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Document Version
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Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

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Broadening perspectives on achieving social change

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Abstract

The articles in this special issue challenge readers to reconsider the relationships among individual mobility, collective action, and social change. Taken together, they reveal an increasing and broadening interest in the concept of social change and raise important questions about its societal applications. In this commentary, we expand on this rich body of research by considering how surface indicators of (lack of) social change such as individual versus collective action may be related to a wider range of motives than has been assumed. Moreover, we consider more carefully what constitutes social change, and discuss different forms of equality as a means to conceptualizing social change. In doing so we attempt to move beyond implied dichotomies between individual and collective strategies and actions to consider alternative perspectives on classifying and studying social change.

Broadening perspectives on achieving social change

The past decade has revealed a growing interest in social psychologists to study social change from an intergroup perspective. Much of this work has focused on collective actions by disadvantaged group members to improve their position by, for example, engaging in demonstrations, signing petitions or other forms of collectively motivated actions against the status quo (van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009; see also Reicher, 2004; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; Wright, 2010, for reviews). However, there has been relatively less attention paid to other potential avenues to social change that are quieter, less explicitly 'collective', either because the actions that produce change may not be motivated by the desire to improve the position of one's low-status group, or because they take place in relative isolation of the group. For instance, compared to 30 years ago, more individual members of ethnic minority groups hold leadership positions in organizations and their presence there, in and of itself, may represent meaningful social change. In addition, once there, these members of traditionally disadvantaged groups may, through their interactions with others, accelerate that change. For example, women in top positions routinely mentor younger women. Although individual advancement *appears* to have reduced intergroup inequality (at least for some), within social psychology, and the field of intergroup relations more specifically, such efforts to gain personal access to positions of advantage are often described as impediments to social change. Need this always be the case? In line with this special issue's focus on how both the individual and collective actions can induce social change, this commentary will address two themes. First, we discuss the meaning we attach to individual actions (such as personal advancement) and challenge the idea that they necessarily impede social change. Second, we raise the question of what constitutes successful social change.

Individual versus Collective Action

Members of low status groups can 'engage' in a number of responses when they experience disadvantage. Whereas some might resign themselves to their fate, others might try to improve their personal situation (e.g., via personal advancement), while others might attempt to improve the position of the group as a whole (i.e., collective action; see Ellemers, Wilke, & van Knippenberg, 1993; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Researchers in the social identity tradition have typically conceptualized attempts at improving one's personal situation as "individual mobility," and suggested that it involves physically leaving or psychologically distancing oneself from one's low-status group. As such, it has been identified as a strategy that can undermine broader social change. For example, Wright and Taylor (1999) found that successful tokens (i.e., low-status group members who moved into a higher status group through individual mobility), while recognizing that the low status of their former group as unjust, were nonetheless less likely to support actions to address this injustice than group members who remained in a disadvantaged position. Similarly, Ellemers, Derks and colleagues (e.g., Derks, van Laar, Ellemers & Raghoe, in press; Ellemers, Van den Heuvel, de Gilder, Maass & Bonvini, 2004) have shown that *both* women and ethnic minority group members who achieve high status positions in organizations often distance themselves from their low-status ingroup, and that women become so called "queen bees," actively impeding the movement of other women to higher level positions. Moreover, the presence of token members of the disadvantaged group in high status positions, or other evidence that individuals are mobile, can decrease support for social change both in members of the low and the high status group (e.g., Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Kaiser, Drury, Spalding, Cheryan, & O'Brien, 2009; Richards & Wright, 2010).

These individual actions, that *seem* motivated by personal motives (e.g., advancement) only, are often contrasted with 'collective action' which is seen as the key to creating social change – change that will reduce the inequality between social groups (see Wright, 2010).

Broadly defined, collective action refers to any action in which a group member acts as a representative of his/her group with the goal of improving the conditions of the group as a whole (Wright, et al., 1990). Interestingly, Dixon and colleagues (in press), in this special issue discuss South African data showing that political solidarity between two or more historically disadvantaged groups can induce social change as disadvantaged groups support each other in their efforts to gain access to resources of the high status group. Yet generally, one of the critical motivators of collective action is a clear and focused attachment to the specific ingroup and strong *ingroup-motivated* effort against the existent status relations.

Although it has been clearly shown that a focus on individual mobility can lead attention away from, or shroud evidence of, collective injustices and thus reduce collective efforts for social change, some of the work in the current issue suggests that this might not always be the case. First, we argue that 'individual' action (such as personal advancement) need not always indicate an underlying motive to "leave" the group either physically or psychologically. Second, we question whether actions need always be collectively motivated in order to successfully create social change.

How Well Do Individual versus Collective Actions Reveal Underlying Motives?

