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Yes we can? Group efficacy beliefs predict collective action, but only when hope is high

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ABSTRACT

Surprisingly, hope is under-researched in contemporary social-psychological explanations of collective action and social change. This may be because collective action research typically focuses on “high-hope” contexts in which it is generally assumed that change is possible (the main appraisal of *hope*), and thus the main question is whether “we” can change the situation through collective action (i.e., *group efficacy beliefs*). This line of thought implies that such beliefs should only motivate collective action when hope is high. To test this hypothesis, we conducted three experiments in contexts that were not “high-hope”. In **Study 1**, conducted within the “low-hope” context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we found that manipulated group efficacy beliefs did not increase individuals’ collective action intentions. **Studies 2** and **3** used the contexts of NHS privatization in the United Kingdom and Gun Control Reform in the United States — contexts that were neither “low-hope” nor “high-hope”, which enabled us to manipulate hope and group efficacy beliefs together in one design. Consistent with our hypothesis, findings of both experiments revealed that group efficacy beliefs only predicted collective action when hope was high. Replicating **Study 1**, when hope was low, group efficacy had no effect on collective action intentions. We discuss our findings in light of the idea that only when hope for social change is established, the question of whether “we” can create change through collective action becomes relevant. Without hope, there can be no basis for agency, which informs goal-directed action.

Collective action has long been recognized as a potentially powerful way in which change is promoted and implemented in societies, spanning from the French Revolution to the American Revolutionary War, and from the Civil Rights Marches to the Occupy Movements. Such collective action, however, does not typically arise spontaneously or out of the blue. Perhaps before all else, people need to be able to imagine the very *possibility* that the social world or order could and should be different (Tajfel, 1978; see also Ellemers, 1993). The emotional experience of this reflects the discrete emotion¹ of *hope* (Lazarus, 1991; Snyder, 1994; see also Bury, Wenzel, & Woodyatt, 2016), which is typically elicited by the cognitive appraisal that a meaningful goal is possible to achieve in the future (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990; Lazarus, 1991). According to appraisal theories of emotion (Breznitz, 1986), emotions like hope arise when an event is appraised as relevant and important to an individual’s concerns, which thus strengthens the mere cognitive perception of possibility and adds a motivational element, manifested in planning paths to achieve the desired goal (Stotland, 1969). As such, hope for social change in particular should reflect more

than the mere perception that social change is possible (Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009), and for this reason should play an important role in the social psychology of collective action.

Yet surprisingly, hope for social change is under-researched in this literature. We believe this is because scholars of collective action typically study either activists (whose very identity entails at least some hope; van Troost, van Stekelenburg, & Klandermans, 2013), or non-activists (i.e., sympathizers) within contexts in which social change already seems possible (e.g., as indicated by ongoing mobilization attempts by social movements; Van Zomeren, 2016). In either case, hope is implicitly or explicitly assumed to be a constant, perhaps even a prerequisite for collective action. As a consequence, the emphasis on what motivates non-activists in such contexts has been placed much more on individuals’ *group efficacy beliefs*: the belief that the ingroup is able to achieve social change through unified action (Bandura, 2000; Hornsey et al., 2006; Klandermans, 1984, 2004; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999; Wright & Lubensky, 2009; for a review see Van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012). Indeed, such beliefs have been

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¹ Discrete emotions differ from long-term sentiments, moods, and traits or dispositions in that they both targeted at a specific target (people, groups, or symbols), and are elicited by a specific event or context appraised as meaningful (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1994).

identified as crucial for motivating engagement in collective action such that non-activists with stronger group efficacy beliefs are more likely to engage in collective action.

Importantly, this line of thought presumes that individuals with stronger group efficacy beliefs experience at least some hope for social change. Indeed, their belief that the group is *able* to potentially create social change already assumes that such change is perceived as possible to begin with. This makes it difficult to examine the unique role of hope within contexts that clearly reflect high hope for change, because presumably the relevant concern is no longer whether change is possible (the main appraisal of *hope*), but whether “we” can change the situation through collective action (i.e., *group efficacy beliefs*). However, at present we know little about whether group efficacy beliefs are still relevant when social change is not necessarily perceived as possible (i.e., when conditions for hope are not high to begin with). Indeed, if the pertinent question is whether social change is possible at all, then individuals may be less concerned with questions about having the agency to achieve it. We therefore focus in this article on contexts in which hope is not high, and among populations not necessarily imbued with hope (i.e., non-activists), so as to allow a joint analysis of hope and group efficacy beliefs. Specifically, we propose that when hope for social change is high, group efficacy beliefs motivate collective action (e.g., Van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2010). However, when hope for social change is low, group efficacy beliefs should no longer motivate collective action, as it may be irrelevant to consider the group's ability to create change without perceiving change as possible.

