

Original Research Reports

“I Don't Really Want to Be Associated With the Self-Righteous Left Extreme”: Disincentives to Participation in Collective Action

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Abstract

This paper considers collective action non-participation by people sympathetic but not committed to participating in actions for social change ('sympathisers'). We conducted a thematic analysis of open-ended written accounts of the barriers to participating in sustained collective action (N = 112), finding that people can be reluctant to engage in some types of collective action. Participants wrote about the potential for detrimental consequences resulting from association with 'protesters', concern that they may be undermined by 'extreme' fringes of a movement, ambivalence about the visible performance of group normative behaviours (specifically, protesting), and trepidation about 'loss of self' within a group. We discuss the findings in relation to theory on social (dis)identification, social (dis)incentives, and identity performances, arguing that inaction does not necessarily stem from apathy. Rather, people may engage in motivated inaction – that is, active avoidance of some types of actions, or from affiliations with particular groups, as a response to negative inferences about the legitimacy or efficacy of some forms of collective action. Practical strategies are suggested for groups and individuals, including the potential for people to take actions for social change independently of a formally organised movement.

Keywords: collective action, inaction, social incentives, social identity, identity performance, autonomy, participative efficacy, protest, activist stigma

Non-Technical Summary

Background

In order to maintain a healthy democracy, people need to be invested in the functioning of their society and mindful of their impact on other people and the environment. One of the main forms of democratic participation (other than voting) is the engagement in protest – public coordinated actions that are usually organised by a group of people who share grievances. Yet most of the people who say they care about the social issues do not usually participate in these protests or take other collective actions.

Why was this study done?

The existing research on why people do not take action often ends up studying why people do take action, and then infers that inaction results from a lack of these facilitators, rather than from a motivated choice to remain inactive. This study instead asks people, who have a self-reported interest in social change, why they hold reservations about participating in actions for social change.

What did the researchers do and find?

The researchers created an open-ended text survey and recruited students and a community sample. The survey asked people a series of questions including on their thoughts about joining a collective or group to bring about social change,

and their reservations and concerns about participating in coordinated group actions to bring about change. The text data were analysed for re-occurring themes, which were extracted by grouping together similar responses.

The more common reservations about participation were: 1) a tension between agreeing with the social cause but not agreeing with the actions taken by some groups, specifically around more vocal protesting; 2) a fear of being associated with people who do not have the best intentions at heart (e.g. "extremists" or "professional protesters"); 3) a concern that by becoming a member of a collective they might lose their autonomy and their ability to be effective.

What do these findings mean?

These findings demonstrate the importance of understanding people's current perceived reality, in which to them the threat of being undermined or lost in a group may be very real. It also draws attention to negative stereotypes about protesters and how they may influence potential supporters. This interpretation shifts the focus away from what motivates people to take action, and onto addressing the barriers that might cause them to engage in intentional (motivated) inaction. Social change almost inevitably requires large numbers of people joining their voices to assert their desire for change, and we suggest ways to address people's concerns about participating. However, there are also a variety of alternative avenues that people could engage in to better their society, and these should be explored in future research.

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2018, Vol. 6(1), 242–270, doi:10.5964/jssp.v6i1.567

Received: 2015-08-07. Accepted: 2018-01-07. Published (VoR): 2018-06-28.

Handling Editor: Johanna Vollhardt, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA

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Collective action research in social psychology has moved through a period of innovation and integration (Becker, 2012; van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). Research has examined many aspects of collective action mobilisation, including: action as an outcome of subjective feelings of injustice, group efficacy, social identification with disadvantaged others (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in action (Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005; Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009; van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012), and more recently, the diverging predictors of different forms of collective action (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Tausch et al., 2011; Thomas & McGarty, 2018; Thomas, McGarty, & Louis, 2014). Less research, however, considers factors that motivate people to not take action (cf. Hensby, 2017; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014).

Our starting point is the observation that inaction is a phenomenon in its own right. This has been termed *motivated inaction* (Stroebe, 2013). People can expend significant energy avoiding politics (Eliasoph, 1998; Taft, 2006) and inaction can be a meaningful response to one's evaluation of a situation (Drury, Cocking, Beale, Hanson, & Rapley, 2005; Stroebe, 2013). In short, rather than construing inaction as an absence of action per se, there are good reasons for considering the nuanced ways in which people arrive at decisions to *not* take action, or to disengage from action.

In the collective action participation literature, erosion and attrition have been explained as resulting from the presence of instrumental or pragmatic hard barriers (Klandermans, 1997), and structural factors that restrict access

to opportunities for participation (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). For example, people living in rural areas might find it difficult to travel to places where demonstrations are being organised. But inaction can also have more psychological explanations. Classic work has evaluated the probabilities that people would engage in action based on perceived risks and benefits (Olson, 1968; Riker, 1990; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968) and social psychological motivations such as group identification (Klandermans, 2002; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). More recent work has argued that disidentification is a psychologically distinct construct from (a lack of) identification, capturing a sense of detachment from, dissatisfaction, and perceived dissimilarity with, the group (Becker & Tausch, 2014). Thus, disengagement is not just about structural barriers; it also involves a psychological process of disidentification from, and resistance to, the group. The current paper examines the reasons why people have reservations about taking action in line with their otherwise sympathetic support for social change. This is a socially and politically consequential group of people who are not well represented in current collective action research.

Social Identification and Socialisation Into Collective Action Participation

Most contemporary literature on collective action agrees that coordinated attempts to challenge a state of affairs overwhelmingly stem from a sense of commitment to, and identification with, a group (see van Zomeren et al., 2008, for a meta-analysis). That is, people must identify with other people who share their world views, and see this group (identity) as central to how they see themselves, in order to be motivated to act (Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2016). However, it is also clear that there are many different social identities that might enable participation in action (see Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009). For instance, those identities that have become *politicised* (specifically, politicised collective identity, Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), that is, embedded in a broader understanding of the position of their group in the context of unequal power relations, are stronger predictors of collective action than those identities that are not (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Similarly, social identification with a social movement organisation (Stürmer & Simon, 2004) or as an activist (Barr & Drury, 2009; Blackwood & Louis, 2012) facilitates collective action. Other research suggests, however, that many people who take concerted actions to change the status quo ('activism' by any other name) do not identify as activists or protesters (e.g., Bobel, 2007; Stuart, Thomas, Donaghue, & Russell, 2013). Some people act simply on the basis of desired changes that they want to see in the world, that is, where their opinions become the basis for the formation of a psychological group (see Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds, & Muntele, 2007; Smith, Thomas, & McGarty, 2015). Our analysis adopts the view that it is important not to pre-judge the nature of the psychological collective (group membership: that is, activist or not) that underpins action, or disengagement from action.

While people may identify with different *psychological* groups, the physically-present and interacting group ('the crowd', e.g. Reicher, 1987), and the organisations that build up around a social movement, also play a key role in facilitating sustained participation - via the development of social ties with fellow group members (Van Dyke & Dixon, 2013; Zuckerman, 2005). Thus, intragroup dynamics of group socialisation are integral to identity formation (Harré, 2007; Klandermans, 1997; Levine & Moreland, 1994), to the adoption of group norms (Livingstone, Haslam, Postmes, & Jetten, 2011), and to the maintenance of that identity (Harré, Tepavac, & Bullen, 2009). Ingroup norms include action norms (the agreed upon, expected types of actions members engage in), and thus identifying with these groups and being concerned with the opinions of other group members creates a social impetus for engaging in action (Bäck, Bäck, & Knäpton, 2015).

