code the instances of talk about categories, such as humans (lines 1–2) and homosexuals (lines 1, 4–5).

1 Umm. (4) Yeah well every human, human being, whether gay or lesbian,
2 is of course a human, human, but (3) now we're bringing this into every issue and
3 under this guise, guise crumble this Finnish society that's the most negative thing so.
4 […] I don't know how much gays and lesbians have experienced discrimination. […]
5 I would think that the percentage of the population that is these people that.
6 It should not be in every, everything every week in media to be raised and.

At the level of *form*, the participant rhetorically uses a self-sufficient argument that does not require further elaboration (Wetherell & Potter, 1992): 'every human, human being, whether gay or lesbian, is of course a human' (lines 1–2). Furthermore, this argument allows for categorising homosexuals as a superordinate category of humans. This categorisation is, however, limited and conditional, as indicated by the use of a concession 'but' (Potter, 1996), constructing gender issues as posing a threat, particularly to 'this Finnish society' (line 3).

The extract also shows the particularisation of sexual minorities as a distinguishable group of people in society: 'I would think that the percentage of the population that is these people. It should not be in everything every week' (lines 5–6). Questioning the discrimination of sexual minorities – 'I don't know how much gays and lesbians have experienced discrimination' (line 4) – further serves to delegitimise the rights of sexual minorities.

Additionally, the use of 'I' in making personal evaluations about the topic contrasts with the impersonal, uncategorised, and particular language used to refer to the minorities as 'this… issue' and 'these people' (lines 2, 4; Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Although the participant first uses the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' explicitly (lines 1, 5), using impersonal and general terms allows them to make more negative evaluations of gender and sexual minorities and delegitimise their visibility without explicitly mentioning gay individuals (line 5).

The *analysis of function* allows us to demonstrate for what purposes self-sufficient arguments, concessions, categorisation, and particularisation are used in this specific context. For example, concession serves to highlight the dilemmatic character of the participants' talk around gender issues (Billig et al., 1988), while the use of common, superordinate category functions to avoid accusations of prejudice and construct an inclusive position. Furthermore, emphasising difference and distinguishing sexual minority members from the majority functions to discursively marginalise the 'other'.

In our third example, the participant comments on the presidential elections and the possible presidency of Pekka Haavisto, whose position was introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

1 What Pekka Haavisto brings to mind, [he's] an extremely smart man. […]
2 I could say that, however, in many families and other so, so, there in the background
3 were his uh that, okay a smart man and everything, but and this, a certain kind of
4 background that he's dating with a man and he's with a man I guess mar– married and in
5 other and doesn't represent this kind of, traditional, traditions like a male president who
6 has a female wife or. A female president or male husband, so it's like in the background.
7 […] On the other hand, Haavisto would give a good impression if he was elected, in the
8 sense that this tolerance and other things, and then when there is, uh, this kind of publicly
9 like this um let's say directly an op– openly gay, even though he doesn't bring it up but
10 like in the background and other so, so. […] But then again, on the other hand, one
11 wonders if the world is going forward. I just feel that in public at the moment, when you
12 look at some TV shows, then there are lesbian couples and there are gay couples, there
13 are, you know people who have changed their sex and others, then, are there ordinary
14 [people] there anymore, like the ordinary people, man and woman. […] The ordinary
15 man and woman, they make the next generation, and the world is being populated, but
16 it will not become populated if there are just male and female couples.

In the *analysis of content*, we observed topics related to Pekka Haavisto (lines 1–10), traditional gender roles (lines 5–6), the media (lines 11–14), and reproduction (lines 14–16). In the *analysis of form*, we considered how the participant discursively positions Haavisto positively: 'an extremely smart man' (line 1). However, the rich use of concession – 'okay a smart man and everything, *but*' (line 3) – draws attention to and discursively particularises his homosexuality: 'this, a certain kind of background that he's dating with a man and he's with a man I guess mar–married' (lines 3–4). This position is strengthened by constructing the gay presidential couple as nontraditional (lines 5–6).

It was common for participants to explicitly construct sexuality as a secondary aspect, something 'in the background' (line 6) and Haavisto positively as giving 'a good impression' (line 7). However, the negotiations between the positive outcomes of his presidency (lines 7–8) and the implicit negative aspects of his homosexuality demonstrate the dilemmatic character of this discourse (Billig et al., 1988) and how sexuality is discursively particularised from competency and intelligence. When analysing the discursive functions of this extract, we may extend the findings from the first two examples, where recategorising gender and sexual minorities as privileged was used to juxtapose average, ordinary (heterosexual) people with the stereotypical minority members who publicly celebrate and manifest their identity. In the present example, the participant portrays Haavisto as *not* highlighting his sexuality. However, the participant then concedes 'but then again' (line 10; Potter, 1996), moving on to an account, in the form of a list construction (Jefferson, 1990; lines 12–13), of his worries about the public visibility and presence of sexual minority members in society at the cost of the majority.

The extract further demonstrates how categorising 'ordinary people' as heterosexuals through gender binary – 'man and woman' (lines 13–14) – allows the speaker to implicitly recategorise sexual and gender minorities as abnormal and thus exclude them from the heteronormative category. Additionally, the rich use of unidentified categories in the participant's talk, such as 'others' (lines 10 and 13), constructs a seeming confusion and discomfort around the topic. The participant moreover draws on an essentialist argument – 'the ordinary man and woman, they make the next generation' (lines 14–15) – illustrating how populist gender discourse is constructed around threatened, binary gender roles, which is characteristic of gender populism (Saresma, 2018).

In sum, in the *analysis of function*, we analysed the social implications of positioning Haavisto positively as capable but then particularising him (negatively) as a homosexual. This intricate interplay between positive categorisation and negative particularisation functions to negotiate prejudice and avoid being accused of explicit prejudice.

Our fourth example again tackles the presidential elections. Here, the participant discusses the potential impact on the country's image if Haavisto were to become president.

1 Well yes it says a lot about our country when it's the figurehead and about the values
2 and. I really don't see Haavisto and his gay husband going to like, I don't know if he
3 would go to like a Middle Eastern country where gay–gays are stoned to death.
4 And then he goes, goes there, and in no way I accept any stoning of gays, like I think
5 it's bar–barbaric [laughs] and totally primitive, this Islam, but he would go to a country
6 like this. […] Well yeah, I don't, it would be like a bad thing, and poorly represented
7 Finland, that I wouldn't, I wouldn't want in any case.

At the level of *content*, we detected instances of talk about the nation (lines 1, 6–7) Pekka Haavisto (lines 2–4), the Middle East (lines 3–6), and Islam (line 5). The analysis of content allowed us to distinguish the different topics that Haavisto's potential presidency would be associated with. Unlike the previous example that was related to the qualities of Haavisto, this one is related to Islam and the Middle East.

In the *analysis of form*, and like the previous example, the participant highlights Haavisto's homosexuality as a distinguishable feature: 'I really don't see Haavisto and his gay husband going to like… a Middle Eastern country' (lines 2–3). Simultaneously, the example shows how the Middle East, as a symbol of the Islamic world, is constructed as a severely dangerous and deadly place for homosexuals (line 3). This enables the participant to construct Muslims as homophobic, without mentioning Muslim individuals explicitly, by referring to the vague notion of a 'Middle Eastern country' (line 3; Puar, 2007; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). The participant uses the common rhetorical tool of supporting sexual minority rights: 'in no way I accept any stoning of gays, like I think it's bar–barbaric [laughs] and totally primitive, this Islam' (lines 4–5). This, however, is followed by a construction of negative evaluation: 'Well yeah, I don't, it would be like a bad thing and poorly represented Finland that I wouldn't, I wouldn't want in any case' (lines 6–7).

In terms of the *analysis of function*, we can see how categorising Muslims as homophobic enables the speaker to position herself as rational, commonsensical, and tolerant. Simultaneously, the use of vague expressions around Finland's international image serves to justify her negative position towards a gay president. Furthermore, blaming the 'other' for homophobia functions to avoid accusations of prejudice. This exemplifies the classic discussion of Islam in populist gender discourse, where right-wing populist actors use the defence of (gender) minority issues as a discursive resource to cast Islam in an unfavourable light and oppose racialised others, such as Muslim men (Dietze & Roth, 2020).

Concluding discussion

This methodological chapter had two interrelated aims. First, we outlined a pragmatic three-step procedure for conducting CDP analysis of the discursive content, form, and function (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016) of laypeople's talk. Second, we applied this procedure to empirical examples to demonstrate how the notions of categorisation and particularisation are used to negotiate prejudice in populist gender and sexuality discourse.

Our analyses identified various discursive functions of categorisation and particularisation. On the one hand, recategorising sexual minorities as privileged (Extract 1) was used to delegitimise minority rights; categorising homosexuals to a superordinate category of humans (Extract 2) was used to appear tolerant; and categorising Muslims as homophobic (Extract 4) was used to avoid accusations of prejudice. On the other hand, particularising homosexuals as friends (Extract 1) was used to appear tolerant, while particularising sexual minorities from the majority (Extract 2) was used to marginalise and exclude sexual minorities from society. Impersonal accounts of 'these people' and the use of unidentified categories, such as 'others' in talk on gender and sexuality created an air of confusion and ambiguity in these constructions. Further, the vast use of concessions (e.g., 'but…', 'on the other hand…') illuminates the dilemmatic and multifaceted character of categorisation and particularisation in lay discourse around gender equality and sexual and gender minority rights.

Following Michael Billig (2002), we suggest that a CDP approach has several advantages in comparison to mainstream social psychological perspectives on social categorisation and prejudice, such as those focusing on their cognitive aspects. The CDP approach proposed here is useful not only in capturing the flexible construction of social categories, but also in highlighting the special features, dimensions, and categories that construct exceptions and particular cases in populist discourse and the various social implications these may have. It also enables examining the ideological character of such categorisation and particularisation, and how ideology thus becomes enacted in talk, with social and political consequences.

Indeed, as Billig (1985) concluded, particularisation does not always indicate tolerant thought, nor does categorisation indicate prejudiced thought. Lay discourse and argumentation around socially sensitive or political topics often use both categorisation and particularisation flexibly to justify the speaker's position. For example, the discussion about presidential candidate Pekka Haavisto highlighted how positioning him positively as capable and particularising him negatively as a homosexual allowed for navigating prejudice while avoiding being accused thereof. However, distinguishing 'modest' homosexuals (such as Haavisto) from those who 'overly manifest' their homosexuality served to argue against the public presence of gender and sexual minorities in society. Today, increasing national and global polarisation and tensions have created two worldviews stretching farther away from each other on pressing

societal issues, such as gender (equality), immigration, and climate change. A CDP approach is useful for understanding how this polarisation is created, reproduced, and sustained in everyday talk, and thus ultimately, how it might be combatted.

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Chapter 4

Visual rhetorical analysis to unveil populist appeal

The case of Jussi Halla-aho's presidential campaign images

Jari Martikainen and Inari Sakki

Introduction

For over two centuries, posters have been pivotal in shaping election campaigns (Seidman, 2010). During Barack Obama's 2008 United States presidential campaign, his campaign conveyed messages of hope, change, and unity by harnessing the emotive power of images. In an era dominated by social media and digital advertising, the campaign's strategic use of imagery, particularly through posters, captivated audiences, sparked conversations, and mobilised unprecedented levels of grassroots support (Seidman, 2010). Thus, the power of visuals in political persuasion was taken to new levels.

Visuals are a powerful tool in political communication as they can create narratives, shape attitudes, mobilise support, as well as influence social movements and collective action. Specifically, in populism, visuals are employed as a key tool for communication, mobilisation, and identity building. For example, Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' slogan and red baseball caps became iconic symbols of his 2016 presidential campaign, appealing to a sense of national pride and nostalgia among his supporters. Curini et al. (2024) analysed the chromatic features (hue and saturation) of right-wing populist party logos in Europe and beyond, finding that these parties used higher (bluer) hues to convey a purer ideological commitment and lower saturation to project professionalism, competence, and trustworthiness in their visual identity.

However, despite the vast amount of research on populism, its visual and aesthetic aspects have been largely ignored (Moffitt, 2022). In this chapter, we aim to draw attention to this caveat by unpacking the visual rhetoric communicated in the presidential election campaign images of Jussi Halla-aho, the leading figure in the Finnish right-wing populist movement.

The case: Jussi Halla-aho and persuasive functions of images

Jussi Halla-aho, the Speaker of the Finnish Parliament and former leader of the Finnish right-wing populist Finns Party (FP), initially became a public

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figure through his blog, *Scripta – Kirjoituksia uppoavasta lännestä* (Writings from the sinking West). Here, he introduced and popularised the Islamophobic narrative in Finland, illustrating the central ideology of his writing: the alleged threat of Muslims. The guestbook of Halla-aho's Scripta blog became so popular that in 2008, it led to the creation of the Hommaforum online community, focused on criticism of immigration and multiculturalism (Horsti, 2015). These online platforms, centred around anti-immigration discussions, mobilised supporters around a common cause, and some online activists subsequently joined the right-wing populist FP, contributing to its success in the 2011 elections.

However, while his provocative blog writings brought Halla-aho celebrity status, they also initiated several accusations of racism and misogyny. In 2012, he was convicted of ethnic agitation and disturbing religious worship over his blog posts about immigrants and Islam. Despite this, his popularity on social media contributed to his electoral success and subsequent rise to political power within the FP. In 2017, Halla-aho was elected as the leader of the FP, and in 2023, he became the Speaker of the Finnish Parliament.

Although Halla-aho has not written on Scripta for years, he remains active on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), maintaining his status as an ideological leader of the Finnish anti-immigration movement. The admiration and respect towards his leadership are exemplified by his nickname 'Master', given by followers who eagerly follow, spread, repeat, and amplify his statements through multiple social media channels and hybrid media networks (Horsti, 2015; Horsti & Saresma, 2021). In contrast to typical populist leaders and the previous FP leader Timo Soini, Halla-aho is not a charismatic performer, as he seems rather awkward when confronted by the media or when speaking to the wider public. Instead, he has built his leadership through his verbal rhetoric characterised by an ironic use of language, fact-building rhetorical strategies, and the creation of new anti-immigration language through neologisms. His position as an intellectual of his party is bolstered by his background as a researcher and PhD holder (Arter, 2020; Horsti, 2015; Saresma & Tulonen, 2020).

To our knowledge, while a vast amount of empirical research has previously focused on Halla-aho's verbal discourse on the Scripta blog (Horsti, 2015; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Sakki et al., 2017; Saresma & Tulonen, 2020, 2023) and on the multimodal communication of the FP's electoral campaigning (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Pettersson et al., 2023; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021), no previous study has approached his political communication through visual analysis. In July 2023, when Hallo-aho announced via a pre-recorded YouTube video posted on his Twitter account that he would stand as the FP candidate in the 2024 presidential elections, we saw this as an opportunity to expand on past research on the populist appeal of the FP and Halla-aho by conducting a study of images and visual persuasion.

Images in political communication have persuasive functions (Schill, 2012). Differing from written and spoken language, images do not have a visual syntax capable of expressing exact relationships between the visual elements included in the images (Blair, 2004). Therefore, the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are presented importantly modify the way they are perceived and made sense of (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). According to Blair (2004), images can be understood as implied arguments – *enthymemes* – where images suggest a semantic affordance that is completed by the audience (see also Schill, 2012). While their claims are not explicit, images have a powerful appeal to audiences and can be flexibly used for persuasive purposes. As Schill (2012) stated, 'images "say" things without saying things' (p. 130) and 'while not explicit… images invite enthymematic conclusions by the viewer' (pp. 122–123). For this reason, images are frequently used for communicating negative or politically controversial views (Schill, 2012). For instance, in the visual communication of right-wing populist parties, such as the FP, images are used to mobilise anti-immigrant and misogynist meanings without explicitly stating them (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Pettersson et al., 2023; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021).

Visual populist communication

Visuals play an increasingly significant role in populist persuasion. With the widespread use of media technologies worldwide, images have become paramount, overshadowing traditional forms of communication (Moffitt, 2022). Studies show that voters rely on visual cues (e.g., physical attractiveness) to assess candidates and make voting decisions. Consequently, candidates strategically manage positive self-images and use visual frames to mobilise and persuade voters (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Steffan, 2020). A growing body of research has delved into the management of politicians' visual images on social media platforms. Many studies have concentrated on the use of Instagram by populist leaders, including analyses of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022), Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020), and Donald Trump (Dobkiewicz, 2019; Moffitt, 2024). While limited, existing studies exploring the visual semiotics of politicians' Instagram posts suggest that these figures primarily utilise the platform to convey proximity to citizens. This can be achieved through various means, such as establishing direct eye contact with the viewer, assimilating into crowds, or illustrating interactions with diverse social groups (e.g., Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020).

Grabe and Bucy (2009) analysed visual television coverage of U.S. presidential campaigns (1992–2004) and identified three visual frames: the ideal candidate, sure loser, and populist campaigner. The ideal candidate frame highlights the traits of statesmanship and compassion essential for effective leadership. Statesmanship is depicted through visuals of power, authority, and national

symbols, while compassion is shown through images of children, families, and religious symbols. Meanwhile, the populist campaigner emphasises the candidates' connection with ordinary people, symbolised by informal attire, interactions with citizens, and performing physical tasks. In the context of European populist right-wing parties, Bast (2024) conducted a comprehensive visual content analysis of eight populist politicians' Instagram posts. The study identified the creation of a professional image and compassion, aligning with the ideal candidate frame, as well as ordinariness and closeness to citizens, echoing the populist frame, as key visual communication strategies.

Studies on populist communication often examine how populist leaders cultivate an image of ordinariness and authenticity through various communication strategies. It is important for populist leaders to often portray themselves as ordinary individuals who understand the concerns of the common people. Authenticity, in contrast, refers to the perceived genuineness and sincerity of the populist leader's message and persona, which can be achieved by using language and symbols that resonate with the everyday experiences and values of their target audience. For example, based on the visual discourse analysis of Orbán's Instagram in 2019, Szebeni and Salojärvi (2022) focused on the importance of authentic performance, through which Orbán aimed at visually embodying the features of an ordinary man by frequently using symbols of nationality and masculinity. In a similar way, Mendonça and Caetano (2020) described Bolsonaro's visual aesthetic as a blend of populism, masculinity, and charisma, which projected an aura of both approachability to the masses and a representation of himself as a charismatic exceptionality. By adopting this approach, the authors contended, Bolsonaro employed a strategy of parodying the traditional trappings of his presidency. This allowed him to simultaneously appropriate the office's symbolic authority while cultivating an image of being an unconventional figure who is 'one of the people'. This narrative was reinforced through seemingly mundane images, such as an Instagram post depicting him preparing breakfast with ordinary bread rolls and sweetened condensed milk poured directly from the can (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020, p. 14).

In addition to politicians' visual self-presentation, several studies have examined campaign posters and their visual communication (e.g., Adami, 2020; Doerr, 2017; Richardson & Colombo, 2013). A common theme in these studies is the portrayal of Muslims as the 'dangerous other' (Wodak, 2015) and the presentation of derogatory content within humorous and fictional frames (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Wodak & Forchtner, 2014). This calculated ambivalence (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014) underscores the strategic attempt to convey divergent meanings through the ambivalent use of visual rhetoric, addressing different audiences and evading responsibility for the messages expressed (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). For instance, Adami (2020) conducted an in-depth visual analysis of two posters published for events organised in Verona in 2019 by organisations associated with the PRRP political sphere

and fundamentalist religious stances. The study demonstrated how the posters propagated extreme right and fundamentalist Catholic values using mild and moderate visual styles combined with positive and purposeful vocabulary and imagery, such as portraying the term 'family' as a morally unifying category. Adami (2020) introduced the concept of 'communicative camouflage', highlighting these organisations' attempt to use visuals to moderate extreme right and fundamentalist messages.

Furthermore, to study populist visual communication, Sayan-Cengiz and Tekin (2022) explored the campaign posters for the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, the Rassemblement National in France, and the Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands. In line with previous research on gendered populism (Saresma, 2018; Wodak, 2015), their study showed that while Muslim migrant women were represented as victims and Muslim men as aggressors, native women also appeared in campaign posters as embodiments of authentic national identities, either as reproducers or defenders of the nation. Interestingly, native heterosexual men were absent from the visual communication of campaign posters, suggesting the powerful position they hold in this PRRP's imagination. This implies that they are designated spectators and addressees of visual communication materials rather than objects of representation.

Previous research demonstrates how right-wing populists visually construct 'the people' by mainly depicting white individuals, incorporating national symbols, and referencing the nation's history, such as by showcasing historic events. For instance, Gimenez and Schwarz (2016) analysed the visual communication strategies of the French National Front and the Swiss People's Party, illustrating their distinct visual approaches in constructing the people and emphasising proximity to the people. While the French National Front presents itself visually as a party *for* the people, the Swiss People's Party portrays itself as a party *of* the people. Similarly, Moffitt (2024) examined the visual portrayal of the people in Instagram images of Donald Trump (right-wing populism) and Bernie Sanders (left-wing populism). The study found that Sanders's people were considerably more diverse demographically compared to Trump's, which predominantly featured white, masculine individuals.

This chapter continues this line of research and explores the visual rhetorical persuasion of campaign images of the FP's presidential candidate, Jussi Hallaaho. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate the power of images in mobilising political imagination. Due to their high visibility in public spaces and across online and offline media, campaign images serve as an important instrument aimed at appealing to a broader audience, not just those already interested in the populist party's messages. This chapter makes two key contributions. First, theoretically, it adds to the literature on populist persuasion by highlighting the role of images in populist communication. Second, and more importantly, through our in-depth and detailed analysis of visual rhetorical strategies in campaign images, this chapter provides a methodological toolkit for other scholars interested in studying visual populist discourse. In what follows, we

first elaborate on the key premises of visual rhetorical analysis and then illustrate how the method can be used to study the form, content, and function of images using two images of Jussi Halla-aho's presidential campaign as examples.

Visual rhetorical analysis

Visual images importantly contribute to the contemporary 'rhetorical environment' (Foss, 2005, p. 142) in politics, providing a powerful means to disseminate information as well as influence people's thoughts and actions. Through their emotional appeal, images are capable of persuading and mobilising people (Danesi, 2017; Martikainen, 2019). They are not neutral documents of reality, but intentional visual acts and arguments aimed at social outcomes (Danesi, 2017; Kjeldsen, 2017) – a fact emphasised in the context of visuals related to political campaigns (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Seidman, 2010). Specifically, the scope of visual rhetoric encompasses the structure, meanings, and social functions of images (Foss, 2005). Accordingly, we used visual rhetorical analysis to study the contents and forms/compositions of the campaign images as well as their social, political, and ideological functions (Danesi, 2017; Foss, 2005; Martikainen & Sakki, 2023b).

We divided the procedure of visual rhetorical analysis into three different but interrelated stages using content, compositional, and sociosemiotic analyses (see also Martikainen & Sakki, 2023b). Whereas content analysis focuses on examining the people, objects, and environments depicted in images, compositional analysis provides a means to study the methods of visual expression (e.g., colour, viewing angle, and proximity) and their juxtaposition (Martikainen, 2019; Martikainen & Sakki, 2023b; Rose, 2016). Meanwhile, sociosemiotic analysis offers tools to examine the meanings constructed through the interplay of visual components (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). We associate these three analytical stages with the three metafunctions included in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006), O'Halloran's (2008), and Royce's (2007) models of visual analysis based on systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1978). Specifically, we relate content and compositional analysis to textual (composition of the image) and interpersonal (communication with the viewers) metafunction, whereas sociosemiotic analysis is related to ideational metafunction (meaning of the image; see also Martikainen & Sakki, 2023b). Because the methodological literature offers detailed guidance to the analytical procedures of content, compositional, and sociosemiotic analyses (e.g., Bell, 2012; Hook & Glaveanu, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2016), they concretise the analytical operations carried out at the three metafunctional levels. In the analysis, we focus on elaborating how the choice of visual elements in the images (textual metafunction) construct certain kinds of relationships between Halla-aho and the viewers (interpersonal metafunction) and political meanings (ideational metafunction) that serve particular political functions.

Although the interpretation of images is always partly subjective, visual rhetorical analysis provides a means to interpret images based on the culturally preferred meanings of the visual elements. For example, different types of framing express social distance, vertical viewing angles indicate power relations, and colours have culture-specific meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002, 2006). In addition to culture, the interpretation of images is shaped by their social and political context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Given that the images we analyse in this chapter are presidential campaign images of the FP candidate, we interpreted the images both in the frame of Western culture and the political agenda of the FP.

Analysis

We analysed two central images published by FP presidential candidate Jussi Halla-aho during his presidential campaign. The first image (Figure 4.1) is a screenshot from a video in which Halla-aho announced his willingness to be a presidential candidate for the FP. The image was published in the FP newspaper *Suomen Uutiset* as well as in national newspapers.

