

Collective Action as a Precursor to Social Change: Causes, Risks, and Consequences

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ABSTRACT

This article, as a review study, investigates the relationship between collective action and social change by examining the causes, risks, and consequences of collective action. Collective action signifies the coordinated efforts of a group of individuals who share a common goal or objective, encompassing activities such as protests, rallies, strikes, or boycotts. Drawing upon empirical research from social psychology, the article underscores the potential of collective action as a potent tool for challenging existing norms, influencing policy decisions, and enhancing public awareness of societal issues. However, the article also addresses the potential risks and challenges associated with collective action, including group polarization, conflict, and the potential for violence. The article argues that effective collective action necessitates careful consideration of various factors, including group dynamics, communication strategies, and leadership structures. By comprehending the causes, risks, and consequences of collective action, social psychologists can offer valuable insights into how to promote effective collective action and achieve meaningful social change. Overall, the article emphasizes the significance of collective action as a precursor to social change and underscores the need for meticulous planning and deliberation to ensure its success.

Keywords: Collective action, Social change, Risks, Social movement, Protest

INTRODUCTION

Collective action is a topic that falls within the purview of various sub-disciplines of social sciences, including sociology, management studies, and social psychology. The differences in how each discipline approaches collective action make it challenging to establish a universally accepted definition. Collective action is commonly defined as any effort that serves to improve the collective situation of disadvantaged or low-status groups (Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

In social psychology, the roots of modern theories and research on collective behavior trace back to Le Bon. Le Bon highlighted that individuals behave and think differently within a crowd compared to when they are alone, emphasizing the influence of crowds on human behavior and thought. He argued that crowds are often seen as cruel, base, and primitive, with individuals in a crowd being guided by unconscious forces rather than their individual consciousness (Le Bon, 1997, p. 25). Le Bon strongly criticized Herbert Spencer's view that the elements forming a crowd simply aggregate to create a collective average. Instead, Le Bon believed that new characteristics and elements emerge specific to the crowd, analogous to how chemical reactions produce new substances with different properties when certain elements are combined (Le Bon, 1997, p. 23). Thus, Le Bon focused on the destructive nature of collective behavior, suggesting that individuals within a crowd are more prone to engage in harmful actions due to the negative influences of the crowd. In contrast, McDougall (1921) rejected the notion of collective consciousness and unconsciousness. He posited that every organized society has a collective mind that desires unity. In other words, a group or crowd possesses a specific mental structure or system, which is shaped by the minds of the individuals forming that crowd. According to McDougall, the collective mind of society and the individual mind mutually shape each other, without a hierarchy between them (Arkanoc, 1993, p. 5).

Modern social psychology theories provide various definitions of collective action. Wright et al. (1990) argue that collective action processes are not merely dependent on the number of individuals or the presence of a crowd. Hence, not all forms of organization are considered collective action. Specifically, the action must address or improve the condition of a disadvantaged group. For example, a hunger strike initiated by an individual to improve conditions in a prison can be classified as collective action. Klandermans (1997) defined collective action as the behavior of people coming together to achieve a common goal or purpose, highlighting the importance of the group's direction and the shared goal motivating the group. Wright and Tropp (2002) suggest that interpersonal behavior occurs when individual identities emerge as “self” and “other.” According to this definition, collective action is a special case of intergroup behavior that contrasts with individual actions designed to improve personal status and serves as a strategy to enhance the position of the in-group. In social psychology, collective action is often studied in the context of social movements, protests, and other collective political actions. Understanding definitions of collective action is crucial for grasping how and why individuals come together for common goals.

This review aims to explain how collective action functions as a precursor to social change and to explore the causes, risks, and consequences that arise in this process. Collective action refers to the coordinated efforts of individuals with a common goal and encompasses various activities such as protests, rallies, strikes, or boycotts. This study focuses on the potential of collective action to trigger social change by challenging existing norms, influencing policy decisions, and raising awareness of social issues. At the same time, it addresses the possible risks and challenges associated with collective action, such as group polarization, conflict, and violence. This article aims to provide valuable insights for social psychologists on how collective action can be carried out more effectively to achieve meaningful social change. Overall, it emphasizes the importance of collective action as a crucial tool for social change and underscores the necessity of careful planning and evaluation for the success of this process.