In combination, these findings point to two key underexplored social psychological processes involved in collective action: a consideration of the impediments and facilitators of sustained commitment to the group over time; and, relatedly, an acknowledgement of the multiple group memberships that may be implicated in action, as well as the ways in which these come into conflict. We address these two gaps, respectively, in more detail below.

Fluctuations in Commitment and Social Identification

Classic stage models of collective action participation typically place participation in one event as the end stage (Klandermans, 1997; Oegema & Klandermans, 1994). However, more recent collective action research has started to engage with the fluctuations in psychological commitment to the cause over time (see Corrigan-Brown, 2012; Harré et al., 2009; Tausch & Becker, 2013; Thomas, McGarty, Rees, Berndsen, & Bliuc, 2016). For example, the model by van Zomeren, Leach, and Spears (2012) has a participation feedback loop that recognises the influence of previous participation on future participation.

If participation can fluctuate over time it follows that the levels of psychological commitment to the group (social identification) may also change as a function of intragroup socialisation, changes in the norms, values, and directions of the group. These ideas are anticipated in the *elaborated social identity model* of collective action (ESIM; following Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2009; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996; Stott & Reicher, 1998), which argues that social identities and social meaning emerge and are continually renegotiated through social interactions within the group (intragroup) as well as through interactions with outgroups and powerful authorities (intergroup). For instance, Barr and Drury's (2009) analysis of the 2005 G8 summit direct actions showed that those experienced in collective action were able to draw on their experience to access resources (instrumental and social) that facilitated an enduring sense of empowerment. However, they found that some of those less experienced felt alienated or disconnected from the activist community (see also Hornsey et al., 2006). Thus, participants in the same event can experience those events in completely different ways that may empower and sustain participation on the one hand, or promote disengagement on the other. People may also re-evaluate their group memberships over time to determine if they align with what the group deems appropriate, and acceptable, or who they want to be in the future (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), and will leave if the group no longer fits their needs or values (Moreland & Levine, 1982). Yet little research has engaged with attrition or fall-out as an intentional, *motivated* decision.

Social Identity Non-Integration, Social Disincentives, and Inefficacy as Facilitators of Inaction

Fluctuations in commitment can be due to the many different social identities implicated in the development and maintenance of motivation to act. However, the literature does not often specifically consider how membership of different groups might fit together within a whole 'self' or, conversely, fail to integrate (but see Baray, Postmes, & Jetten, 2009; Louis, Amiot, Thomas, & Blackwood, 2016; Turner-Zwinkels, Postmes, & van Zomeren, 2015; Turner-Zwinkels, van Zomeren, & Postmes, 2015). For instance, while individuals might identify with a group of people who they share grievances with, this does not necessarily lead to an easy transition into identification with a specific social movement organisation or a crowd at a demonstration (Neville & Reicher, *in press*; Stuart et al., 2013). Theoretically, this suggestion is consistent with the incorporation of moral conviction into the social identity model of collective action (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012). That is, motivated inaction could be an outcome of poor fit between moral conviction (belief in the cause) and the specific action-oriented content of politicised identities (i.e. the methods taken by the group).

Part of the complexity of transitioning or integrating different identities regards the symbolic or strategic components of identity expression (i.e., impression management, Goffman, 1959). The identity performance component of the *social identity model of deindividuation effects* (SIDE: Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995) suggests that social identities are performed much like personal self-presentations. In order to adopt a social identity, people need to be willing to perform that identity to different audiences, and according to perceived ingroup norms; in turn, unwillingness to engage in identity performances can erode one's commitment to the group (Klein et al., 2007). The collective action literature on 'social incentives' (Klandermans, 1997) inputs a role for the anticipated negative responses of valued others as a barrier to collective action participation. Thus, concerns about managing the public identity performances of activism could plausibly constitute a psychological barrier to forming or continuing attachment to that group. Indeed, the majority of collective action non-participants are from a social environment that disapproves of participation (Hensby, 2017; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014).

Overtly politicised collective identities (e.g., activist identities, Simon & Klandermans, 2001) may be particularly susceptible to identity performance concerns, due to their strong ideological and prescriptive norms. Activists can be delegitimised by outside groups and bystanders (Adair, 1996; Linden & Klandermans, 2006; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995), and some activists face the complex task of making themselves palatable to a bystander public (Louis, 2009; Stuart et al., 2013; Thomas & Louis, 2013, 2014). Activists can be aware of the beliefs that oppositional groups hold about them – referred to as meta-stereotypes – and can act to strategically confirm these stereotypes to outgroups (Klein & Azzi, 2001). This requires activists to be willing to be “entrepreneurial deviants” (Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014) and accept (or even seek out) some negative attention in order to create a challenge to the status quo. The media can then distort communications with the public (McLeod & Detenber, 1999), and/or well-intentioned but misinformed ally activists can distort the original messages of the movement (Droogendyk, Wright, Lubensky, & Louis, 2016). Thus, there is a level of complexity involved in being an activist which requires more than identification with a group who share grievances (see also Curtin & McGarty, 2016). Yet little research has considered how this impacts upon sympathiser's inclination to participate. In one such study, Bashir, Lockwood, Chasteen, Nadolny, and Noyes (2013) show amongst people nominally supportive of a cause, negative perceptions of the activists engaged in these movements can lead supporters to avoid becoming affiliated with them.

Further potential facilitators of inaction are the beliefs that actions are illegitimate or ineffective in bringing about social change. Beliefs that action will be effective is a predictor of taking action (Bandura, 2000; van Zomeren et al., 2008) and group efficacy – that is, the belief that the group can bring about change - can increase perceptions of the legitimacy of the groups actions (Jiménez-Moya, Miranda, Drury, Saavedra, & González, 2018). Yet, research also shows that people evaluate the efficacy of collective action in contextually adaptive, and often seemingly paradoxical ways (Hornsey et al., 2006; van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2010). Of particular interest in this study is the link between individual and group efficacy known as 'participative efficacy' – that is, individuals' belief that they can make an incremental contribution to the group (van Zomeren, Saguy, & Schellhaas, 2013).

The Current Study

Our study adopts an open-text survey methodology to investigate people's perceptions of collective action, with a particular intention of identifying their reasons for inaction. Studies examining negative encounters or perceptions of collective action typically involve those who have overcome barriers to participation (e.g., Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995; Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014). However, in order to understand inaction, we need to consider the experiences of people who are ambivalent: that is, people who are attitudinally sympathetic but not active, or who infrequently

participate in some actions. These people's experiences may be qualitatively different from committed activists (see [Hansson & Jacobsson, 2014](#); [Livingstone, 2014](#); [Vestergren, Drury, & Chiriac, 2017](#)). The online survey design also addresses a pragmatic difficulty associated with studying those who typically do not turn up to events, and facilitates a larger sample than an interview study.

