



Modeling collective action through media to promote social change and positive intergroup relations in violent conflicts[☆]



Rezarta Bilali^{a,*}, Johanna Ray Vollhardt^b, Jason Ray David Rarick^a

^a New York University, Department of Applied Psychology, 246 Greene Street, New York, NY 10003, United States

^b Clark University, Department of Psychology, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

- We test the effect of role modeling of collective action in two field experiments.
- We test effects of role modeling on collective efficacy and action in the DRC.
- Role modeling collective action increases collective efficacy.
- Role modeling collective action exacerbates negative intergroup attitudes.
- Role modeling collective action affects the content of group discussions.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 February 2016

Revised 17 July 2016

Accepted 17 July 2016

Available online 19 July 2016

Keywords:

Social influence

Media

Role modeling

Collective action

Discussion

Intergroup conflict

ABSTRACT

Does social influence exerted through role modeling of collective action impact social change in contexts that are not conducive to collective action, such as long-lasting violent conflicts? We examined this question in two field experiments in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. We created two versions of an episode of an existing media intervention (a show aiming to promote positive social change), in which fictional characters either planned collective action (role modeling condition), or did not plan action (control condition) to address grievances. In Study 1, role modeling affected individual-level outcomes: it increased perceived collective efficacy and willingness to take action, but exacerbated intergroup attitudes and reduced tolerance. Study 2 tested the influence of role modeling on a group-level outcome (group discussions). Discussions following the role modeling show focused less on grievances, and included more positive lessons of the show, as well as more statements about collective efficacy and collective action. The findings highlight the influence of role modeling of collective action through media on efficacy and action for social change, but caution against unintended consequences on intergroup attitudes.

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1. Introduction

In 1989, people all over Europe watched on television as East Germans brought down the Berlin Wall. Very quickly mass action spread across Eastern Europe, resulting in the fall of the region's communist regimes. In 2010, protests in Tunisia that were globally disseminated through social media (e.g., McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2014) sparked demonstrations across the Middle East and North Africa, commencing the so-called Arab Spring. In both cases, watching others in similar circumstances engage in efficacious collective action seems

to have encouraged people to use similar actions and tactics in their own communities. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) may help explain the spillover of these mass movements, as it suggests that observing others engage in effective action increases perceived efficacy to impact change. This, in turn, increases motivation to engage in collective action. These observations raise important questions regarding the role of social influence in collective action. Specifically, can social influence through modeling of collective action encourage action for positive social change, even in contexts where many psychological and practical obstacles to such action exist?

Role modeling, especially through media, has been used extensively to promote behavioral change in a wide variety of domains—including gender equity, family planning, AIDS prevention, sex education, and literacy (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004). However, despite the burgeoning literature on collective action (e.g., Becker, 2012; van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009; for reviews, see Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren, 2015; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), and

[☆] This research was supported by grants by Psychology Beyond Borders, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, and a Healey Research Grant to the first two authors. We thank Radio La Benevolencia Humanitarian Tools Foundation, especially the DRC office for their logistic support, and the two Congolese researchers who collected the data.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Applied Psychology, New York University, 246 Greene Street, Kimball Hall, rm. 407W, New York, NY 10003, United States.

E-mail address: rezarta.bilali@nyu.edu (R. Bilali).

some scarce social psychological research on the role of media in collective action (McGarty et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2015), we found no research assessing the potential of role modeling through media to shape collective action and social change. This is surprising considering the large literature showing the impact of role models in media and elsewhere on aggressive (e.g., Anderson, Carnagey, & Eubanks, 2003) and prosocial behavior more generally (e.g., Greitemeyer, 2011).

In this paper, we integrate insights from the literature on social modeling, collective action, and intergroup conflict to examine social influence through role modeling of collective action in media in contexts where there are barriers to engaging in social change. We assessed the impact of role modeling of *prosocial* and *inclusive* collective action for social change—i.e., members of different groups working together for social change that benefits the community as a whole, rather than just the (ethnic) ingroup, and that is not violent in nature—in a context of longstanding violent conflict in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). While Study 1 examined whether role modeling of inclusive collective action can influence individual-level outcomes (perceived efficacy, collective action tendency, and intergroup attitudes), Study 2 examined the influence of role modeling on group-level outcomes, specifically on group discussions. Increasing the external validity, we used a popular media intervention to test our research questions among diverse community samples in the Eastern DRC.

