



Collective climate action: Determinants of participation intention in community-based pro-environmental initiatives



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ABSTRACT

There seems to be consensus that apart from individual behavioral change, system-wide transformations are required to address the challenges posed by climate change. Collective action is viewed as one core mechanism in social transformation but there is currently no systematic research on collective climate action. By reviewing theoretical perspectives and models explaining collective protest, we aim to provide a starting point for such a research program. Based on correlational data from a student sample ($N = 652$), a sample of participants of a local climate protection initiative ($N = 71$), and visitors of a climate protection event ($N = 88$), we tested constructs derived from these theoretical models. Social identity, perceived behavioral control, and participative efficacy beliefs consistently predicted substantial amounts of variance in participation intention. Implications for future research are discussed, such as recognizing the interplay between cost-benefit calculations and social identity, or temporal dynamics in collective action engagement.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, environmental psychology has explored psycho-social determinants of individual pro-environmental behavior. This knowledge is of high practical value: It provides practitioners with a solid theoretical foundation for developing social marketing campaigns aiming to promote behavioral change in domains such as mobility, home energy use, and nutrition. A number of evaluation studies demonstrate that social marketing campaigns based on psychological theorizing can effectively change the targeted behaviors (e.g., Abrahamse, Steg, Vlek, & Rothengatter, 2005; Michie, Whittington, Abraham, & McAteer, 2009; Möser & Bamberg, 2008). On the other hand, however, there is also growing skepticism whether an approach focusing on changing individual behaviors alone will achieve the degree of change required for the transformation toward a more sustainable society (e.g., Peattie & Peattie, 2009). Shove (2010), for example, argues that such an individualistic approach is essentially flawed

because it does not take into account the infrastructural frame conditions and “social practices” of a society facilitating or impeding individual pro-environmental behavioral change. This critique is in line with research in ecological economics claiming that apart from individual behavioral change, system-wide transformations are required to initiate the move to a low-carbon economy (e.g., Jackson, 2009; Seyfang, 2009). Thus instead of focusing on changing individuals' consumption behavior, these researchers suggest investigating how, when, and why people take *collective action* aiming to engage in sustainable production and consumption patterns.

A prominent example of emerging community-based collective action initiatives is the Transition Towns (TT) movement (www.transitiontowns.org; Hopkins, 2008). It aims at mobilizing community action and fostering public empowerment and engagement around climate change, with the objective of bringing about a transition to a low-carbon economy. TT initiatives pursue many locally-based activities which aim to reconfigure social practices around energy consumption, for example establishing locally-owned renewable energy companies, promoting locally-grown food, encouraging energy conservation, exemplifying low-carbon living, and building supportive communities around these

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activities. In the present paper, we draw on TT and an initiative for “local energy autonomy” as examples to illustrate the psychological drivers of collective action for sustainability.

2. The present paper

Little is currently known about the motives underlying a person's decision to actively participate in an initiative such as TT groups (but see Rees & Bamberg, 2014; Van Zomeren, Spears, & Leach, 2010). The present paper therefore aims to provide a theoretical basis for a research program on collective action in the sustainability domain. Beginning with Le Bon's (1895) analysis of crowd behavior, social sciences have explored the motives and processes underlying collective action for over a century. We begin the theoretical part of the current paper by offering a definition of collective action. To contextualize the lines of thought that we are drawing on for the current work, we then review four theoretical approaches identified in the literature exploring the individual motives to engage in collective action (Section 3.). Before this background, in the next section we then outline three models of collective action that integrate the four motivational “pathways” to collective action in different combinations (Section 4.). Most of this research relates to collective action against social injustice and discrimination and has consequently been tested exclusively in these domains. We therefore discuss how these models may be adapted to the field of environmental psychology where appropriate. In the empirical part of the paper, we apply the three models to predict the intention to participate in TT initiatives reported by a student sample (Study 1), the intention to participate and actual participation in meetings discussing and preparing “local energy autonomy” by a sample of citizens living in a small village (Study 2), and collective climate action intention reported by green activists visiting a talk given by Rob Hopkins, the founder of the TT movement (Study 3). We compare the different models to test which of them best applies to collective climate action and which adaptations might be needed to increase the predictive accuracy of the models. In this model comparison, we find empirical support that participative efficacy beliefs, perceived behavioral control, and especially social identity are the most relevant drivers of collective climate action. The paper's final part summarizes the results and discusses their implications for future research (Section 9.).