Elsewhere, people who do not take part in action may be referred to as non-activists, or as possessing a non-politicised identity. However, we take the lead of [Corrigall-Brown \(2012\)](#) who suggests that 'activist' is not always a strictly defined identity nor is it constant. Some people may be in a stage of trying out (or retiring) their 'activist wings', and in that case there are not very clear identity norms to follow. They may also hold multiple potentially relevant social identities (e.g., opinion-based identity, social movement organisational identity, an identity defined by status or power hierarchies). We thus refer to our sample more broadly as sympathisers.

We adopt a broad definition of collective action, as actions which "aim to challenge or protect the status quo, and can be conducted by low-status groups, high-status groups, or groups not distinguished by status position" ([Becker, 2012](#), p. 1; see also [Droogendyk et al., 2016](#)). Also key to this definition is that the actions must be designed to affect the circumstances of the group as a whole, and not specific individuals ([Wright et al., 1990](#)), although individuals can act as representatives of their group ([Becker, 2012](#)). We thus recruited for people who "have ever participated, or wanted to participate, in any form of collective action".

The study aims are to analyse the content of the inferences and evaluations that people make about collective action, including perceptions of what constitute the normative (expected, agreed upon) behaviours of group members. Our aim is to understand how some inferences about collective action, and the group memberships that enable it, may act as a barrier to ongoing participation. The analysis focuses on social and psychological barriers rather than instrumental ones (e.g., accessing transport to attend a rally). We analyse the nature and form of those barriers, rather than quantifying the reasons for and against participation per se, but we nevertheless provide information about the prevalence of themes overall.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twelve participants were recruited via convenience sampling. The sample included both university students and general members of the Australian community. Fifty-four were Australian university students (80% psychology, 20% law or environmental science); they received credit towards course requirements, or entered a \$50 prize pool. A further fifty-eight participants were from a database of people from the wider Australian community; they received \$6 each. The majority of participants were female (64%) and the mean age was 32.5 ($SD = 13$). The age ranges were: 42% between 18-25 years, 27% between 25-40 years; and 29% between 41-68 years old. They reported being White Australian or European (80%), Asian (8%), Mixed (5%, e.g. Maori/White), African (.1%), or did not specify ethnicity. We did not collect information on rural/urban location, however the majority of participants were urban because they were either university students attending a city campus or recruited from a participant database which was originally created through mailbox drops in urban locations. Responses were anonymous and participants were assigned a unique response number.

Materials and Procedure

The project was advertised through campus notice-boards, newsletters, and an online community database, as “wanting to hear about the experiences of a broad range of people who have ever participated, or wanted to participate, in any form of collective action”. Our operationalisation adopted a deliberately broad definition of collective action, as:

...either groups of people coming together to try and create social change around a particular issue (e.g. a protest rally), or it can also include individuals each making their own contribution towards a common goal (e.g. sponsoring a child). Collective action can include activities such as writing letters to politicians, boycotting goods, donating money, attending protests, signing up to activist organisations, attending group meetings, reading information published by a social movement/collective action organisation, and many more activities. Collective action can also include online (internet) actions. Examples of online action are things like joining a Facebook group, or receiving an email newsletter from a collective action group.

Participants completed the survey online, in their own time. The survey comprised of a series of 13 mostly open-ended questions (see Appendix for full list) that were intended (except for one question) to be phrased in neutral terms. The questions used in this analysis are from section 2 – on their anticipations/experiences of being involved with groups of people who are engaged in social change (“Please explain why being part of a collective is/isn’t important or helpful to you”), and a question aimed to encourage participants to move beyond pragmatic barriers: “There are a lot of people who are concerned about social or environmental issues but, for various reasons, have difficulties becoming involved in collective action. Apart from it making demands on your life, in terms of issues like time, money, or difficulty travelling, do you feel like you experience any further reservations or concerns about your involvement?”

Data Analysis

The initial coding was conducted in the online tool Dedoose (dedoose.com), by the first author (in discussion with the other authors), and was guided by the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a systematic method of carefully noting re-occurring themes. Our coding focussed specifically on two sets of questions from the survey that were most pertinent to the research questions. First, we coded participants’ answers to questions about why they do or do not find it helpful or important to be part of an organised collective (see Q4, Appendix), and when they might prefer to act alone (without a formally organising collective; Q5, Appendix). We refer to the outcomes of this analysis below as ‘Perceptions of working in collective action groups’ (see also Table 1). Second, we coded responses to a question about the reservations and concerns they have about collective action in general. We refer to the outcomes of this analysis below as ‘Reservations and concerns’ (see also Table 2). The initial coding was inclusive, assigning all responses at least one code. Each participant’s response could be coded against more than one code, but only once against the same code.

After generating the complete list of codes, and merging repetitive codes, the next stage of analysis involved ordering the codes hierarchically in a more deductive, theoretically determined way – for example, by creating headings for intragroup concerns (that is, factors relating to the socialisation within the group) and intergroup concerns (that is, factors relate to the group acting against other outgroups, the public, or authorities). This coding structure is listed, along with examples of each code, in Table 1 and Table 2. The final stage of the analysis involved selecting the most prevalent codes relating to negative evaluations of collective action, from across both sections.

They were reviewed for similar ideas, and then integrated into the final themes that are analysed in more detail in the main body of the analysis section.

The novel use of the open-ended text method (see [Terry & Braun, 2017](#)) sought participants' experiences or reflections on collective action in a very broad sense and relating to any number of causes they had an interest in. We thus made the decision not to try to differentiate any systematic differences in the sample.

With thematic analysis, how data is interpreted depends on the adopted perspective and level of analysis, which must be kept clear and consistent throughout ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). We adopted a realist perspective, which is about taking participants' accounts as a reflection of their real experiences. One example of this is how participants' reflections on the interpretations that other people might make about their behaviour can shape their own willingness to participate in those behaviours. That is, what others *really* think is not directly relevant, but rather it is the perspective of the individual, and how that perspective is used to explain their behaviour, which is relevant to the interpretation.

The quotes selected to represent each theme are those most illustrative of the theme, while also representing the perspectives of as many participants as possible (that is, we sought to not present the same participant repeatedly).

Analysis and Findings

Outline of Analysis

The participants wrote an average of 250 words (ranging from 120-752) across the whole survey. As this study took place in Australia and the participants were university students and community members with internet access, the type of causes reported are those that concern the actions of structurally advantaged, primarily urban, people. The common causes participants reported an interest in were: environmental degradation/conservation (54 occurrences), climate change (25 occurrences), poverty (23 occurrences), minority rights (women, indigenous, refugees, LGBTQTI – 25 occurrences), human rights abuses (22 occurrences), animal abuse (20 occurrences), child abuse (10 occurrences), and federal political issues (e.g. capitalism, censorship, political corruption, involvement in war, working conditions – 25 occurrences).

Two participants reported no participation in collective action¹, and the remaining participants had at least participated in some form of collective action, at some point in their lives. Participants reported engaging in actions monthly to every few months – including signing petitions and donating money (80% of participants), around half of participants had boycotted goods or companies, purchased fair trade goods or signed up to an online action group. More than a quarter (28%) had attended a protest, and 17% of participants had joined an (offline) action group. On the basis of these characteristics, the sample can be described as comprised of people who have had some involvement in collective action, or as sympathisers of social change. Seventy-three of the 101 participants listed reservations about being involved in collective action (other than the ones we listed –time, cost, travel constraints).

[Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#) illustrate the themes relating to perceptions of working in collective action groups, and their reservations and concerns about collective action, respectively.