1.1. Role modeling collective action to foster positive social change in violence-affected contexts

The social psychological literature on collective action has identified several key predictors of collective action, including collective identification (Simon & Klandermans, 2001), perceived injustice (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009), efficacy beliefs (van Zomeren et al., 2008), group-based emotions (Tausch et al., 2011), ideology (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2009), and moral conviction (van Zomeren, Postmes, Spears, & Bettache, 2011). As evident from this brief list, the literature has examined individual-level perceptions, attitudes, and emotions as drivers of collective action. Considering the collective nature of collective action, the role of social influence (e.g., group norms: Drury & Reicher, 2009; Smith & Postmes, 2011; Thomas & McGarty, 2009) and group level processes (e.g., dynamics of group interactions: Smith, Thomas, & McGarty, 2015) in enabling collective action have received remarkably limited attention. In addition, collective action research has focused mainly on people who are already engaged in collective action, or on contexts where social change is in progress (van Zomeren, 2015). We know little about effective ways of encouraging collective action to impact non-violent social change in conflict settings (Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Saguy, & van Zomeren, 2014; Tabri & Conway, 2011) or when structural conditions constrain collective action (Klandermans, 1997). Many psychological and structural barriers unique to these contexts (e.g., ongoing violence, repressive regimes) impede efforts toward positive social change (see Hameiri, Bar-Tal, & Halperin, 2014). Opportunities to participate in collective action might be limited, and such action might not be common (i.e., normative), or might not be perceived as a viable option for addressing collective grievances. Moreover, conflict-supporting social norms (Paluck & Green, 2009) and silencing of dissident voices present important barriers to participation (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). Modeling collective action for positive social change might help overcome these barriers, as it can help transform social norms and open new behavioral channels, especially in settings where violent collective action is widespread.

Bandura's (1986) influential work on social modeling suggests that people can learn by observing others' behaviors. These new, observed behaviors will be adopted if people believe they possess self-efficacy to enact them, which can also increase by observing similar others perform a behavior (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, modeling collective action has the potential to increase self- and collective efficacy for impacting social change, and willingness to engage in collective action. We focus

on collective action that would contribute to reducing conflict, such as speaking up against derogation or mistreatment of outgroups (Staub, 1989), engaging in intergroup cooperation rather than competition, and working together to solve community problems (e.g., Sherif, 1966). These ideas are in line with research on opinion-based collective action, in which people form groups (including across pre-existing social categories) based on common beliefs regarding an issue of common interest (McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009). Building on these ideas, we focus on modeling *inclusive* collective action, where members of different groups are shown to work together to address shared grievances. This has the potential not only to increase collective efficacy for change, but also to improve intergroup attitudes through vicarious or imagined intergroup contact (i.e., encouraging observers to imagine participating in such interactions themselves: e.g., Miles & Crisp, 2014).

1.2. Role modeling collective action through media

Vicarious learning through role modeling is at the core of education-entertainment, which is a media genre used to bring about social change (Bandura, 1986; Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Singhal et al., 2004), including conflict reduction and reconciliation (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2013; Paluck, 2009; Paluck & Green, 2009). Entertainment-education communicates educational messages typically through the popular format of a serial drama on television or radio. Entertainment-education dramas promoting prejudice reduction and reconciliation, for example, portray positive role models who engage in prosocial actions, speak up against authorities and hate speech, and have positive intergroup interactions, thereby influencing social norms about desirable behaviors. These programs are particularly effective when the audience identifies with the positive role models and takes their perspectives, allowing participants to vicariously live through the characters' experiences (Belliveau, 2005). For instance, Paluck (2009) showed that a reconciliation radio drama in Rwanda had a positive influence on listeners' perceived social norms and behaviors related to intergroup outcomes such as social distance and prosocial orientation, and Bilali, Vollhardt, and Rarick (2016) replicated some of these findings for a similar media intervention in Burundi. Notably, although these studies revealed positive media effects, the effect of role modeling was not directly assessed. We therefore tested (Study 1) whether models of non-violent action increase individual-level collective efficacy and intentions to engage in similar action. Because the modeled behaviors portray cooperation between members of different groups, we also examined the impact of the role modeling on audience members' intergroup attitudes.

While early research on mass media focused on its direct impact on the audience (i.e., on individual level outcomes; Harris, 2009), later this research expanded to incorporate underlying mechanisms of influence such as effects on discussions and dialogue among audience members (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). For instance, in India, research on Pune Radio Farm Forum project showed how a radio drama spurred discussions that unified villagers around joint action for social change, such as digging wells or establishing enrichment centers for children (as cited in Papa & Singhal, 2009). In Rwanda, discussions among listeners of a reconciliation radio drama helped facilitate its positive effects on perceived conflict norms and behaviors (Paluck & Green, 2009). Considering the importance of group discussions as an underlying mechanism of mass media's influence, as well as for collective action, in the present research we also examined the effect of role modeling of positive collective action on group-level outcomes (Study 2). Specifically, we tested whether role modeling of positive collective action can steer group discussions in ways that facilitate positive social change.

2. Overview and context of the present research

In the present research we assessed the effects of modeling inclusive collective action on perceived collective efficacy and willingness to engage in collective action. We also examined the effects on intergroup

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