3. Definition of and four pathways leading to collective action

Wright, Taylor, and Moghaddam (1990, p. 995) provide a definition of collective action that can be considered exemplary for the current literature: “a group member engages in collective action any time that she or he is acting as a representative of the group and the action is directed at improving the conditions of the entire group”. This definition views collective action as a group behavior that is motivated by a member's desire to improve the position of his or her in-group. Collective action can take many forms, ranging from non-violent actions such as taking part in peaceful demonstrations, signing petitions, or participating in acts of civil disobedience, to more radical forms such as sabotage and violence. There is, by now, a rich literature on the social psychology of collective protest. Various authors (Haslam, 2001; Klandermans, 1984, 1997; Stürmer & Simon, 2004; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) have distilled from this literature the four most influential “pathways” to collective action that we will summarize next.

3.1. The cost-benefit pathway

This pathway is based on Olson's (1965) assumption that people calculate the costs and benefits of a particular action and then try to

maximize their subjective utility. This assumption essentially frames collective action as a social dilemma: Whereas everybody may profit from the benefits of successful collective action (e.g., lower tuition fees in the case of student protest movements), the costs of participation have to be borne by individuals. A strictly rational actor would hence do nothing and wait for others to take care of the collective action (“free-riding”). For Olson (1965), active participation in collective action is more likely if it is associated with benefits only obtainable through participation. Klandermans (1984) extends this line of thought and specifies three “selective” motives for collective action: The *collective motive* captures the benefit of the collective action goal for the individual (e.g., equal rights), and the individual's expectation that collective action will achieve this goal. The *normative motive* represents the individual's assessment of what significant others think about collective action and his or her own expectation that they will approve or disapprove of collective action (e.g., ridicule or admiration by friends or family). The *reward motive* covers individual costs and benefits of collective action (e.g., losing money or time or having a good time with friends). Empirically, Stürmer and Simon (2004) report unique contributions of all three motives to the prediction of collective action participation intention.

3.2. The collective efficacy pathway

Resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) assumes that social protest constitutes a set of rational actions by groups to advance their collective interests, pressuring those in power to submit to the demands of the aggrieved. At the beginning, research on resource mobilization focused mainly on objective resources (e.g., number of group members, financial support) promoting the formation and organization of social movements. However, empirical research soon indicated that the group's objective resources are less important than the individual actors' subjective perceptions that the group as a whole is able to successfully organize and conduct collective actions. This subjective sense of available resources is termed *collective efficacy*, referring to expectations that one's group is able to achieve social change through collective action (Bandura, 1997; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). The higher the perceived collective efficacy, the more people should be motivated to participate in collective action. Van Zomeren and colleagues' (2008) meta-analysis reports an averaged random effect correlation (53 studies) between collective efficacy and collective action of $r_+ = .34$ (95% CI = .29–.39).

3.3. The group-based emotions pathway

This pathway focuses on how taking collective action can regulate group-based emotions, e.g., anger resulting from unfair collective disadvantage. Relative deprivation theory (Walker & Smith, 2002) suggests that the affective component of perceived deprivation predicts collective action intentions better than the cognitive component (Dubé-Simard & Guimond, 1986). According to this approach, individuals first appraise whether their disadvantage is group-level, then appraise whether the group disadvantage is fair, legitimate, and just. Appraising the collective disadvantage negatively evokes group-based anger, and motivates individuals to take collective action. Van Zomeren et al. (2008) report an averaged correlation (65 studies) between group-based negative emotions and collective action of $r_+ = .35$ (95% CI = .30–.39).

3.4. The social identity pathway

From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner,

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