Social Psychological Theories Explaining Participation in Collective Action

There are various social psychological theories aimed at explaining why people participate in collective action. These theories examine different aspects of human behavior and social dynamics to understand the motivations behind pursuing common goals or opposing existing conditions. One of the most significant of these theories is Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which suggests that individuals engage in collective action to strengthen their social identities and achieve a sense of belonging. According to Social Identity Theory, people are more likely to engage in collective action when they identify with a group and perceive the group's status or well-being to be under threat. Research supporting this theory reveals how group membership directs individual actions and how solidarity within a group promotes collective action (Kaya & Mamatoğlu, 2019; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008).

Similar to Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization Theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, and that group membership can influence behaviors and attitudes (Haslam, 1997; Turner et al., 1987). Self-Categorization Theory suggests that people are more likely to engage in collective action when they make a clear distinction between their own group and others, and when they perceive their own group as highly homogeneous or similar (Hornsey, 2008). On the other hand, Relative Deprivation Theory proposes that individuals are driven to collective action in response to perceived inequalities and injustices. Relative deprivation refers to the feeling of being disadvantaged or treated unfairly compared to others (Walker & Pettigrew, 1984). This perception can motivate individuals to engage in collective movements and take action for social change. Research has explored how relative deprivation can lead to social unrest and mobilization (Walker & Smith, 2002).

Additionally, the Frustration-Aggression Theory, proposed by Dollard et al. (1939), suggests that individuals may channel frustrations from blocked goals or unmet needs into collective action. Frustration can lead individuals to express aggression towards their environment, which can then be organized into structured efforts. This theory addresses how personal frustrations can transform into social action and trigger social change.

Lastly, Social Movements Theory examines the emergence, development, and sustainability of social movements. This theory explores factors such as leadership, ideology, organizational structure, and strategies,

and their impact on the success of collective action. Research supporting this theory provides detailed insights into the dynamics of social movements and how successful movements are organized (Tilly, 1978). These theories provide a multifaceted understanding of the motivations and processes behind collective action, offering a crucial foundation for comprehending how individuals come together to address shared concerns and achieve common goals.

Exploring Forms of Collective Action: From Public Protests to Social Movements and Civil Disobedience

Social psychology has identified different types of collective action that people can engage in to address social issues and achieve shared goals. Public displays of dissent, such as marches, rallies, and sit-ins, are forms of collective action that are often used to draw attention to a particular social issue or challenge the existing social, economic, or political structures. Protesters may engage in nonviolent or violent tactics, depending on the nature of the issue and the political context (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Additionally, collective actions that involve individuals withholding their labour or financial support are another type of collective action. Boycotts involve consumers refusing to buy goods or services from a particular company or industry, while strikes involve workers withholding their labour to demand better working conditions, wages, or benefits. Both boycotts and strikes are effective ways to pressure companies or governments to change their policies (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Tilly, 2005). Moreover, social movements are collective actions that involve individuals and groups coming together to challenge the existing social, economic, or political structures. Social movements aim to change social norms, attitudes, and behaviors by drawing attention to specific issues, advocating for policy changes, or promoting alternative ways of thinking and living. Social movements may involve various forms of collective action, including demonstrations, protests, and boycotts (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Finally, civil disobedience is a type of collective action that involves individuals deliberately breaking the law to protest or challenge a specific social issue. Civil disobedience is often seen as a last resort when other forms of collective action have failed to achieve the desired results. Civil disobedience may involve nonviolent forms of resistance, such as sit-ins, hunger strikes, or other forms of peaceful protest (Pineda, 2021).

Social psychology has identified different types of collective action that individuals and groups can use to address social issues and achieve shared goals. These types of collective action vary in their nature and effectiveness, depending on the context, the goals, and the tactics employed. Understanding the dynamics of collective action from a social psychological perspective can help us better understand how social change happens and how we can work together to create a more just and equitable world.

Motivations Behind Collective Action: Exploring Social Identity, Empowerment, and Collective Efficacy

Collective action refers to the actions taken by individuals working together towards a shared goal or objective. Social psychology provides insights into the reasons why individuals engage in collective action, which can range from a desire to change societal norms to personal empowerment.

Social identity: Collective action is often motivated by a shared sense of identity among individuals who identify with a particular group, cause, or ideology. Social identity theory suggests that people derive a sense of self-esteem from their group memberships and are therefore motivated to take action to defend and promote the interests of their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This can manifest in various forms of collective action, including social movements and protests.

Empowerment: Collective action can also be motivated by a desire for personal empowerment. When individuals come together to take collective action, they may feel a greater sense of agency and control over their lives, which can lead to increased well-being and satisfaction (Stürmer & Simon, 2004). This can be particularly true for marginalized or oppressed groups who have historically lacked power and agency in society.