Perceptions of Working in Collective Action Groups

Table 1 shows that the notions that groups are motivating (1a), effective and powerful (1d), were expressed frequently by participants.

Table 1

Thematic Coding of Perceptions of Working in Collective Action Groupsⁱⁱ

Theme title (number of occurrences)	Examples ⁱⁱⁱ
1. Positive about groups - unelaborated (5)	"I believe as much as you do not need to be a part of a group it is always preferred." (#9724)
a. <i>Groups are motivating, helpful (31)</i>	"It is quite important, as it makes me feel that there are others out there that feel the same way. It is quite helpful being part of a collective, as others can do the work I can't, such as organising petitions or events etc.!" (#11483)
b. <i>Groups develop my social skills (1)</i>	"Because you want be a part of a group that you feel accepted in and a part of, it also enables you develop social skills and mix around with people that have your same beliefs" (#11365)
c. <i>Groups help my career (1)</i>	"It is socially acceptable to be part of a collective. If you state that you have done community service of some sort, you will have higher chance of getting a scholarship you applied for, or even a job that you want." (#9469)
d. <i>Groups are more effective, powerful (56)</i>	"generally groups are better at getting a message across, and gain more supporters." (#11370)
i. <i>Voices are heard more in groups (8)</i>	"Many voices make more noise" (#11399)
ii. <i>Groups address the limitations of individuals (5)</i>	"larger numbers of people provide differing points of view. one person has their own perceptions and understandings about the world which are usually subjectively driven." (#9355)
2. Negative about groups	
a. <i>Groups too extreme/self-righteous (8)</i>	Act alone: "Yes. Means I can express my opinion concisely on my own terms without being implicitly implicated in the potentially extreme / wrong opinions of others." (#11469)
b. <i>Groups damage reputation of the cause (6)</i>	Act alone: "Yes, I don't believe that large protests are always the way to go, sometimes they can actually damage the public's perception of protestors rather than truly raise awareness..." (#11531)
c. <i>Interpersonal difficulty with group members (10)</i>	"Being part of a collective is both helpful and not so helpful. it helps in the sense of increased awareness and numbers is power. When there is enough people wanting a change, a change is bound to happen. However, people have different opinions and ways of doing things which can result in disagreement and conflict." (#9853)
d. <i>Groups waste resources (1)</i>	"I am really glad that they [groups] exist but too much money is spent on administration, fancy offices, and paying legal fees ie. Bob Brown's case." (#11466)
e. <i>Value/strategy misalignment with groups (17)</i>	Act alone: "Yes - sometimes there are not active and organised groups interested in the same issue/s and sometimes the collective acts in ways that are not in line with my own ideas re appropriate action" (#11490)
i. <i>Loss of voice in group (5)</i>	"Sometimes individual ideas are lost in a group" (#11529)

Theme title (number of occurrences)	Examples ⁱⁱⁱ
<p>3. Groups not essential, but can be helpful/ambivalent about groups (13)</p> <p><i>a. Depends on the cause/actions as to whether it's better to work alone or with groups (14)</i></p>	<p>"It is not essential to be part of a collective in order to change things for the better. There are of course some types of action which are most effectively done as part of a large group e.g. where a show of popular support for a particular issue is necessary. While I am happy to participate in such action when it is necessary, I do not feel it is necessary to be a 'signed up' participant just for its own sake." (#11511)</p> <p>"The times I act on my own are when I apply my beliefs at what things I purchase, which is quite passive. When I am being active I prefer to be part of something others are involved in. Because collective action is stronger and more motivating." (#11509)</p>
<p>4. Positive about working alone – unelaborated (4)</p> <p><i>a. Independent action is virtuous (25)</i></p> <p><i>b. Action can be more efficacious alone (22)</i></p> <p><i>c. Acting alone can encourage others to act (5)</i></p> <p><i>d. No one else is taking action on this issue (9)</i></p> <p><i>e. Prefer to act alone if the issue is personal to me (5)</i></p> <p><i>f. I'm someone who works better alone (personality) (4)</i></p>	<p>"I like to act alone" (#11424)</p> <p>"[Belonging to a collective] isn't important because I would do what I believe is right even if I was the only one who was doing so. It is important because you are able to support each other and encourage others to participate." (#11435)</p> <p>"Yes. I get frustrated, sometimes, waiting for change to happen. Getting a group of people to agree to DO something constructive can be a slow process. As I have mentioned before, above, one person can make a difference albeit in a small way. But that one action can have a snowball effect or be the impetus for others to take action and so change is effected more rapidly." (#11507)</p> <p>"It is good because when working with others you know that your contribution may amount to something significant and may encourage others to join as well. However, it isn't that important to me personally because I should be able to contribute regardless of whether other people will or not" (#11433)</p> <p>"There are always opportunities to contribute toward action. There are not always others at hand to assist. Sometimes action on one's own is the only option at that time. If so, I will act on my own." (#11535)</p> <p>"When the issues are of a personal nature, then yes on my own is the preferred option." (#11445)</p> <p>"It comes down to my personality and the ways I contribute. I'm a writer, I know my strength is in words, and mostly that process is a solo one. Some people have the energy and personality and skills to be active in more extroverted ways, and I leave that to them. When I am involved in producing events, for example to raise awareness and build culture (I've done this re queer culture, disability arts, and women's events, to name some) then a team is way better than trying to do it on your own - there is simply a lot to do and you need a bunch of people to do it well." (#11509)</p>
<p>5. Do not like to act alone (12)</p> <p><i>a. I'm someone who works better with others (personality) (2)</i></p>	<p>"nope, too much energy and hard work" (#9412)</p> <p>"no as I am not very assertive or self confident" (#9714)</p>
<p>6. No strong opinion/not interested (7)</p>	<p>"the things I do are part of my daily life, and I feel that's all I can do at the moment." (#11531)</p>

The concerns about working with groups most frequently related to interpersonal difficulties (2c), and misalignment with group members on values or strategies (2e). Codes 3 and 4 capture the idea that people can take independent action without an organised group, but that groups can be helpful, or that working without a group can be positive. The sub-themes show that participants reported that people should take action regardless of support from others

(i.e. that independently taking a stance is a virtue) (4a), and that taking action without an organised group can, in some circumstances, be more efficacious (4b).

Reservations and Concerns

Table 2 (below) illustrates the codes from the question focussing explicitly on their reservations about collective action.