In Figure 4.1, serious-looking Jussi Halla-aho is depicted sitting beside a table. He wears a black suit, which communicates officiality and formality traditionally associated with the position of a president/presidential candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). At the level of textual metafunction, the composition of the image is highly symmetrical, with Halla-aho occupying the central axis of the photo, accentuating his status as the presidential candidate and communicating formality at the level of ideational metafunction. Although a connection to the viewer is established through his gaze, the medium shot,

Figure 4.1 Picture of Jussi Halla-aho (photo: STT/Lehtikuva)

formal suit, and Halla-aho's location behind the table create distance from the viewer. Additionally, Halla-aho's serious facial expression does not signal any emotional engagement, resulting in a restrained and formal type of contact with the audience at the level of interpersonal metafunction (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Together, these visual choices suggest that Halla-aho's personality is not the focus of the image. Instead, he is depicted as a representative of a social role (presidential candidate) underlining statesmanship, which resonates with Grabe and Bucy's (2009) notion of an *ideal campaigner frame*. The juxtaposition of semantically congruent visual choices at the level of textual metafunction (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2008) – formal attire, symmetrical composition, serious facial expression – intensify each other's meanings (Royce, 2007) and construct a very traditional image of Halla-aho as a presidential candidate at the level of ideational metafunction (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2008). This not only reflects the conservative stance of the party itself but also serves as a means to appeal to conservative voters (see Lähdesmäki, 2019).

Furthermore, the composition of the image, Halla-aho's attire, posture, and location sitting behind a table (with hands clasped together on the table) looking straight at the viewer creates an intervisual link to the Finnish presidents' annual speeches on New Years broadcasted on 1 January. In a similar setting, incumbent Finnish presidents give their New Year's speech from the Presidential Office. Every year, these speeches attract millions of people, their familiarity potentially appealing to the unconscious collective memory of the Finnish people, despite the lack of conscious connection with the president's speech (see Ylä-Anttila, 2017). Nevertheless, this sense of familiarity may act as persuasive force affecting voters' decision making (cf. Martikainen & Sakki, 2021) and is often used as a tool in populist persuasion (Ylä-Anttila, 2017). This is further emphasised by the photo's appearance as a pastiche visualising the FP's desired future with Halla-aho as the president of the nation, persuading the voters to fulfil the dream. Overall, this example shows how visual choices at the level of textual metafunction (e.g., composition, posture, setting) evoke intervisual references (New Year's speech), which importantly contribute to the meaning of the image and sense of familiarity at the level of ideational metafunction. At the same time, this is an excellent example of a visual rhetorical strategy, where subtle visual features and intervisual references are harnessed to construct an implicit claim, an *enthymeme* (Blair, 2004), that appeals to audiences' emotions and imagination as well as mobilises them.

However, while the aforementioned interpretation of the intervisuality in Halla-aho's image refers to the future, it can also be understood as referring to the past. The greyish/brownish colour scheme of the image (textual metafunction) furnishes the image with a dated/retro look (ideational metafunction), which may become associated with old photographs of Finnish

presidents (intervisual reference). The choices at the level of textual metafunction (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2008), the plain interior, and Halla-aho's traditional suit similarly draw associations with the past at the level of an ideational metafunction. Through these visual elements, the photograph mobilises nostalgic longing for a past cherished by the FP (Lähdesmäki, 2019; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). At the same time, Halla-aho appears as a mediator between the past, present, and future, creating a sense of continuity.

Meanwhile, at the level of interpersonal metafunction, the frontal image and Halla-aho's direct gaze create a bond between him and the viewer. Despite the formality and distance discussed previously, the eye-level angle deployed in the image (textual metafunction) communicates equality and democracy at the level of ideational metafunction (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), typical of presidential/political campaign images in other cultural contexts (see, e.g., Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020; Steffan, 2020). In addition, the semantically congruent visual elements at the level of textual metafunction – plain interior, matte surfaces, and greyish colour – resonate with each other (O'Halloran, 2008), communicating ordinariness and modesty at the level of ideational metafunction. The blush on Halla-aho's cheeks appears as an involuntary reaction and creates an air of authenticity. The visually communicated virtues propagated by the FP – ordinariness, authenticity, and honesty (Elmgren, 2015; Niemi, 2013) – become associated with Halla-aho, allowing him to appear as a representative of the virtuous common people rather than as a member of the traitorous and self-sufficient political elite (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021).

The second image we analysed is the official presidential campaign poster for Halla-aho (Figure 4.2).

Compared to Figure 4.1, the official presidential campaign poster in Figure 4.2 depicts Halla-aho closer to the viewer, narrowing the distance between them at the level of interpersonal metafunction. The colour scheme also differs substantially, with the intense blue colour emphatically communicating Finnishness (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2016), calmness, and rationality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Additionally, the vertical form of the image can be associated with meanings of rationality and power (Cian, 2016). Together, the use of these visual elements (textual metafunction) communicates rationality, resonating with Halla-aho's erudition and constructing an understanding of a reasonable and rational presidential candidate at the level of ideational metafunction. This method of depiction differs from several images of populist leaders emphasising masculinity and physical acts (see, e.g., Mendonça & Caetano, 2020; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022).

Furthermore, in Figure 4.2, Halla-aho is depicted on the left of the image against a blue background. At the level of textual metafunction, the combination of white text and blue background draws associations with the colours of the Finnish flag as well as the prototypical elements of Finnish nature (i.e., snow and lakes), appealing to the collective sensory experiences of the voters

Figure 4.2 Official presidential campaign poster for Halla-aho (photo: Pledge Times 10.1.2024)

at the level of ideational metafunction (see Martikainen & Sakki, 2023a). The colour combination is repeated in Halla-aho's white shirt and blue tie along with his intense blue eyes, which were likely intensified through photo editing to reflect the shade of the background. According to the ancient idiom 'the eyes are the windows to the soul', eyes display a person's character, revealing their true inner essence (Soage, 2023). Thus, through his deep blue eyes, Halla-aho appears not only as a representative of Finland but as an embodiment of the Finnish soul.

Based on this perspective, it is not Halla-aho's eyes that reflect the background, but rather, the other way around: the blue background reflects and echoes the embodied Finnishness of Halla-aho. The use of the colour blue, one of the most common symbols of Finnishness, can be understood in terms of creating a feeling of national proximity with the Finnish voters (see Gimenez & Schwarz, 2016) based on common nationhood as well as collective emotional and sensory experiences associated with the colour (Martikainen & Sakki, 2023a). This level of national connectedness is further communicated by Halla-aho through his direct eye contact with the spectator. Hence, in terms of interpersonal metafunction (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2008), the bond between Halla-aho and the viewer is constructed on both the national and personal levels.

Moreover, Halla-aho's direct eye contact with the viewer also plays an important role in visual rhetoric. Compositionally, eyes are arranged at the upper golden section, emphasising the role of the gaze (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Therefore, the contact with the viewer at the level of interpersonal metafunction is reinforced through the visual construction of the image (golden section) at the level of textual metafunction. Direct eye contact is often understood as communicating honesty and credibility, whereas gaze aversion is associated with dishonesty (Kreysa et al., 2016). In political campaign images, authenticity and sincerity are often performed by looking straight at the viewer (Liebes, 2001; Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020). In this image, Halla-aho's restrained facial expression emphasises the communicative importance of the eyes, which portray honesty, sincerity, and authentic Finnishness. The gaze appears as a visual rhetoric designed to promote/evoke the viewer's trust in Halla-aho (Liebes, 2001).

At the level of interpersonal metafunction, eye contact is usually interpreted as communicating approachability, generating positive feelings among viewers. Moreover, direct eye contact addresses the viewer and creates an interpersonal bond between them and the person being depicted (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). It may even generate self-referential processing in terms of 'a heightened processing of stimuli in relation with the self' (Conty et al., 2016, p. 184). Therefore, Halla-aho's gaze in the poster may be understood as a means of appealing to voters at a personal level, mobilising their personal involvement and engagement. Specifically, his facial expression is serious but gentle, as the corners of his mouth are slightly bent upwards. Additionally, he

is slightly frowning, as if he is listening and responding to the worries of the viewers (see Feng & O'Halloran, 2012). Together, these facial elements suggest that there is a dialogue going on between him and the viewer.

Although Halla-aho appears caring and approachable, the use of the medium shot at the level of textual metafunction constructs some distance between himself and the viewer at the level of interpersonal metafunction. Hence, the relationship between Halla-aho and the viewer is not that of an intimate friendship (that a close-up would communicate) but rather a semi-formal relationship (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Furthermore, Halla-aho wears a black suit and black sweater, communicating meanings of formality and traditionality as well as expertise, rationality, and serious commitment. The black suit also occupies approximately half of the picture area.

At the level of textual metafunction, the use of the colour black adds serenity, steadiness, and stability to the image at the level of ideational metafunction, resonating with the meaning of the words '*turvallinen tila*' ('safe space' in English). While the term safe space originated within LGBT culture, it has since been embraced by feminists and other marginalised communities – groups whose rights are often challenged by right-wing populists (e.g., Saresma, 2018; Wodak, 2015). In this context, the selection of this concept as a presidential campaign slogan subtly invokes what scholars refer to as the power of rhetorical silences (Moshin, 2018). This kind of dog-whistling is meant to be noticed by those who understand the rhetoric while remaining unnoticed by those who do not. In this case, dog-whistling is likely to be noticed not just by the like-minded supporters but also by the opponents of the FP, including leftists, feminists, and liberals supporting minority rights. It sends a different message to Halla-aho's followers and opponents, serving as a source of amusement and laughter for 'us' and provocation and mockery for 'them' (Pettersson et al., 2023; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021).

While the wider audience is unlikely to understand this hidden message, the Finnish words *turvallinen tila* are imbued with different meanings and semantically resemble another Finnish word, *turvapaikka* (asylum), connotating asylum seekers/refugees applying for asylum. However, the text in the poster reads 'Finland must be a safe space', and the Finnish colour combination – white text on the blue background – seems to connote that Finland must be a safe place for *Finnish people*. This interplay of verbal and visual modalities can be understood in terms of calculated ambivalence (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014). While the poster explicitly focuses on Finland's safety, the ironic style characteristic of Halla-aho links the term 'safe space' with 'asylum', enabling an implicit claim, an *enthymeme* (Blair, 2004), that mobilises the party's anti-immigration agenda.

In addition, the imperative form 'must be' suggests that Finland *is not* a safe place currently or that its safety is endangered. On the one hand, this may implicitly refer to the FP's anti-immigration rhetoric portraying refugees as a threat to national well-being (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Sakki & Pettersson,

2016). On the other hand, it may refer to the insecurity caused by Finland's geopolitical situation as a neighbour of Russia. Indirectly, the demand for Finland's safety may also refer to Finland's recent accession to NATO to increase national security, which was supported by Halla-aho (Finnish Broadcasting Company, 2022).

At the level of textual metafunction, the figure of Halla-aho crosses the image space vertically and horizontally, communicating hegemony and stability at the level of ideational metafunction, as if reassuring voters to rely on his protection in times of crisis and war. Additionally, the vertical form of the image and slightly low camera angle, positioning Halla-aho slightly above the viewer (textual metafunction), communicate power (ideational metafunction; Cian, 2016) and strengthen the air of protection, respectively (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Meanwhile, compositionally, the figure of Halla-aho is on the left of the image. This visual choice at the level of textual metafunction may communicate multiple meanings at the level of ideational metafunction. First, the left is typically associated with the past, as familiar information is often presented on the left (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Therefore, this position may communicate an appreciation of traditions and traditional values typical of the FP (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Second, Halla-aho is not depicted in the centre of the limelight but on the side, as if serving the nation unselfishly. Specifically, he is presented as a humble servant of the nation instead of a member of the elite that the FP often claims is egoistic and self-interested (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Pettersson et al., 2023; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Thus, the central point is rather occupied by the ultimate goal of a sovereign nation – 'Finland must be a safe space' – for Finnish people, allowing Halla-aho to appear as a protector and constructor of this safe space.

Discussion

In this chapter, we aimed to draw attention to the visual appeal of populism and demonstrate the power of images in political imagination. Visual rhetorical analysis was used to unpack the visual rhetoric communicated in the presidential election campaign images of Jussi Halla-aho, the leading figure in the Finnish right-wing populist movement. With our chapter, we wish to make two key contributions. First, theoretically, we add to the literature on populist persuasion by highlighting the role of images in populist communication. Second, through our in-depth and detailed analysis of visual rhetorical strategies in campaign images, this chapter provides a methodological resource for other scholars interested in studying visual populist discourse.

In this chapter, we elaborated on the operations of political visual rhetoric by showing how the composition of visual elements at the level of textual metafunction creates a connection between Halla-aho and the audience through interpersonal metafunction and conveys a political message at the level of ideational metafunction that serves specific political purposes. Our

analysis showed how the arrangement and composition of visual elements in the presidential campaign images of Jussi Halla-aho construct an understanding of him as an embodiment of Finnishness who is a steady, rational, and caring protector and leader of the nation. Additionally, our analysis demonstrated how the meanings constructed were drawn from collective memories, (sensory) experiences, and national feelings as well as contemporary social and political challenges. The visually constructed national nostalgia is personified in Halla-aho and communicated to audiences through his direct eye contact. Meanwhile, the moderate facial expression, restrained gestures, formal yet simple outfit, and plain image composition construct an understanding of Halla-aho as an ordinary and authentic leader whose status is not based on 'elitism' but rather on genuine Finnishness and caring rationality.

We also showed how the visual rhetoric of the images made implied arguments (Blair, 2004) and created calculated ambivalence (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014) around the topic of national safety for mobilising anti-immigration sentiments. Halla-aho's campaign slogan represents a strategic adoption, recategorisation, and reversal of a significant value held by the political opponent. The original concept of a safe space, rooted in the protection of minority rights, undergoes a transformation within the realm of right-wing populism. Here, it becomes weaponised in the service of the FP's anti-immigrant agenda, coupled with the mockery of political adversaries (e.g., feminists, sexual minorities). As previously analysed, this slogan carries a plethora of meanings and can serve diverse rhetorical purposes depending on the audience. As Moshin (2018) illustrated in his examination of Trump's rhetoric, the potency of rhetorical silences lies in their ability to be dismissed by the mainstream, allowing for denial of their existence altogether. Consequently, the slogan may function as an inside joke among like-minded individuals as well as a deliberate incitement of division and polarisation for those for whom the original concept of a safe space matters most. Meanwhile, the broader audience is likely to interpret it within the framework of the FP's anti-immigrant stance and perhaps even perceive it as Halla-aho's endeavour to present himself as a leader of the nation in the new sociopolitical landscape of the Russian threat. Thus, while Obama harnessed hope and unity through his campaign posters, Halla-aho's emotional message seems more ambiguous and divisive.

In contemporary times, the role of visuals in political communication is emphasised. Since visual images are not 'quiet things' in terms of neutral documents of reality but rather active constructors of social – and political – reality, critical awareness of their constructed nature, rationales, and functions are of utmost importance. By showing how the composition of visual elements (textual metafunction) constructed a relationship between Halla-aho and the viewers (interpersonal metafunction) as well as political meanings (ideational metafunction) to serve particular political functions, we hope this chapter has provided valuable tools to develop skills of critical visual literacy necessary when studying, navigating through, and tackling visual political persuasion.

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Chapter 5

Analysing subject positions in multimodal populist communication

Katarina Pettersson and Jari Martikainen

Multimodal political communication

On 28 August 2022, Hillary Clinton tweeted the following: 'As Ann Richards said, "Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did. She just did it backwards and in high heels". Here's me in Cartagena while I was there for a meeting as Secretary of State. Keep dancing, @marinsanna'. The text was followed by a picture of Clinton dancing during a work visit to Cartagena, Colombia. The tweet was a reaction to the media turmoil that had surrounded Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin after a leaked video in which she was dancing and partying in a way that some considered inappropriate for a person in her position (Singh, 2022). Through her tweet, Clinton thus allied herself with the supporters of Marin, who defended her right to private life and argued that the criticism against her was largely caused by the fact that she was a young woman in a position of power (Larnaud, 2022).

Clinton's tweet was one of many in which celebrities and politicians posted pictures of themselves dancing in support of Marin. These examples are of interest in the present chapter for two reasons. First, they show that today, political and media debates increasingly take place in the online environment, rendering them global in nature. Second, they illustrate that these debates are not merely verbal but *multimodal*: they contain verbal, visual, digital, and oftentimes sonic elements. Studies examining this type of communication have demonstrated that it is remarkably powerful, as the combination of verbal, (audio)visual, and digital features renders it effective (Pettersson & Sakki, 2017; Yadav et al., 2011), and as it can reach vast audiences in an instant (Arthurs et al., 2018). Accordingly, as Clinton's tweet exemplifies, the online environment allows for the expression of support and solidarity and for constructing a common collective identity (Gal et al., 2016). However, on the flip side, research has demonstrated that the internet also constitutes a space where hate speech, racism, and conspiracy theories can flourish (see Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). Research has shown that the clever use of online platforms and social media has been a key factor in the successes of far-right and right-wing populist parties in the past decade (e.g., Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Salojärvi

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et al., 2023). A central feature of this discourse is the construction of opposing identities between the 'good' in-group of the people against the 'bad' out-groups of political antagonists as well as immigrants and refugees (Pettersson et al., 2024; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Scholars examining online right-wing populist and far-right mobilisation have, accordingly, emphasised the need for multimodal analytic approaches for grasping its rhetorical and emotional appeal (e.g., Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023; Salojärvi et al., 2023).

In this chapter, we build upon this emerging literature on the multimodal communication and mobilisation of right-wing populist parties. The central aim is to show how a multimodal critical discursive psychological (MCDP) approach that draws insights from multimodal discourse analysis (MDA; Kress, 2011; O'Halloran, 2008) and critical discursive psychology (CDP; Edley, 2001) can be used to study the simultaneous verbal, visual, and sonic features of such political discourse (Kilby & Lennon, 2021; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024). In the following section, we discuss some key features of right-wing populist communication online, after which we present the central principles of the MCDP approach. Next, through illustrative examples from our research on election campaign videos in the context of Finland, where the right-wing populist Finns Party (FP; in Finnish: Perussuomalaiset) has enjoyed huge electoral successes in recent years, we demonstrate how we have conducted MCDP-informed analyses in practice. In this chapter, the analysis focuses specifically on the multimodal construction of subject positions in right-wing populist political discourse. We finish with a concluding discussion in which we reflect on the implications of this type of research for our understanding of contemporary (right-wing populist) political communication and persuasion.

Multimodal right-wing populist discourse

Political communication has certainly 'moved online' in general, but why have right-wing populist parties in particular been so successful in taking this digital leap? One answer to this question is that digital spaces allow for direct communication with the audience – be they existing or presumptive followers or voters. This entails that the mediating role played by journalists of traditional news media, whom right-wing populist movements typically consider to be biased against them (Horsti & Saresma, 2021; Pettersson & Sakki, 2020), is erased. It gives these politicians considerable freedom regarding both what they articulate and how. Importantly, it is a platform where 'typical' right-wing populist topics that tend to be difficult and polarising, such as immigration (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021), gender issues (Horsti & Saresma, 2021), and climate change (Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023), can be used effectively in communication and persuasion.

A second answer is one that we already briefly introduced, which has to do with the nature of online political communication. Indeed, online communication is characterised by its multimodality: it is a conglomerate of verbal,

digital, and (audio)visual features. Hillary Clinton's tweet above is a prime example of this: it contains a strong verbal message (keep dancing), a digital feature that connects the tweet to the case of Marin (@marinsanna), and a visual component (Clinton dancing) that serves to strengthen the verbal message. In conjunction, these different components enhance each other's potential and co-construct the meaning of the message (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), making it more than the sum of its parts in terms of forcefulness and rhetorical appeal (Pettersson & Sakki, 2020; van Leeuwen, 2012). Moreover, and more importantly, images and sounds have more power than words when it comes to appealing to the emotions of an audience (Huddy & Gunnthorsdottir, 2000; van Leeuwen, 2012). Thus, they are important for mobilising popular support for a political cause (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Salojärvi et al., 2023).

Relatedly, these unique features of the online space allow for expressing hostile and hateful messages that traditional media would not permit. Research has shown that online platforms are particularly fertile ground for the construction of antagonistic divisions between 'us' and 'them' (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016); for the production and spread of racist (Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018; Sakki & Castrén, 2022) and misogynist (Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023; Saresma et al., 2021) hate speech; as well as for conspiracy theories (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020), propaganda, and fake news (Pérez Curiel, 2020). This is partly due to the forceful language that characterises some online spaces, such as X (Törnberg et al., 2021), but also the fact that derogatory messages can be easily 'concealed' behind images, hyperlinks, and verbal cues such as humour and sarcasm (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2017; Nikunen, 2015). Indeed, research has shown that right-wing populist politicians tend to engage in a double communication of sorts – maintaining a more balanced and 'politically correct' discourse in traditional news media whilst communicating in much stronger and more radical ways with their followers on social media (Hatakka et al., 2017), thus catering both to the general electorate and to their own supporters.

Given the societal relevance of the triumphal online marches of right-wing populist parties, research into this topic has surged in recent years. Studies have delved into the multimodal discourse used in political blogs (Pettersson & Sakki, 2020, 2024), political cartoons (Lennon & Kilby, 2020), Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Pettersson et al., 2024; Yoon, 2016) on X (Peréz Curiel, 2020; Pettersson, Payotte, & Sakki, 2023), Instagram (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022), and YouTube (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Salojärvi et al., 2023). In incorporating verbal, visual, and sonic digital features, political (campaign) videos posted on forums such as YouTube provide an optimal arena for voter mobilisation. Multimodal communication in videos is powerful and emotionally appealing, and it is an opportune format for the utilisation of humour and sarcasm in the construction of antagonistic identities or subject positions (Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023). Finally, due to its integration with other online platforms in the *hybrid media system* (Chadwick, 2017) and its global reach, multimodal messages on YouTube become widely circulated.

This allows (far-right and right-wing populist) political actors to reach broad and transnational audiences (Laaksonen et al., 2020).

An MCDP approach

With its roots in social semiotics, MDA is a vast research tradition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) that offers theoretical, methodological, and analytical perspectives on how meaning is constructed through multiple, simultaneous resources or modalities in discourse (Kress, 2011; O'Halloran, 2008). These resources – or building blocks of multimodal messages – are rooted in the social and cultural context in which the (political) message is produced (Kress, 2011). One strand in the MDA tradition is the systemic functional approach (cf. Halliday, 1978, 1994), which focuses on the interaction and joint construction of meaning through different modalities such as visual, sonic, and verbal ones (O'Halloran, 2008). Within this approach, multimodal discourse is studied at three interrelated levels: textual (the composition of the message), ideational (the interplay of multimodal resources), and interpersonal (communication with the audience) metafunction (O'Halloran, 2008; Royce, 2007). In practice, in terms of political discourse, this approach allows for studying how meaning is constructed through multiple, simultaneous modalities (textual and ideational metafunction) and how these contribute to the emotional appeal and persuasive potential of the message (interpersonal metafunction). However, it is important to note that these meanings cannot be taken for granted, but interpretations of the multimodal interplay must be sensitive both to the context of the multimodal work itself and to the social and political context in which it is produced.

In our own work, we have brought the systemic functional approach to MDA into interplay with the CDP study of political discourse (see Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024). CDP approaches discourse at the crossroads of the societal 'macro' and individual 'micro' dimensions of discourse, conceiving discursive meaning making at both levels as deeply intertwined (Edley, 2001). In other words, individuals are viewed both as producers of discursive meanings and as products of broader discursive repertoires of meaning that are embedded in the social, cultural, and societal contexts in which they act. In terms of practical analysis of discourse, this means that attention is paid both to the fine-grained discursive and rhetorical patterns (e.g., discursive tools and rhetorical strategies) deployed in the construction of meaning and to the broader societal debates that such constructions are shaped by and contribute to (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). A central concern in CDP research is to study the construction of *subject positions*, which refers to how individuals discursively position themselves and others in social interactions (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). Edley (2001) conceptualised subject positions as connecting 'the wider notions of discourses and interpretative repertoires to the social construction of particular selves' (p. 210).