Normative beliefs: Collective action can also be motivated by normative beliefs, which are shared beliefs about what is right and wrong or what is socially acceptable or unacceptable. When individuals perceive that a norm has been violated, they may be motivated to take collective action to rectify the situation and restore the norm

(Klandermans, 1997). This can be seen in various forms of collective action, including boycotts and protests against companies or institutions that are perceived to be acting immorally or unethically.

Collective efficacy: Finally, collective action can also be motivated by a sense of collective efficacy, which is the belief that a group can work together effectively to achieve a shared goal (Locke, 1997). When individuals have a strong sense of collective efficacy, they may be more likely to take action and persist in the face of obstacles and challenges. This can be particularly important in social movements or other forms of collective action that require sustained effort over time.

From a social psychological perspective, collective action is the result of the interplay between individual and group factors. According to the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals' self-concept is partly based on their membership in social groups, such as nationality, ethnicity, or religion. This group membership provides individuals with a sense of identity and belonging, which can influence their attitudes, behaviors, and emotions. Collective action occurs when individuals identify with a particular group and perceive that the group is experiencing injustice or discrimination. This sense of group-based injustice can lead to feelings of anger, frustration, and moral outrage, which motivate individuals to take collective action (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). In this context, collective action can be seen as a way to restore social justice and protect the group's interests.

However, the decision to engage in collective action is influenced by several individual factors, such as cost-benefit (Louis et al., 2004), perceived efficacy, and social norms (Van Zomeren et al., 2004). Perceived efficacy refers to the belief that collective action can achieve the desired outcomes. Perceived cost-benefit refer to the personal, social, and material cost-benefit associated with engaging in collective action. Social norms refer to the expectations and beliefs of significant others about the appropriateness of engaging in collective action. From this perspective, successful collective action requires the mobilization of group-based identities, the perception of group-based injustice, and the presence of individual and group factors that promote engagement in collective action.

Social psychological perspectives provide insights into the individual and group factors that underlie collective action. These perspectives highlight the importance of group-based identities, perceived injustice, and individual and group factors that promote engagement in collective action. Social psychology provides insights into the reasons why individuals engage in collective action, which can range from a desire for personal empowerment to normative beliefs about what is right and wrong. Understanding these motivations can help individuals and groups work together more effectively to achieve shared goals and promote positive social change.

Risks and Challenges of Collective Action: Group Polarization, Groupthink, and Escalation

While collective action can have many benefits, there are also some potential risks associated with it from a social psychology perspective. Collective action can lead to group polarization, which is the tendency for group members to become more extreme in their beliefs and actions after discussing issues within the group. Social psychology research has shown that group polarization can lead to increased intergroup conflict and decreased cooperation between groups (Sunstein, 1999; Myers & Lamm, 1976). Additionally, collective action can also lead to groupthink, which is the tendency for group members to conform to the group's norms and suppress dissenting opinions. Social psychology research has shown that groupthink can lead to flawed decision-making and reduced creativity (Janis, 1972; Hinsz, Tindale, & Vollrath, 1997). Moreover collective action can sometimes escalate the conflict, rather than resolving it. Social psychology research has shown that collective action can sometimes lead to increased hostility and violence, particularly if there are opposing groups involved (Tilly, 2003; Klandermans, 1997). Finally, collective action can also lead to stigmatization of certain groups, particularly if those groups are seen as opposing the goals of the collective action. Social psychology research has shown that stigmatization can have negative effects on mental health and can perpetuate intergroup conflict (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Crisp & Turner, 2011).

Social psychology research suggests that collective action can have some potential risks, including group polarization, groupthink, escalation of conflict, and stigmatization. While these risks should be taken seriously,

they should not necessarily discourage individuals from engaging in collective action. Rather, they should be considered and addressed in to promote effective and positive collective action.

Impact and Outcomes of Collective Action

The results of collective action can vary depending on various factors, including the goals of the group, the level of support they receive, and the actions taken by those in power in response to the collective action. Social psychology provides insights into the potential outcomes of collective action, including changes in attitudes, behaviors, and societal norms.

Collective action can lead to changes in attitudes towards social issues and groups. When individuals engage in collective action, they may become more aware of the issues at hand, which can lead to changes in attitudes towards the group or issue (Klandermans & Oegema, (1987). For example, participation in a protest against police brutality may lead to increased support for the Black Lives Matter movement and changes in attitudes towards law enforcement. Additionally, collective action can also lead to changes in behavior, both among those engaging in the collective action and among those outside the group. When individuals engage in collective action, they may be more likely to engage in other forms of activism or pro-social behavior (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013). In addition, collective action can raise awareness and lead to changes in behavior among those outside the group. For example, a boycott of a company that engages in unethical practices may lead to changes in consumer behavior and increased pressure on the company to change their its practices.