Table 2

Thematic Coding of the Reservation and Concerns Question^{iv}

Theme title (number of occurrences)	Examples ^v
1. Efficacy (18)^{vi}	"What we are doing doesn't actually change things in the long run; that I am wasting my time." (#11458)
2. Individual/interpersonal concerns	
a. <i>Personal life stigma</i> (3)	"Negative responses from those around you. Peer pressure. Making sure that I pick the right battle." (#11464)
b. <i>Professional stigma</i> (6)	"I have been mocked in my workplace for my beliefs and action" (#11455)
c. <i>Poor health/personal consequences/loss of privacy</i> (6)	"I have concerns about full on volunteer work for causes such as refugees or children in poverty as I worry about the emotional toll it would take and that I might not be equipped to deal with distressing things that I might encounter." (#11351)
d. <i>Difficulty gaining skills/knowledge</i> (3)	"Environmentalists are sometimes treated with disregard as environmental scientists/ecologists/conservation biology is not taken seriously by a lot of people. They are still treated as hippy science. Passion for a cause is all good but if you don't have the proper knowledge and applicable ways to solve problems then no good can come of it." (#9451)
e. <i>Not personally suitable/shyness/self-confidence issues</i> (3)	"My personal concern is a lack of self-confidence, making it difficult to talk to people I don't know or form bonds with strangers." (#11452)
f. <i>Lack commitment to cause</i> (3)	"If I'm not passionate about something, I won't contribute or think too much about it. Until I have established a healthy and happy life for myself, I believe that I can't be of a huge use to others." (#11300)
g. <i>Others (that I know) don't care about the cause</i> (1)	"Yes, it can be hard to make the commitment sometimes as others seem to be living mostly in a hedonistic manner." (#9792)
h. <i>Social stigma/reputation/stereotype concerns</i> (12)	"Sometimes one can be associated with people one doesn't want to be eg people who use violence instead of peaceful methods...this is one thing that can put me off." (#11482)
3. Intragroup concerns	
a. <i>Difficulty being an individual in a group/autonomy</i> (11)	"Even in a group of like minded people there is always the threat of different behaviours that may offend others" (#11467)
b. <i>Hypocrisy/corruption</i> (3)	"Taking the environment for example. We have environmentalists who rave about saving the environment etc, but are quite happy to travel thousands of kilometres using fossil fuel. Promote tourism which requires using fossil fuel. So it appears that ideas/thoughts are not thought through and therefore I do have reservations." (#11510)
c. <i>Effort/extent of commitment to group</i> (4)	"the effort of participation being associated with a particular group being different to the majority of members of these groups expectation of further commitment from group members" (#11377)

Theme title (number of occurrences)	Examples ^v
<i>d. Extremists/factions within groups (18)</i>	"Sometimes I feel reservations because some people that join collective action groups are 'professional protesters' and do not actually care about a certain cause, are only interested in rebelling and being a nuisance. I don't want to join people like that so I have reservations when deciding to or not." (#9802)
4. Instrumental^{vii} - time (2)/income & cost (6)/safety & security (8)	"money is an obvious one as I'm a student and so have very little but I give my time instead of money which is more valuable to me. Time can be a constraint and you can't be everywhere at once so I pick key things to be a part of and give my all instead of many and not give all I can be."(#9494)

Code 1 shows that participants cited concerns about the efficacy of collective action. As it is well established in the literature (e.g., Bandura, 2000; Hornsey et al., 2006) we do not directly focus on efficacy here. However, it is important to note that efficacy is bound up with other concerns, because efficacy considerations change as one becomes more or less engaged with a cause (Blackwood & Louis, 2012; Hornsey et al., 2006). We note in Table 2 where efficacy co-occurred - most frequently alongside concerns about extremists/factions within groups (3d). However, this coding does not capture more implicit references to efficacy, which can be drawn out more in the qualitative analysis.

Consistent with our aims, we focus on the social and psychological related concerns in participants' accounts. The most commonly occurring themes from these topics relate to social stigma, reputation, and stereotyping concerns (2h), difficulty maintaining autonomy in a group (3a), and concern about extremists and factions within groups (3d).

Detailed Analysis of Prevalent Themes

The following analysis is ordered by combining similar codes from both of the thematic tables, to draw out the more latent implications (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) of participants' more frequently occurring evaluations of collective action and how these perceptions could relate to non-participation in collective action. The following sections illustrate these, with example quotes, in the following order: hostility towards protesters, concerns regarding how collective action is seen by others, and establishing autonomy in a collective.

Hostility Towards Protesters (Table 1 - 2a, 2b; Table 2 - 2h, 3d)

This theme represents the specific ideas that participants have about protesters. First, it is notable that there is an assumption present in these data that collective action is synonymous with protesting, despite our inclusive definition. Accordingly, there are perceived social consequences to being 'a protester'. Some of the terms used to describe protesters were quite negative, including: "rabid", "irrational", "counterproductive", "hypocritical", and "aggressive". However, in contrast to attempts to de-legitimise protesters because of opposition to the cause, these terms were typically applied to a perceived radical fringe. Participants expressed the concern that some protesters might serve as inappropriate representatives of the cause and therefore could derail the movement, or damage their own efforts.

I don't really want to be associated with the self-righteous left extreme... I'd far prefer to argue sensibly and scientifically, with proven fact rather than unproven rhetoric, to get my point across than stand the other side of a picket line shouting righteous slogans and feeling good about myself. (P#11469, 25 yr Male in Education)

This participant depicts a “self-righteous left extreme” who are in opposition to good sense and science by contrasting arguments that use “proven fact”, to those with “unproven rhetoric”. This shows that he is emphasising the *method* of communicating a cause, in particular aligning with what he deems as more sensible, scientific, or fact-aligned approaches. Moreover, as seen in the above and the following example, protests are described as encouraging people who are said to be protesting in order to feel good about themselves, which portrays them as lacking genuine concern and only engaging for self-interested (hedonic) reasons.

In the next extract collective action is also described as attracting disingenuous people:

My main concern is that, in my opinion, collective action groups can unwittingly attract extremists or people of a particular political mind who are simply looking for a cause to fight and be dramatic about, rather than necessarily attracting people who are purely there to fight the corner of that particular cause. For me, it is about trying to make a difference for the subjects that matter to me rather than getting mixed up with a crowd of professional demonstrators. (P#11514, 34 yr Female in Animal Health)

Extremists and people ‘looking for a fight’ are placed into the same category here and contrasted to those who are ostensibly genuine about the cause. The term “professional demonstrators”, though not defined, may convey a view of people who participate for economic benefit, personal attention, or because they do not have a more legitimate form of employment. As in the previous extract, her concern rests with the apparent lack of genuine concern from so-called professional demonstrators and is enough to result in avoidance of some demonstrations, and to find her own ways of ‘making a difference’. That is to say, hostility towards protesters can be based on a concern about participative efficacy – their ability to make an incremental contribution.

How Collective Action Is Seen by Others

We also identified patterns in these data regarding concern for the opinions of others – a known disincentive for participation in collective action (Klandermans, 1997; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014). The following analysis identifies some nuances to social disincentives, and how they connect to efficacy and differential participation in collective actions.

The ‘others’ referenced in these data were sometimes specific - such as personal or professional relations (Table 2 - 2a, 2b), but more often implicitly referenced a broader public (Table 1 - 2b; Table 2 - 2h). The realisation that the group needs to win over the bystander public is a key component of the process of becoming politicised (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). In one example of this theme, a participant expresses participation disincentives as arising from being associated with public figures who represent these causes:

Sometimes I disagree with the politics or methods of others associated with a cause. Sometimes I want to support the cause but not be associated with public figures who also support it. (#9445, 22 yr Male in Law)

The repeated use of the term “association” indicates concern for their reputation and how this can be marred by others who represent the cause. This concern could be linked to the previous theme on hostility towards protesters, but appears to be more related to the reputational effects of association. In the following response the participant is responding to the question on whether they feel it is important or helpful to be a part of an organised collective. They make an implicit link between social disincentives and efficacy.

