

# Toward a cultural psychology of collective action: Just how “core” are the core motivations for collective action?

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I review the interesting contributions to this special thematic section in light of what has been referred to as the four *core motivations for collective action* (i.e. moral conviction, and group identification, anger and efficacy beliefs). Specifically, I relate the key findings and insights from these articles — based on intriguing data from participant samples in the Philippines, Japan, Indonesia and China — to these core motivations for collective action, after which I raise the question of just how “core” these motivations are, with an eye to an abundance of cultural variance. I answer this question by suggesting a number of conceptual bridges to move the field forward toward a proper *cultural psychology* of collective action. Such a cultural psychology, in my view, does justice not only to the notion of core motivations for collective action but also to the abundance of cultural variance. Specifically, I suggest to think about culture in terms of guiding *when* collective action is more or less likely to occur, within which the core motivations reflect the *psychological processes* that facilitate it.

**Keywords:** collective action, culture, core motivations, identity, anger, efficacy, moral conviction

This special thematic section of the *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology* includes a number of fascinating articles across a variety of topics, contexts and populations (e.g. with participant samples from the Philippines, Japan, Indonesia and China), which are all focused on collective action (i.e. any action that individuals engage in to achieve group goals; Van Zomeren, 2016b). In this article, I review the key findings and insights from these three articles and relate them to what has been referred to as the four *core motivations* for collective action (i.e. moral conviction, and group identification, anger and efficacy beliefs; Van Zomeren, 2013). The key question I then raise is: Just how “core” are these core motivations for collective action, in light of abundant cultural variance?

My answer is that the core motivations seem relevant for predicting collective action across the globe, but also that it would help our field tremendously if the psychology of collective action took culture more seriously (Van Zomeren & Louis, 2018). One way to do this is to conceive of culture as *psychology* much more than as geography, which facilitates its integration with the psychology of collective action. Indeed, culture is about shared ideas of what is valid and valuable in the world (Smith, Fischer,

Vignoles, & Bond, 2013) and hence concerns the priorities of individuals as well as collectives (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010; Schwartz, 1992); and, by implication, the collective actions individuals undertake through these four core motivations. The challenge for the future is to develop this major bridge, and to this end I will offer a number of suggestions in this article.

Specifically, the notion of core motivations describes the *psychological processes* through which people participate in collective action, but this does not tell us *when* such motivations will be psychologically relevant. This is precisely what I believe a proper cultural psychology of collective action will help us to understand better (i.e. *when* collective action is more or less likely to occur in the first place). As such, comparisons between cultural contexts reflect much more than just whether a particular finding “replicates” in a different context — culture is more than just an empirical comparison. To this end, I think the contributions to this special section help us see the need for broader theoretical integration in this field, and to build a major bridge between cultural psychology and the psychology of collective action.

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## Findings and insights from the contributions to this special thematic section

The psychology of collective action (e.g. Klandermans, 1997; Van Zomeren, 2013; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; see also Becker & Tausch, 2015; Thomas, Mavor, & McGarty, 2012; Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & Van Dijk, 2009) has identified four core motivations for collective action: Individuals' *group identification* (e.g. with a labor union), their *group-based anger* (e.g. about measures taken by the government), their *group efficacy beliefs* (e.g. the belief that together union members can change these measures through joint action), and their *moral convictions* (e.g. that these measures violate individuals' core values). This does not mean that all four motivations always predict individuals' collective action for anyone in any collective action context, but across the board, research typically finds positive, medium-sized effects of these predictors in studies of collective action (for a meta-analysis, see Van Zomeren et al., 2008). This is in part, however, because collective action research typically already focuses on the relevant group identity within a specific collective action context (e.g. a social movement trying to mobilize people), which facilitates that it typically finds that group identification predicts collective action (but see Van Zomeren, Susilani, & Berend, 2016).