The distinction between individual versus collective behavior derives from a social identity approach which sees behavior as ranging on a continuum from those guided by exclusively personal/individual identities to those guided exclusively by collective identities (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As part of their Self-Categorization Theory, Turner and colleagues (1987) further posited the idea of functional antagonism between individual and collective identities, such that in a given context either personal or collective identity will become the salient and primary driver of both self-representation and behavior. This has led to a focus on contrasting personal with collective identities and individual with collective types of behavior. Thus, in the context of social change research, individual mobility

strategies are often contrasted with collective actions (e.g., Ellemers et al., 1993; Wright et al., 1990). However, it has become increasingly evident that this view of the personal and collective identity as antagonistic may represent the nature and function of identity too narrowly (e.g., Spears, 2001; Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). Similarly, in evaluating motives for participation in collective action it has been acknowledged that these may be collective (to improve position of one's group) and/or personal (e.g., a cost-benefit analysis of personal gains and losses related to participation; see Stürmer & Simon, 2004). With the less antagonistic representation of the personal and collective identity, it is perhaps not surprising then that Becker and colleagues (Becker, Barreto, & Kahn, in press), show in this issue that targets of discrimination can respond to experiences of discrimination by engaging in both individual and collective actions simultaneously.

Nevertheless, building on this early work, the motives that people can have in the face of disadvantage are often deduced by contrasting the types of individual versus collective actions people engage in. For example, early work by Wright and colleagues (1990) considered whether low-status group members collectively protested their low-status (indicating group improvement motives), tried to leave their low-status group (indicating personal advancement motives) or did nothing (indicating acceptance of their fate). While this approach has proven useful, this kind of direct interpretation of actions at face value, may lead us to ignore a wider range of motives that may underlie each of these different responses by members of disadvantaged groups. Indeed, in the present issue, Leach and Livingstone (in press) propose that what is seen as supposed 'acceptance' of one's low-status, such as favoring the outgroup above one's own group, might actually be a form of resistance. For example, when women appear to agree with gender stereotypes, describing men as more agentic and women as more communal, we need not assume that women consider agency as a

positive characteristic. Moreover, endorsement of this male stereotype need not also mean acceptance of the current power relations. We believe that this tendency to interpret behaviour at face value rather than considering a range of possible underlying motives is not only important in terms of understanding the full psychological meaning of a given action choice, but may also limit the kinds of behaviors we have traditionally seen as particularly conducive to social change.

Motives Underlying Individual Advancement. Applying this call to consider the broader psychological meaning of a given form of action to the specific case of individual mobility could reveal underlying motives that are indeed more collective. Given the accepted view of individual mobility as the abandonment of the ingroup or joining of the outgroup, it is not surprising that attempts to improve one's personal position would be understood as evidence of a lack of commitment to the low-status ingroup. And, again there is clear evidence that this assumption has merit (e.g., Derks, et al., in press; Ellemers et al., 2004). However, there may be reasons to challenge its universality. Wright and Taylor's (1999) work showed that successful individual mobility of token group members undermined subsequent support for collective action by the low-status group. Yet, interestingly, this lack of support had less to do with distancing from the low-status ingroup, and more to do with their growing identification with their new high-status ingroup.

Kulich and colleagues (in press) come to a similar conclusion based on their work on how members of low-status groups deal with identity conflict emerging from their belonging to both an inherited low-status group (e.g., women, racial/ethnic minority) and an achieved high-status group (e.g., professional status). They conclude that, although achieving high professional status tends to be associated with less support for one's low-status gender or racial/ethnic group, this may be due to increased identification with the high-status group (e.g., profession) rather than decreased identification with the low-status group.

Even stronger evidence that personal advancement can, at times, be coupled with a motivation to support the ingroup is provided by Derks and colleagues (Derks et al., in press; Derks, van Laar, Ellemers, & de Groot, 2011), who show that those members of low-status groups who identify highly, and perceive their ingroup to be threatened, may respond to personal advancement into a high-status position, by engaging in ingroup promoting behavior such as actively mentoring ingroup members within their organization. Thus, it appears that individual mobility need not always be associated with ingroup distancing motives.

Motives Underlying Collective Action. It is fairly well established that in general high identifiers are more likely to recognize subtle disadvantages against their group, to be loyal to their group, to join social movements and to engage in collective action (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). As Becker and colleagues (in press) discuss in this issue, those who lack any relation with their group, disidentifiers, are more likely not to act against discrimination in the form of sexist comments. Yet, it may be worth considering possible qualifiers of this relationship between ingroup identification and collective action. Indeed, Jimenez and colleagues (Jiménez-Moya, Spears, Rodríguez-Bailón, & de Lemus, in press) provide an example of when low ingroup identifiers may be more likely than high identifiers to instigate social change. At times high identifiers may be bound by concerns about maintaining the group's image and thus may be more careful in the types of actions they are willing to take. Consequently, they may not participate in non-normative actions that they believe could damage the group's image. By contrast, low identifiers are freer of such concerns and may thus be more willing to engage in more radical forms of collective action. To the degree that these radical actions can be part of an effective campaign for social change, this work offers one case where strong ingroup identification may not be a strong precursor to social change.