I think sometimes people tend to ignore large protest rallies, or dismiss them as being rabble; one person making a lot of noise can be a lot more powerful than a bigger group. (P#11505, 28 yr Male in Marketing)

The reason given by this participant for not wanting to belong to a collective action group is based on *others* dismissing protests as “rabble”, not necessarily because they hold this personal view. This indicates that activist stigma may not only be something that people have to personally accept in order to be an activist, but also weighs into judgements about the potential for one’s actions being dismissed, and therefore ineffective. The alternative - “one person making a lot of noise” - is contrasted as being more powerful (we return to the notion of independent action and efficacy later on).

In addition to implicit references to a general public, specific others were also mentioned – for example:

[I am concerned about] The false portrayal of my views by an extremely biased and/or ill-informed media. [television channels] 7, 9, & 10 only care about headlines. The ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] is so far to the left that they cannot see the right (in either a political or moral sense). (P#11464, 55 year Male in Theology)

I feel some level of concern for the way these actions may be perceived by other people. Particularly when these actions show up during internet searches of my name, I have some concern for how this may be perceived by future employers. (P#11492, 25 year Female in Marketing)

there may be personal repercussions. You can get boycotted both personally and professionally. You then may be treated like a leper, alienate those people you hold dear to you. Suffer health wise. (P#11507, 52 year Female, Unemployed)

In the first example, the concern is about false portrayal by media outlets to their audiences; the second, a concern about future employers and the public availability of information on the internet is mentioned; in the third example the concern is about both personal and professional alienation. These represent references to different others who may not support one’s involvement, or have the potential to misrepresent one’s involvement. Thus, each different type of “other” has different relational repercussions (that is, professional ramifications versus threats to interpersonal relationships).

The notion of being seen by others was not always expressed as unambiguously negative, indicating that participation in collective action can be experienced as a dilemma (cf. [Klandermans, 2002](#)); necessary in order to be heard (and even making them feel proud), but also holding the potential for derogation by others. In one account an individual identified one way in which such ambivalence could be resolved - by making a distinction between “visible” and “invisible” actions:

For invisible actions, such as signing petitions or being on a newlist, I have no reservations. For visible actions such as protesting, I might feel embarrassed, not for being part of the cause, but for making a display of myself. (P#11483, 24 yr Male in Public Service)

In this example “visible” actions have higher potential social disincentives for participation. We can also identify a distinction between being seen to be associated with a cause, and being seen to participate in the cause in a particular (visible) way. Their concern was not in terms of misaligned values or goals, but rather discomfort with the form in which these values are expressed – that is, identity performances rather than social identification per se.

Establishing Autonomy in a Collective

The third overarching theme is about participants' reference to a putative fit between the individual and the physical group or organisation. The positive feelings of empowerment and the practical assistance that being part of a group provides (see Table 1 - 1a, 1d), are contrasted to the difficulties in reaching agreement and alignment (Table 1 - 2c, 2e); the concerns that becoming a member of a group threaten individual expression and efficacy (Table 1 - 4b; Table 2 - 3a); and more generally, ambivalence about the necessity of working in groups to achieve one's social change goals (Table 1 - 3, 3a). We demonstrated in previous themes how negative perceptions about the people who participate in actions might encourage people to engage outside of a formal, organising collective. Here we examine in more detail what this means. The first example demonstrates the ambivalence over whether being part of a collective is important:

I am in the middle here. Sometimes like in the case of contributions for cause, I feel it is helpful, at other times, I do not feel comfortable going with the majority. Perhaps [collective action] would change me to the extent that I become one of many, and may lose my ability to voice and think for myself. This would be concerning. I rather be independent and contribute where I feel it may make a difference. (P#11510, 42 yr Male in Consulting)

This participant's concerns convey a view that it can be difficult to maintain a sense of personal autonomy in a group and that the group may come to subsume individual expression. This is described as concerning because it disables their feelings of personal autonomy and participative efficacy. However, in the next example the participant uses the notion of "voice" in quite a different way.

It can be easier to act on your own and even though others may support something similar to you it doesn't mean it is the same. There values may stop a little too early for example and make concession that should not be made. When joining a group or organisation you are basically lending your approval and voice to its cause. However these groups favour many causes some of which I agree with, some I do not. I rather not have my voice lent to those I do not agree with. (P#9911, 23 yr Male in Psychology)

This quote is an example of an individual perceiving poor fit with groups, rather than loss of self or autonomy. The participant describes lending his voice to a group whose values and methods he does not wholly agree with, despite sharing support for some of the same issues. This quote and the previous one, despite arising from different sources, would likely result in the same outcomes – namely, adopting independent action towards collective goals, or inaction.

A concern about the loss of autonomy could also be related specifically to the interpersonal, face-to-face aspects of groups. That is, the idea of having others working together towards a goal can feel generally positive (see Table 1 - 1a, 1d), but the day-to-day activity of working with others was not always described as necessary or positive (Table 1 - 2c).

Sometimes there is too much talk and not enough do. There are a lot of opinions and not all of them are compatible and then it is hard to go in a direction you prefer. (P#9687, 32 yr Female in Environmental Science)

The contrast highlights a distinction between working in a *physical or interpersonal* group, and feeling part of a *psychological* group (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012, 2015). Physical groups might be characterised by interpersonal difficulties (Harré et al., 2009), however, knowing that one is part of a group in a psychological sense can

feel satisfying and empowering. Thus, ambivalence is provoked by conflicting experiences between belonging and autonomy at different levels of group attachment.

The final subtheme related to autonomy (Table 1 - 4a) speaks more of a moralistic value of independent action, rather than a psychological need for autonomy. For example:

You should continue to be active in whatever your beliefs are regardless of support from others. A greater voice is often heard more clearly. (#11484, 44 yr Female, Home Duties)

This perspective does encourage participation in collective actions on one level, but does not intrinsically tie participation in action with group membership. The idea is that you should not rely on others in order to enact your values, even though it may have greater effect. This speaks to a common thread throughout this study emphasizing that individuals can work towards a common goal in the absence of a formal organising mechanism or group.

Discussion

This research examined the perceptions of a range of people who have had some involvement in collective actions, asking them what reservations they hold about further engagement in actions to achieve social change. Our aim was to investigate the social or psychological barriers that might work against initiating or sustaining participation in actions for social change and/or membership in collective action groups. We argued that an explicit focus on negative accounts is needed in order to understand how inaction might be a motivated and meaningful response to current (perceived) conditions. The participants in this study asserted their beliefs as meaningful contemplations of the impact of their actions or group affiliations upon their autonomy and efficacy. In what follows we consider the implications of these findings in terms of existing theory on actions for social change, and social identity.

Perceptions of Protesters and Collective Action

One component of identity formation involves people drawing on a representation of the stereotypical (or prototypical) notion of a group member and using that understanding to shape their own self construal (Turner, Wetherell, & Hogg, 1989). Similarly to Bashir et al. (2013) who experimentally identified negative stereotypes of feminists and environmentalists, in these data there was evidence across different respondents that they are drawing on negative stereotypes of people engaged in action (protesters in particular). Moreover, people reported their inaction (or rather, their disinclination to participate in protests) as motivated by the desire to avoid association with people who are ostensibly disingenuous.