However, the core motivations should also be understood as *context sensitive* to the extent that, for example, not all groups will be psychologically relevant in a given context, or not all contexts will feature the same moralized issues that play into people's moral convictions (e.g. some may moralize equality issues, whereas others moralize loyalty issues). Gender, for instance, may mean very different things depending on cultural context, and hence gender identification can serve as a mobilizer in some contexts (e.g. where gender inequality is widely perceived as immoral), but as a pacifier or harmonizer in other contexts (e.g. where gender inequality is widely legitimized and accepted). Keeping this in mind, the core motivations then reflect a basic motivational potential that needs to be unlocked by contextual conditions, such as provided by political and cultural systems (Van Zomeren, 2016b).

Therefore, to understand collective action within a specific context, we need to understand, for example, what the *relevant group identity* is, or *which issues are moralized* within that context. This is precisely the point where culture, defined psychologically as shared ideas about what is valid and valuable in the world, becomes important and consequential for the psychology of collective action. For instance, culture guides which, and to what extent, certain groups are psychologically relevant and what they mean (e.g. Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). Furthermore, culture guides what is moral and hence which issues can be moralized (e.g. Schwartz, 1992), which emotions can be experienced and expressed (e.g. Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and whether collectives are likely to change the

broader political or cultural system (e.g. Van Zomeren, 2016a, 2016b). Before I discuss this further, let me review the three contributions to the special section, with an eye to core motivations for collective action in cultural contexts of Japan, China, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

### Moral conviction and group identification

The article by Wibisono et al. (this issue) is a good example of the cultural meaning of different group identities. Specifically, this focuses on the experience and meaning of individuals' religious and national identity in the cultural context of Indonesia, where religion and nationality often work together, such as when groups seek to strengthen religious education in schools. Wibisono et al. found in a survey study among 178 Indonesians that religious fundamentalism is a better predictor of religious identity than national identity, which are positively correlated. They also found through interviewing 35 members of more and less fundamentalist movements that those activists with stronger religious fundamentalism prioritized religious over national identity when they viewed them as incompatible on important issues; but that those activists with weaker religious fundamentalism were able to integrate the two identities more. As such, although both groups of activists presumably want to engage in collective action, they do so on a different basis in terms of identity, as differentially defined by religious fundamentalism.

Intriguingly, the notion of religious fundamentalism comes close to the notion of *moral conviction*—one of the four core motivations for collective action—as this entails the notion that one's attitudes are connected to one's core values and experienced as factually true, and hence are not open for debate or compromise (e.g. Skitka, 2010). Indeed, given the presumed categorical nature of group membership, moral convictions offer very clear boundaries of who is in the group and who is out, and thus are very clear definers of a group identity (e.g. McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009). In this sense, it is interesting to see that those who presumably define their identity through such religious convictions cannot easily integrate their national identity in cases where there is potential clash (e.g. legalization of *sharia*). They are what they stand for, which makes them ready for action to defend any perceived threat to those convictions (for a review, see Van Zomeren, Kutlaca, & Turner-Zwinkels, 2018).

Moreover, it is at least equally interesting to see that such a fundamentalist approach to identity does not appear to be required for collective action—the more moderate activists clearly indicated a more integrated identity (in terms of religion and nationality) on which to act. This fits with the broader idea that it is important to understand what the relevant group identity is (and for whom) in a specific context, and that moral convictions may not be required for collective action—that is, strong, action-oriented group identities can exist without moral convictions that reduce the former to the latter. Future research

can help us understand such different ways of group identity formation that nevertheless lead to activism in either case.

### Group-based anger and efficacy beliefs

Another core motivation for collective action is group-based anger about perceived unfairness, typically directed towards those perceived to be responsible for it (Lazarus, 1991). The second article by Li et al. (this issue) focused on Chinese individuals' anger among those higher or lower on the social ladder (i.e. social class), defined as an individual's objective and/or subjective position in society and access to resources. Across two (correlational and experimental) studies, anger predicted collective action among them, in total, 218 Chinese participants — but only for those higher in social class.

Given the broad empirical support for anger's action-oriented implications (see Van Zomeren, 2013), the key question is why those lower in social class showed no, or less of an effect in these studies. The authors' argument revolves around individuals' perceptions of control, influence and efficacy that may be lacking among those lower in social class. Unfortunately, however, this explanation was not tested, and hence could not be confirmed empirically. I agree with the authors that we therefore need more research to understand what it is about lower social class that would make group-based anger less of a relevant motivation for collective action.