In interactions, individuals can use their agency to accept or reject the subject positions that are offered to them. In our research on right-wing populist discourse online, including the analysis of subject positions (Pettersson & Sakki, 2024), we have developed a CDP analytic procedure for studying the content (what is talked about), form (how is this talked about), and function (what social and political functions the discourse serves) of political discourse (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

Whilst MDA and CDP have been scarcely united in research on political discourse (Kilby & Lennon, 2021; for examples of such studies, see Lennon & Kilby, 2020; Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2020, 2024; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021), we propose that this is a promising avenue for scholars interested in multimodal political discourse. Indeed, as political, commercial, and everyday discourse is becoming ever more multimodal and digitalised, CDP must look beyond its traditional focus on verbal expressions (cf. Kilby & Lennon, 2021). Conversely, as concepts central to political mobilisation – such as the construction of identities or subject positions and in- and out-groups – are a key focus of CDP research (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998), MDA can benefit from insights from this research tradition. Such insights can enhance the analysis of how the different modalities co-construct such social categories and identities or subject positions. Despite their different theoretical homes – social semiotics (MDA) and social constructionism (CDP) – joining forces is also possible from an epistemological point of view, as both approaches consider the social embeddedness and functionality of discourse. In practical terms, which we elaborate on in more detail below, the three dimensions of multimodal discourse examined in the systemic functional approach – its textual, ideational, and interpersonal metafunctions (O'Halloran, 2008; Royce, 2007) – can be advantageously combined with the CDP analysis of the content, form, and function of political discourse (Pettersson & Sakki, 2024; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

An MCDP analytic process in practice

In this section, we present the stages of the MCDP analysis of the construction of subject positions using our studies on the FP's campaign videos as examples (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). In terms of practical analytical operations, we divide the MDA into three phases.

Phase 1

The analysis starts by watching the videos multiple times to develop a thorough understanding of them. This first phase of analysis provides a means to divide the multimodal narration into smaller analytical units. For example, in videos, scenes can serve as smaller analytical content units, where a 'continuity

in time, place, character, ideas, or themes' (Choi & Lee, 2006, p. 703) constitutes a meaningful entity in the entire multimodal product. In this phase, the analysis focuses on the content of the multimodal product.

Phase 2

The second phase of the analysis focuses on scrutinising the use of multimodal resources in each episode included in the analysis. Here, a multimodal transcription of the videos is produced (see Table 5.1). When analysing videos, we have found it useful to have separate columns for annotations regarding the verbal, visual, and sonic modalities (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2019). In addition, it is important to add notes on the timeframes, which clarify the simultaneous relations of different modalities. In this phase, the analysis focuses on the form and content of the multimodal narration. Concomitantly, in terms of exploring the verbal elements of the video, the critical discursive analysis at this stage focuses on the contents (what is said) and form (how it is said; i.e., what rhetorical strategies and discursive resources are deployed; cf. Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) of the discourse and the subject positions constructed therein (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

Phase 3

The third phase of the analysis focuses on examining and interpreting the interplay of different modalities as well as the social functions their organisation serves (O'Halloran & Lim, 2014; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). The different modalities are understood as semiotic resources with certain meaning potentials, and the way they are intertwined in the context of the multimodal work determines which meaning potentials are foregrounded (O'Halloran, 2008). When analysing the joint meanings of multimodal products, we drew from the systemic functional approach to discourse analysis described above (see O'Halloran, 2008). This approach provides analytical tools for analysing the construction of joint meanings, for instance, in terms of co-contextualisation and recontextualisation. Co-contextualisation refers to the integration of multimodal resources with congruent meaning potentials resulting in meaning expansion that intensifies each modality's meaning potentials. Recontextualisation, in contrast, refers to the integration of multimodal resources with incongruent meaning potentials that can serve, for instance, as a means of communicating tensions between groups of people (O'Halloran, 2008; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021).

In the following sections, we present two examples from our studies on political campaign videos of the right-wing populist FP. Through these examples, we illuminate the third phase of our MCDP analysis – the analysis of meaning construction through multimodal semiotic resources. Further, in line with CDP, we elaborate on the societal and political functions that the discourse

Table 5.1 Multimodal transcription of a video ('Ketutus: A Story of Being Seriously Pissed Off')

Verbal narration	*Visual narration*	*Sounds*
	00:00–00:32 • (video image) Library, bookshelf, books • (video image) A man wearing a black suit walks into the library, torso and legs visible, face not shown. • (video image) The man picks up the comic 'Ketutus – A Story of Being Seriously Pissed Off'. • (video image turns into animated image) The man sits down at the black table, placing the comic on it. The cover has an orange title on a blue surface. The cover's picture shows a man standing and wearing a black suit, white shirt, and red tie. His arms are open, pointing slightly upwards. He is smiling. Around him are black and white ray-like elements. • (animated image turns into a video image) The man opens the comic. On the first page, there is an image of a church tower (Helsinki Cathedral).	• A clock ticks • Music: slowly changing chords • A door opens • Steps • A page of the comic is turned.
00:32 (verbal narration begins) There was once a small nation inhabited by content and happy people. The citizens of this country greatly enjoyed their homeland...	00:32–00:48 • (video image) The camera moves from the tower of Helsinki Cathedral to a bird's-eye-view of Helsinki.	
00:42 ... the independence of which had come at great cost.	00:42 • (video image) The golden cross of Helsinki Cathedral is shown.	• Gradually, the music becomes louder, and the chords start to form a melody.

Source: Martikainen and Sakki (2021)

may serve. With these examples, we show how multimodal resources and rhetorical strategies are used as a means of constructing subject positions for different stakeholders in a persuasive manner that promotes the agenda of the (right-wing populist) political party. We also elaborate on how the multimodal construction of opposing subject positions may serve as a means of mobilising popular support. In the analysis below, we focus on co-contextualisation (the interplay of multimodal resources with congruent meanings) and recontextualisation (the interplay of multimodal resources with incongruent meanings; O'Halloran, 2008; Royce, 2007). We illuminate the centrality of the multimodal construction of antagonistic identities or subject positions in right-wing populist persuasion and mobilisation and demonstrate the usefulness of an MCDP approach for studying such constructions.

Example 1: Multimodal constructions of the subject positions of the dangerous, traitors, victims, and saviours

The first example is based on our study of the FP campaign video 'KETUTUS – A Story of Being Seriously Pissed Off' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzCK4tTu2nE) from the year 2019 that focuses on issues related to migration and refugees (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). The campaign video constructs refugees as violent criminals. This subject position is constructed as part of the interpretative repertoire of refugees as a threat to the nation's safety common in FP political rhetoric (see Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Pettersson & Sakki, 2020; Rovamo et al., 2023; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Visually, refugees' subject position as violent criminals is constructed through scenes that depict violence and destruction. These include scenes where dark-skinned men in a van kidnap a white adolescent girl (01:49–01:58); where a black man with cruel facial expression detonates a bottle bomb (02:46–02:49); where people run away from a black silhouette that holds a knife (02:44–02:46); and where a woman and child walk through a street filled with shards, smoke, and fire (02:29–02:31/02:49–02:51). In addition, quick transitions from one scene to the next create an air of restlessness (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Martikainen & Sakki, 2021). Sonically, these scenes are accompanied by the sounds of breaking glass, fire, and screaming people that communicate acts of violence and people's agony.

Apart from one scene depicting a politician with a speech bubble reading 'Welcome refugees' accompanied by the storyteller's line 'Disregarding resources and safety, the leaders welcomed a flood of people' (01:39–01:49), the word 'refugee' is not mentioned in the video. However, when combined with other modalities (e.g., images of dark-skinned men and sounds of explosions), it becomes evident that the verbal expressions such as 'The country that was previously safe for women and children is history' (02:44–02:51) and images with anti-refugee slogans stating 'our own nation first', 'stop rape', and 'we demand safety' (02:42–02:44) indirectly refer to refugees, reinforcing their

subject position as violent criminals (cf. Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Hence, the video interlaces visual, sonic, and verbal modalities that jointly communicate the threat posed by refugees. This is an example of multimodal co-contextualisation whereby different, semantically congruent modalities intensify each other's meaning potentials, here referring to danger and violence. Simultaneously, it is an example of a multimodal expansion of meaning (O'Halloran, 2008), whereby politically polarised and potentially racist claims are not made explicitly in verbal terms but, rather, are strongly implied by the multimodal semiosis (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021).

As elaborated earlier, the verbal, visual, and sonic modalities intensify each other's meanings and jointly construct the understanding of refugees as a threat and danger. However, this image of evil refugees would not be that powerful without the harmonious multimodal semiosis created at the beginning of the video that constructs an understanding of Finland and the Finnish nation as calm, friendly, and peaceful. Visually, these associations are constructed through slow camera motion, tranquil scenery of the cityscape of Helsinki at dusk and a family celebrating Christmas, and warm colours that all communicate congruent meanings of a harmonious and peaceful way of life (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Sonically, a similar tranquil sentiment is communicated through slow-tempo instrumental music and the calm, deep voice of the storyteller (van Leeuwen, 2012). In terms of verbal narration, phrases like 'There was once a small nation inhabited by content and happy people' and 'citizens enjoyed their homeland' (00:39–00:41) create an air of nostalgia (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016) and converge with the harmonious meanings communicated by the visual and sonic modalities. Again, different modalities with congruent semantic potentials are set in co-contextualising relations that intensify their joint meanings.

Hence, the powerful images of refugees as dangerous criminals, on the one hand, and the peaceful Finnish nation, on the other, are created through multimodal co-contextualisation. When relating these powerful co-contextualised multimodal constructions to each other, their contradictory meanings recontextualise each other, emphasising the danger and threat posed by refugees and constructing the subject position of a victim for the Finnish nation. Thus, recontextualisation acts as a multimodal means to create opposite subject positions for refugees and Finns as well as a politically charged tension between them.

Simultaneously, the multimodally constructed subject positions of refugees as a danger and the Finnish nation as a victim create a call for an agent protecting and safeguarding the Finnish nation. Indeed, the multimodal interplay constructs the subject position of saviour or protector for the FP itself. In addition to the multimodal seedbed provided by depictions of refugees as a threat and the Finnish nation as a victim, the FP's subject position as the saviour is constructed against the subject position of traitor constructed for

current decision makers (i.e., the acting government) promoting more liberal migration policies. Also here, co-contextualisation is used to construct the subject positions and recontextualisation to emphasise the contradictory characteristics of these positions.

Taken together in the video, two out-groups familiar from prior studies on radical right-wing political rhetoric are constructed: refugees and the political other embodied by traitorous decision makers (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; Wood & Finlay, 2008) that threaten the safety and well-being of the in-group (Finnish nation). As a protector of the Finnish nation, the FP itself is positioned as part of the in-group (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). In sum, through recontextualisation, four subject positions are constructed in opposition to each other as ideologically antagonistic pairs: the threatening refugees and treacherous political others on the one side and the victimised Finnish nation/people and the saviour FP on the other.

Example 2: Multimodal constructions of the subject positions of rational men and foolish women

The second example is based on our study of the FP campaign video 'Get over It' from the year 2021 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J63xdXsbhoo; Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023). In this video, multimodal resources are used to construct a politically justified opposition between allegedly rational, down-to-earth members of the FP, on the one hand, and elitist, unprofessional, and foolish female politicians, on the other hand. Like the afore-analysed FP campaign video, this video also constructs caricaturist subject positions through co-contextualisation and juxtaposes them in terms of recontextualisation to persuade viewers to adopt the FP's point of view. However, differing from the previous video, this campaign video integrates the power of the opening and ending scenes as well as humour as a rhetorical tool into the construction of opposite subject positions – those of the common, sensible FP (men) against the hysterical and naïve (female) elite. Again, the positions are constructed through co-contextualisation and placed in opposition to each other through recontextualisation.

The video starts with a panoramic view of an idyllic Finnish rural landscape. Sonically, the slow-tempo instrumental music associated with the slow-motion image of the calm scenery reinforces the peaceful meanings communicated by the visuals (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The camera moves from the rural landscape into a car where two ordinary working men – supporters of the FP as it later turns out – talk with each other about high petrol prices. In the opening scene, semantically congruent visual, verbal, and sonic modalities are set into co-contextualising relations, whereby their integration reinforces their communicative power: the ordinary rural landscape (visuals), ordinary-looking men with unshaven faces and working clothes in broken colours (visuals), the topic of their

discussion (verbal), colloquial expressions (verbal), and slow-tempo talk with flat intonation (sonic) all complement each other's meaning potentials to construct a subject position of down-to-earth, common people among the FP's members/supporters. By introducing these men at the very beginning, the video persuades the viewer to adopt their – and the FP's – point of view in the following narration of the video (Gulino, 2024; Sommer, 2006).

In the next scene, the men see a shiny black car standing by the road and a woman and man in black clothes standing beside it. It becomes clear that the car has run out of electricity, that the woman standing beside the car depicts former Prime Minister Sanna Marin, and that the other four female ministers of the government are inside the car. In what follows, the female government is constructed as detached from ordinary people through visual, verbal, and sonic modalities: the shiny black car (visuals), the formal outfit of the female politicians (visuals), their arrogant facial expressions (visuals), the low viewing angle (visuals), the scene where the female politicians concentrate on refreshing their makeup inside the car (visuals), loud electric disco music playing inside the car (sonic), the female politicians' degrading verbal comments (verbal) as well as references to a chic lifestyle – for example, 'we are running late for a big magazine photoshoot' (1:16–1:17) and 'we will get praise under the crystal chandeliers toasting with champagne glasses' (3:04–3:05).

These modalities form a stark contrast to the rural landscape and ordinary FP men in workers' attire, positioning female politicians as an elite detached from ordinary people – a typical discursive pattern in right-wing populist discourse (Mols & Jetten, 2014; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). This multimodally constructed detachment serves as the basis for positioning the female politicians as stupid fools. This is fostered by their absurd behaviour and verbal utterances as well as naivety in terms of environmental issues. On the one hand, they emphasise their pro-environmental commitment and are delighted when the FP men promise to provide them with clean energy. On the other, they fail to realise that the men produce electricity for their cars from a gasoline-driven generator. The contrast between the two subject positions – 'them', the arrogant and ignorant (female) elite, and 'us', the rational and ordinary (male) people – is rhetorically fomented through the use of an array of rhetorical strategies, such as extreme-case formulations, hyperbole (Pomerantz, 1986), metaphor (Charteris-Black, 2006), and references to reason and rationality (Augoustinos & Every, 2007). At the end of the video, the FP men watch with amusement as the female politicians' car drives off, inviting the viewers to laugh with them (clever, rational men) at the female politicians (stupid, irrational women). In sum, the video's multimodally constructed derogatory caricature of female politicians serves to construct a misogynist message, creatively and persuasively disguised as humour (Pettersson, Martikainen, et al., 2023).

Concluding discussion

In this chapter, we sought to show how a critical discursive multimodal analytic approach can be used to study the construction of antagonistic identities or subject positions in right-wing populist political communication, as in the campaign videos analysed above. When examining the two examples together, it becomes evident that they use multimodal resources – especially co-contextualisation and recontextualisation – to construct such a divide between 'us, the good' and 'them, the bad'. Whereas refugees and traitorous politicians are positioned as out-groups in the first campaign video, a similar out-group position is constructed for the female politicians in the second campaign video. In both videos, co-contextualisation together with a rich repertoire of rhetorical strategies and discursive resources serves to form a positive image of the in-group and a negative image of the out-group. The multimodal messages of the FP's campaign videos are constructed so that nothing politically incorrect or blatantly prejudiced is explicitly uttered through any single modality. However, as we showed through the examples above, a multimodal analysis can detect and deconstruct ways in which the (verbally) unsaid is transformed into the mode of strongly suggested by the multimodal interplay. This implied nature of multimodal semiosis makes it possible for the FP to communicate politically incorrect messages – including racist and misogynist ones – without fear of being accused of explicitly promoting these views (cf. Pettersson & Sakki, 2017).

We maintain that as political and public debates around societally pressing issues, including immigration and climate change, increasingly move online, MDA research is becoming highly important. Naturally, it remains essential to disseminate and carefully examine verbal forms of political communication and persuasion. Yet, as we have seen, the digital sphere allows for expressing political messages and constructing (antagonistic) subject positions in various non-verbal ways, such as through images and sound. Through their capacity to appeal to the emotions and shared cultural knowledge of the audience, visual and sonic messages are even more powerful than words (Huddy & Gunnthorsdottir, 2000; van Leeuwen, 2012). Therefore, as digital platforms for transmitting political messages are transformed and new ones created, researchers of political discourse must continue to develop tools for analysing the contents, forms, and societal consequences of communication in these milieus. To this end, we find interdisciplinary initiatives for researching online political mobilisation especially valuable. For example, whilst media studies and computational social science have a lot to say about how the specific features of the online environment (e.g., algorithms) work to strengthen and direct the communication of certain versions of social reality (Garcia, 2023), social psychology has essential theoretical insights regarding the centrality of identities in political mobilisation (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Thus, interdisciplinary methodological approaches, such as MCDP proposed here, are key

to grasping the paramount role played by multimodal identity constructions in shaping political landscapes, affiliations, and attitudes.

In this chapter, we focused on the multimodal construction of subject positions in political messages that are hostile to immigrants and refugees and that ridicule and discredit women active in politics. All of this begs the question of how it might be possible to respond to such political messages. How can we produce counterarguments – through the creative use of multimodal means – that can match right-wing populist rhetoric in terms of persuasive power? We believe it is essential for political messages that promote equality and pro-environmental causes not to seem detached from or ignorant of the concerns of the people they seek to mobilise.

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Chapter 6

Multimodal persuasion in right-wing populist TikTok discourse

Crafting a sense of 'us'

Jenni Jaakkola and Inari Sakki

Populist politicians on social media

As traditional political communication channels (e.g., newspapers, TV) have gradually been replaced by social media platforms, political communication has undergone a notable transformation in recent years. Given their reliance on these new platforms to mobilise audiences, right-wing populist actors have skilfully modified their communication strategies to stay up to date with the latest trends (Pajnik & Sauer, 2018). For instance, Marine Le Pen has utilised Twitter to craft a dynamic image of herself as a tough yet compassionate presidential candidate, appealing to a broader voter base (Pettersson et al., 2023). Donald Trump has also leveraged Twitter to shape an assertive image of himself by sending political messages directly to his followers while labelling traditional media as 'fake news'. Conversely, Viktor Orban has curated an authentic and statesmanlike image on Instagram through visual elements by sharing carefully selected photos depicting nationalistic and masculine symbols (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). Additionally, the rapidly growing app TikTok, with 1.5 billion global users in 2023 and a strong young audience (Iqbal, 2024), is increasingly utilised by political actors, especially right-wing populists for political purposes (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023).

While Twitter focuses on text and Instagram on images, TikTok centres around videos and music. It encourages the creation of concise, multimodal content with popular music, fostering performative, mimicked, and memetic videos (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Its editing tools offer a wide array of features, enabling users to add visual effects, sounds, music, and text to videos. This allows for the personalised presentation of politics (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). This provides politicians with various options to express themselves and create captivating videos where political messages are presented as trendy and inspiring. Through the use of simultaneous verbal, visual, and sonic features, multimodal political communication can attract audiences, enhance users' engagement, and evoke emotions contributing to the entertaining experience. TikTok operates through an algorithm, ensuring that each video needs to be engaging.

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Social media and its multimodal tools have been shown to be valuable for conveying populist messages as well as persuading and mobilising a diverse audience (Pettersson & Sakki, 2020). Through social media, populist politicians can bypass traditional journalistic media norms, not only allowing politicians to express populist ideology freely using strong language (Moffitt, 2016) but also enabling them to mobilise voters by providing them with the space and tools to act as leaders and construct a common social identity (Pettersson et al., 2023). As populists portray themselves as advocates of the people (Mudde, 2004), through such platforms they can reach and interact closely with an even larger audience of like-minded individuals.

In this chapter, we examine persuasion on TikTok through the construction of a common social identity by one of the most-followed Finnish politicians on the platform, Sebastian Tynkkynen (Piirainen, 2023). We use the integrative social identity model of populist leadership (ISIMPL; Uysal et al., 2022), which is based on the dual-agency model of identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2022) and the identity leadership model (Haslam et al., 2020). Our analysis of the videos focuses on how Tynkkynen persuades and mobilises his audience by employing different discursive and multimodal means and TikTok features, through which he builds a populist leadership and common identity in close interaction with his audience. Empirically, this chapter provides new insights into the role of multimodality in political communication on TikTok as well as the role of social identity in political persuasion. Theoretically, it updates social psychological theories of identity leadership in the context of social media and new forms of communication. Methodologically, it integrates traditional rhetorical and discursive qualitative methods into multimodal approaches, utilising multimodal critical discursive psychology (MCDP).

Integrative social identity model of populist leadership (ISIMPL)

The social identity approach (SIA), based on social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorisation theory (SCT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), suggests that an individual's identification with a group shapes their self-concept. This sense of belonging leads members to act in accordance with the norms and values of the group, with leaders playing a central role in harnessing a social identity to mobilise the group (Haslam et al., 2020). Tynkkynen has been particularly successful in this regard, not least through his social media activity.

The social identity theory of leadership (Haslam et al., 2020), based on SIA, emphasises the leader's role as an embodiment of the group's *identity leadership*. Leaders have a role in defining who 'we' are, helping them to gain power and shape the group's behaviour. There are four key elements to this theory. First, effective leaders must be seen as *prototypical* members of the in-group, one of 'us', embodying the group's characteristics and distinction from the out-group. Second, leaders should work for the group through identity

advancement, act in the interest of the group, and advance its goals as an *in-group champion*. Third, leaders need to foster a shared sense of 'us' and actively participate in defining the in-group's social identity as *entrepreneurs of identity* by determining group members, norms, and prototypicality. Finally, leaders need to *embed identity* by convincing group members to believe in what they are doing. They need to create convincing visions of the in-group's social identity and its significance in collective action. In addition, leaders should turn the vision of social identity into reality by constructing the performance of identity, building structures, establishing participatory rituals and events that reflect the group's values and norms, as well as mobilising the group's energy toward shared goals.

Furthermore, Haslam et al. (2022) created a dual-agency model of leadership wherein collective action results from collaboration between the leader and the audience, both of whom are influential actors. The leader constructs a social identity, fosters a sense of 'us', defines in-group goals, and outlines actions to achieve them. Meanwhile, followers adopt the common identity and demonstrate their loyalty by advancing these goals through creative actions. Interaction is thought to create a sense of common social identity, leading to collective action (Haslam et al., 2020). For instance, Trump's speech before the storming of the Capitol can be interpreted as an interaction with followers where the reinforcement of social identity – without explicitly instructing a specific course of action – created the space for people to act (Haslam et al., 2022). TikTok is a particularly useful channel for interaction between politicians and followers, as the example of Tynkkynen shows.

Uysal et al. (2022) viewed the identity leadership model as descriptive of populist leaders and proposed ISIMPL. According to SIA, individuals identify themselves with a group and seek to maintain positive self-esteem by favouring the in-group and increasing intergroup differentiation (Jetten et al., 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). ISIMPL proposes that populism echoes this antagonistic logic, emphasising the importance of a populist leader to create a positive group identity for 'the people' and unite them against various out-groups, often portrayed as enemies (Laclau, 2005; Mols & Jetten, 2016). The narrative of a threatened nation is crucial for creating a shared sense of victimhood (Mols & Jetten, 2014; Reicher & Ulusahin, 2020).

In this chapter, we aim to examine persuasion through the construction of social identity using ISIMPL by asking: *How does Tynkkynen employ multimodal and discursive strategies in TikTok to construct populist leadership and shared social identity?*

MCDP analysis of Tynkkynen's TikTok videos

In this chapter, we examine the Finns Party (FP; in Finnish: Perussuomalaiset) politician Sebastian Tynkkynen's TikTok videos. Tynkkynen has been active on various social media channels and was one of the first politicians to join TikTok

in Finland. By our analysis date (February 2024), he had 135,700 followers and 3.4 million likes. Tynkkynen first gained nationwide recognition by participating in the reality TV series *Big Brother* in 2011. He then moved to politics and served as the chairman of the FP Youth from 2015 to 2016. Since 2019, he's been a member of Parliament and currently holds the position of the third vice chairman of FP. When Tynkkynen joined the party, it had already risen from a small party to the third-largest party in parliament with an agenda consisting of anti-immigration, anti-environmental (Lonnqvist et al., 2020), and EU-sceptical stances (Herkman, 2017). He has openly spoken about his Pentecostal background, homosexuality, and prosecution for incitement against an ethnic group, which he, however, has denied committing (Pettersson, 2020).

After TikTok provided the Research API, we examined 277 of Tynkkynen's publicly available TikTok videos published between December 28, 2019, and April 2, 2023. This period spans from his very first video on the platform to his most recent one published before the 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections. It is also the period in which the FP and Tynkkynen were in opposition and preparing for elections. Examining TikTok becomes important as TikTok was believed to impact voter behaviour in the 2023 elections. Studies support this, as using TikTok appears to be correlated with the level of support for the FP (Tukiainen et al., 2023).

The TikTok videos were analysed through an MCDP approach (Pettersson & Sakki, 2024), combining elements from critical discursive psychology (CDP; e.g., Wetherell, 1998) and multimodal discourse analysis (MDA; Kress, 2012; see Chapter 5 in this volume). We were interested in how Tynkkynen constructs social identity in TikTok videos through various multimodal means. The analysis of the material progressed through the three stages introduced by Sakki and Pettersson (2016): content, form, and function. In the first stage of analysis, we watched all 277 videos (length of the videos was 0.10–10 minutes, often less than 3 minutes) multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the *content* and familiarise ourselves with the collected videos. In the second stage of analysis, we delved into the *content and form* in more detail, focusing on multimodal resources in each video. We crafted multimodal transcriptions for each video, categorising their content into distinct columns for spoken, visual, textual, musical, and digital elements. By examining the interplay of different semiotic modes, we aimed to understand the overall meanings of the videos, in which Tynkkynen often talks to the camera about politics or his personal life or appears in humorous or emotional self-made videos (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). In the last stage of analysis, we explored the *functions* of these constructions in light of ISIMPL.