Where do these perceptions come from? People gather information about protests from traditional (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Reicher & Stott, 2011) and social media (McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2014), from the opinions of others (Bäck et al., 2015; Klandermans, 1997; Zuckerman, 2005), and from our first-hand experiences (Barr & Drury, 2009; Reicher & Stott, 2011). Intriguingly, the findings here suggest that protesters need not only to contend with negative labelling and derogation from those opposed to their agenda (Einwohner, 2002; Papastamou, 1986), but also from movement sympathisers. “Extremist” can be a term used not only to say that someone is going too far or too hard, but also to say that they do not have the interests of the movement at heart. It is possible for protesters to participate in misguided ways, or to have their message distorted, thus impeding the success of the social change movement (Droogendyk et al., 2016). This includes impeding the recruitment of supporters (Thomas & Louis, 2014).

The findings also suggest that even when these negative views were not held by participants themselves, they still make assumptions about other people's perceptions (see [Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011](#); [Goffman, 1959](#)). That is, even when people are engaging in what are, to them, meaningful collective actions, they expect their behaviour to be misinterpreted by others, forming a "social disincentive" to participation ([Klandermans, 1997](#); [Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014](#)). Other literature also demonstrates that a lack of social affirmation of one's self-definition can result in psychological threat, making it difficult for individuals to participate in the public sphere (e.g., [Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011](#); [Morton & Sonnenberg, 2011](#); contributing to the 'spiral of silence', [Noelle-Neumann, 1974](#)). In theoretical terms, stereotypes *and* meta-stereotypes of "professional protesters" may create identity performance concerns ("I do not want to behave in those ways" or "I do not want to be *seen* to behave in those ways"), as well as identity alignment concerns ("I am not like them").

The literature on engagement in conventional/moderate versus extreme/radical forms of collective action (e.g., [Tausch et al., 2011](#); [Thomas et al., 2014](#); [van Stekelenburg, 2014](#)) has highlighted that decision making about actions is nuanced and strategic ([Thomas & Louis, 2014](#)). Our study suggests that participative efficacy - the belief that one's individual contribution to the collective cause will make a difference ([van Zomeren et al., 2013](#)) - is unachievable if (some of) the group's actions are seen as illegitimate. People may weigh up the fit between their convictions, the perceived legitimacy of the physical groups who represent their social identity (i.e., their psychological group membership), the legitimacy and efficacy of the action-norms (or methods) of those groups, and how this effects their participative efficacy.

Autonomy Concerns and Identity Formation

Participants also reported fear of losing individual agency or voice as disincentives to sustained participation in collective actions. These stem primarily from intragroup (within group) factors. Autonomy is a fundamental psychological need ([Hornsey & Jetten, 2004](#); [Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)), thus it makes sense that the fear that one could be misinterpreted by an audience or cease to be heard might stall participation if people are worried that becoming a group member would result in an unacceptable loss of self-determination.

Ironically perhaps, the participant's explicit concerns about autonomy do not articulate well with the data on the role of social inclusion and group memberships in personal autonomy. A growing literature suggests that it is through increased belonging that people experience *increased* autonomy ([Koudenburg, Jetten, & Dingle, 2017](#)) and positive personal benefits from engaging in activism, including personal agency ([Blackwood & Louis, 2012](#)). The key question seems to be *when* do autonomy needs facilitate or disrupt the development of social identity and group belonging (see [Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2015](#))? It is possible that autonomy concerns could be more operative during different stages of identity development (see [Groves, 1995](#); [Hansson & Jacobsson, 2014](#); [Kovan & Dirkx, 2003](#); [Livingstone, 2014](#) on the transformative effect of participation), or when attempting to integrate multiple complex identities ([Louis et al., 2016](#)). Moreover, conflictual intragroup relations might threaten autonomy despite identification at a more abstract psychological group level – as the reality of working alongside other people can be fraught ([Harré et al., 2009](#); [Moreland & Levine, 1982](#)). We suggest treating *anticipated* autonomy threat and identity performance concerns as barriers to collective action participation, even though such fears may be unsubstantiated amongst those who regularly participate in collective action.

Limitations and Suggestions

Our effort to survey across a range of social issues considers disincentives and barriers to collective action participation in a general sense. Given our focus on generating a picture of broad barriers to participation and the open-text methodology, we are unable to make specific claims about particular movement contexts or audiences. Given our broad definition of action, it is also the case that participants may have been drawing upon rather different forms of collective action – for example violent or non-violent (Becker & Tausch, 2015; Tausch et al., 2011), or benevolent versus activist (Thomas & McGarty, 2017, 2018) and we would expect that these different forms of action would also meaningfully shape perceptions. Thus, although we cannot claim which identities or groups our participants were thinking of as they completed their responses, the assumption that protest represents typical collective action, and the hostility towards protesters, does suggest that these participants are coming from a more moderate perspective. Had the population been radicalised, for instance, they may have expressed derision at protesters for their conventional tactics (e.g. as in Stuart et al., 2013). It is also the case that our sample does not allow us to speak to considerations amongst those who are entirely disinterested or apathetic about politics. We would expect, consistent with our earlier suggestions, that highly disengaged people might have qualitatively different perceptions of collective action compared to the sympathetic population considered here.

We omitted a measure of political orientation from the survey, however the causes listed by participants (see p. 15) suggests that the sample is left-leaning. Our data also cannot adjudicate as to whether these explanations are post-hoc narratives used to justify and explain an incongruity between an attitude and inaction; or whether they did indeed constitute a priori barriers. We nevertheless contend that there is utility in understanding how people rationalise their behaviour, post-hoc. Longitudinal studies that are able to provide a temporal perspective of fluctuations in identity and commitment over time would provide a deeper understanding of how people engage in judgements about efficacy, autonomy, individual-group fit, and identity performances, along their trajectory of activism.

Finally, the findings are reflective of a particular cultural epoch. Our sample is a relatively privileged one and the concerns illustrated by these participants reflect that. Social incentives, for instance, may be particularly relevant for people whose participation in social movements reflects an intrinsic expression of self (Polletta & Jasper, 2001), who are rejection sensitive (Bäck, Bäck, & Garcia-Albacete, 2013; Bäck et al., 2015; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014), or for whom the consequences are less real, as with advantaged group members (Droogendyk et al., 2016). Folk psychology about crowds has also painted them as rabid and mindless, and this view persists in the media and general public's view of collective action even today (Neville & Reicher, *in press*). The particular concerns about autonomy are likely more present in a culture with historically individualistic values, where being 'part of the crowd' is still deemed undesirable (Reicher, 2015), and previous research has shown that even very committed activists have to strategically amplify their individuality to offset criticisms (Stuart et al., 2013; see also Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002). In other settings, crowds can be viewed as positive and unifying (Tewari, Khan, Hopkins, Srinivasan, & Reicher, 2012). However it is still important to understand the predictors and barriers of action participation in (relatively) privileged Western populations, because the support of relatively advantaged people is needed to address large scale global issues and express the voices of those who cannot make themselves heard (Becker, 2012; Curtin & McGarty, 2016; Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2010).

Future research should build on this broad investigation of the barriers to address the limitations created by our inclusive recruitment strategy. For example, by selecting particular social causes and associated groups, and evaluating people's normative judgements of each and their consequential willingness to engage. The construction

of some protesters as disingenuous or extreme indicates a need to examine both the contextually specific splits and factions within social causes, including more moderate and radical fringes, and/or whether sympathisers are internalising the negative campaigning and stigmatisation of protesters that is produced by their opposition.