Similarly, making salient a superordinate (common ingroup) identity that includes

both the low-status ingroup and the high-status outgroup has been described as a strategy that, although able to improve intergroup attitudes (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), can reduce collective action (e.g., Wright & Lubensky, 2009). This is thought to occur because the salient superordinate identity reduces identification with the ingroup. However, Górska and Bilewicz (in press), present a case where making salient a superodinate identity may not have this effect. They show that low-status group members who perceived high levels of group-based deprivation (i.e., the Polish LGBTQ community) respond to a manipulation that makes salient a superordinate identity (i.e., the Polish national identity) with greater ingroup pride and *stronger* support for collective action to induce social change. These findings are reminiscent of Mummendey and colleagues (e.g., Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999) work on ingroup projection in which they warn that making salient a superordinate category will not always lead to more positive and benign intergroup relations. Instead, they point out that this common ingroup identity can be a source of controversy and conflict as the two groups seek to define the character of the common ingroup as more consistent with their own smaller subgroup (and thus less consistent with outgroup). It seems reasonable that one way of contesting of the common ingroup identity may be collective action on the part of low-status groups. Although somewhat different from the previous example where low identification produced more collective action (Jiménez-Moya et al., in press), both of these findings strongly suggest that we consider more complex and nuanced models of the relationships between group identification, collective action and social change.

Individual Mobility and Social Change?: Evolutionary vs. Revolutionary Change.

Beyond this evidence that the relationship between ingroup identification, individual mobility and collective action may be more complicated than simple applications of the social identity approach might imply, we would like to propose that individual mobility might also play a more productive role in social change.

Collective and Individual Action as Collaborators in Social Change. We may also want to remind ourselves that social change is evaluated by the degree to which group-based inequality and structural and interpersonal discrimination is reduced, not by the means by which this happens. Although strategic collective action may be a very important means of achieving these ends, it is likely not the only means. Changing the demographics of those who hold high-status positions, by whatever means, should lead to changes in the perceptions of who belongs in these high-status groups. For example, a generation ago the prototypic representation of a medical doctor in North America was almost certainly a man. However, in 2013, women outnumber men in almost all Canadian medical schools and in the United States more the 70% of the graduates from programs in family medicine are women. Thus, to the degree that our prototypes are determined by our direct experiences a child growing up in North America will be much less likely to imagine that a doctor should be a man. Of course, these kinds of changes in the demographic of high-status professions like medical doctors owe a great deal to successful collective action. However, it seems unreasonable to claim that they owe nothing to the active efforts of individual women pursuing their own personal ambitions and desires for individual mobility. In fact, vigorous individual action may be essential for the opportunities offered by successful collective actions to be realized – even as collective action pushes the doors open, upward mobility efforts by individual minorities and women may be the only way that anyone can walk through those doors.

Further, as our example of the prototype of medical doctors implies, individual mobility efforts that contribute to changing the look of groups that were historically the province only of privileged groups now offers its own source of social change. The strong presence of women and minorities in a high-status group changes the shared expectations and beliefs about who can occupy positions of authority, power and status. And as these beliefs and expectations change, society evolves to be closer to the world imagined by those who

vigorously engaged in collective action.

Further, while the recently advanced arguments that cross-group contact can be problematic for collective action (e.g., Tausch et al., in press) are certainly an important advancement, it is worth recalling that even some of the earliest elaborations of this idea recognized that the contradiction need not be inevitable (see Wright & Lubensky, 2009), and some even propose specific solutions. In the spirit of these solutions, we propose that there may be two ways in which the cross-group contact that should result as low-status group members move up the social hierarchy might actually increase collective action participation. First, it may be that the contact that results from individual mobility may actually serve to highlight the group-based inequalities that exist (see Poore, Gagne, Barlow, Lydon, Taylor, & Wright, 2002) and increase the sense that a group-based response is necessary. So, while some successful members of the low-status group may respond to the difficulties they face by becoming "queen bees", others may be made more radical as they awaken to the inequalities they now experience very personally (see Crosby & Ropp, 2006). Second, these cross-group contacts need not always be negative. Tausch and colleagues (in press) present research in this issue that reveals that, in some cases, forming cross-group friendships (positive contact) can increase interest in individual mobility while not reducing motivation for collective action. It may even be possible that personal movement onto a high-status position offers an opportunity for low-status group members to seek out and find high-status group members who are explicitly supportive of the low-status group's struggle. Forming relationships with these people – advantaged group allies – could not only strengthen the psychological underpinnings of collective action (see Droogendyk, Louis & Wright, 2014), but could also create an opportunity for forming coalitions that would enhance, rather than undermine, collective action (see Subašić, Reynolds & Turner, 2008).