Analysis

Based on our MCDP analysis, we identified four multimodal and discursive strategies Tynkkynen employs to construct and mobilise a populist identity

leadership. These strategies include (1) constructing an image of himself as a prototypical figure of the in-group, (2) demonstrating how he acts as the representative of the people, (3) fostering a shared social identity with the in-group, and (4) blaming the out-group. This chapter concentrates on the latter two aspects of the identity leadership discourse that engage in the antagonistic construction of 'us' and 'them' (acting and making 'us' and blaming 'them'; Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Function, content, and form of Tynkkynen's TikTok videos in relation to populist leadership and common identity

Populist identity leadership (functions)	*Multimodal and discursive strategies (content + form)*	*Tools (content + form)*
Acting and making 'us' (103)	Celebrating the in-group (90)	*Speech*: delivering information about in-group values, entertaining, mobilising to act, organising meetups *Visual*: speaking or performing to the camera, checkered shirt, various locations, smiling, colourful *Music*: calm, energetic, popular and familiar songs, meaningful lyrics *Text*: main points *Digital:* followers' messages, emojis, red borders, images, videos
	Shared victimhood (13)	*Speech:* describing mistreatment towards the in-group *Visual:* speaking to the camera, checkered shirt, various locations, dark, serious *Text:* main point
Blaming 'them' (51)	Mockery (19)	*Speech:* criticising 'them' *Visual:* speaking to the camera, checkered shirt, various locations, lengthy, serious *Text:* main points *Digital:* angry or surprised emojis, coloured borders, pictures, and videoclips of other politicians
	Irony (32)	*Speech:* making fun of 'them' *Visual:* speaking or performing to the camera, checkered shirt, various locations, shared videos, lip-syncing, meme-like *Music:* cheerful, popular, and familiar songs *Text:* main points *Digital:* emojis, filters

Note: Frequencies are given in parentheses.

Acting and making 'us'

Fostering a sense of 'us' within the in-group is essential for a leader to make group members feel like a part of the collective as it fosters group cohesion and clarifies what the group represents (Uysal et al., 2022). The first identified *function* of Tynkkynen's videos is acting and making 'us', consisting of 103 videos that can be divided into two multimodal and discursive strategies: (1) celebrating the in-group and (2) mobilising a shared experience of victimhood.

Celebrating the in-group

The construction of a social identity requires leaders to actively define social categories through interactions with their followers and to motivate them to believe in their actions (Reicher et al., 2005). Following the social identity theory of leadership (Haslam et al., 2020), leaders must envision a compelling social identity and its significance to their followers, and enact it collaboratively through rituals that reflect the social identity. Additionally, they must mobilise followers towards the desired goals.

Tynkkynen constructs an in-group identity (90 videos) by verbally delivering information that defines the group's values. Specifically, he responds to followers' questions and facilitates interactions with followers (56 videos), shares entertaining content that creates a positive atmosphere by conveying a sense of 'us' (9 videos), organises meetups, encourages followers to participate (15 videos), and mobilises followers to take direct action (10 videos). Through skilful use of visual elements (signature checkered shirt, bright colours, smiling, and speaking spontaneously in various locations), Tynkkynen creates a positive, content-rich, and engaging image of himself.

Music also plays a notable role (31 videos), serving as a persuasive tool in various ways. Informative videos are often accompanied by calm music, which enhances their persuasiveness. Meanwhile, more energetic and electronic music, popular songs, and familiar tunes from TV shows and movies are used in entertaining videos and those discussing future meetups with supporters, creating an inspiring and positive atmosphere that attracts viewers. The choice of music can attract viewers and engage them by evoking emotional responses through associations (Abidin, 2021).

Lastly, textual elements emerge as an important semiotic mode, with almost every video including text summarising the key message. To foster a sense of belonging with the in-group, Tynkkynen interacts with followers by sharing group pictures and his followers' messages (12 videos). Additionally, the videos' appeal is enhanced by digital additions such as emojis (8 videos) and red borders (21 videos), which evoke positive emotions and contribute to his visual brand. Videos that celebrate the in-group seek to convey a positive feeling and sense of 'us'. This is demonstrated in Example 1 (Table 6.2), which was recorded just before the parliamentary elections in 2023.

Table 6.2 Multimodal transcription of video 268

Time	*Visual*	*Verbal/music*	*Text*	*Digital*
0:00–0:01	Tynkkynen sits on a bus wearing a checkered jacket, looking at the camera. The sun's rays are reflecting from the background.	Male singer sings in an upbeat party song ('I don't care about anything else').	'The greatest entertainment right now is reading on TikTok'	
0:02–0:08	Tynkkynen nods his head to the rhythm of the music and smiles.	'I enjoy life, the fleeting moment, and you won't see a tear from me'.	'the crying of the green-lefts because finally young people no longer fear to admit	
0:09–0:20	He glances to his side and keeps nodding, looking at the camera again and smiles broadly.	'I enjoy love, I enjoy freedom, and I won't stay still'.	that they support the Finns Party after all the insults and labelling. FP'	(heart and Finnish flag emojis)

Source: Posted: 26 March 2023, total length: 00:20 min, https://www.tiktok.com/@sebastiantynkkynen/video/7214757667837938949?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7334700762067502624

The video begins with Tynkkynen sitting on a bus, wearing a checkered jacket, and looking directly into the camera. Reflecting a common feature of Tynkkynen's videos, there is no spoken narration. Instead, other semiotic modes – visual, musical, textual, and digital elements – play a significant role. Sunlight pours in through the windows and casts a positive and hopeful ambiance, hinting at divine illumination (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). The popular Finnish song 'Nautin Elämästä' ('I'm Enjoying Life') by Portion Boys, a party band appealing to a large audience, starts playing, with lyrics resonating with carefree joy: 'I don't care about anything else' (0:00–0:01). Tynkkynen nods to the beat of the music and smiles, projecting contentment (Feng & O'Halloran, 2012). The use of a well-known song serves as an effective strategy to boost the video's appeal and visibility and construct a sense of togetherness.

The lyrics of the song contribute to the multimodal construction of the message as they reinforce Tynkkynen's satisfaction: 'I enjoy life, the fleeting moment, and you won't see a tear from me' (0:02–0:08). The textual element provides insight into the source of this satisfaction: 'The greatest entertainment right now is reading on TikTok, the crying of the green-leftists because finally young people no longer fear to admit that they support the Finns Party after all the insults and labelling' (0:00–0:20). The textual element delineates

a stark antagonistic divide between political factions, portraying the FP as victims, subjected to insults and labelling, and the green-left as the culprits. This emotionally charged division and blame allocation allow Tynkkynen to create a shared sense of victimhood and evoke a desire that once again they could regain their position (Reicher & Ulusahin, 2020; Rovamo & Sakki, 2024). The text also carries undertones of triumph and superiority, celebrating the in-group's success while decrying the opposition. The video culminates with the digital elements of a heart and Finnish flag emojis alongside the text ´FP´ (0:09–0:20), evoking nationalistic affect and identity through symbols (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2016; Pettersson & Sakki, 2017). Through humour and positive meanings attached to the in-group, Tynkkynen cultivates a sense of positivity that bolsters the positive group identity.

Example 2 of in-group celebration is illustrated in Figure 6.1, with Tynkkynen employing multiple modes of communication to showcase an in-group celebration during a meetup.

In the video, Tynkkynen stands in the foreground wearing a colourful shirt with a happy expression, smiling at a dark and monochrome crowd behind him. The text says: 'Greetings from the Rovaniemi [city in Finland] meetup'. This conveys to followers that active and vibrant meetups are being held in various cities, exemplifying the positive energy and emphasising Tynkkynen's dedication to engaging personally with his supporters. Participants are observed collectively chanting 'vote in the local elections' – a rallying call that not only encourages voting but also represents a form of identity enactment that inspires similar engagement from others (Uysal et al., 2022).

The practice of fostering collective action and displaying public endorsement serves as a strategic approach to embodying a shared identity vision (Haslam et al., 2020). This technique mirrors what Reicher and Haslam (2017) described as identity festivals, a term they used in relation to Trump's approach to identity leadership. During these gatherings, Trump shared his visions for America's future and provided followers with the opportunity to celebrate and affirm their alignment with his vision, allowing them to feel like a part of it. In a similar manner, Tynkkynen's meet-ups act as platforms where supporters can congregate to celebrate common beliefs, reinforcing their group identity. One notable event was a moped meet-up tailored specifically for young moped enthusiasts, illustrating the importance of recognising and engaging with the interests of the target audience to create appealing and significant events. As Jurstakova et al. (2024) noted, crafting engaging events for followers necessitates an understanding of their motivations and exemplifies the dual-agency model of leadership (Haslam et al., 2022).

Shared victimhood

Another strategy to enact and make 'us' takes place through harnessing an experience of shared victimhood. This approach centres around constructing a narrative

Figure 6.1 Screenshot of video 98 (Posted: 18 January 2022, total length: 00:11 min, https://www.tiktok.com/@sebastiantynkkynen/video/7054578712842456326?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7334700762067502624)

where the in-group is portrayed as collectively wronged or disadvantaged (Mols & Jetten, 2014; Reicher & Ulusahin, 2020; Rovamo & Sakki, 2024). To reinforce in-group identity, it is crucial to distinguish between 'us' and 'them', portraying the out-group as an antagonistic force and the in-group as innocent victims who must stand up to restore their rightful status (Ntontis et al., 2024).

Tynkkynen frequently casts himself and his supporters of the FP as victims (13 videos). In these videos, Tynkkynen speaks directly to the camera in various locations, wearing a checkered shirt. He describes the inappropriate and unpleasant treatment directed at him or his supporters for their affiliation with the FP, calling it 'political violence'. However, in contrast to his celebratory content, the tone of the victimhood-themed videos usually lacks music and is markedly serious. Almost every video includes text or pictures as an added digital element summarising its key message. Tynkkynen's expressions, appearance, and other visual details in the videos reflect negative emotions. The construction of shared victimhood that concerns the entire FP and its supporters is exemplified in Example 3, where Tynkkynen reads a message from his followers (Table 6.3).

The video begins with Tynkkynen sitting in his car, attentively reading a message from a young follower. The textual semiotic mode, 'Message from an 8th grader', foregrounds both the age of the sender and the importance of receiving such correspondence from a young supporter. Tynkkynen's decision to address the message from the car conveys a sense of immediacy, suggesting an eagerness to engage with the follower's issue directly, demonstrating his readiness to serve the in-group (Haslam et al., 2020). The video is surrounded by red borders, which is thematic for Tynkkynen. In addition, it serves as a visually arresting and alert colour, drawing the viewer's attention (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

The car's shadowy interior, with raindrops running down the windows, intensifies the emotional tone of the melancholy of the message (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). Tynkkynen leans his head against his finger as if pondering (Figure 6.2) and articulates the follower's concern, reading it from the phone screen: 'Today, after school, I have to have a discussion because I express my own opinion at school, and it differs from the others' opinions' (0:00–0:23). After reciting the message, Tynkkynen looks directly into the camera at eye level, making an imaginary, but deep and equal, connection with the viewer, while his proximity to the camera also fosters a sense of closeness with his audience (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

Tynkkynen implies the ubiquity of the follower's experience: 'Both girls and boys express concerns about voicing their opinions in classes' (0:24–0:48). He then expresses solidarity by stating, 'This is really a serious matter' (0:49–1:18). The narrative of the video frames the FP as a group collectively subjected to targeting, which in turn cements a shared identity centred around victimhood (Mols & Jetten, 2020; Rovamo & Sakki, 2024). Additionally, it underscores the unity within the in-group by demonstrating the support and attention Tynkkynen gives to followers.

Table 6.3 Multimodal transcription of Video 138

Verbal	*Visual*	*Text*	*Digital*
0:00–0:23			
'Today, after school, I have to have a discussion because I express my own opinion at school, and it differs from others' opinions. I'm considered a racist in the school community because I think about Finland's interests and the safety of Finns. Teachers also threaten me with disciplinary discussions if this does not stop. I hope you could address these kinds of issues in parliament'.	Tynkkynen sits in the car wearing a red jacket, his gaze angled downwards as he reads a message on his phone screen. The light from the screen reflects on his face in the dimly lit car. He leans his head against his finger. The phone screen dims, and he adjusts the brightness.	'Message from an 8th grader'.	Bright red borders
0:24–0:48			
'Both girls and boys express concerns about voicing their opinions in classes like social studies, particularly regarding topics related to basic Finnishness, Finnish nationalism, Islam, immigration, multiculturalism, asylum seekers, because they are aware of the teacher's stance on these issues'.	He looks around and at the camera. He counts on his fingers.		Scene cut
0:49–1:18			
'And when those first critical remarks among the class are presented for the first time in front of the teacher, the teacher has just responded with such a disdainful tone back to these students that afterward there was no longer any motivation to express the real, true view that each student has. Because they know that they will be ridiculed, so to speak, by the teacher's mockery, among the other students. And this is really a serious matter'.	He leans his head against his finger. He speaks to the camera while occasionally looking out of the window. He waves his hand, shakes his head, and scratches his nose.		

Source: Posted: 17 April 2022, total length: 4:57 min, https://www.tiktok.com/@sebastiantynkkynen/video/7087648530323557638?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7334700762067502624

Figure 6.2 Screenshot of Video 138 (Posted: 17 April 2022, total length: 4:57 min, https://www.tiktok.com/@sebastiantynkkynen/video/7087648530323557638?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7334700762067502624)

Blaming 'them'

Populism is strongly characterised by its dichotomous division of society into binaries such as 'us' versus 'them' and 'good' versus 'bad'. According to Hameleers et al. (2017), this moral division between opposing groups encapsulates a central tenet of populism, often manifested through the allocation of blame and responsibility for societal problems to more- or less-well-defined others. Previous studies on populist actors' rhetoric revealed that blame may be attributed flexibly to the 'elite' (Hameleers et al., 2017), societal out-groups such as immigrants (Hirsch et al., 2021), or enemies within a society (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). In Tynkkynen's videos, the function is blaming 'them' (51 videos) through a multimodal and discursive strategy involving mocking and irony.

Mockery

Mocking, or making fun of someone or something, is a form of ridicule that often entails imitating or mimicking another group in a scornful or contemptuous manner – a common tactic used by the FP (Pettersson et al., 2023) and Tynkkynen in his TikTok communications (19 videos).

In most of his videos, Tynkkynen speaks directly to the camera and primarily directs criticism towards former Prime Minister Marin (6 videos); her government and other members of parliament (9 videos); as well as the Extinction Rebellion, an active climate movement in Finland (4 videos). These videos are often lengthy, sometimes nearly 10 minutes, with Tynkkynen typically maintaining a serious demeanour throughout. While a few videos contain calm music to enhance the message's persuasive or ironic tone or threatening music to amplify its seriousness, nearly all include textual elements that underline the mocking nature of the message. In the former strategy, he evokes a sense of victimhood by sharing experiences about the unpleasant treatment they have experienced. Here, he digitally testifies the behaviour of other politicians by exploiting pictures from news and interview clips of them in the videos. Additionally, he uses angry or surprised emojis, a blue hue filter, and black and red borders to convey a serious tone in the videos (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

The multimodal aspect of Tynkkynen's mockery of the out-group is exemplified in video 195 (Posted: 24 August 2022, total length: 8:59 min, https://www.tiktok.com/@sebastiantynkkynen/video/7135188304579890437?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7334700762067502624), where he solemnly attacks Marin. Tynkkynen begins by reminding viewers of the latest scandal involving Marin[1]: 'The latest revelation to come out is the after-party of the flour gang at Ruisrock [a music festival in Finland]'. He emphasises the seriousness of the situation with a serious expression and a textual element stating, 'Marin's resignation is now imminent' (0:03–0:22).

Tynkkynen continues by listing and disapprovingly imitating Marin's behaviour:

> I couldn't imagine that we would soon be talking about the Prime Minister's urine, lap dances, drug tests, trusted friend party-Ilmari, crotch dances with Sabina Särkkä, the presence of superficial celebrities at Marin's place, and the Prime Minister's press room breast photo.
>
> (2:53–3:16)

He questions Marin's abilities to perform her duties, saying, 'when various packages are being debated at the EU level, we better have someone there who has the clout and credibility in the eyes of other negotiators' (3:41–4:15). He derogatorily compares Marin's friends, stating: 'It's like watching a parade of attention and publicity-hungry kindergarten children heading straight to the Prime Minister's official residence' (5:02–5:22), while simultaneously showing a video shared by Marin's friend on TikTok, where Marin's friends are walking and dancing in Marin's backyard, serving a digital 'proof' of her alleged immoral behaviour.

Finally, Tynkkynen expresses his concern about the future with a Prime Minister behaving in this manner: 'I'm genuinely concerned about this situation, about what might happen under those circumstances. When the Prime Minister, whose head contains state security and foreign relations information, is inebriated and at the mercy of that flour gang' (7:08–7:24). This emphasises Tynkkynen's own position as a servant of the nation, while allowing him to portray Marin as a traitor (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). It also resonates with previous research showing how Marin is portrayed in a manner that puts vanity and her own fame and glory ahead of her responsibilities (Pettersson et al., 2023; Sakki & Martikainen, 2022).

Irony

Humour and irony have been shown to be effective tools in framing political discourse, providing entertainment while often disguising hateful messages in a seemingly lighter and more acceptable fashion (Gal, 2019; Hakokõngäs et al., 2020; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Tynkkynen utilises irony to accentuate the divide between 'us', the FP and its supporters, and 'them', the political opponents (32 videos).

Topics Tynkkynen ridicules include the Extinction Rebellion and climate policy, Prime Minister Marin, the government, the red-green-left political spectrum, feminists, the media, and legislation. Most of the irony is performed with Tynkkynen directly in front of the camera (21 videos), while some feature other politicians and are overlaid with Tynkkynen's sarcastic commentary (8 videos). In a few videos, he lip-syncs, and the shared content often adopts a meme-like and cinematic approach.

Music plays a significant role as a multimodal semiotic resource, incorporating electronic and cheerful tracks (9 videos) to enhance a positive atmosphere as well as widely recognised pop songs or familiar melodies (9 videos) to establish emotional connections and evoke specific moods and themes related to the video's message. Meanwhile, textual elements play a part in summarising main points, coupled with the use of emojis (6 videos), filters (2 videos), and red and black borders (7 videos), which enrich the entertainment factor and intensify the pejorative message of the videos. Example 4 demonstrates how irony is constructed multimodally in a video where Tynkkynen sarcastically comments on a proposal from the governing party (Table 6.4).

In the video, there is no verbal narration. Instead, the dominant semiotic resources are music, text, visual, and digital elements. Tynkkynen films himself with a TikTok filter transforming his face into a character resembling those from the fantasy movie *Avatar*, imbuing the video with a blue hue. The video operates on a memetic level, with memes having been recognised as effective tools in political communication and persuasion (Hakokõngäs et al., 2020; Milner, 2016). Tynkkynen looks at the camera, and the text of the video reads: 'Greens: Remove Sunday supplements', referencing the Green Party's proposal to abolish work supplements for workers. A confused emoji with eyes wide open and face blushing follows the text, signifying Tynkkynen's bewildered reaction to the proposal. Such smiley emojis serve as representations of real-life emotional expressions (Feng & O'Halloran, 2012).

Tynkkynen then sighs and looks upward, a gesture of hopelessness mixed with frustration (Figure 6.3). In the background, the mysterious theme music from the TV series *X-Files* plays, underlying the ironic tone of the video and suggesting conspiracies, mysteries, and contradictions in line with the theme of the series (0:00–0:02). Next, Tynkkynen leans towards the camera

Table 6.4 Multimodal transcription of video 171

Time	*Visual*	*Music*	*Text*	*Digital*
0:00–0:02	Tynkkynen looks at the camera with a frustrated expression. He's wearing a checkered shirt. He sighs and looks upwards.	The mysterious *X-Files* theme music.	'Greens: Remove Sunday supplements'.	Blue avatar filter with blue background. Confused emoji with eyes wide open and face blushing.
0:03–0:09	He leans towards the camera and raises his eyebrows.		'In what reality do the Greens actually live?'	Frustrated emoji, exhaling steam from nose.

Source: Posted: 22 May 2022, total length: 0:09 min, https://www.tiktok.com/@sebastian-tynkkynen/video/7100581055660412165?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7334700762067502624

Figure 6.3 Screenshot of video 171 (Posted: 22 May 2022, total length: 0:09 min, https://www.tiktok.com/@sebastiantynkkynen/video/7100581055660412165?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7334700762067502624)

and raises his eyebrows to enhance the dramatic and bewildered effect and positions himself to gaze at the audience from an upward angle, adopting a symbolic powerful stance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). The accompanying text inquires, 'In what reality do the Greens actually live?'. Text, punctuated by the frustrated emoji, the *X-Files* theme, and the *Avatar*-inspired filter, emphasises the perceived absurdity of the Green Party's proposal and hints that the party is disconnected from reality (0:03–0:09). By suggesting that the proposition is unrealistic and far from the concerns of people, challenging the notion that irrational political elites could represent people (Pettersson et al., 2023; Uysal et al., 2022), and maintaining a posture of authority, Tynkkynen communicates that the FP genuinely advocates for the interests of 'ordinary people' (Mols & Jetten, 2016). The integration of well-known music and the allusion to a famous movie character provide viewers with familiar and entertaining elements that can generate visual intrigue and elicit positive emotional responses (Abidin, 2021).

Discussion

Our MCDP analysis demonstrates how TikTok serves as a favourable platform for a populist actor to reach diverse audiences, engage with followers, and function as a platform where a common social identity is created and mobilised multimodally. It seems that politicians have recognised the multimodal power of TikTok for political persuasion (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023). The present chapter suggests a novel perspective to examine the multimodal construction and mobilisation of a shared social identity in right-wing populist communication on TikTok. Our MCDP analysis of the Finnish right-wing populist Sebastian Tynkkynen's TikTok videos allowed us to focus not only on verbal communication, but also on visual, musical, and interactive details. This enabled us to unpack the construction of identity leadership and social identity crafted via TikTok videos that incorporate diverse tools, constructing multimodal and discursive strategies, celebrating the ingroup and shared victimhood, with the function of acting and creating 'us'. Additionally, he employs tools that build multimodal and discursive strategies, such as mockery and irony, with the function of blaming 'them'.

Identity leadership refers to a leader's capacity to mobilise an audience by creating and embedding a sense of social identity, 'us' (Haslam et al., 2020). In populism, creating a sense of 'us' means establishing a distinction between the people and the elite enemy, which lies at the core of populism (Uysal et al., 2022). The right-wing populist FP has frequently utilised this division, fuelling polarisation and constructing their own group as morally superior (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). As we have shown, Tynkkynen deploys this rhetoric in his TikTok persuasion through multiple fine-grained multimodal tools. Central to his political communication is reinforcing the in-group's positive common identity through different interactive strategies. A shared sense of 'we-ness' is

built by celebrating the in-group through entertaining content that praises the FP and encourages followers to engage in collective action (cf. Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023). Along with entertaining TikTok videos that celebrate the in-group, Tynkkynen posts more serious videos that imply a sense of shared victimhood, with the in-group being offended by the political opponent (Rovamo & Sakki, 2024). One particular type of video targets political opponents more directly using serious mockery and humorous irony (Pettersson et al., 2023). Humour appears as a central device in Tynkkynen's persuasion, both in addressing the in-group and the out-group. As Billig (2005) proposed, humour can strengthen social identity through pleasure bonds, or it can exclude people through mockery.

In relation to Tynkkynen's identity leadership, he often appears in videos speaking colloquially to the camera and directly addressing followers. This may be a typical feature of communication on TikTok, but it can also be a deliberate choice for being perceived by the audience as the embodiment of a common identity (Haslam et al., 2020). Speaking in different locations while maintaining proximity to the camera, Tynkkynen creates an intimate atmosphere and makes it clear that he is always there for his followers, demonstrating his dedication to the group (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005).

Beyond his rhetorically powerful and confident speech, Tynkkynen also adeptly employs various memetic and multimodal features of TikTok for his political persuasion, making his videos visually engaging. Visually, the videos differ from each other as Tynkkynen plays with contrasts, balancing his role as a serious and convincing expert as well as a playful, ironic entertainer. He also often appears wearing his signature checkered shirt instead of fancy suits, portraying himself as one of the people, emphasising authenticity when seeking to appear distinct from the elite (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). The red colour of the shirt is also used strategically in other parts of his videos, thus serving as his visual brand.

