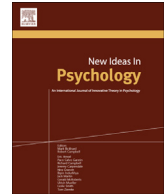




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# Collective action as relational interaction: A new relational hypothesis on how non-activists become activists



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## ABSTRACT

Theory and research documents but does not explain the empirically observed different motivational profiles of activists and non-activists. For this reason, little is known about how non-activists *become* activists. Building on a broad literature that views humans as relational beings, I propose to reconceptualize collective action as social interaction that *regulates social relationships* (i.e., which relationships are individuals regulating, and how?) This facilitates an integrative understanding of the *different motivational profiles* for activists and non-activists (based in Fiske's (1991) notion of different relational models with associated taboos and obligations to guide their regulation), which enables the development of a *new relational hypothesis* about how non-activists become activists (namely through two specific changes in relational models with one's ingroup and outgroup, authority, or system, in response to taboo violations in social interaction). I discuss implications of this relational perspective for theory and research on collective action and psychological and social change.

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*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

— Attributed to M. Mead in: [Frank G. Sommers and Tana Dineen \(1984\)](#). *Curing Nuclear Madness*. (p. 158).

As exemplified by successful social movements such as the US civil rights movement (e.g., [McAdam, 1996](#)), progressive social change depends in part on individuals' joint efforts to achieve collective goals (e.g., mass protests, petitions, strikes, sit-ins, etc.). *Collective action* is typically defined as any action that individuals engage in on behalf of a group to improve the conditions of that group ([Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990](#); see also [Van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009](#)). Of course, not all individuals are equally prone to engage in collective action. Activists (defined objectively as members of social movements or action groups) are

obviously more 'active' than non-activists (defined objectively as members of a disadvantaged group that are not members of social movements or action groups). Although surprisingly little is known about how non-activists become activists, it is clear that when they do, a *qualitative psychological change* occurs (e.g., [Livingstone, 2014](#)) that changes their empirically observed motivational profile, including changes in their self-concept and a drop in the motivational power of their anger (e.g., [Stürmer & Simon, 2004](#)).

But how and why does this happen? The currently popular explanation for this qualitative shift revolves around changes in the self-concept<sup>1</sup> (e.g., from a non-

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper, I use the terms 'self', 'self-concept' and 'identity' interchangeably. Furthermore, when I use terminology like 'when non-activists become activists' I do not imply that this is a desired, stationary outcome. What I mean by this is that there is a qualitative change in how individuals relate to the world, which has implications for how they see themselves and their world, and for their self-based motivations to change that world.

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politicized to a politicized group identity; Drury & Reicher, 2009; McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Simon et al., 1998; Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009; Turner-Zwinkels, Van Zomeren, & Postmes, 2015). This fits with theoretical assumptions that the core motivations for collective action are self-based (i.e., group identification, group-based emotions, and group efficacy beliefs; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; see also Thomas et al., 2009; Thomas, Mavor, & McGarty, 2012; Van Zomeren, 2013). Individuals who identify with Greenpeace, for instance, are understood as having a politicized group identity; yet it remains unclear how and why individuals with an unpoliticized group identity (e.g., identifying with 'greenies') become politicized.

In this article, I propose a new and integrative relational explanation for this qualitative shift in self-based motivational profiles. A relational perspective (Van Zomeren, in press; Fiske, 1991, 1992, 2004; Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Van Zomeren, 2014) suggests that individuals are generally motivated to regulate (that is, to generate or maintain) relationships<sup>2</sup>. Such relationship regulation revolves around the prevention of *taboo violations* and the enactment of *obligations* through relational interaction. Although there can be many ways to regulate a relationship, Fiske's (1991, 1992) *relational models theory* identifies four universal ways to relate, each associated with qualitatively different taboos and obligations (i.e., what one ought to do, and what one should never do) to guide their regulation. This is important because taboo violations (e.g., an authority acting out of line; an ingroup member betraying the group) may lead individuals to change or even reject relationships. It follows that non-activists become activists when they perceive, through social interaction with their ingroup or outgroup, that taboos underlying relationships with their ingroup and/or outgroup have been violated. As a consequence, they need to change their way of regulating those relationships, either by changing the relational model involved, or by rejecting the relationship altogether.