Finally, collective action can lead to broader societal changes, including changes in laws, policies, and societal norms. Social movements and collective action have been instrumental in achieving various civil rights gains throughout history, including the right to vote, marriage equality, and the abolition of slavery (McAdam, 1999). When individuals come together to engage in collective action, they can exert pressure on those in power to make changes that benefit the group or issue at hand.

The Dynamics of Collective Action: Understanding Its Role and Impact on Social Change

Collective action refers to the process of social groups coming together to achieve a common goal and has been extensively studied in the fields of social psychology and sociology. Theories of collective action focus on understanding why and how individuals and groups participate in collective movements. These theories often address fundamental motivations such as the pursuit of justice, combating inequalities, demands for social reform, and the preservation of group identities (Wright & Lubensky, 2009). Collective action not only advocates for group interests but also has the power to alter social norms or reform existing systems.

Collective action is considered a crucial tool for promoting social change (Reimer et al., 2017). Such actions enable individuals to unite and advocate for common goals while challenging social norms, policies, and structural systems. For collective action to be effective, certain factors need to be taken into account.

A successful collective action must be sustainable over time. Research indicates that the likelihood of creating social change increases when collective action is maintained in the long term and integrated with other political and social actions (Klandermans, 2014). Additionally, another factor that enhances the effectiveness of collective action is the formation of the action around a shared identity and goals, coupled with mutual support among group members (Sturmer & Simon, 2004).

Effective communication strategies and leadership structures are also critical to the success of collective action. Well-structured communication can help coordinate the group's efforts, while strong leadership plays an important role in maintaining these efforts over time (Haslam et al., 2020; Lawson & Lawson, 2022). Historical examples, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, demonstrate how collective action can effectively achieve social change. However, the capacity of collective action to trigger social change is not always straightforward or simple. In some cases, group dynamics, strategic shortcomings, or external factors may prevent these actions from achieving the desired outcomes. Social psychology suggests that overcoming these challenges requires careful management of group dynamics, communication strategies, and leadership structures (Klandermans, 2014).

Social change refers to significant transformations in a society's structure, cultural norms, or power dynamics. These processes are often long-term and complex, triggered by various factors such as social movements, laws, political reforms, and cultural changes. Dixon et al. (2012) discuss the paradoxical effects of intra-group and inter-group contact on social change. Their study suggests that positive contact can sometimes promote the maintenance of the status quo rather than social change, which is an important topic of discussion in the literature on social change.

Saguy and Chernyak-Hai (2012) examine the effects of intra-group contact on participation in collective action, showing how the conflictual situations individuals and groups are exposed to shape their attitudes toward supporting or resisting social change. In this context, collective action is closely related to how group members define themselves and how group identities are constructed. The literature on collective action seeks to understand how these processes affect social dynamics at both individual and group levels. A meta-analysis by Hässler et al. (2020) provides a broad perspective on the effects of intra-group contact on social change. The study examines whether interactions between different social groups can renegotiate social statuses and whether these processes have the potential to create societal-level change. Such studies are crucial for better understanding the dynamics of social change processes and how power relations between individuals and groups evolve. Studies exploring the relationship between collective action and social change deeply investigate the effects of intra-group and inter-group contact on these two processes. Barlow et al. (2012) note that negative contact often reinforces intra-group discrimination, while positive contact has the potential to alleviate this situation. However, positive contact does not always promote social change and may sometimes tend to preserve the existing status quo. This issue is a significant area of discussion in the literature on social change and collective action. Glasford and Calcagno (2011) propose that there may be a conflict between efforts to reduce prejudice within disadvantaged groups and collective action. Their study examines how groups address internal dynamics while struggling against injustices in the current social order. Such studies reveal that social change processes are complex not only at the societal level but also within group dynamics.

In conclusion, collective action, when supported by appropriate strategies and structures, can be a powerful tool for promoting social change. Findings from social psychology provide critical guidance on understanding which factors are important for enhancing the success of collective action.

DISCUSSION

From a social psychology perspective, while collective action is a necessary tool for achieving social change, it also faces various challenges and risks that can affect its success. Factors such as group cohesion, communication, leadership, and backlash threats from opponents of the group's objectives can complicate the success of collective action. Therefore, successful collective action requires a comprehensive strategy to overcome these challenges and enable a sustainable change process.