Music also plays a crucial role in Tynkkynen's TikTok persuasion. While music is commonly used for political purposes (Doehring & Ginkel, 2022; Patch, 2016), Tynkkynen uses it in three different ways. Music is used to enhance the entertaining or serious mood, to emphasise the humorous message, or to add meaning to the lyrics, and familiar songs may serve to increase visibility for the videos. Additionally, in almost all of his videos, text serves as a semiotic code that underlies the argument. Tynkkynen also utilises digital elements, such as filters, to create an entertaining atmosphere and emojis (such as hearts and smileys) to serve as symbols and convey emotions.

Echoing social identity leadership approaches (Haslam et al., 2022; Uysal et al., 2022), interaction is a crucial aspect in Tynkkynen's videos, as he actively fosters dialogue with his followers through various multimodal means. This dynamic relationship between leaders and followers has significant potential to influence people's behaviour (Haslam et al., 2020, 2022). Tynkkynen engages

with his followers, responded to their questions, organised meetups, and used images and videos to facilitate references and interaction with his audience. By doing so, he demonstrates that social identity is the result of collective effort (Reicher et al., 2005).

To conclude, this chapter explores the ways in which the Finnish right-wing populist politician Sebastian Tynkkynen constructs and mobilises a shared social identity with his followers on TikTok. To our knowledge, this is the first study empirically exploring the multimodal construction of social identity and populist leadership in political TikTok communication. This study underscores the intricate interplay between multimodal communication, identity construction, and populist leadership in contemporary political discourse, constituting a promising area for further investigation in future research.

Note

1 On 17 August 2022, the Finnish afternoon newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* reported that a 'party video' of Marin, featuring her dancing and singing with public figures, was circulating on social media (https://www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000009011256.html). It was soon claimed that they shout 'flour gang' in the video, which refers to powdered drug use (https://is.fi/politiikka/art-2000009011830.html).

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Chapter 7

Investigating social representations of 'the people' in the Greek context

Who are 'the people'?

Myrto Droumpali and Xenia Chryssochoou

Introduction

'Popular sovereignty is the foundation of government. All powers derive from the People and exist for the People and the Nation; they shall be exercised as specified by the Constitution' (First Article of the Constitution of the Hellenic Democracy).

In recent years, the question of what populism is as a sociopolitical phenomenon has interested social scientists. But what exactly is populism, and why does it attract scientists and laypeople alike? We argue that in its essence, populism presents a simplified narrative of the social order. It expresses the relationship between two camps, 'the people' and 'the elite', and their conflictual existence within society (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In this Manichean divide of the social status quo, the so-called populist political actors promise to enforce a new order with their 'alternative', anti-systemic, anti-elitist agenda. What lies at the base of this 'us' versus 'them' division is social and material disparity and a shift of power. This injustice (power imbalance) cannot remain as such because it is incompatible with the most essential principle and promise of democracy, popular sovereignty.

Populism has been studied by different disciplines – history, political science, economics, and social and political psychology. Beyond the definition of populism (De La Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019; Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), the phenomenon has been studied in the context of party politics (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016; Rooduijn et al., 2012), voting behaviour (Andreadis et al., 2019; Bakker et al., 2015; Rooduijn, 2017), political rhetoric (Blassnig et al., 2018; Bos & Brants, 2014; Dai & Kustov, 2022; Sakki & Martikainen, 2020), political strategy (Barr, 2018; Weyland, 2021), and as a mass mobilisation medium (Aslanidis, 2016, 2018; Canovan, 2002; Kenny, 2023). Its impact on the government (Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2015; Keefer et al., 2021), public policy (Bartha et al., 2020), and the fundamentals of liberal democracy (Galston, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Pappas, 2019; Urbinati, 2019) have also been explored.

In this chapter, our approach is rooted in social and political psychology. We observe that research on populism may have reached a saturation point by

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looking at populism either as an epistemological question or from the point of view of political actors. We argue that what lacks in scholarly work is the examination of lay constructs and social representations of the phenomenon and its core components: the people and the elite.

Social representations approach to the lay understanding of populism

In our approach, we follow a theoretical path based on Moscovici's (1961/2008) classic work on the lay understanding of psychoanalysis. In it, Moscovici investigated how a new concept such as psychoanalysis is disseminated, understood, and integrated into the broader cultural fabric through communication, interaction, and collective interpretation. We propose a similar case for the lay understanding of populism. By studying the social representation of populism, we believe that we will be able to understand how citizens evaluate populist social order and construct their social realities within it, along with the possible factors that function as a welcoming bedrock for populism (Katsambekis, 2020).

Throughout the vast literature on populism, there have been few studies linking populism to the theory of social representations. In the qualitative work of Espinosa et al. (2024), the researchers investigated the social representations of populism and democracy in Peru. They found that the participants negatively evaluated populism and understood it as a discursive repertoire that politicians employed to gain support and claim power (see also Chapter 9 of this volume). Additionally, participants constructed the image of the populist citizen, painting them as naïve, ignorant, lacking access to education, socially excluded, impoverished, and in need of alleviation of their material condition (Espinosa et al., 2024). In another qualitative study, Rovamo and Sakki (2024) approached populism as a naturalised social representation to study how Finnish lay interviewees constructed, challenged, and resisted it. The results showed how the term populism was predominately comprehended in a negative light, conceptualised as a unique and distinctive style of doing politics either by misleading politics or appealing to ignorant supporters. Through these conceptualisations, the actions of the populist politicians were described as deviant and goal-oriented and the populist supporters as irrational and emotionally driven.

From the quantitative side of social representations literature, Staerklé and Green (2018) used the social representations approach (SRA) to study self-identifying right-wing populist voters across four European countries. The participants were examined in relation to their political attitudes, self-appraised identity as right-wing populist voters, as well as attitudes toward traditional parties (both right and left wing). The results illustrated how the identities of right-wing populist voters stemmed partially from their perceived distrust toward other citizens, lack of political efficacy, and precarious material circumstances (Staerklé & Green, 2018).

Similarly, Farooq (2019) explored the social representations of supporters of populist parties, both right wing (from the United Kingdom and Sweden) and left wing (from Spain and the Netherlands) and how they compared in five dimensions: (1) institutional trust, (2) democratic deficit, (3) globalism, (4) social and political identity, and (5) social position. The findings revealed a distrust towards political institutions across all participants and a belief in a democratic deficit in their respective societies. Both groups also held negative attitudes towards the elite. However, left-wing populist party voters were found to be more positive toward dimensions of globalism and expressed greater trust toward people generally, whereas the contrary was true for right-wing populist party voters.

More recently, Staerklé et al. (2024), analysing data from eight European countries using SRA, defined populism as a common way of thinking of society in terms of intergroup relations. They proposed that populism is a mentality that is based on two dimensions: a power asymmetry between the people (the powerless majority) and the elite (the powerful minority) and a morality dimension that compensates for the lack of power, in which the people are the moral ones as opposed to the immoral elite.

However, despite these valuable contributions to understanding the attitudes and beliefs of so-called populist voters, and provided that populism is a way of understanding an intergroup social order, we still lack insight into how lay people construct the key components of this social order, namely the people and the elite. In this chapter, we focus solely on the lay constructions of the people.

Why focus on the people?

In populism, the notion of the people represents a broad and often vaguely defined collective entity positioned in opposition to a perceived elite or establishment. Its content varies depending on the specific ideological context and the goals of the populist movement, party, or leader (Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2011; Katsambekis, 2020). For example, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012) suggested that in inclusionary populism (usually left leaning), the people is defined as a volatile 'empty vessel' (p. 151) that is not pre-determined. In contrast, in exclusionary populism (usually right leaning), the people refers to an imaginary, transcendental signifier (i.e., the nation, the race). In accordance with this left–right division of constructing peoplehood, Mudde (2007) remarked that the left views the existence of major disparities among people and advocates for their resolution through proactive involvement of the state, while the right perceives these inequalities as natural and beyond the scope of state intervention. This difference is important because it often determines how populist actors symbolically construct the 'other' and operationalise the people's grievances, which in turn determines what kind of solutions/policies they propose (De La Torre, 2013; Stanley, 2008).[1]

In any case, the qualities attributed to the notion of the people in populism are often contradictory and ambiguous. Canovan (2005) noted that the notion of the people encompasses a paradox representing both the privileged segment of society claiming universality and the marginalised segment of the population struggling for inclusion. In that sense, the people are wronged by the elites; stripped of their inherent right to sovereignty; and, at the same time, the bearers of constitutional power. Within populist discourse, the people are transformed from being a mob crowd, humiliated, silenced, and excluded, into vessels of dignity and redemption (De La Torre, 2013) and political subjects (Canovan, 1984).

Another aspect that seems important in the conceptualisation of the people is the homogeneity and purity attributed to the category. Populist rhetoric often portrays the people as a unified and homogeneous group, sharing common interests (Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2011), values, and identities (Meléndez & Kaltwasser, 2017). By doing so, these individuals become reduced to a populace ready to be convinced and activated by a charismatic leader (Weyland, 2001). In populism, leaders commonly articulate societal concerns that feel overlooked by the ruling class (the elite), motivating these groups to push for a reordering of the political status quo (Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2011; Schmidtke, 2023). Additionally, in much of populist discourse, the people are a romanticised concept perceived as morally pure, virtuous, kind, honest, and authentic (Katsambekis, 2020; Mudde, 2004), in contrast to the perceived corruption, immorality, and exploitative nature of the elite.

We observe from the above that defining the people is challenging. Recently, an edited volume by Zienkowski and Breeze (2019) highlighted the diversity of definitions of populism and the people in scholarly literature. To navigate this, one perspective that may be adopted is Laclau's (2005) concept of the people as an empty signifier. In this conceptualisation, the people are not a fixed or predefined group but rather a construct shaped through political articulation. They are not the starting point of any populist mobilisation but rather a symbolic invocation that resides within the unmet demands undermined by the dominant power, shaped by the significance that the political system of representational democracy assigns to that notion (Laclau, 2005). They are not merely a group of individuals, but rather the interactions of a political movement (Espejo, 2017). Therefore, the people as a notion gain substance through (1) their shared marginalised and underprivileged circumstances; (2) their claim to be a legitimate community and holders of democratic sovereignty; and (3) their shared unmet demands, grievances, and frustrations.

Given this difficulty, as well as its ideological constructions and the dual understandings of the people as both sovereign entities and passive followers, it becomes even more important to examine how lay people give meaning to this category. Who are the people in lay thinking? This is what we investigate within the Greek context.

The Greek context

In the last 15 years, Greece has faced numerous impactful political developments, including a major economic crisis, an extensive refugee emergency, and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as numerous other impactful political developments or scandals. These events have led to the mobilisation of large segments of the population. Specifically, people have engaged in collective action by participating in demonstrations advocating human rights, national identity (such as the Prespa agreement), biopolitics and free movement (COVID-19 vaccination and lockdown regulations), women's rights (addressing femicides and gender-based violence), and justice (in response to incidents like the Tempi railroad accident). Together, these protests have mobilised the entity of the people. Therefore, our aim is to understand how this entity is conceptualised by ordinary citizens within Greek society. Do lay thinkers conceptualise the people in the same manner as scholars? To explore this question, we present data from interviews conducted with Greek citizens.

How people think of the people: Methodology

We analysed 54 semi-structured interviews covering general political topics related to beliefs and perspectives on the Greek sociopolitical context. Of our interviewees, 30 were men while 24 were women, with ages ranging from 20 to 75 years old. Here, we present the analysis of questions concerning the key components of populism, including: (1) Who holds power? (2) Do the interviewees perceive themselves to have any power? (3) Who lacks a voice/power in Greece? (4) Who wields excessive power? (5) Who belongs to the people? (6) Who belongs to the elite? (7) Is it possible to become a member of the elite? In addition to being a relevant dimension in populism, the questions regarding the elite also contribute to the understanding of the people, as they are often constructed in comparison to or as the antithesis of the elite.

Although we focused on these questions, we thoroughly reviewed and considered each interview in its entirety to understand each individual's reasoning. We applied a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2019) to enable a comprehensive exploration of emerging themes and the identification of patterns and connections that might not be immediately apparent (Byrne, 2021). Through RTA procedures, our goal was to uncover nuanced insights into how lay interviewees conceptualised notions of the people within the Greek sociopolitical context.

Representations of the people

The analysis revealed five themes on lay representations of the people in the Greek context: (1) a class conceptualisation of the people, (2) the people as

voters, (3) the homogenous people, (4) the empowered people, and (5) the powerless people.

A class conceptualisation of the people

Interviewees associated the notion of the people to societal divisions primarily based on socioeconomic status, representing them as members of the working and lower middle class. This classification inherently delineates the elite and the people as two distinct and antagonistic social classes, highlighting a perceived distance, as demonstrated in the following extracts:

> The people [are those] who do not participate in the elite; middle, lower middle-class and below. Those who are socially and economically in the petty bourgeois classes.
>
> (Male, 44, private sector worker)

> The people are the working class, the self-employed, the poor peasantry, those are the people.
>
> (Male, 35, private sector worker)

> To the people I give a class interpretation, essentially the popular strata, the great majority of the country's inhabitants, regardless, I do not limit it ethnically. Essentially, I will not only say about the Greeks, but I will also say those who live in a state, such as the Greek one, who work, live, raise their children, grow up themselves, all their social activity and survival is in this area.
>
> (Male, 37, lawyer)

The interviewees' responses revealed that the people were predominantly defined in terms of social class, with an emphasis on the working class and those in lower socioeconomic positions, highlighting a perceived distance from the elite. Importantly, the interviewee in the third extract emphasised inclusivity in their understanding of the people, basing it on the importance of everyday life activities rather than nationality. In other words, it is their social condition that qualifies them as the people. This was made explicit by another interviewee:

> The people are the largest part of the population, those who have some common daily problems, some common concerns: where will they work, how much money will they make, how will they going to support themselves, if they will succeed to go on holidays this year, if they will manage to put some money on the side, how they will manage to buy groceries. I believe these people have these concerns in common, regardless of religion, colour, and political beliefs, people who have these concerns in common, the simple, everyday ones, I think they make up the people.
>
> (Male, 40, taxi driver)

The interviewee defined the notion of the people by shared lived experiences and material circumstances, qualifying social class through common challenges in everyday life. Here again, we notice that common everyday concerns transcend differences in religion, race, and political beliefs.

This theme also revolved around the image of the breadwinner, with many interviewees depicting the people as honest, hardworking individuals striving to meet their needs:

> The common man is the one who struggles for survival, the wage earner, the day labourer who barely makes ends meet.
>
> (Male, 72, retired technician)

> [The people are] the poor people, of low economic class, of the daily wage, the breadwinning. Something separate from the world of politics.
>
> (Male, 29, actor)

The people as voters

The second theme revolved around the association of the people with their right to vote, a fundamental democratic attribute that empowers them within a democracy. While some interviewees acknowledged this connection, they also recognised exceptions, such as immigrants, who were considered part of the people despite lacking voting rights:

> [The people are] the body of voters, but there are also non-voters who are also people, such as immigrants.
>
> (Female, 29, civil servant)

This extract reflects a more inclusive view of the people, considering not only voters but also non-voters, such as immigrants, as part of this group. This inclusive view challenges the strict rule of citizenship, highlighting a more collective and solidarity-based definition of the people. Others emphasised that citizenship rights and responsibilities (e.g., voting) were essential for defining the people, indicating that the notion of the people was intricately tied to voting and the associated political processes, as can be seen in the following extract:

> [The people are] all people who have the right to vote, who live and work in Greece. Those of us who have the same rights and the same obligations towards the law. And those who do not live in Greece but have the right to vote.
>
> (Male, 42, car seller)

The interviewee adopted a more traditional perspective, equating the people with those who had the right to vote whether they lived within national boundaries or were holders of citizenship even outside these boundaries. The interviewee also highlighted the traditional conception of the people being equal in rights and duties towards their country.

The homogenous people

The third theme consisted of a dominant construction of the people as homogenous and all-encompassing. In this theme, the people includes everyone, even the rich and powerful. This description is consistent with the homogeneity aspect of the people but simultaneously inconsistent with the Manichean division between the pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), as the following extracts demonstrate:

> We all are the people. We all are the people, it's just that the people are not united, they are not united as a fist because everyone looks at their own micro-interests, everyone looks at themselves and no one will sacrifice themselves. No one, there are some, the few, the so-called crazy. Not many [are willing to] sacrifice themselves for the sake of the country, of… someone, how should I put it… for an idea, something they believe in.
>
> (Female, 55, shop owner)

> The people are essentially all of us, regardless of position. When someone says the people in Greece, it is understood as someone who is essentially from a certain point of the strata and below. The concept is used more for the person who does not have the financial means. But we are all people because we are all equal. And those in the elite belong to the people. Don't they belong to the people?
>
> (Male, 39, physicist)

As the first interviewee expressed, the people are viewed in principle as homogeneous but also divided due to their selfish and individualistic nature. Meanwhile, the interviewee in the second extract explicitly stated that the people encompass both the people and the elite. However, the rhetorical question posed at the end of his response implies that the boundaries between these social groups may not be as clear-cut as portrayed, requiring rhetorical justification. Although this interviewee acknowledged that lower classes form the people, they also put forward the argument of equality to include the elite within the people. The statement 'we are all people' serves as a self-sufficient rhetorical argument for the inclusiveness of the social category, as demonstrated in other extracts:

> We all are [the people]. All of us. And the elite is also in the people.
>
> (Female, 35, private sector worker)

> The people are all of us who live in this state, us, the simple, everyday citizen. But the rich man is also the people, we cannot categorise people, we are all people, we belong to the same state.
>
> (Female, 56, metro station master)

In these extracts, the interviewees attribute a transcendental, ontological quality to the concept of the people. This conception does not recognise the existence of a conflict between the people and the elite. In the latter extract, the interviewee defined the people in relation to their belonging to the same state. This may suggest a reference to the nation-state, where class conflicts are subdued due to shared national interests and experiences (Chryssochoou, 2023).

The empowered people

The fourth theme constructed the people as active members of a group that seeks change through collective action. This portrayal presents an emancipatory view of the people, suggesting that when unified, they wield the ultimate power in society. This notion is exemplified in the following extracts:

> [The people] have power and can do things, when say there are marches on the streets, demonstrations, gatherings, etc. and claims are made, obviously the power of the people is visible, but I don't know to what extent this has an effect in practice and what results it can bring. But basically, all the changes that have happened, they have started by the people, and this shows that the people have power.
>
> (Male, 40, logistics)

> I think the people have the most power because the people are the ones that will vote to elect, the ones that go out to the streets to protest. And they are the ones who, if they all unite, are able to say we will turn everything upside down. They can do it because there are millions of people and I think there is no greater power than the multitude of men [people].
>
> (Female, 20, education student)

The people were constructed as those who have power and can achieve social change. As seen in the above extracts, various forms of collective action were portrayed as avenues for bringing about this change. While the interviewee in the first extract expressed some doubt about their effectiveness, the second emphasised the importance of unity and utilised the numerical strength of the people to assert their power.

The powerless people

In contrast to the fourth theme, the fifth theme portrays the people as entirely disempowered. The theme emphasises that the voice of the people is either unheard or intentionally silenced by the establishment/government:

> The system has not allowed voices to exist. There may be various demonstrations, whatever, but that doesn't say anything, it's just mob [όχλος]. The people by no means have power. Even from the older days when there was the slogan the people in power, it was a mess, because I lived it.
>
> (Male, 67, retired surgeon)

In the extract above, the interviewee discussed traditional forms of collective action but portrays them as ineffective and lacking organisation, using the term *ochlos*, which has negative connotations from ancient Greek, suggesting disorganisation and chaos within demonstrations. By employing this term, the interviewee emphasises the disorderly nature of protests and their inefficacy and drew on his personal experience to bolster this argument.

Furthermore, interviewees often described how the government systematically ignores the collective actions of the people. As illustrated by one interviewee, this misrecognition by the government reinforces the perception among the populace that their actions will have no impact, perpetuating a sense of powerlessness and normalisation of governmental indifference:

> The government passes a lot of things [bills] that the people simply accept because I definitely think that the people do not have the power, because there are so many demonstrations, marches, etc. and I don't think they even care. When it's time [to pass the bill], they pass it and make it law etc. It's as if they [the people] don't exist, while there are many reactions, I think they don't care, they don't care at all, what matters is that what they originally thought is done and that the government is not influenced by anything else.
>
> (Female, 30, private sector worker)

Meanwhile, another interviewee depicted the people as active but powerless in the face of government misrecognition:

> There are voices that are heard, that is, in all the marches that take place, on the internet a lot, in all these online meetings that take place since the pandemic started, but I don't think they are heard by the government, let's say, but there are certainly self-organised groups, efforts at the neighbourhood level let's say, at the school community level that are making changes, but I don't think they are being heard by the government. I imagine this happens because it is not in the government's interest.
>
> (Female, 24, preschool teacher)

In addition to discussing smaller-scale collective actions at the local level, the interviewee also acknowledged the influence of social media as a tool for collective action. Within this theme, social media was highlighted as a potential solution and a valuable tool for expressing and organising collective action (Crano & Gaffney, 2021), a point made by other interviewees:

> The majority of the people [have no power]. The common citizen is usually not heard. Recently, the power that Twitter and some such media is increasing. Mainly Twitter. Through some hashtags they sometimes succeed and change decisions.
>
> (Female, 60, mathematician)

> The average person does not have any power because there is no means to express it. There is social media, but to have a voice on social media you need to have a lot of followers.
>
> (Male, 21, engineering student)

However, it can be observed that social media was not always seen as the sole solution. The interviewee in the latter excerpt challenged the influence of social media, suggesting that its effectiveness depends on specific circumstances.

Lastly, the theme of the disempowered people also highlighted the loss of sovereignty among the people. It indicated that power lies within international institutions, such as the European Union, and a small group of influential families and individuals.

> We are supposed to live in a democratic country, and I would like the people to have the power. In other words, the person you have voted for should represent you worthily and follow what he has committed to because that is why you voted for him. So, in essence, the people should have the power. I no longer think that people have the power. I believe there are lines we follow. Are there not commitments, are there not lines from the European Union I imagine that everyone follows? When you are both in debt and they lend you money, necessarily [this happens]. I think we never had the power and maybe we thought we did.
>
> (Female, 35, accountant)

> Certainly not the people [have the power]. We don't, the people don't command and control. The people don't even make the governments. I am closer to believing that the prime minister will be the one nominated by a maximum of five families on the planet. Things and situations are imposed on the political scene by external factors. It is very disappointing to come to the conclusion that… America is commanding and maybe China and Russia and two other countries do as well, let's say.
>
> (Female, 51, occupational therapist)

Both interviewees in the above extracts expressed scepticism about Greece's democracy, indicating that decisions imposed on Greek citizens are made regardless of their will. They implied that representatives elected by the people prioritise the interests of the globalised economy, not those of the people. This portrayal depicts Greek politicians as influenced by foreign big powers, rendering the people entirely powerless. As the latter interviewee stated, their votes are not seen as having any significance, highlighting the classic division between the powerless people and the powerful political elite. It also represents the mismatch when the people (despite being the majority) perceive themselves as powerless against the powerful elite minority (Staerklé et al., 2024).

Social representations of the people: Some food for thought

With this study, we aimed to illustrate the lay representations of the notion of the people in the Greek context. Through qualitative analysis of 54 interviews of lay thinkers, we identified five themes. First, the people were characterised by their social class, represented by the image of the breadwinner and their shared social and material adversities. In other words, the people appeared as a social category defined by social and material conditions. The second theme described the people as voters producing a civic perspective. This fundamental democratic right is seen as defining membership within the broader community. Such membership is detached from specific group qualities and is granted based on affiliation with political entities like the nation-state. In the third theme, the perceived homogeneity of the people was emphasised, encompassing everyone – including the elite. This perspective may stem from a national and ethnic perception or possibly from experiencing fewer inequalities, leading to a rejection of an antagonistic divide between the people and the elite. Meanwhile, the final two themes revealed contrasting perceptions of the people. While the fourth depicted them as a socially active and dynamic group capable of making change and redistributing power, the fifth portrayed the people as having lost their voice and sovereignty, referencing the representation crisis observed in liberal democracies (Roberts, 2019; Seferiades, 2021; Stavrakakis et al., 2017).

Together, these conceptualisations/themes can be theorised along two axes. The first axis distinguishes between defining the people based on social conditions versus national membership and civic rights. This axis either establishes a hierarchy within the nation, separating people from elites, or unifies everyone, mitigating social inequalities. The second axis contrasts the people as agents of change versus the people as disempowered and disillusioned. Further research should investigate how these principles organise the social representation of the people in different contexts and perhaps explore a larger audience by quantitatively testing these principles alongside factors influencing different conceptualisations (for similar approaches, see Lorenzi-Cioldi & Clemence, 2001;

Staerklé et al., 2024). Moreover, examining the intersection of these two axes could provide valuable insights into different political actors.