This finding actually relates nicely to another core motivation for collective action — *group* efficacy beliefs. Such beliefs pertain to whether individuals believe that the relevant group can achieve its goals through joint action (e.g. Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999; see also Bandura, 1997). Perhaps, as the authors also speculate in the discussion section of the paper, those lower in social class had lower group efficacy beliefs. A core motivation approach, however, suggests alternative explanations. For example, perhaps individuals did not perceive a relevant group in this context, and hence did not feel anger on behalf of this group. Perhaps those from lower social class moralize different issues (e.g. Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993), and hence draw different group identity boundaries based on those (Van Zomeren et al., 2018). Future research can test such possibilities.

The final contribution to the special section by Ochoa et al. (this issue) actually tests a model based on all four core motivations (i.e. the extended Social Identity Model of Collective Action, or SIMCA for short; Van Zomeren, 2013, 2016b) among male students from Japan and the Philippines, revolving around the issue of gender inequality in these countries. In total, 131 Philippine and 103 Japanese males were surveyed, which makes the type of collective action here one of “allied” collective action. Interestingly, the predicted relationships between the core motivations and collective action, as indicated in the zero-order correlations between the key variables, were all in the

predicted direction and statistically significant; yet identification with men did not consistently correlate with collective action and the core motivations, which thus did not appear to be such a relevant group identity across these two cultural contexts; and that a regression model testing the SIMCA — although with, as the authors admit, relatively small samples — generally showed support for the model.

It is important to note that all participants were male and collective action was geared toward gender inequality — in fact, this is why the authors included measures of another potentially relevant group identity in this context: that of men (rather than women). Although support for this idea was not consistent and only visible to some extent in the Japanese sample, the findings for identification with women (i.e. the disadvantaged group in this context) were consistent and in line with the SIMCA. It thus seems that the core motivations for collective action can even be found among those who are objectively part of the advantaged group, but psychologically identify or sympathize with the disadvantaged group. This is an interesting finding that confirms and stretches the scope of the SIMCA, as has also been observed in other work (e.g. Cakal, Hewstone, Schwar, & Heath, 2011; Klavina & Van Zomeren, in press).

### Summary

The three articles in this special thematic section offer intriguing tests of different core motivations for collective action in cultural contexts that are typically not the mainstream's focus; moreover, the studies are based on samples of participants from Japan, China, Indonesia and the Philippines, which are typically not among the populations studied in mainstream psychology (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). For this reason, they offer a fair contribution to the field in terms of researching collective action from a cultural perspective, which highlights the fascinating diversity (of topics, contexts, and populations) in the current era of theory and research on collective action, while at the same time solidifying an underlying set of core motivations that seem to be psychologically relevant to collective action across the globe.

### Just how “core” are the core motivations for collective action?

One way to think about what is “core”, “fundamental”, or “universal” even, is to establish a phenomenon without finding much variance across very different cultural context and populations (e.g. Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). For example, the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; see also Ainsworth, 1989; Batson, 1990; Bowlby, 1969; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Fiske, 1992; Van Zomeren, 2016a) may be considered a “universal” because for most people, most of the time, belongingness matters and is expressed in social interactions with other people within the social networks that they are embedded in. In the context

of collective action, “core” motivations should thus reflect predictors of collective action across very different cultural contexts and populations — that is, they should matter for most people, most of the time. For three of the core motivations (group identification, anger, and efficacy), meta-analytic evidence seems to support this line of thought (Van Zomeren et al., 2008), and from different reviews we can infer that this may very well be the case for moral conviction too (Skitka, 2010; Van Zomeren et al., 2018).

However, it would be a mistake to conclude from this observation that culture just provides “different contexts” in which to “replicate” such findings — as noted, culture is more than an empirical comparison. Unfortunately, this is precisely how culture is often perceived in psychology — as geography rather than as psychology. A proper cultural psychology of collective action, however, defines culture as shared ideas about what is valid and valuable in individuals’ social world, which enables us to connect it to the psychology of collective action (Smith et al., 2013; Van Zomeren, 2016a).