To overcome these challenges, several solutions can be proposed. For instance, promoting shared identities and goals can enhance group cohesion, while strong communication strategies can better organize group efforts. Additionally, fostering effective leadership and organizational structures is crucial for the long-term sustainability of collective action. Forming alliances with other groups and individuals to increase support for the movement can also be beneficial. However, despite all these strategies, collective actions carry various risks, such as social stigmatization, physical harm, legal consequences, and failure. Despite these risks, successful collective action can lead to policy changes, increased public awareness of social issues, and questioning of existing social norms and power structures.

The potential of collective action to contribute to social change also brings complexity and challenges. Collective action is a process where individuals come together and act in a coordinated manner toward common goals. Social change, on the other hand, refers to the broader transformation of society or social structures over time. Collective action can serve as a mechanism for initiating social change by challenging existing norms, influencing policy decisions, and raising awareness of social issues (Klandermans, 2014). Protests, demonstrations, boycotts, and other forms of activism are examples of various forms of this action. The ultimate goal of collective action is to address social grievances and achieve social change by supporting the interests of marginalized groups. On the other hand, social change can stem not only from collective action but also from

broader societal, economic, and political dynamics. In this context, understanding the theoretical foundations explaining individuals' reasons for participating in collective action is of great importance. Various social psychology theories, such as Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization Theory, and Relative Deprivation Theory, reveal how group identity, perceived threats, injustices, and inequalities can trigger collective action (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985). For example, Social Identity Theory emphasizes that group identity and perceived threats to the group's status are fundamental factors promoting collective action (Tajfel, 1982). Relative Deprivation Theory, on the other hand, highlights the motivational role of perceived injustices and inequalities (Runciman, 1966).

This study argues that collective action is not merely a spontaneous or irrational reaction but rather a strategic and rational response to perceived social injustices. This perspective challenges traditional views that regard collective behavior as inherently irrational and destructive. Instead, it argues that collective action is often a conscious and rational effort for social justice and change. However, while collective action has the potential to trigger social change, it can also encounter various risks and challenges during this process. Risks such as group polarization, groupthink, conflict escalation, and the stigmatization of opposing groups are common problems encountered during collective actions. Group polarization can lead to the adoption of more extreme views and actions, intensifying conflicts and reducing the likelihood of compromise (Sunstein, 1999). Groupthink can lead to the suppression of dissenting views within the group and result in poor decision-making (Janis, 1972). Additionally, the potential for conflict escalation can undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of collective action. These challenges highlight the necessity of careful planning, strategic decision-making, and inclusive leadership to minimize the risks of collective movements. Successful collective action requires a common goal and motivation, effective communication strategies, strong leadership, and awareness of intra- and inter-group psychological dynamics. In this context, developing appropriate strategies to manage group dynamics and prevent negative outcomes from uncontrolled collective action is of critical importance.

The outcomes of collective action can vary depending on the nature of the action, context, and the reactions of power holders. The immediate outcomes of collective action can involve changes in attitudes and behaviors among both participants and observers. For instance, participating in protests or strikes can lead to increased political awareness and engagement among participants and influence public opinion and policy discussions. Moreover, the impact of collective action is not limited to immediate outcomes; it can also lead to long-term social changes. Changes in laws, policies, and social norms are examples of the long-term effects of collective action (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Historical examples, particularly the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, demonstrate how sustained collective action can lead to significant social reforms.

This study presents several key insights for effectively promoting collective action. First, it emphasizes the need to clearly understand the motivations and dynamics that trigger participation to manage collective action effectively. Recognizing the role of group identities, perceived injustices, and collective efficacy can enhance support mobilization and the sustainability of participation. Second, it highlights the importance of strategic planning. Selecting appropriate forms of action and developing effective communication strategies and leadership structures are crucial for enhancing the success of collective action. Third, it underscores the importance of being aware of the risks associated with collective action. Developing various strategies to mitigate risks and achieve more effective outcomes is necessary.

In conclusion, this study highlights that while collective action can be a powerful tool for social change, it also acknowledges the complexities and challenges involved in this process. Extensive research from social psychology provides a broad perspective on the causes, risks, and outcomes of collective action. Understanding the psychological dynamics of collective action creates opportunities for social psychologists, activists, and policymakers to develop more effective strategies. This approach offers a balanced view that recognizes the potential of collective action while also being aware of the challenges and risks that may be encountered in this process. The aim is to inform a new generation of social change leaders who leverage the power of collective action for a more just and equitable world.

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