Overall, what is crucial here is that these conceptualisations of the social category of the people have consequences in relation to identities and their politicisation (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Those who conceptualise the category based on social class and perceive themselves as unified agents of change (Gibson, 2003) are more likely to adopt a dynamic and assertive stance as political subjects (Laclau, 2005). Conversely, individuals who view the category as defined by the social conditions but feel disempowered and lacking control may passively accept inequalities, justify the social order (Jost & Banaji, 1994), and withdraw from political claims. Similarly, we might speculate that those who conceptualise the category as all-encompassing and simultaneously as effective agents of change may be inclined to engage in exclusionary struggles, while those who feel disempowered may disengage from politics altogether. Thus, it can be observed that understanding how lay people conceptualise the category of the people can provide valuable insights into how they give meaning to the social order, navigate potential conflicts, and politicise their identities. Moreover, their construction of the category of the people could shed light on the potential audiences of populist leaders and parties and their appeal.

Social representations serve as a form of democratic knowledge construction (Chryssochoou, 2022). Our approach to examining grassroots representations of the people reflect our willingness to give voice to the people themselves, who, in Greek democracy as in other democracies, are the bearers of sovereignty as specified in the Constitution. It is important to remember that popular sovereignty remains fundamental to all democratic regimes in modernity (Stavrakakis, 2019). Hence, the notion of the people should not be demonised and considered a threat to liberal democracies, as is often portrayed in the literature on populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Whether the notion of the people could potentially be used as a weapon against democracy largely depends on how it is constructed by the people themselves.

Our findings offer a valuable perspective on the state of liberal democracy and its shortcomings. Despite the prominence of the idea of popular sovereignty, it is simultaneously constrained both institutionally and symbolically, a concern frequently highlighted in the literature (Stavrakakis, 2019). Moreover, people feel that political parties and the government are not listening to popular demands, potentially leading to a rupture in the social contract. In response to these circumstances, the notion of the people gradually coalesces, giving rise to politicised identities. Citizens seem to be aware of this democratic shortfall and incorporate it into their articulation of themselves as the people.

Our findings indicate that the category of the people is not an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005) for those who could claim this membership; rather, it encompasses various conceptualisations with different consequences for social action. Some of these conceptualisations may even pose a threat to democracy due to their exclusionary nature or disengagement from politics. Therefore, one

could argue that populism, often viewed in scholarly literature as an anomaly (Kalyvas, 2019), is actually a component of post-democratic liberal regimes that face capitalist crises. We hope to have demonstrated in this chapter that working within the framework of social representations allows us to examine how individuals themselves give meaning to the social order, providing fertile ground for the proliferation of populist discourses.

Note

1 Having said that, we should emphasise that in our view, left- and right-wing expressions of populism should not be equated. This methodological but mostly biased normative equation is not only theoretically unproductive but also provides cognitive resources for a normative undermining of the democratic axiom (Seferiades, 2021) and a consequent advocacy of post-democracy (Crouch, 2004). It potentially semantically and conceptually equates active for social change left-wing groups with the far right. The effect of this is two-fold: (a) the non-condemnation and non-delegitimisation of the far-right and (b) the implicit delegitimisation of the left.

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Chapter 8

Contrasting representations of 'the elite' in Swiss populism

A comparative study of left-wing and right-wing populism

Mariman Mabrouk and Christian Staerklé

Introduction

The antagonism between 'the elite' and 'the people' serves as a central tenet of populist rhetoric, regardless of its left- or right-wing orientation (Mudde, 2004). However, while much attention has been given to right-wing populism, left-wing populism has remained relatively unexplored (Otjes & Louwerse, 2013), creating an imbalance in understanding this phenomenon. Building upon the notion that populist ideology rests on anti-elitism and people centrism (Staerklé et al., 2023), this chapter aims to address this imbalance by employing a comparative approach.

Through semi-structured interviews, we explore how both left- and right-wing populists perceive the elite, contrasting these perspectives with each other. The social representations approach (SRA) allows for a comparison between how left- and right-wing populist voters represent the elite, providing insights into the social construction of populism and its core aspects. More precisely, it aims to explore what these representations 'do' and what broader sociopolitical goals they serve.

The Swiss political landscape, with a semi-direct democracy and multiparty system, provides an interesting context for this investigation. While both left- and right-wing populist parties exist in Switzerland, right-wing populism tends to be more prevalent than its left-wing counterpart.

The Swiss case

In Switzerland, the political landscape is predominantly influenced by right-wing parties, despite the presence of various political forces and semi-direct democracy. The Swiss People's Party (in German: Schweizerische Volkspartei [SVP]) holds the dominant position in the national parliament. Often labelled as a radical right-wing populist party, it is known for its controversial stance on immigration and its anti-establishment rhetoric (Ivaldi & Mazzoleni, 2019). Other right-leaning parties include the Centre, representing social conservatism; the Liberal-Radical Party [PLR], advocating for neo-liberal and economic

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conservatism; and the Liberal Greens Party, promoting a neoliberal pro-environment agenda. On the left, the Social Democratic Party and the Greens Party are prominent (Jolly et al., 2022). The populist left is represented by the People's Workers Party (in French: Parti Ouvrier Populaire [POP]), a radical left-wing party known for its recent political campaign ads featuring the slogan 'Place au peuple' ('Make way to the people'), echoing populist rhetoric on popular sovereignty. Despite its presence, the radical left remains marginal in Swiss politics, as underscored by its loss of the sole seat it held in the National Council during the 2023 elections (Swiss Info, 2023). However, it maintains a stronger presence in the French-speaking regions of Switzerland.

The elite and the people in populism

Manifestations of populism are akin to a chameleon, displaying a remarkable adaptability to different contexts. Canovan (1984) highlighted the diverse interpretations of the people within populist groups. Similarly, the term elite encompasses a range of entities in populist discourse, beyond just political figures (De Cleen, 2019), including the media, the state apparatus, intellectuals, and economic powers (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Klinger & Koc-Michalska, 2022). This adaptability underscores ideological flexibility and 'thinness' of populism, allowing it to blend elements from various political ideologies (e.g., nativism to communism; Ernst et al., 2017). Research has extensively examined how populist parties and politicians utilise anti-elitist rhetoric across different platforms, including manifestos (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017), press releases (Brown & Mondon, 2021), political blogs (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016), and social media (Ernst et al., 2017). For example, research shows that populist actors often leverage social media to directly engage a broader audience, bypassing traditional gatekeeping channels (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). This strategy serves to mobilise support by framing the elite as the source of systematic injustices and inequalities that populist leaders promise to address.

According to De Cleen (2019), the concept of the elite is not a straightforward, objective category. It is, instead, a construct defined through discourse, especially within populist rhetoric. This means that the identity and characteristics attributed to the elite are not innate or universally agreed upon, but rather are constructed through language and communication. Populist parties actively shape public perceptions and social representations of the elite through discourse and media, portrayed as adversaries who do not prioritise the interests of the people. This characterisation paints the elite as 'the enemy from above' wielding unjust power over the majority (Klinger & Koc-Michalska, 2022, p. 3). In essence, populist parties craft the image of the elite to resonate with societal grievances and people's emotions (Engesser et al., 2017). By depicting the elite in oppositional terms, they not only reinforce their narrative of representing the people but also contribute to a more polarised and antagonistic political landscape.

In line with the Manichean view of populism, the notion of the elite is constructed in relation to its antagonistic opposite, the people. Within populist discourse, the people are depicted as sovereign, unified, ordinary, pure, good, morally upright, and virtuous (Mudde, 2004; Staerklé et al., 2023). Laclau (2005) elucidated this dialectical process by emphasising the creation of an 'internal frontier' in populist narratives, which establishes a division between 'us' and 'them'. This dichotomy shapes the perception of society as fundamentally divided into two irreconcilable camps: one defined by unmet social needs and a virtuous community (the people) and the other depicted as an unresponsive and illegitimate power structure (the elite). Laclau's insights highlight how populism extends beyond mere rhetoric, influencing how we understand and act in the world. Consequently, the concepts of the elite and the people are not isolated but intricately linked through their dialectical interplay. The people are juxtaposed with their inverted counterpart, the perceived evil and immoral elite (Mudde, 2004).

Populist parties on both the right and left exploit the distinction between the people and the elite to rally support. They position themselves as champions of the people, yet beneath this shared narrative lies significant divergence in how they view the relationship between the two groups. Left-wing populism typically frames this relationship in terms of class and economic inequality, often drawing on Marxist ideologies (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). Here, the elite is portrayed as the economic upper class and their political allies, seen as perpetuating economic injustices (March, 2011). This form of populism intertwines political anti-elitism with critiques of capitalism, focusing on socioeconomic issues (March & Mudde, 2005). In left-wing populism, the people are depicted as hardworking, ordinary citizens exploited and betrayed by the politically and economically powerful elite (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). Additionally, left-wing populists often emphasise 'people centrism' in their online communications, advocating for people's sovereignty and direct empowerment rather than relying on moral stereotypes or pitting them against minority groups (Ernst et al., 2017).

In contrast, right-wing populism frames the people–elite divides through cultural and nationalist lenses, often grounded in authoritarianism and nativism (Otjes & Louwerse, 2013). In this framework, the elite encompasses political figures, intellectuals, and media professionals, criticised for their perceived detachment from the values and interests of the 'real' people (Mudde, 2007). While acknowledging issues like hardship and inequality, right-wing populism proposes nationalistic solutions, emphasising cultural identity, national sovereignty, and concerns about immigration and globalism (Staerklé & Green, 2018). Supporters of this ideology often invoke a sense of national identity, positioning themselves as defenders of traditional values against perceived threats from elite cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (Rydgren, 2005). The people are more narrowly defined in ethno-cultural terms, typically excluding immigrants and other minority groups, aiming to construct a homogeneous national identity, characterised by a group of morally superior citizens with similar views (Mudde, 2007; Staerklé & Green, 2018; Staerklé et al., 2023).

Social representations in politics

This chapter is grounded in the SRA. Social representations are systems of knowledge that become parts of social worlds and enable communication between people. They refer to shared knowledge that is produced, contested, and transformed within and across social groups in interaction (Howarth, 2006). Social representations not only represent reality but also construct it (Elcheroth et al., 2011). Hence, they are always consequential: translating into social practices, having social effects, and maintaining ideological discourses and social relations. This means they are never disinterested but constructed from a specific perspective. Howarth (2006) described social representations as a political project guided by the interests, goals, and activities of the groups that produce them within a given intergroup context (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008). SRA helps to understand some of the fundamental questions that concern political psychologists, notably the nature of power and its connections with political reasoning (Elcheroth et al., 2011).

Social representations theory (SRT) has faced criticism from discursive psychologists for being overly descriptive and lacking tools to analyse representational practices (e.g., Potter, 2019). Similarly, Voelklein and Howarth (2005) argued that SRA has primarily focused on the content and structure of social representations, neglecting their function and broader societal implications. However, these criticisms have been addressed by several scholars who emphasise the importance of action in research. This shift in focus not only examines what social representations are but also what they do in social and political relations (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020; Gibson, 2015). Specifically, Gibson (2015) argued that merging social representations with discursive analysis could be mutually beneficial. Integrating these approaches would enable researchers to explore how social representations are constructed and function in discourse as well as how meanings transform through language and communication. Rovamo and Sakki (2023) demonstrated how this integration allowed for an in-depth analysis of the discursive strategies used by lay populist interviewees to challenge and transform dominant representations of populism.

Following this line of research, this chapter seeks to explore how left- and right-wing populists in Switzerland represent the elite through SRA. In doing so, we aim to study how they construct the notion of the elite in their discourse. Given that all representations always do something (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005), we also explore the discursive functions of these representations in relation to broader ideologies and social relations.

The present study

In this chapter, we analyse 22 semi-structured interviews equally divided between the populist left (n = 11) and right (n = 11). We targeted individuals who left populist comments on Facebook articles and subsequently directly contacted members affiliated with the left and right populist parties. In age, participants

ranged from young adults to pensioners. In length, the interviews varied between 56 and 141 min with an average length of 96 min. All subjects were interviewed voluntarily and provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

In this study, we focused our analysis on questions related to the concept of power and the elite. Specifically, participants were asked: (1) Who holds power in Switzerland? (2) How do you understand the concept of the elite? (3) Who are the elite? (4) How do you get to become the elite?

In terms of the analytic process, we adopted an inductive approach to our material to examine how social representations of the elite are constructed and used discursively. Drawing from rhetorical and discursive approaches (e.g., Billig, 1991; Potter, 1996), we explored the content, form, and function of the discourse (see Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). After familiarising ourselves with the material, we systematically coded it by identifying both semantic and latent codes, focusing on explicit and implicit meanings given to the elite. At this stage, we mostly focused on the content of the talk (what people said about the elite). Meanwhile, in the second phase of the analysis, we paid attention to the action orientation of the talk, that is, how they talked about the elite and what this talk served in relation to wider ideologies and societal and political discourses (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). We also employed a comparative analysis to explore the similarities and differences in the discursive strategies employed by the two populist wings. By comparing the discursive work in representing the elite, we explored how each group shapes the elite in relation to its ideological positions and the broader sociopolitical landscape.

Representing the elite on the left and right

Our analysis yielded three contrasting representations of the elite in left- and right-wing populist talk: (1) the elite as abstract systems vs. specific individuals, (2) the elite as a source of unfairness vs. fear, and (3) the elite as reality vs. illusion. In the following subsections, we analyse the operations of each representation (focusing on social functions) and illuminate them through data excerpts.

The elite as abstract systems vs. specific individuals

In the first contrasting representation of the elite, left-wing activists portrayed the elite as a broad and diffuse force, encompassing entire systems like capitalism. In contrast, right-wing activists personified the elite by focusing on concrete individuals or specific entities.

Left	*Right*
'So, in a way, **power is also money** and so, um… for me, it's clearly these **economic and employer circles** that make the rules in Switzerland' **(Male, POP activist).**	'If I had to put **a name**… uh… to an elite such as I'm talking about here, it's **Mr. Schwab** in Davos. But he's just one pawn among many' **(Male, SVP activist).**

In the above example, the left-wing interviewee constructed the notion of the elite through the interplay of power, money, and social networks, highlighting the dominance of economic interests and the interconnectedness of those who wield power over societal structures. In contrast, the right-wing interviewee identified the elite more concretely by naming 'Mr. Schwab in Davos' while also acknowledging his role as part of a larger group ('one pawn among many').

These distinct discursive choices serve different purposes. The left-wing interviewee portrayed the elite as abstract concepts and groups, attributing blame to a broader system rather than the actions of specific individuals. This aligns with the broader leftist critique of capitalism, which focuses on systemic causes of inequality. Politically, representing the elite as an immaterial force may shift the focus towards systemic change rather than individual accountability. In contrast, representing the elite as individuals fulfils different purposes. First, it allows interviewees to grasp and transform an abstract concept into a concrete entity, facilitating cognitive understanding (Moscovici, 1961). Second, politically, it attributes complex social dynamics to specific individuals' actions and decisions. This aligns with a radical right-wing discourse that blames specific actors, such as Muslims, migrants, or Mr. Schwab, for societal issues rather than systemic entities (Béland, 2019; Cervi, 2020; Rovamo et al., 2023).

Elite as a source of unfairness vs. fear

Both left- and right-wing interviewees portrayed the elite, whether financial or political, as responsible for societal injustices. The discussion about the elite evoked emotionally charged anecdotes, references, and terms in both groups. However, the grievances behind their construction of the elite differed.

Left	*Right*
'Let's just **say I was also fired quite violently for no reason** related to my work, but simply very poor management of the company. And then, yeah in fact it was just a sort of feeling that **as a worker we were taken for a disposable handkerchief' (Female, POP activist).**	'I saw this documentary in Australia. And then there's **this guy who comes in with a jet** and he explains that he **bought for $300,000,000 of land**, he **owns the water. He says that drought is good for business.**… We see that we find this also in Switzerland in some aspects.… But there, it's very clear there was a farmer… he couldn't pay, so he had to sell some machinery, and, in the end, he had to sell his farm! Because he's not able to pay for the water for his lands! And that, **I tell myself, we must avoid at all costs**. But I see that today with the challenges facing primarily the canton of Valais and the municipality I preside over: we must be attentive to future generations and **preserve** these assets in the interest of all' **(Male, SVP activist).**

Here, the left-wing interviewee described feeling like 'a disposable handkerchief' after being dismissed from a job. This metaphor conveyed the sense of unjust and impersonal treatment from the management, viewed as part of the elite, towards the worker, seen as representing the people. Moreover, the mention of being fired 'quite violently for no reason' underscores a sense of injustice and exploitation by the elite (Mangset et al., 2019). In contrast, the right-wing interviewee refers to a 'guy who comes in with a jet' representing the elite, who controls access to natural resources, depriving a farmer, symbolising the people, of water and threatening his livelihood. This narrative imbues fear and emphasises the perceived threat posed by the elite's influence on people's lives, as indicated by expressions like 'we must avoid at all costs' and 'preserve'.

These discursive choices reflect distinct ideological concerns. Depicting the elite as a source of resentment highlights their indifference to the hardships of the working class. Using personal anecdotes as a microcosm of broader labour issues evokes feelings of injustice. In contrast, portraying the elite as a threat to people's access to natural resources taps into fears of cultural and economic changes, triggering a sense of fear and the need for protection. These representations also reveal differing views on the role and responsibility of the elite in society.

Elite as reality vs. illusion

In the third contrasting representation, the distinction is drawn between portraying the elite as a significant, influential reality versus an illusory or overstated concept. The left-wing interviewees emphasised the concrete impact of elite-driven policies on people's everyday lives, presenting the elite as an undeniable force that actively shapes socioeconomic conditions. Conversely, right-wing interviewees often challenged the very existence of a distinct elite class in Switzerland, portraying the elite as either negligible or non-existent.

Left	*Right*
'I talk to PLR members, some of them are [laughs], one of them was a painter or I don't know, but there you are; **you realise that the PLR will never defend your interests?!** One thing that's pretty obvious is that my parents, or at least my dad, used to work, well he still works, he was a cook in a hospital in the lower Valais, and then they had to restructure and now he's had to change hospitals and he's in an inter-cantonal hospital. I told him, "**You know, you've been voting Liberal-Radical for 42 years now, and they've destroyed everything in the public service.** You should be happy, **it's exactly the will of that party to kill public service** and then make budget cuts' **(Male, POP activist).**	'So we could talk about people with big salaries, people who own land, and so on, but I think that **the term elite at the moment, yeah… I don't really see it**. Especially in Switzerland, because we're considered as citizens nowadays, and we can easily see federal councillors on the train and go and talk to them. For me, **there aren't really any elites in Switzerland**. We're all on an equal footing, we're all citizens, we're all responsible for what we do, we're all responsible for ourselves I'd say, for our own worth, for helping our fellow man and so on' **(Male, SVP activist).**

In the above example, the left-wing interviewee employed sarcasm to critique the impact of the Liberal-Radical Party on public services. He recounted a personal anecdote about his father's experience as a hospital cook to illustrate the absurdity of voting decisions that result in the destruction of public services and budget cuts. The use of humour added a tone of irony or sarcasm to the critique, highlighting the incongruity of the situation. Thus, the representation of the elite was depicted as a concrete and harmful reality, rather than as an abstract or theoretical notion.

In contrast, the right-wing interviewee expressed scepticism about the existence of a distinct elite class. He drew from the collective 'we' to argue for the egalitarian nature of Swiss society, where citizenship supersedes any notion of an elite. In so doing, he emphasised individual responsibility and mutual support within the community, rejecting the idea of social hierarchy based on wealth or status.

Making sense of elite talk on the left and right

Both left- and right-wing voters had differences in how they constructed the elite, but they also shared some similarities. Both ideologies portrayed the elite in relation to the people and focused on economic structures, with the left emphasising wealth inequality and the right addressing the financial elite. Given Switzerland's wealth and concentration of financial power, both sides used similar economic frames to depict the elites, highlighting a sense of inequality toward a system favouring the rich on the left, while targeting specific wealthy figures and individuals on the right.

Our analysis showed three contrasting representations of the elite among left- and right-wing populist interviewees. The elite was constructed as (1) an abstract system vs. individuals, (2) source of unfairness vs. fear, and (3) reality vs. illusion. In line with SRA (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Howarth, 2006), these representations are consequential, serving the interests of specific groups and maintaining power relations. On the left side, representing the elite as abstract systems placed the blame on structures and institutions in shaping social inequalities (Molinari, 2017), while from the right-wing perspective, portraying the elite as specific individuals attributed blame to bad individuals within the group. This emphasises individual responsibility, self-reliance, and meritocratic beliefs (Evans, 1997).

Meanwhile, portraying the elites either as a source of unfairness or as a threat addressed different grievances. This study suggests that on the left, viewing the elite as unjust spurred a desire for change, while on the right, depicting the elite as a threat appealed to fear and prompted a protective response. These representations reflect the rhetoric of both left-wing and right-wing populist parties and politicians. The left wing focuses often on injustice and unequal distribution of resources (Cohen, 2019), while the right wing emphasises fear of minorities (Tummala-Narra, 2020). Future research should further elaborate on the differences in the emotional landscape between the populist left and right.

Lastly, portraying the elite as either having a real impact or as illusory highlighted a significant difference between the two groups. This has different implications for social and political dimensions, influencing each side's stance on change. Portraying the elite as illusory can align with a conservative political agenda, often linked to radical-right orientation. Among our right-wing interviewees, Switzerland was portrayed as an egalitarian paradise inhabited by like-minded individuals. This portrayal does not advocate for change but rather promotes conservation, contrasting with the left's desire for progressivism (Proulx et al., 2022).

Moreover, while our right-wing interviewees often denied the existence of the elites, they described powerful elite-like figures and expressed frustration with their influence in discussions that were not explicitly framed around the elites. This selective acknowledgment suggests discomfort on the right when directly confronted with the topic. Staerklé and Green (2018) and Staerklé et al. (2023) demonstrated that a significant part of right-wing anti-elitism is linked to institutional distrust, but that the level of institutional distrust among right-wing populists is significantly lower in Switzerland than in other European countries studied, such as Greece, France, and the United Kingdom. This could be one possible explanation for why Swiss right-wing populism downplays the vertical people–elite antagonism based on economic inequality, aligning more with a neo-liberal economic agenda. The unique Swiss political context, with direct democracy and a consensus government, and the populist right in power as a longstanding governing party, might diminish the rhetorical power of the elite within Swiss right-wing populism. While the supply side of populism, comprising party and populist leaders, mobilises anti-elitist views (Brunner, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2006), the demand side, represented by right-wing voters and activists, views the elite differently. They often perceive the elite as non-existent or as distant entities outside the country. Further research could examine whether this denial of the elite by populist right-wing movements appears in other populist contexts.

In this chapter, we explored the ways in which political groups on the left and right articulate, share, and mobilise understandings of the elite within the Swiss context. Social representations are essential for understanding how individuals and groups make sense of their social and political world. However, they are not merely reflections of reality but actively participate in its creation, thereby influencing political and social behaviours.

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Chapter 9

Social representations of populism in lay discourse in Greece

Ioannis Ntotsikas and Xenia Chryssochoou

Populism as a consensually contested concept

Repeatedly cataloguing the various approaches to the concept, political science publications often acknowledge the contested nature of populism (e.g., Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Tsatsanis et al., 2018). In spite of this theoretical polyphony, Canovan (1981) argued that 'all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to "the people", and all are in one sense or another anti-elitist' (p. 294; see also Mudde, 2004). Analyses and theorisations on the Greek case feature predominantly among populist literature, since both the country's contemporary history of conflict and recent socioeconomic crisis offer an exemplary frame of reference for studying populism (Chryssogelos, 2017; Pappas, 2014). At the same time, we have detected a lack of studies on lay representations of the concept.

In this chapter, we shift our focus to the subjective category that populism articulates on behalf of, namely, the people. Specifically, our goal is to provide a primary mapping of the lay representational field of populism in Greece through the use of the social representations theory (SRT; Moscovici, 2008). Since its inception, SRT research has focused on examining the appropriations scientific discourses undergo when integrated into the world of common sense. Here, we utilise qualitative material collected through interviews among lay voters to examine how the concept of political science has been transferred to and (re)negotiated by the general public. In the next section, we offer a brief account of three extensively utilised theoretical approaches to populism.

Populism as an ideology, strategy, and culture

According to Kaltwasser et al. (2017), there are currently three significant theoretical approaches to populism: the political-strategic, socio-cultural, and ideational. In the first perspective, populism refers to a political strategy employed by a personalistic leader who pursues or holds government power directly without intermediaries and is championed by a vast amount of non-institutionalised followers (Weyland, 2001, p. 14).

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Meanwhile, the socio-cultural approach defines populism as a particular type of political connection between political leadership and relevant social groups (Ostiguy, 2017). This connection is built and expressed through appeals that resonate with and are well-received by certain segments of society due to historical and socio-cultural factors (Ostiguy, 2017).