Building this connection would promote understanding of, for example, how cultures prioritize different values, different ways to construe group identities, the emotions to be experienced and expressed, and the belief in agency to change the broader political or cultural system. This is why I think that we may expect not too much variance in the predictive power of the core motivations themselves in contexts where they are psychologically relevant, but we can expect enormous variance in *when* these motivations are psychologically relevant for collective action (Van Zomeren, 2016a). To develop this line of thought further, I propose a number of ideas revolving around the four core motivations that may help us to move forward toward a proper cultural psychology of collective action that does justice to the core motivations as well as to abundant cultural variance. The main idea is that culture guides *when* collective action is more or less likely to occur, within which the core motivations reflect the *psychological processes* that facilitate it.

### Moral conviction and group identification

*Values* are typically defined as psychological priorities people hold, based on principles such as benevolence or hierarchy. Indeed, much cross-cultural work has identified meaningful differences between countries within which people hold different values (Schwartz, 1992; see also Fiske, 1992). Yet, of course, the variance within countries is also considerable (Smith et al., 2013), as a country can be a container of “culture”, but so can smaller communities, social networks, and organizations. This suggests that cultural values, from the perspective within a specific country, for example, are perceived as a default, or norm; and that some people have internalized this norm and thus conform to it, whereas others may have not (e.g. Heu, Van Zomeren, & Hansen, in press). In this framework, values

serve as general benchmarks for behavior, but may be insufficiently specific to predict collective action within a specific context.

This is exactly why moral convictions are more likely to be predictive of collective action than more general values: They are more specific and are clearly internalized (Kutlaca, van Zomeren, & Epstude, in press; see also Sabucedo, Dono, Alzate, & Seoane, 2018). Furthermore, moral conviction comes along with a psychological tendency of absolutism, which creates clear group boundaries and thus can forcefully define a group identity (Van Zomeren, 2013). The key question, then, is which specific issues will become moralized (as indicated by moral conviction) in different cultural contexts with different values as defaults. Establishing this bridge between cultural context (in terms of values as broad priorities and benchmarks) and moral conviction on a specific issue as a core motivation for collective action will help us understand how the former affords or inhibits the latter and thus when collective action is more or less likely to occur.

A second bridge can be established between cultural context and group identification. The key idea here is that culture guides which group identities are likely to become psychologically relevant. The power of this core motivation then comes from the observation that once people identify with such a relevant group, they become more likely to engage in collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). This suggests we first need to understand what different cultures psychologically reflect in terms of group identities — not just in terms of group identification, but also in terms of their content or meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to escape the notion of individualism-collectivism (e.g. Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; see also Smith et al., 2013) as a broad-stroke, cultural-psychological variable that may be relevant to collective action. For instance, cross-cultural variance implies that some countries will be more collectivistic than others, and hence set different value priorities for individuals in terms of group memberships (e.g. Heu et al., in press). One way in which this materializes psychologically is in how the self is construed: Individualists tend to construe their self in more independent self-ways, whereas collectivists tend to do this in more interdependent self-ways (e.g. Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). One consequence of this is a preference for social harmony among those construing the self as interdependent, which may not sit well with participating in collective action (as a form of social conflict).

Indeed, collectivists should by definition prioritize the group more than individualists; but, if part of collectivism is a tendency toward interdependent self-construal and a preference for harmony within the group, then collectivists may, paradoxically, not be the most likely people to participate in collective action. This is actually what we may have found in previous research (Van Zomeren et al., 2016) in Indonesia. In two surveys among Indonesian

ethnic minority group members, we examined the role of group identification on collective action against discrimination of ethnic minorities. Across the two studies, we found that ethnic group identification did not predict collective action in this context, despite generally high levels of such identification. In fact, what we found was that such identification was predicted by “seeking shelter” in their network of social relationships (e.g. family, friends, significant other), which did not motivate them to engage in collective action — in that sense, this group identity was clearly not the psychologically relevant one for collective action, as it was defined by individuals’ network of relationships that prioritized harmony over conflict. Establishing a bridge between cultural context and group identification therefore would help to understand how the former affords or inhibits the latter, and thus collective action is more or less likely to occur.