Practical Implications

Although this research identifies barriers and disincentives to participation, we do not suggest that they are insurmountable. Ambivalence can be overcome, as demonstrated in crowd research (Barr & Drury, 2009; Drury & Reicher, 2000). During volatile times in global politics there is understandable trepidation amongst scholars to giving air-time to criticisms of collective action and protesters, but such reluctance could prevent adaptive, self-organising change. Accordingly, it is worth briefly considering how some of these concerns may be alleviated to promote participation in prosocial movements (i.e., those that aim for the non-exclusive betterment for all, see Thomas, Smith, McGarty, & Postmes, 2010, for guidelines on distinguishing prosocial and hostile social movements).

One option is to strategically re-define the identity through top-down social movement communications (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Reicher, Hopkins, Levine, & Rath, 2005). Such communication could break down strong prescriptions on behaviour and re-define involvement in terms of a variety of actions open to potential participants (i.e., beyond 'protest' per se). Reputational concerns may need to be dealt with in order to recruit and retain members. Prescriptive identity barriers may also be challenged in a more bottom-up fashion, through small group interaction where people discuss their motivations, beliefs, and concerns and normalise action (McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009; Thomas & McGarty, 2009; Thomas, Smith, et al., 2010). Thus, where a person experiences uneasiness, this unease can be shared with others, and through social communication it becomes possible to redefine the identity.

Identity performance concerns could also be managed through development of alternative, less visible forms of low-bar individual engagement as a pathway into more group-based actions. The notion of 'invisible actions' (a term used by a participant) could include reading emails from a group, making private donations, changing consumer habits, or even anonymous blogging. Taking 'independent action' that is still representative of the group's interests (see Becker, 2012) was raised in this study as being a virtuous endeavour and a way of managing interpersonal frustrations. Although these are not strictly *collective* actions, they are behaviours that would enable people to acquire activist capital (i.e. activist skills, Van Dyke & Dixon, 2013), thereby potentially leading them on to further engagement in actions. Furthermore, if group leaders attend to socialisation experiences and create alternative participatory options for those less inclined to be 'visible', perhaps this would reduce identity performance concerns in those initial stages of participation.

Concluding Comments

This study considered how inferences made about what is required for one to be involved in collective action, or a member of a collective action group, shapes motivated inaction. The analysis focused on negative protester stereotypes, social incentives, identity performances, and autonomy needs, and the ways in which they inform social identity development and participative efficacy. Sustained participation in action should be considered as resulting from interactive (push-and-pull) factors between barriers and motivations. We have shown that people can actively avoid participating in some types of collective actions if they perceive that their individual psychological needs might not be met or if they believe that their association with so-called "extremists" might undermine their efforts. The successful transition of some people through these states of uncertainty does not make the

process less problematic for all others. We suggest that motivated inaction can arise as a form of psychological resistance (see [Leach & Livingstone, 2015](#)) where people evaluate the perceived legitimacy of physically-interacting groups (or factions within groups) as a representative of their social identity (or psychological group), and therefore their legitimacy to speak on their behalf. Motivated inaction is therefore a qualitatively distinct state from apathy or lack of engagement ([Stroebe, 2013](#)), and sympathisers should be further studied as a small but consequential part of the mobilisation potential for social change.

Notes

- i) They may have skipped the question in error, as they later wrote as if they had attempted to take actions. They were not excluded from the analysis.
- ii) See Appendix, Survey questions 4 and 5.
- iii) Some typographical errors have been corrected for readability. One answer can be coded against multiple themes.
- iv) See Appendix, Survey question 6.
- v) Some typographical errors have been corrected for readability. One answer can be coded against multiple themes.
- vi) Efficacy co-occurred 12 times with: individual in group difficulties (3a, 2 times), instrumental concerns (4a, 3 times), personal consequences (2c, 1 time), effort of group commitment (3c, 1 time), extremists/factions (3d, 4 times), and social stigma/reputation (2h, 1 time). Note: participant 9831 is responsible for 4 co-occurrences.
- vii) As the instructions asked them about concerns *in addition* to instrumental concerns, this number probably does not reflect the true frequency of instrumental concerns.

Funding

The first author received support from the Murdoch University Research Scholarship while conducting this study. The second author was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DE120101029).

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

We thank anonymous reviewers and Dr. Johanna Vollhardt who provided us with constructive feedback on previous versions of this manuscript.

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Appendix

Survey Text

In this study we are interested in learning about your level of interest and/or involvement in any form of collective action. Collective action is broadly defined as either groups of people coming together to try and create social or political change around a particular issue (e.g. a protest rally), or it can also include individuals each making their own contribution towards a common goal (e.g. donating money to an aid organisation).

Collective action can include activities such as writing letters to politicians, boycotting goods, donating money, attending protests, signing up to collective action organisations, attending group meetings, land conservation work, reading information published by a social movement/collective action organisation, and many more activities.

Collective action can also include online (internet) actions. Examples of online action are things like joining a Facebook group, or receiving an email newsletter from a collective action group.

Have you ever participated in any of these forms of collective action? (*multi choice*)

- Boycott goods/companies
- Sign up to an online collective action group
- Joined a (offline) collective action group
- Attend a protest
- Write a letter
- Sign a petition
- Donate money
- Signed up for an activist newsletter
- Purchased Fair Trade goods
- Other – describe

How often do you take part in campaigns? (*single choice*)

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Every few months
- 6 months
- Yearly
- Less than yearly

Demographics

Age _____

Gender

- Female
- Male

Ethnicity _____

Are you a citizen or permanent resident of Australia?

- Yes, Australian Citizen
- Yes, Australian permanent resident
- No

What is your main field of study/work? (e.g. Environmental Science, Politics, Marketing) _____

Main Survey (open text)

Section 1

1. Briefly, what are the particular causes that concern you the most?
2. Why do you feel the need to be involved in these causes?
3. How does being involved in collective action make you feel?

Section 2

4. Some people believe that the power for change lies in groups of people acting together, rather than on their own. Do you feel like it is important or helpful to be a part of an organised collective? Why/why not?
5. Are there times when you prefer to act on your own? Why/why not?
6. There are a lot of people who are concerned about social or environmental issues but, for various reasons, have difficulties becoming involved in collective action. Apart from it making demands on your life, in terms of issues like time, money, or difficulty travelling, do you feel like you experience any further reservations or concerns about your involvement? What are these?

Section 3

Think back to the first time you remember becoming involved in collective action, such as attending a group meeting. I would like to know what kind of thoughts ran through your head when you were contemplating joining this group.

If you have not taken part in collective action, take a moment to imagine yourself attending a collective action group meeting. We are interested in knowing what thoughts would run through your head about this possibility.

7. What aspects of the possibility of becoming involved in collective action interest or excite you?
8. What aspects of the possibility of becoming involved in collective action concern you?

Section 4

9. Do you feel like you becoming involved in collective action would change you as a person? Has it changed your perspective or lifestyle in any way?
10. Do you ever feel like being involved in collective action limits your life in any way?
11. What kind of person do you think it takes to make an impact, and to bring about social change?
12. Do you feel like you are the kind of person who can make a difference?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add?