Lastly, the ideational approach, most notably introduced by Mudde (2004), describes populism as 'a thin-centered ideology' (p. 543) that posits society as fundamentally divided into two cohesive and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'. It further asserts that politics should reflect the *volonté générale*, that is, the general will of the people. However, despite its excessive prominence, Kefford et al. (2022) argued that the ideational approach fails to consider the significant impact of populism's communicative, performative, and discursive appeal. They also highlighted the importance of understanding populism as a relationship involving political representation between citizens and politicians. Several theoretical contributions have attempted to fill this gap.

For instance, both Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) political communication style and Moffitt's (2016) performative approach acknowledge the importance of communication in defining populism. Specifically, the former defines populism as a 'communication frame' that seeks to appeal to and align with the people, while claiming to speak on their behalf (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, pp. 322–323), whereas the latter views the term as a 'symbolically mediated performance' utilised in structuring and navigating both institutional and everyday political power dynamics (Moffitt, 2016, p. 28). Furthermore, proponents of the discursive approach understand populism as a *form of discourse* and a 'distinctive way of doing politics', focusing primarily on the way populist movements assort, articulate, and express distinct and potentially diverging public demands as equivalent to each other (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2018, p. 203). Finally, according to Roberts (2019), the issues presented by populism essentially originate from representational crises, specifically due to the decreasing ability of party systems to incorporate 'broad popular constituencies' (p. 188) – and their demands – in the democratic sphere.

The vast majority of these approaches provide their own sets of criteria for detecting populist political parties, movements, and leaders while following a normative framework that understands populism predominantly as a threat to political pluralism and representative democracy (Seferiades, 2020). Simultaneously, it has been frequently argued that any effort to identify the universal aspects of populism will inevitably be overshadowed by a multitude of exceptions, with the phenomenon resembling a 'set of distinct claims' rather than a 'codified doctrine' (Müller, 2016, p. 10; see also Laclau, 2005). This study aims to provide insights into lay constructions of this ambiguous and heavily charged political term in Greece, where the term has been consistently utilised and debated for almost half a century.

Social representations: Studying politics between science and common sense

Initially proposed in Moscovici's (2008) seminal work on public perceptions of psychoanalysis, SRT aims to provide a 'vision of social relations and human behavior' by delving into the construction of social knowledge in *thinking societies* (Chryssochoou, 2022, p. 3). Far beyond a mere stacking of ideas or images, social representations refer to 'ways of world making' (Moscovici, 1988, p. 231), focusing largely on symbolic networks of meaning constructed through social interactions that continuously evolve through communication.

Social representations function in a threefold way. First, they provide a conventional social order by placing objects and experiences in certain collective contexts. Second, they facilitate communication, both between individuals and groups, serving as codes for mutual understanding. Third, they enable social change by providing a common discursive ground for debate – and conflict – to occur (Howarth, 2006; Moscovici, 2000). The process of representational transformation, or re-presentation, takes place inside the context of social and public dialogue, both between individuals and at the intersection of individuals and society (Marková, 2003).

Historically, SRT is concerned with how various scientific discourses are being incorporated into the common sense of different social milieus (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Jovchelovitch, 1996). Moscovici (2000) proposed a categorical differentiation between a reified and a consensual universe of knowledge, with the former being controlled by the language and rules of science and the latter constituting our shared constructions of the real. These constructions always entail a political implication, both in their creation and circulation, since social psychological understandings are inherently embedded in the wider frame of social relations, institutional regulations, and power asymmetries (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Phoenix et al., 2017). SRT, being inscribed to the consensual universe, enables a social-psychological exploration of everyday knowledge in a *democratic* way, attending to a need for a non-normative exploration of common sense(s) in a highly fragmented social and political world (Chryssochoou, 2022). At the same time, according to Howarth et al. (2014, p. 22) SRT has been inherently about 'the politics of knowledge' as social representations 'enable dialogue and argumentation', 'support community identities and fuel intergroup conflicts', and 'inform the politics of the every day and the normative politics of legal, institutional and policy debates'.

Returning to populism, despite the concept's ongoing significance in the public debate, empirical studies on the ways people understand the term in everyday communication are limited (Rovamo & Sakki, 2023). Considering both the theoretical saturation and the prevailing negative connotations often associated with populism within academic and political circles (Stavrakakis, 2017), it is of increasing importance to research lay representations of populism to understand how this concept is constructed in common sense. Here,

in line with SRT's original research inquiry (Moscovici, 2008), we utilise material collected from qualitative interviews, looking at how a concept of political science has been transferred to and (re)negotiated by the general public. In order to contextualise our research, in the following section we provide a brief account of the historical events associated with the emergence and growth of populism in Greece, alongside the intellectual developments that the term has undergone.

Intellectual-historical renderings in the Greek context

Addressing modes of political incorporation, Mouzelis (1985) initially categorised Greece as part of the semi-periphery countries. Here, the integration of lower classes into the polity depends primarily on clientelism (i.e., a quid-pro-quo political relation of patronage) rather than populism (contrary to, e.g., Argentina). Typically, scholars trace populism's prevailing influence in Greek politics to the period after the end of the military dictatorship in 1974 (Pappas & Aslanidis, 2015). The emergence of the 'archetypically populist' (Pappas, 2019, p. 164) Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and its charismatic leader, Andreas Papandreou, dominated the country's political scene for two consecutive terms (1981–1989) in a period that has been described as the populist decade (Clogg, 1993). However, PASOK and Papandreou built their dominance on an already deep-cutting, decades-old political and social cleavage: the Greek Civil War (1946–1949). After the Civil War, a large portion of mostly lower social classes had been, in many cases, deprived of their civil, political, and economic rights (Nikolakopoulos, 2001). During that time, Greek society was roughly divided between the supporters of the winners' right-wing authoritarian state and the defeated left-wing camp. Along these lines, the winners' side forced an exclusionary, state ideology following a 'paradoxical juxtaposition' between the nation and the people (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2017, pp. 12–13).[1]

In the 1980s, Papandreou reintroduced this division by reclaiming both notions, this time between the post-civil war monopolistic 'establishment' and the disenfranchised 'non-privileged' groups. Staying in power for 8 years, PASOK effectively carried out an unprecedented incorporation of these disenfranchised social groups into the Greek state's institutions, economy, and civil society (Lyrintzis & Spourdalakis, 1993, p. 30, as cited in Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019). By the end of the decade, populism had officially crossed over from theoretical discourses to lay political debates (Liakos, 1989), evolving into a political insult and an accusation of appropriating people's genuine spirit (Lyrintzis & Spourdalakis, 1993). In 1994, Diamandouros contextualised Greek populism inside a long-standing *cultural dualism*. Accordingly, Greek politics and culture ought to be examined as a struggle between two competing cultural *camps*: a 'reformist' one, encompassing ideas of European

integration, modernisation, and meritocracy, and an 'underdog' one, revolving around banal attitudes of isolation, traditionalism, and state paternalism.

PASOK and New Democracy (ND) represented the two poles of a typical two-party political system that dominated Greek politics starting in the 1980s all the way to the double electoral earthquake of 2012[2] that followed the outburst of the Greek economic crisis in 2010 (Teperoglou et al., 2015). The crisis established a new cleavage in the Greek political system. On one side was the There Is No Alternative (TINA) 'anti-populist' camp, mainly represented by PASOK and ND, and on the other was the anti-austerity 'populist' one, mainly represented by the Coalition of the Radical Left, Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras (SYRIZA),[3] until their accession to the TINA camp in 2015 (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019). This camp not only put forward a technocratic discourse of rational and modernised governance, promoting new austerity measures as the only viable solution to the crisis, but also shifted blame to previous abuse of bank loans and false prosperity by collectively indulging populist demands (Sevastakis & Stavrakakis, 2012).

Our aim here is to address the ways in which lay Greeks understand populism today, after having been through a deep economic crisis and while still recovering from a turbulent recent historical past. In the next empirical section, we provide a primary account of the social representations of populism in Greece.

Researching lay representations of populism in Greece

Between the 2019 and 2023 national elections, we conducted 54 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the Greek public. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, interviews were carried out both live and online. To avoid assumptions that certain parties and/or voting behaviours are *a priori* populist (Flick et al., 2015), we purposively avoided recruiting participants based on their voting behaviour. The interview guided incorporated questions related to issues of national identity, political behaviour and culture, power, and populism. To recruit participants, we adopted a convenience sampling strategy (Flick, 2009) followed by snowballing (Noy, 2008). Attention was paid to recruiting participants from all age groups, with participants' ages ranging from 20 to 75 years old. Additionally, there was variation in the participants' socioeconomic status.

The interview material was transcribed verbatim. The material was coded and analysed in its original language before being translated into English as excerpts in this chapter. We employed the tool of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) due to its flexibility in identifying patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and epistemological relevance with representations in considering themes and thematic relationships in a given dataset (Flick & Foster, 2008). Additionally, this tool has been used recently by others in Greece to analyse lay representations of other phenomena such as protests (Vlazakis et al., 2022) and diversity (Diamanti et al., 2023).

After familiarising ourselves with the data, the first author started coding in an inductive, bottom-up way, while looking for conceptualisations of populism in the participants' talk. The initial codes were then reviewed and refined by the second author. Eventually, two main themes were developed from these codes: *populism as a deceitful tactic of politicians* and *populism as a project of TINA*. Each theme contains its own subtheme, highlighting 'a dimension of the central concept of the theme' (Braun & Clarke, 2024, p. 10): *the 'low' audience of populism deceit* and *anti-populism as technocratic discourse*. In the following section, alongside presenting the findings of our analysis, we discuss how the identified themes are interrelated with each other in the broader context of contemporary Greek politics.

Populism as a deceitful tactic of politicians

The first theme emphasises populism as a deceitful tactic of politicians, which considers populism as a technique employed by political parties and politicians to increase their appeal and sustain their power. In the following extract, a 31 years old who abstained from the 2019 elections made use of populism as a derogatory term, considering it to be both a synonym for 'propaganda' and an 'insult':

> [It means] propaganda. When someone tries to entice the people with things that may be appealing to them, while in reality, they are not.… Populism is considered an insult when we say that someone is a populist, we mean they're trying to mislead, to mock someone.… All [Greek] parties are populist, let's not kid ourselves, meaning they all promise things to please the people, the voters, promises which obviously they are not going to keep… because no party has pure intentions, there is both the aspect of power and the economic aspect in all of them, and the desire to stay in the positions they have, and everything else. So, I believe populism goes hand in hand with politics; it is intertwined with politics. And not just now, always.
>
> (Female, 31, preschool teacher)

In this account, politicians are believed to make use of populist tactics as techniques of political deception, serving to persuade the people and gain their support through ostensibly popular political promises. Moving forward, the participant asserted that due to their shared adoption of certain sought-after proposals and the absence of intention to keep them, all Greek parties can be considered to be populist. In that sense, this account appears to construct a binary between political parties and the people, forming a certain out-group around the politicians (e.g., 'someone tries to entice the people'). The participant then proceeded to maintain that populism and politics are inherently 'intertwined' – at least in the Greek context. Specifically, the party attachment to economic

power and Greek politicians' personal 'desire' to retain their status are described both as characteristics of populism and as realities that cut across Greek politics. This account conveys an overall dismissal of the Greek political system in ethical and moral terms, understanding false political promises, utilitarian relationships between economic and political power, and self-interested politicians as the status quo. At the same time, propaganda here seems to serve as a synonym for political deception rather than a certain mode of political communication or framing.

Meanwhile, in the second extract, populism was discussed in relation to deceitful tactics of persuasion and the politician's particular aims:

> It means trying to serve your own purposes, to touch the emotions, to move the listener, the viewer, in order to bring them where you want and ultimately manipulate them. As a politician, I mean you do this, or to mislead them.… Well, I think they've somewhat sensed that populism is becoming noticeable, but everyone engages in a bit of populism. When they converse among themselves in the Parliament, you hear various things. Various fake fights to steer public opinion. And yes, there is populism, but I think because this word has been worn out, and most people have grasped it, it's not as prominent as it was in the '90s, you know, not so much or at least not as overt. Okay, the educational level also plays a role now.
>
> (Female, 43, high school teacher)

In this interview, populism was equated with *emotional manipulation*, alongside being discussed as a method for politicians to 'mislead' the voters and serve their own objectives. For the participant, populism is being directed towards a 'listener' or a 'viewer', predominantly referring to populism as a method of political messaging in the broader context of political communication. Despite 'becoming noticeable', the participant here claimed that populism is still pervasive in the way politicians engage with the people in the public arena. Specifically, talking about the parliamentary processes, the participant promoted the idea that political disputes are essentially a matter of theatrics staged by the political system in an attempt to artfully manage the public and control popular sentiment. Portraying Greek politicians 'fake fighting' with each other, the account advanced a certain *they are all the same* representation of contemporary politics, where political difference is perceived either as a stunt or fails to exist in the first place. In the end, the participant asserted that the term populism itself is somewhat 'worn out', while the actual methods it entails are becoming more evident in the eyes of the public. This comes as an effect of an 'overuse' of populism in the 90s, eventually associating a current higher public 'educational level' with populism being 'less overt'.

Once more, the idea of using populism promotes a representation of the latter in tactical terms. Populism seems to be understood as a way of doing politics (Hellström, 2013; Webber, 2023), specifically one that uses simple

and direct language to propose accordingly simple and direct political programs and policies (Canovan, 1999). The outlined constructions of populism in both tactical and stylistic terms, namely around ideas of deceitful methods and misleading communication, appear to be in dialogue with two theoretical approaches to populism in the field of political science: the political-strategic one (Weyland, 2001) and populism as a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Weyland's (2017) strategic approach suggests an extensive view of populism as a certain political relation of representation, and therefore a strategy, albeit one of deceit. In this vein, the political-strategic approach promotes an idea of populists as ideologically flexible opportunists, who utilise policies for self-serving purposes (Weyland, 2021). Correspondingly, Seferiades (2020) stated that populism represents a certain kind of discourse that is only allegedly popular, while in reality is 'forged, inauthentic and deceptive' (p. 246). Meanwhile, according to the communication style approach, populism is merely a mobilisation strategy, namely a typical communication procedure to connect with voters (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). de Vreese et al. (2018, p. 425) also saw populism as a communication phenomenon that acknowledges that populist politics ought to be communicated inside the context of public discourse in order to effectively reach the intended audience.

Emotional manipulation has been another classic fixture in the studies of populist communication (Wirz, 2018). These approaches are echoed by our participants with two points of theoretical divergence. On the one hand, the strategic approach emphasises deceit around participation, specifically in terms of unmediated representation. On the other hand, the communication approach emphasises mobilisation and discursive manipulation. Participants of our study saw populism mostly as a means of persuasion to serve unethical practices and/or corruption. Moreover, theoretical approaches seem to understand populism in the margins of mainstream politics, referring to specific political actors. In contrast, populism in lay discourse seems to be an establishment or a systemic feature of Greek politics rather than a phenomenon created by a lack of representation or a crisis (see Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). The receivers of the deceitful populist message, relating populism to a certain audience in terms of cultural background and personal cultivation, are explored on a deeper level in the following sub-theme.

The 'low' audience of the populist deceit

Under this sub-theme, we intend to point out the participants' representation of potential populist supporters, as it was discussed by several participants in their overall tactical conception of populism:

> Populism is to trivialise ideas and to simplify your language in order to develop an argument that sounds easy and accessible to the ears of the

> recipient. It is a message with very low-level content of meaning, substance, and use of language, emitted by a sender to be received by a recipient, exploiting what I mentioned earlier, any form of illiteracy, whether it has to do with language skills or financial knowledge, or… anything that's not easy for someone to understand.
>
> (Male, 54, finance worker)

In the excerpt above, a finance worker associated populism with a superficial yet palpable discourse. By downplaying potentially complicated concepts and utilising 'simple language', populist discourse is characterised as casting an easy to grasp 'message'. This transmission is embedded with 'low-level content' lacking 'substance' aimed at constructing a relationship of 'exploitation' between a populist actor and an 'illiterate' potential supporter. Matthes and Schmuck (2017) found that populist communication is most persuasive for voters with lower levels of education – a finding echoed by Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2018) and Hameleers et al. (2019).

An ambiguity worth exploring is manifested here when populism remains at the conceptual terrain of deceit: a populist 'sender' wishes to 'exploit' their 'recipients', this time taking advantage of 'any form of illiteracy' those recipients may possess. Whether this emanates as a deficiency in language comprehension or in familiarity with concepts in economics, populism in this case appears as an inferior/crude type of political messaging. It seems to be described as capable of performing a double function, that is, to simultaneously transmit 'low' substance and crude and inferior 'meaning' (see Ostiguy, 2017) while bearing the potential to utilise certain expert knowledge if relevant (e.g., economics). The participant here seemed to attribute another potentiality to the populist discourse, not just relating to its "low" audience but also potentially *taking advantage of it*, when needed, by confusing it.

Populism as a project of TINA

While the previous theme was comprised of accounts linking populism to deceitful tactics used by politicians to increase their appeal and maintain power, the second theme illustrates how participants conceptualised populism within the context of TINA (see Roberts, 2019). Specifically, as detected in our data, this theme addresses a thematic relationship between populism and neoliberal management of politics, namely cynical measures of economic austerity. The following excerpt illustrates this relationship:

> Generally, anything that disturbs or anything that is outside the *comme il faut*, the proper way of communication, whether it's the commonly accepted way of communication in the public agenda, can be considered populism. But it's a conversation where, when you hear it, you know that behind it there is the notion of cynicism. Anyone criticising populism is the

> one who wants to exercise cynical and inhumane politics, so the concept of populism doesn't actually exist for me… but obviously, how everyone perceives populism also has to do with their own politics and their own priorities.
>
> (Male, 36, pharmacist)

As observed in other extracts, this participant discussed populism within the context of public communication. Emphasising the 'ways of communication', populism is distinguished from the 'proper' or '*comme il faut*' way, describing 'anything' that appears threatening (i.e., 'disturbs') to this as populist. Moreover, this perspective appears to take advantage of the negative connotation surrounding populism as the term is defined as a means for those in power to both deflect from and legitimise their policies while dismissing any other proposal as populist. Consequently, the participant claimed to reject the term, suggesting that 'it doesn't actually exist' for them. Along this line, the participant gave the impression of understanding populism in relation to those who allegedly stand against it. By referring to 'the notion of cynicism', the participant constructed populism in relation to its adversaries, specifically those who possibly hide 'behind' it. This claim reflects a well-known tension between populism and anti-populism within the Greek context, where occasionally both political projects seem to struggle for hegemony, with crisis periods potentially intensifying the rivalry (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019). In this vein, the participant here also discussed populism mainly by referring to the rhetoric that stands against it. This point was elaborated by Stavrakakis (2014), who pointed out the ways in which anti-populist discourse often trivialises popular demands while reducing politics to technocratic administration. Similarly, Mudde (2004) underlined how populism itself can be seen as an illiberal though democratic reaction to technocratic governance, while Roberts (2019) insisted that the TINA international consensus remains responsible for the populist backlash.

The next sub-theme explores this tension deeper by focusing on the discourse of anti-populism by proponents of technocratic politics.

Anti-populism as technocratic discourse

In this sub-theme, the supporters of technocratic arguments and neoliberal economic and social policies converge to an anti-populist political stance, aiming to delegitimise any policy alternatives to their political platforms by dismissing it as populist:

> So, it's not just at an individual level; everyone occasionally engages in populism. All political factions, all parties, have people who will say very populist things, just to gain the favour of the public. It's not… how should I put it, it's a phenomenon that transcends party lines. However, when accusations

> of populism are thrown from one faction to another or in public discourse, many times, it's like saying, no one can actually deal with [what] the people [need], that's what they often mean when they say, 'You're being a populist'. It's not about what the people want, but 'We know, we have the solution, we are the technocrats, we will implement what needs to be implemented'.
>
> (Male, 43, private sector employee)

In this excerpt, the participant set off from the idea of populism as a method to win over the people by adopting generally favoured political stances. Here, populism is essentially *saying populist things*. In line with the previous accounts presented, the participant also sustained that populism 'transcends' political platforms and parties. The participant depicted populism as an 'accusation' that competing political 'factions' use to blame each other with regards to adopting popular, yet allegedly 'impossible' to implement, policies and political proposals. In this view, populism serves to dismiss any political initiative that attempts to 'actually deal with the people', particularly to build substantial relations of political representation based on public or popular demands, as populist (see Laclau, 2005).

Contrary to that, 'technocratic' or knowledge-based expert-driven policies were deemed to be the only attainable and within reach 'implementations'. In the excerpt, the participant seemed to construct populism as a notion employed by proponents of technocratic governance, where policymaking relies on specific, 'rationalised' technical expertise as opposed to incorporating public demands (Kurki, 2011). As Caramani (2017) outlined, both directives appear as 'essentially anti-political visions of collective decision-making, postulating a unitary, general, common interest of a given society' (p. 60). In the end, arguments for technocratic politics and against populism seem to construct an 'anti-populist' discourse as the only well-informed, viable, and implementable way of political conduct.

Discussion

This chapter aimed at sketching out a primary mapping of the lay representations of populism in Greece. In the first theme, populism was described as a *deceitful political tactic* employed by politicians to boost their appeal and serve self-interested purposes. By adopting widely accessible language and proposing popular political measures, populist actors manage to succeed in manipulating citizens to trust them with their vote, even when they lack the intention implement those. to do so. Within this theme, the subtheme of the *'low' audience of populism* was discussed as well, wherein participants perceived receivers of the populist message as undereducated and poorly informed citizens. Meanwhile, our second theme captured the participants' conceptualisation of *populism as a project of TINA*. Here, the notion of populism, alongside anti-populism, was merely seen as a *language game* of the ruling political establishment. The

latter, dismissing any reaction or alternative political program to the dominant neoliberal paradigm as populism, attempts to either justify – or distract from – perceived unjust policies and political measures taken against the lower social strata. Accordingly, the sub-theme that emerged here introduced *anti-populists as advocates of technocratic management of politics*, the latter being the only appropriate political solution to any issue.

Eventually, to construct an organising theme from our data analysis, social representations of populism in Greece appears to revolve around the idea of populism as *a method of political communication*. Cutting across our data, populism in the country seems to be predominantly constructed by means of the way the Greek political system uses populist (e.g., deceitful) tactics or anti-populist discourse to communicate their political goals and persuade voters. Additionally, deceitful tactics seem to serve individualistic aims, while anti-populist and technocratic claims appear to assist in adopting a neoliberal political paradigm.

Returning to SRT, and especially to the distinction between the reified and consensual knowledge universes (Moscovici, 2000), our analysis reported correspondences with pre-existing Greek literature of populism and discrepancies with the relevant mainstream theories.

As mentioned, several theoretical conceptualisations of the phenomenon seem preoccupied with populism as a reactionary response to certain political establishments or modes of political representation. In contrast, our participants seemed to describe the establishment *itself* as populist (Seferiades, 2020). This feature appears as a distinctive characteristic of a Greek lay representation of populism, in opposition to most mainstream political science theories (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004; Ostiguy, 2017) and recent empirical studies elsewhere (e.g., Rovamo & Sakki, 2023). This distinctively Greek characteristic is further reflected by the elaborated manner in which our respondents discussed populism in the first place. To put it in SRT terms, the reified universe of academic discourse on populism in Greece has fairly imbued the consensual one, making populism a rather familiar concept for Greek audiences. At the same time, bearing in mind the continuing impact of the economic crisis and the populism/anti-populism political cleavage that it brought about, our data showed a perceived relation between populism and the TINA dogma. Several of our participants appeared to understand anti-populism as a means to delegitimise any divergence from technocratic, neoliberal politics by dismissing it as populist.

The discrepancies between the literature on populism and the way Greek lay people conceptualise it highlight the importance of looking at common sense constructions of populism, especially in crisis-ridden societies at the fringe of Europe with a distinct political history, like Greece. As our data made evident, Greek citizens understand populism to be embedded in their political system, representing the mainstream method of political communication. Future research elaborating on this approach may provide political psychology with further insights into the observed ongoing distrust in politics and democratic institutions.

Notes

1 The concept of Ethnikofrosyni (national mindedness) was invented as the opposing idea to the concept – and political programme – of Laokratia (peoples' rule) as it was put forward by the National Liberation Front, a precursor to the civil war's defeated Democratic Army of Greece. Both the National Liberation Front and Democratic Army of Greece were closely associated with the Communist Party of Greece.
2 The 2012 double national elections, held during the peak of the Grexit–Eurozone crisis, marked the overturn of the 30-year-old, two-party system of PASOK and ND, while SYRIZA became the leading opposition force for the first time.
3 Until then, SYRIZA was a minor party of the left associated with progressive, democratic-socialist politics, originating from an older, Euro-communist split of the Communist Party of Greece.