For instance, one may be called upon by a friend to join a mass demonstration – a decline of which would violate the underlying relationship. Similarly, when a government official publicly announces to raise taxes among the poor, this may be perceived as violating a particular way of relating with an authority that should protect the weakest and neediest in society. As such, one may now reject any previously considered obligation to defer to the

government's authority, and feel committed to those fighting for those in need (e.g., an action group or a social movement). This already illustrates how reconceptualizing collective action as relational interaction explains the qualitative shift from non-activists to activists through a qualitative shift in relational models (and associated taboos and obligations). This relational view enriches the currently popular self-based perspective on collective action because shifts in relational models can bring along shifts in self-concept and thus self-based motivational profiles (e.g., from an individualistic 'I' to a communal 'us'). As such, a relational perspective on collective action suggests that the underlying reason for why groups of committed citizens can change the world, as Margaret Mead purportedly suggested, is that they have *changed the way they relate* to others in that world through social interaction.

## 1. Aims and argument

My specific aims in this article are to (I) outline how a relational perspective *reconceptualizes* collective action as relational interaction (Van Zomeren, 2014); this enables (II) outlining an integrative understanding of empirically observed *different motivational profiles* for activists and non-activists, in order to (III) outline a *new relational hypothesis* about how non-activists become activists. This new and integrative understanding of collective action implies that such action should be understood as aimed at regulating relationships; that changes in the self-concept and other self-based motivations follow from changes in relational models (and their associated taboos and obligations); and that future theorizing and research on collective action and psychological change will benefit from adopting a relational perspective.

A relational perspective rejects reductionist individualist or collectivist perspectives on human motivation (e.g., Fiske, 1991; Gergen, 2009; Gilligan, 1982, 1986; Goffman, 1971; Mead, 1934; Slife, 2004; Slife & Richardson, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Instead, it advocates an essentially relational view of human beings (Van Zomeren, in press; Van Zomeren, 2014), which implies that it posits an essential need among individuals to relate and thus regulate (that is, maintain or generate) social relationships (Rai & Fiske, 2011).

Although a relational perspective reflects a new perspective on theory and research on collective action, the more general notion of a relational perspective in psychology has not been invisible (e.g., Fiske, 1991, 1992; Gergen, 2009; Slife, 2004; Slife & Richardson, 2008; see also Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), in important part because of developments in cultural psychology (e.g., Adams, 2005; Adams, Bruckmuller, & Decker, 2012; Adams & Markus, 2004; Fiske, 1992; Heine, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2004; Rai & Fiske, 2011). In fact, within the domain of intra- and inter-group processes that embeds much social-psychological work on collective action, there appears to be a trend toward considering the importance of social relationships (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Drury & Reicher, 2009; Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013; Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005; Swann, Jetten,

<sup>2</sup> The social identity perspective was a response to more individualistic and instrumental approaches to intergroup conflict such as realistic conflict theory (e.g., Sherif & Sherif, 1953). The logic of the social identity perspective is that when individuals subjectively identify with a group, even when there is no clear self-interest motive present or possible, the resulting social identity becomes self-defining and a basis for group-based perception, feeling, and action (e.g., Smith, 1993; Van Zomeren et al., 2012). This perspective is grounded in the assumption that individuals are motivated to generate or maintain a positive self-concept. Although this is an entrenched assumption in psychology (e.g., Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O'Mara, & Gebauer, 2013), many seem skeptical because it seems a 'Western' projection (Adams, 2005; Fiske, 1992; Heine, 2005; Heine et al., 1999; Kitayama et al., 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2004; Van Zomeren, in press).

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