Of course, we recognize that there are clear political problems with this alternative

representations of individual action as social change – "just work hard and ignore discrimination and eventually enough of your group will get ahead and everything will be fair." Ignoring the effects of tokenism, queen bee effects and legitimizing ideologies that promote individual over collective action, would be clearly problematic. All of these serve to support unequal systems. However, we also believe that the exclusive focus on the contrast between individual and collective actions may limit our understanding of social change. Perhaps it is time to consider how individual and collective strategies may, at times, be complementary and may both result in social change.

Conceptualizing Social Change

Studying how individual and collective strategies induce social change requires a clear conceptualization of social change. Collective action may be a catalyst for social change, but it is important not to equate collective action with social change. Collective action can be ineffective or could even lead to material losses for the low-status group. Thus, determining the outcome of collective action in terms of social change is distinct from the question of what produces collective action in the first place (McGarty, Lala, Thomas, Smith, & Bliuc, 2013).

Although the number of social psychological studies on social change has increased, few specify what actually constitutes social change (but see Louis, 2009; Sweetman, Leach, Spears, & Saab, 2013). The introduction of this special issue offers the following broad definition: "a change in intergroup relations to reflect greater social equality". Yet this definition remains imprecise in that it leaves open the meaning of social equality. We propose that two elements define social (in)equality – structural/material and status inequality – and reductions in either might be considered evidence of social change.

Structural (or material) inequality refers to differences in opportunities, resources, wealth and other tangible outcomes. In the stigma literature this type of inequality is referred to as objective disadvantage (e.g., Major & O'Brien, 2005). An example of structural inequality is

the lower pay of women compared to men (e.g., Barreto, Ellemers, Cihangir, & Stroebe, 2009). A focus on this kind of inequality implies that social change occurs only when we can see measurable improvements in the material conditions of the low-status group (e.g., women and men's pay being more equal). Status inequality refers to the perceived position and value of the low-status compared to the high-status group. An example of status inequality would be the broadly held stereotypes about men (and women) that imply men have characteristics that are more valuable in the workplace. This definition of inequality implies that social change is achieved when the attitudes and beliefs about the low- and high-status groups have changed such that the two groups are evaluated more equally. Thus, when a low-status group is more respected or valued by the high-status group this would demonstrate social change - even in the absence of changes in structural inequality. For example, work by Saguy and colleagues (e.g., Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009) reveals that when high and low status group members focus on what they have in common, rather than how they are different, this leads high-status group members to hold more positive attitudes towards the low-status group thus reducing status inequality. Yet, it appears to have little effect on structural inequality, as the advantaged group continues to offer the low-status group an unequal share of resources. By contrast, as illustrated by Hansen (in press) in this special issue, an intervention by which women in a developing country are given resources and training that improves their financial position relative to men –reducing structural inequality - may, in the long run, also reduce status inequality as male and female perceptions of gender relations change such that women as a group are seen as more valued and deserving of greater respect.

A conceptualization of social change as increasing structural and/or status equality raises a number of interesting questions. For example, are both status and structural equality needed to achieve true social change? The immediate answer appears to be "no." However, we propose that sustainable and long-lasting social change probably involves both status and structural

equality. Historical examples of successful social change movements (e.g., women's rights movements) seem to include both attitude change (e.g., 'women can be excellent leaders') as well as material changes (e.g., almost 50% of the students graduating from medical school in the USA are now women). This distinction also makes apparent questions about whether (and how) reductions in one form of inequality might influence the other. In the examples above, the work by Hansen (in press) seems to demonstrate that changes in structural inequality are a catalyst for changes in status inequality, while the work by Saguy and colleagues (2009) implies that changes in status inequality may not be a catalyst for changes in structural inequality. However, it is likely that the relationship between structural versus status equality and social change is much more nuanced and context dependent than just described.

Conclusions

In this commentary, we have attempted to challenge readers to think about the meaning of key concepts and to seek a more nuanced and complex model of the psychology of social change. We have focused on two themes that are raised more or less explicitly in many of the papers in this special issue: What 'strategies' by low-status group members undermine or produce social change and why?; and What is social change? In answering these questions we have recognized the importance of collective action as a catalyst for social change but have also challenged the idea that it is only through collectively motivated action that social change will occur and that individual mobility is always antagonistic to broader social change. We also consider what constitutes social change, a concept that, although often discussed, has rarely been explicitly defined. We suggest that a more careful consideration of what constitutes social change is necessary and that any conception of social change needs to be distinguished from the behaviours that may (or may not) create it (e.g., collective action or individual mobility). Without a well-articulated understanding of what social change is, it remains difficult to evaluate what strategies have the potential to achieve it.

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