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Chapter 10

Navigating moral emotions in the lay discourse of the Finns Party

Inari Sakki and Mia Silfver

Introduction

'We have come together like a flock of penguins in a storm'. This is a quote from Riikka Purra, the leader of the populist right-wing Finns Party (FP), in her thank you speech to her supporters after winning the parliamentary elections in April 2023. The metaphor of penguins implies an 'us' who is united against an unspecified 'them', an external force portrayed as a storm. The quote suggests that despite being victims of others, the in-group is united and survives through solidarity and collective action.

In many countries, radical right-wing parties have rapidly increased in popularity. From a social psychological perspective, this posits an interesting question: what kind of social psychological processes are involved in gaining political popularity as a new party? In this chapter, we approach the success of the FP from the perspective of moral emotions.

The FP, founded in 1995 as a successor to the Finnish Rural Party, initially represented the working class under Timo Soini's leadership (1997–2017). However, under subsequent leaders Jussi Halla-aho (2017–2019) and Riikka Purra (since 2019), the party has gradually shifted right in its rhetoric and policies (Saresma et al., 2021). Today, its core agenda centres around nationalism; conservative values; and opposition to the EU, immigration, feminism, and multiculturalism (Norocel et al., 2020; Saresma, 2018). In the 2023 parliamentary elections, the FP gained 20.1% of the vote and won 39 seats in the 200-seat parliament, coming in just two seats behind the winning National Coalition Party.

In this chapter, we seek to explore the role of moral emotions in lay voters' constructions of the FP. We aim to analyse how moral emotions are deployed in the discourse of both opponents and supporters of the FP. By doing so, we endeavour to contribute to the current understanding of populist right-wing support, where social psychological processes related to moral condemnation, victimisation, and humiliation may underpin defensive reactions, as referred to by Riikka Purra in her winning speech to her supporters.

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Haidt's model of moral emotions

As politics is largely about competing values that are endorsed by different groups of people (Graham et al., 2009), moral emotions are considered to play an important role in political psychology. While studies often focus on specific emotions, our aim was to examine the social dynamics of several moral emotions. To do this, we draw on the conceptual model of moral emotions by Haidt (2003).

According to Haidt (2003), moral emotions consist of four different emotional families. First, he defined moral anger, disgust, and contempt as belonging to the *other-condemning* family of moral emotions. Having their origins in human evolution, these emotions base morality on trust and reciprocity, highlighting the importance of knowing who trustworthy interaction partners are. As individuals are unable to have personal experiences with everyone, it is necessary to rely on information obtained from others (moral reputation). In other words, expressions of moral anger, disgust, or contempt serve as warning signals of undesirable interaction partners (Haidt, 2003). Of these emotions, anger is described as a response to unjustified insults, which can be triggered either towards oneself or on behalf of others, while disgust has its origins in bodily reactions towards biologically hazardous things, such as rotten food. In contrast, contempt is a 'cooler' emotion than anger or disgust. Haidt (2003, p. 858) described the motivational aspects of this particular emotion in the following way: 'Contempt paints its victims as buffoons worthy of mockery or as nonpersons worthy of complete disregard. It therefore weakens other moral emotions, such as compassion'. Other noteworthy differences between these three emotions were uncovered by Hutcherson and Gross (2011) in a series of experiments. Specifically, the authors concluded that anger is likely to be evoked by appraisals of self-relevance, while disgust seems to be related most strongly to appraisals that a person is morally untrustworthy and contempt to the judgment that someone is incompetent or unintelligent.

Second, the opposite of other-condemning emotions are *other praising* emotions (gratitude, elevation), which express moral admiration towards others. Elevation and gratitude directly motivate prosocial behaviour. Both gratitude and elevation make a person feel warmth and affection towards the individual who elicited the emotion. However, unlike gratitude, elevation seems to create a more generalised desire to become a better person oneself and to follow the example of the moral exemplar.

The third most frequently studied moral emotion family is the *other suffering* family, which includes two major constructs: distress at another's distress and sympathy/compassion (Haidt, 2003). The former refers to the tendency for individuals to become distressed when they see or hear other individuals emit signs of distress. It can also lead to avoiding suffering in others. Sympathy/compassion, in contrast, is elicited by the perception of suffering or sorrow in another person. It makes people want to help, comfort, or otherwise alleviate the suffering of the other and is thus strongly linked to pro-social behaviour.

Fourth and finally, *self-conscious* emotions (guilt, shame, embarrassment) have also been seen as crucial in terms of moral behaviour and social interaction. In particular, several researchers have emphasised the multidimensional nature of shame, recognising both its internal and external aspects. While externally condemning and disapproving of others is considered to be an important part of shame, many researchers actually perceive global, negative self-evaluations as the most relevant features of shame (e.g., Gausel & Leach, 2011). Recently, it has been emphasised that although others' disapproval and self-criticism can be interconnected and feed into each other, it is theoretically relevant to separate them as behavioural motivations depending on which of these aspects are dominant in a specific situation (Gausel & Leach, 2011; Silfver-Kuhalampi et al., 2015). Gausel and Leach (2011) presented a theoretical model in which observed other-condemnation led to feeling rejected, whereas appraisal of global self-defect led to a feeling of inferiority. Of these feelings, feeling rejected was seen to have the strongest relation to self-defensive behaviours, such as hiding, avoiding, or externalising. Allpress et al. (2014) also made a similar distinction between moral shame and image shame, the latter of which is likely to elicit defensive reactions. Moral shame arises when a person feels they have failed to uphold their internal moral standards, focusing on guilt over one's own ethical failures. Image shame, on the other hand, is concerned with maintaining social appearance and reputation, stemming from fear of negative evaluation by others.

Populist moral emotions

Morality plays a crucial role in populism (Mudde, 2004). Populists construct a narrative that pits 'the pure people' against 'the immoral, corrupt elite', resulting in political conflicts that are moralised by denouncing adversaries as evil and enemies of the people (Mudde, 2004). Populists tend to make their claims seem moral and symbolic rather than empirical, thereby making them difficult to disprove. This populist moral logic gives rise to a Manichean outlook, where opposing opinions are considered illegitimate, and compromise is rejected.

Several scholars have emphasised the importance of morality and emotions in political mobilisation processes (e.g., Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Wodak, 2015). According to Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory on populism, the process of political mobilisation commences with unmet demands and grievances, evoking a diverse array of moral emotions among the electorate. For instance, based on in-depth interviews among the supporters of the right-wing populist FP, Rovamo and Sakki (2024) empirically showed how populist threat narratives, specifically relating to collective victimhood, were used to legitimise political support for the party.

On the theoretical side, Salmela and von Scheve (2017) suggested that the popularity of radical right-wing parties is based on two types of psychological mechanisms. The first mechanism of *ressentiment* refers to a process in which negative emotions, such as fear and insecurity, transform through repressed

shame into anger, resentment, and hatred towards perceived 'enemies' of the self, such as refugees, immigrants, the long-term unemployed, political and cultural elites, and the 'mainstream' media. The second mechanism is characterised by emotional distancing from social identities that inflict shame and other negative emotions (e.g., threatened occupational status) and emphasising stable identities that provide meaning and self-esteem (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, and traditional gender roles).

Salmela and Capelos (2021) further theorised that *ressentiment* functions as the emotional mechanism transforming grievances from politics – social deprivation, injustice, humiliation, and lack of political efficacy – into anti-social emotional expressions of morally righteous indignation, destructive anger, hatred, and rage. While the authors acknowledged that emotional defences associated with *ressentiment* frequently operate at the level of individual psychology, they also circulate at the societal level. Specifically, Kazlauskaitė and Salmela (2022) highlighted the role of political leaders and entrepreneurs in creating affective rhetoric that circulates in public discourse and contributes to the process of *ressentiment*. The authors examined media coverage of the Polish Law and Justice party, demonstrating how it leveraged historically embedded narratives of pride and shame. They showed how individual economic shame was suppressed and instrumentalised by shifting focus to collective cultural shame, transforming it into collective anger toward various outgroups on one hand, and collective pride in traditional Polish identity and culture on the other (Kazlauskaitė & Salmela, 2022).

Furthermore, other-condemning emotions have been studied in the context of political debate. Pantti (2016) studied online discussions, Tweets, and comments on news articles concerning refugees and racist anti-immigrant demonstrations. Pantti suggested that expressions of disgust were not only used to communicate moral judgment but also to draw boundaries between 'us' and 'others'. This is because disgust dehumanises its targets and, therefore, blocks compassion and increases polarisation in public discussion. Haidt (2012) also emphasised the role of other-condemning emotions in harmful affective polarisation between political groups: if opposing groups of people are seen as purely evil, perspective-taking, compassion, and respectful communication becomes impossible.

In this chapter, we aim to analyse the manifestation of moral emotions within the discourse of both supporters and opponents of the FP. By focusing on lay moral discourse, our empirical approach transcends the elite-centred argumentation typical of right-wing populist parties, offering valuable insights into how moral emotions act as catalysts for escalating political and affective polarisation among lay people. Methodologically, we endeavour to integrate critical discursive psychology (CDP) analysis with the literature on moral emotions (e.g., Haidt, 2003) and populist emotions (e.g., Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). These approaches traditionally draw from disparate epistemological and ontological orientations, but we argue that this combination enables us to provide a fine-grained analysis of the complex ways moral constructions are

navigated and negotiated in lay discourse. By doing this, we seek to contribute to the scarce empirical research on moral emotions in populist lay discourse.

Approach

Our material is comprised of 55 interviews conducted with Finnish political party voters, 25 of which voted for the populist radical right FP and 30 for various other Finnish political parties. Participants were informed that the study revolved around current political topics in Finnish society, with a particular focus on their personal thoughts and experiences. The interview encompassed 14 questions pertaining to Finnish identity, definitions and concepts of populism, and the overall political climate in Finland (see Chapter 2). We focused specifically on sections in which participants deployed moral emotions in reference to the FP. For clarity, we refer to the FP voters as 'supporters' and the other party voters as 'opponents'. It should be noted that not all talk about the FP delivered by 'opponents' was completely negative. For instance, some pointed out that 'there are also good people' or that the former party leader Halla-aho is 'an intelligent man'. Nonetheless, we decided to focus our analysis on critical and opposing comments as they were relevant for understanding how moral emotions arise and may contribute to the FP's popularity.

All interviews were meticulously transcribed in their entirety, amounting to over 1500 pages. In the analysis, we applied Sakki and Pettersson's (2016) pragmatic three-step model for conducting CDP analysis (see Chapter 3 of this volume). This model focuses on the analysis of content (what is discussed), form (how it is discussed), and function (the social and political consequences of the discourse). In the first phase of content, we began by reading the entire interview material and identifying discussions related to the FP. We identified various themes associated with the FP, such as the role of the media, populist appeal, governmental versus oppositional status, and the downgrading of the FP. In the second phase of form, we examined how morality was constructed and utilised in these accounts identified in the first phase. We focused on rhetorical strategies (e.g., categorisations, concessions) to investigate how specific portrayals of the FP were accounted and negotiated in relation to constructions of morality. In the third phase of function, we analysed these moral constructions of the FP in the context of existing literature on moral emotions (e.g., Haidt, 2003) and populist emotions (e.g., Salmela & Capelos, 2021; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Reflecting on our findings in relation to this literature enabled us to understand the functions of these moral constructions.

Navigating moral emotions in lay discourse

Our analysis revealed the four ways moral emotions were used across the interview material. First, opponents of the FP employed *other-condemning emotions* to assert their moral superiority. Second, FP supporters countered these

moralising constructions using three tactics: *stigmatisation*, *humiliation*, and *victimisation*. These approaches enabled them to challenge the prevailing moral discourse concerning the FP, take actions in support of the FP, and shift blame onto the media and political opponents.

Other-condemning emotions to establish moral superiority

According to Haidt's (2003) conceptualisation of moral emotions, the family of other-condemning emotions (moral anger, contempt, and disgust) serves as a social warning signal that helps to identify and avoid those who are seen to behave in undesirable or immoral ways. In the interviews of the opponents, the FP and its politicians were sometimes described as morally inferior, ignorant, or even disgusting. This is similar to the discourses of irritation and scorn identified by Sakki and Martikainen (2021) when they studied opposing online comments on the FP election video.

Some interviewees expressed disgust towards the FP and the former party leader, Jussi Halla-aho, using the words disgusting or disgusted (in Finnish: inhottava, ällöttää) as in the following extract:

> I would see it as very problematic if he would be elected, like as president, and that he would be seen somehow, as a representative of Finland in particular, and I really don't see that in him, I'm disgusted by him, him as a person and also disgusted by what kind of people he then represents. Rudely speaking.
>
> (Male, Green League voter)

In this extract, the expression of disgust serves to differentiate good, ordinary Finnish people and the 'kind of people he then represents' (i.e., disgusting FP supporters). As a disgusting person, FP politician Halla-aho is depicted as unsuitable for representing Finnish people as a president. As Haidt (2003) described, disgust serves as a warning signal of a morally inferior group that should be excluded and avoided. 'Rudely speaking' acknowledges that using such harsh expressions is against social norms, but here, disgust is constructed as justified as 'it would be very problematic' to allow Halla-aho to represent the Finnish people.

Expressions of moral anger were also present in the interviewees' talk, but similar to disgust, they were rather rare. In the second extract, a left-alliance voter answered the interviewer's question related to the FP's climate policy with the following:

> Well, in my opinion, that is absolutely horrible bullshit and climate change is so severe [a] threat, not only for Finland but for the whole, whole world, that it has to be intervened for real.
>
> (Male, Left Alliance voter)

The interviewee expressed moral anger and frustration by stating that the claims made by the FP are 'absolutely horrible bullshit' and suggesting that FP politicians do not understand the severity of climate change for the whole world. This type of talk can be seen to serve the purpose of convincing others that the claim is incorrect, and that the opposite view is justified. The FP was described as a group of people who are doing immoral and bad things to minorities or even to all Finns, and therefore, objecting to them is justified.

A supporter of Left Alliance reflected possible reasons for the FP's success and suggested the immorality of the FP:

> Uh, do we really have enough education in our society, do we have enough, a high level of education? Why, why are these figures like this, like? I already understand why Trump was elected. Like, and they have a completely different system, they have like such a either-or thing, but like, I, I haven't understood this yet like, what's like, how could that hate, frustration like, be channelled? What scares them? And like, what they value that like, how they, how such a party rises, which doesn't want good for anyone.
>
> (Female, Left Alliance voter)

The interviewee begins by questioning whether there is sufficient education, using rhetorical questions extensively ('Why, why are these figures like this') to express perplexity and prompt the interviewer to agree on the lack of education as a reason for the rise of the FP. The interviewee uses words like 'hate', 'frustration', and 'fear' to suggest that supporters of the FP are driven by negative emotions rather than rational thought. By equating the rise of the FP with Trump's election, the interviewee reinforces in-group and out-group distinctions. The out-group is depicted as less rational, less educated, and immoral, while the in-group is implicitly portrayed as morally superior. The statement 'how such a party rises, which doesn't want good for anyone' implies that the party and its supporters have malicious intentions, trivialising their moral and ethical standing. This is a form of moral belittling, where the interviewee sets themselves apart from and above the FP supporters.

Nevertheless, subtle expressions of contempt were more common in the interviews. Non-verbal expressions, such as sighing or laughing, were often used when talking about the FP. Interviewees described the voters of the FP as misled and not really understanding for whom they had voted. Moral anger and contempt were often intertwined in interviewees' talk but were directed at different groups. The political leaders were described as manipulative and having morally questionable motives, whereas the supporters were depicted as intellectually inferior and easy to fool. Some interviewees referred to FP voters as people 'who just want to object [to] everything' and the FP as offering them a channel and social support for that objection.

The following extract describes this way of presenting the FP leaders and supporters:

> I think they [FP supporters] are taken, fooled at the moment or, I suppose they notice it at some point, I don't know where they will return or, start voting or stop voting, so it is a bit like.… They are nasty people, the leaders there, they are [laughs] fooling their people.
>
> (Male, Centre Party voter)

Here, the FP leaders are categorised as 'nasty people' who are fooling their followers in order to gain power and other benefits. The supporters are described as targets of manipulation, who may eventually notice that they have been fooled before possibly changing their voting behaviour.

In conclusion, both more explicit and more implicit expressions of other-condemning emotions were constructed in the opponents' talk when they reflected on the reasons for the FP's popularity. In these accounts, FP supporters were depicted as morally or intellectually inferior, which served to construct boundaries between the in-group and out-group. In the following sections, we focus on how supporters managed and negotiated opponents' talk on their party.

Stigmatisation fuels sympathising

The FP voters talked frequently about exclusion and the stigma against their party. Other parties were not seen as very willing to form a government with the FP, and the FP supporters were seen to face negative attitudes because of their political views. The way supporters talked about opponents' attitudes illustrates how rejection could elicit emotions that increase the popularity of the FP among voters. Such attitudes were first presented as something that elicits sympathy towards the party as well as moral anger for their unfair treatment. An FP voter described this in the following way:

> So, before those elections, before they were in the government, or something here so, when I followed so, almost in every *Aamulehti* (newspaper), there was always a negative writing about the Finns Party. [Interviewer: Yes.] Now it has subsided and am I sort of contrarian that it also affects me, the kind of when someone is being really mocked. [Interviewer: Yes.] So I take the side [laughs] of the one who is mocked.
>
> …In my opinion, in some sense, at some point it felt that the Finns Party supporters are like second class citizens, when they are against [the] EU, against immigration, that… that they are a kind of… a kind of group that should not exist in Finland and, I think that they are just, damn it, the same kind of ordinary Finns as everybody else, they just disagree on some things. [Interviewer: Mm] That also for them it should, should hold chest high and not, not to put them down and value their opinions.
>
> (Male, FP voter)

At the beginning of the extract, the interviewee expressed the view that the FP was treated unfairly in the media before the 2019 parliamentary elections, echoing with victimisation discourse (see below). The interviewee suggested that this unfair treatment may have influenced his decision to vote for the FP because he is the kind of person who defends those who are treated unjustly, saying, 'I take the side [laughs] of the one who is mocked'. This indicates a desire to correct injustice, leading to political action. In line with Salmela and Capelos (2021), the agency present in this account suggests that the interviewee's talk could be interpreted as resentment, a form of moral anger, rather than more passive emotional *ressentiment*.

The interviewee continued by expressing sympathy towards FP supporters and acknowledging their stigmatised position, saying, 'at some point it felt that the FP supporters are like second-class citizens'. Drawing on negative categorisation and moral condemnation from others (Haidt, 2003) who look down on FP supporters, the interviewee took the position of a vocal advocate for the FP. By stating, 'they are just, damn it, the same kind of ordinary Finns as everybody else, they just disagree on some things', the interviewee expressed moral anger towards the unspecified political opponents. Expressions of moral anger served to justify sympathising with the FP and voting for them.

Humiliation fuels payback

Another way of addressing the question of rejection by opponents involved a strong identification with the FP. Rejection was described through lived personal experiences and as something that evoked the motivation for payback by sticking together and making the party successful. This is presented in the following extract:

> We sat on the back seat, the four of us, and we really praised and talked about the Finns Party, how they are so… how they are so competent, and, so everybody turned to look at us on the bus seats, that who are those, so that [laughs] so they sort of disapproved that we praised the Finns Party, and we did that out of spite when we knew that the general opinion is that it is a populist party and everything else, so like we thought it was just fun then.
>
> (Female, FP voter)

This extract illustrates how the stigmatised position is openly challenged. Others on the bus turned to look at the group discussing the FP in a positive light and 'sort of disapproved', but the interviewee stated that she and her friends did this on purpose to provoke those who disapproved because they 'thought it was just fun then'. In light of the moral emotions literature (e.g., Allpress et al., 2014; Gausel & Leach, 2011), this can be interpreted as a

defensive reaction to rejection. The shaming and stigmatising from others are used to justify the motivation to defend themselves, to 'payback' and reclaim a positive identity, as Salmela and von Scheve (2017) suggested.

However, in this context, identifying as an FP supporter was not presented as inherently shameful, but others are implied to view it that way. Therefore, the emotion constructed and used in this context could be more accurately described as humiliation, being unjustly lowered and belittled by others (Elison & Harter, 2007), rather than shame. There is a social sharing element in the interviewee's account that transforms collective humiliation into a shared joy through payback (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017).

Victimisation fuels blaming 'them'

Numerous FP supporters expressed grievances regarding the media and political opponents, alleging unfair treatment of the FP compared to other parties. Previous research indicates that the cultivation and mobilisation of shared victimhood are vital for uniting followers under a unified identity and fostering moral boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Laclau, 2005; Mols & Jetten, 2020). In the following extract, the interviewee deployed victimisation to blame the media and broader society for unfair treatment and to express in-group identity:

> I don't know whether the Finns Party is perceived as a threat. Are they afraid of it, or do they want to ridicule it perhaps just because of that fear or this kind of popularity, that, that it is… In a quite interesting way almost, so quite many media sources address things in a completely different way if it is related to us or if it is related to some other party.
>
> (Female, FP voter)

The beginning of the above extract serves as a rhetorical concession, where the interviewee acknowledges the opponents' potential reasons for wanting to 'ridicule' the FP, suggesting that fear of the party's popularity might be the main motivation for this behaviour. This concession also portrayed the FP as victims of unjust mockery by others and shifted the focus to the main argument, suggesting that the media treats their party differently and unfairly compared to others. The use of the plural personal pronoun 'us' (instead of the party name, for instance) enabled the interviewee to position themselves as part of the victimised in-group. The argumentation in this discourse resonates with the politics of grievance and victimhood mobilised by FP politicians (Rovamo & Sakki, 2024; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016), showing how this rhetoric may contribute to group-level *ressentiment* (Kazlauskaitė & Salmela, 2022).

In sum, supporters of the FP managed and navigated the moral talk around the party in diverse ways. Common to this moral reasoning was the construction of the FP as stigmatised and unfairly treated by others. This meta-representation (see Chapter 1 of this volume) of others' derogatory views

towards 'us' was deployed to express moral anger, sympathy, payback, and victimisation on behalf of FP politicians and supporters. Importantly, it served to strengthen the sense of 'us' as distinct from 'them'.

Discussion

Moral emotions are integral to the construction and negotiation of political identities, playing a significant role in populist discourse. This chapter explored the role of moral emotions in shaping lay discourse surrounding the FP.

The findings from our pragmatic discursive analysis reveal that both supporters and opponents of the FP utilise moral emotions, albeit in different ways. Opponents employed other-condemning emotions, such as disgust and contempt, to depict themselves as morally superior (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). These moral emotions thus emerged as tools used by opponents to delegitimise the FP (Pantti, 2016) while simultaneously deployed to paint the party and its supporters as morally inferior. This aligns with Haidt's (2003) model in which such emotions serve as warning signals, namely against associating with what is framed as a misguided political faction.

Our findings suggest that FP voters acknowledge the negative stigma associated with their party. Echoing previous literature (e.g., Allpress et al., 2014; Gausel & Leach, 2011), discursive reactions to other-condemnation were defensive. Some interviewees described how others' disapproval and humiliation only strengthened cohesion and positive in-group identity among the supporters of the FP, eliciting anger and motivating them to get 'payback'. Furthermore, the interviewed supporters expressed sympathy (Haidt, 2003) towards their party's politicians and other supporters as well as moral anger and a sense of collective victimhood for their perceived unjust treatment by opponents and the media.

Moreover, Salmela and Capelos (2021) suggested that stigmatisation, humiliation, and victimhood are markers of *ressentiment* – a moral emotion that is considered characteristic of right-wing populism. *Ressentiment* is generally considered a non-agentic moral emotion that does not typically inspire direct action towards change or remediation. In this study, we observed the non-agentic nature of this moral emotion across discourse focused on blaming others. However, in most of our interviewees' accounts, stigmatisation, humiliation, and victimhood manifested with the agency as trigger emotions that transformed into other-directed and political action. Our findings enable speculation that other-condemning moral emotions by 'them' may lay the foundations for negative emotions serving as an important driver of collective action. This aligns with Haidt (2012), who emphasised that other-condemning emotions contribute to harmful affective polarisation between political groups. When opposing groups are seen as purely evil, perspective taking, compassion, and respectful communication become impossible (Haidt, 2012).

Overall, the engagement with moral emotions in the political discourse surrounding the FP underscores a broader social psychological phenomenon wherein moral constructions are pivotal to the dynamics of right-wing populist support. The interplay between other-condemning emotional discourse and counter-discursive acts of sympathy, payback, and blame highlights complex affective mechanisms driving political polarisation, framing a fertile ground for future research in political psychology.

In sum, this chapter suggests that the popularity of right-wing populism is related to the discursive interplay of moral constructions. Opponents of the FP express morally condemning emotions (disgust, moral inferiority, moral superiority, contempt), fuelling the party supporters' sense of stigmatisation, humiliation, and victimhood and further strengthening in-group unity and solidarity – just as FP leader Riikka Purra referred to with her metaphor of penguins in the storm.

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