We put this line of thought to the experimental test in three studies among non-activists. Our main aim was to empirically test our hypothesis that group efficacy beliefs predict individuals' intention to engage in collective action when hope is high, but not when hope is low. We first chose a context in which hope would be clearly low and manipulated group efficacy beliefs (Study 1), followed by studies in two more ambiguous contexts, in which hope would be neither high nor low. This enabled the manipulation of hope as high or low, while crossing this manipulation with a group efficacy manipulation (Studies 2 and 3). As far as we know, these studies are the first to tease apart hope and group efficacy beliefs to test the motivating influence of group efficacy beliefs on collective action intentions at different levels of hope.

1. Yes we can?

A considerable body of research suggests that group efficacy beliefs are a positive predictor of individuals' motivation to engage in collective action, presumably reflecting a sense of collective agency for social change. Indeed, a meta-analysis conducted by Van Zomeren and colleagues (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) showed a positive, medium-sized relationship (mean effect size $r = 0.34$) between group efficacy and collective action across a diverse set of samples, collective action contexts, and issues. For instance, in Mummendey et al. (1999), East Germans' group efficacy beliefs predicted their intentions to engage in collective action to improve the status of their group after the German unification. Similarly, Van Zomeren et al. (2010) experimentally manipulated students' group efficacy beliefs and found it increased their collective action intentions against raising tuition fees in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, we suggest that for the belief that “we” can achieve social change through joint action to increase motivation for such action, there must be an underlying assumption of hope, conceptualized as the emotional experience elicited from perceived *possibility* of change (Cohen-Chen, Van Zomeren, & Halperin, 2015). For this reason, it is important to conceptually differentiate hope from group efficacy beliefs in the context of collective action.

We conceive of hope as a psychological resource that makes social change a desired, realizable goal, although hope alone does not tell us anything about the collective agency of a group of individuals to make

change happen. This fits with findings indicating that hope leads to cognitive flexibility and creativity (Breznitz, 1986; Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994; Isen, 1990; Lazarus, 1991). Furthermore, in intergroup conflicts, hope was associated with conciliatory attitudes (Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Porat, & Bar-Tal, 2014; Halperin, Bar-Tal, Nets-Zehngut, & Drori, 2008; Halperin & Gross, 2011; Moeschberger, Dixon, Niens, & Cairns, 2005), while experimentally induced hope was found to increase attitudinal change in conflict resolution (Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Crisp, & Gross, 2014; Cohen-Chen, Crisp, & Halperin, 2015, 2017; Leshem, Klar, & Flores, 2016) and openness to the outgroup (Saguy & Halperin, 2014). Thus, although the emotional experience deriving from appraising the possibility for a desired outcome — hope — seems to affect how individuals think about policies in society, it is not accompanied by beliefs about the agency needed for collective action to foster social change.

Such agency is precisely what differentiates hope from group efficacy beliefs. As a form of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), group efficacy beliefs include an agent (i.e., the group), an aim (e.g., social change), and an action (i.e., collective action), whereas hope includes only an aim (Averill et al., 1990; Stotland, 1969). In fact, if hope includes some form of agent, it tends to focus generally on the individual who feels it, rather than on the group that could act on it together. Furthermore, hope is relatively structural and can exist even when people do not have control over a situation (Bruininks & Malle, 2005), whereas group efficacy beliefs are relatively situational and agentic (Bandura, 1997) and actually serve as a way to gain control over a situation, for example through collective action. Thus, when people believe their group can achieve its goals through joint action, they experience the collective agency that is lacking when people merely feel hopeful.² It is precisely this sense of agency that motivates collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

This line of thought fits well with other lines of thought in the collective action literature, while contributing something important: That the perceived possibility of change is not merely a perception, but an appraisal that feeds into the emotional experience of hope. This is different from research that implicitly or explicitly examined perceptions regarding stability of structural relations, cognitive alternatives, and belief in the possibility of change (Abrams & Grant, 2012; Louis, 2009; McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009; Wright, 2009; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Indeed, Wright (2009) suggested, but did not test, that group efficacy becomes irrelevant when a social system is perceived as stable. This general line of thought derives from social identity theory (Ellemers, 1993; Tajfel, 1978), which suggests that collective action should occur only under societal conditions that enable individuals to imagine the possibility of a different future (Tajfel, 1978; see also Drury & Reicher, 2000; Ellemers, 1993; Mummendey et al., 1999; Van Zomeren et al., 2012). Therefore, our line of thought is compatible with this perspective, but conceptually we add that the cognitive appraisal of possibility for social change involves the motivational relevance that (Frijda, 1986; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Scherer, 1999). Indeed, this is why hope should be important to consider in the context of collective action, and why we suggest that if there is little hope for change to begin with, group efficacy beliefs should cease to predict collective action.

Against this backdrop, our perspective on hope and group efficacy beliefs also fits with and moves beyond more recent work. It fits with our line of thought about hope's motivational relevance, yet this work did not experimentally manipulate hope and group efficacy beliefs together in one design (which we do in two of the three experiments we

² Although Snyder includes agency in his definition of hope as a cognitive motivational system (Snyder, 1994; Snyder et al., 1991), this definition does not account for situations in which the person or even group experiencing hope has little or even no control over the situation, which has been established as a fundamental characterization of hope (Averill et al., 1990; Stotland, 1969).

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