### Group-based anger and efficacy beliefs

A third bridge concerns connecting cultural context with emotions like group-based anger. One correlate of interdependent self-construal is a norm that negative emotions should not be expressed — people prioritize harmony and do not want to “rock the boat”, or see the boat rocked by others in the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). As a consequence, one could expect collectivists that construe their self in interdependent terms to shy away from anger in order to harmonize relationships within the group, and hence we may not expect it to predict collective action in such cultural contexts. In fact, this may be a partial explanation of the findings by Li et al. (this issue) among those from the lower social class in China. This assumes, however, a more interdependent self-construal (or more broad collectivist perspective) among those lower on the social ladder (see Haidt et al., 1993).

An alternative suggestion would be to consider the underlying cognitive appraisal of group-based anger, which is the cognitive appraisal of group-based unfairness, caused by another group or agent (Lazarus, 1991). In cultures where power distance is higher, this typically means that inequality is legitimized more easily, or that a clear perpetrator is more difficult to identify (Van Zomeren et al., 2016). When collective action seeks to contest social inequality, it should therefore be harder to mobilize individuals in such cultural contexts on the basis of anger (as grounded in appraisals of unfairness of inequality, and blaming a perpetrator). Nevertheless, if one would focus one’s research on those already seeing and contesting that unfairness (as is often the case in collective action research), one would expect the effect of the core motivation of group-based anger on collective action. As such, understanding culture in a psychological way will enable us to understand when the “right” conditions for collective action are in place, which boils down to the conditions for the core motivations of collective action to become psychologically relevant (Van Zomeren, 2016b).

Finally, group efficacy beliefs relate to and contribute to the broader notion of collective agency to change the social structure. Indeed, if culture shapes which values and group identities are psychologically relevant for individuals in the first place, and how perceptions of group-based unfairness and emotions like group-based anger can be experienced, then it may also powerfully shape how much individuals believe that “we” can influence “our” social world through joint effort. For example, in cultural contexts where gender means something immutable (e.g. women are subordinate to men), then such a group identity might be psychologically important to individuals (e.g. for well-being), but may not be relevant for collective action — and one reason for that may be that people do not feel like they can change anything together in the first place (Bandura, 1997; Mummendey et al., 1999).

Some recent work suggests that one important condition for group efficacy beliefs to predict collective action is indeed that people can at least see and emotionally experience the mere possibility for change — that is, they need to experience hope (Cohen-Chen & Van Zomeren, 2018). Indeed, Cohen-Chen and Van Zomeren (2018) found across a number of studies that the predictive power of group efficacy beliefs depends on having at least some hope for social change. This notion of perceiving possibility for social change may be important to examine cross-culturally: In which cultural contexts can we expect more hope for social change, and by extension a stronger potential for group efficacy beliefs to predict collective action?

One answer may come from the notion of *system justification* — a need that individuals are assumed to have (together with a need for ego and group justification) to maintain and protect the (what I would define as political or cultural) system in which they live (e.g. Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, & Sibley, in press). Although system justification tends to be conceptualized as an implicit psychological mechanism (e.g. Osborne et al., in press), one can also view a default level of system justification as an important marker of culture, at least with respect to collective action. Indeed, if a cultural context prioritizes protecting the system over the group and the individual, then conditions will not be favorable for collective action (unless it is to protect the system; Osborne et al., in press); hence, the core motivations may not be psychologically relevant. Indeed, individuals’ convictions should then likely revolve around the system’s values, which would be about protecting, rather than changing, the system, and hence group identities relevant to social change will be difficult to form and maintain, group-based anger will be difficult to experience, group efficacy beliefs to achieve social change will be difficult to find, and as a consequence, collective action would be unlikely to materialize. This illustrates nicely why I believe that bridging cultural psychology with the psychology of collective action will help us better understand when the former affords or inhibits the latter, whereas the core motivations help us understand which psychological processes are most relevant.

## Summary

I have offered a number of ways to bridge a psychological notion of culture with the four core motivations for collective action. In doing so, it becomes clear that cultural context seems particularly important in addressing when collective action is more or less likely to occur, whereas the core motivations address which psychological processes facilitate this. For this reason, I believe we need to start integrating cultural-psychological variables into theory and research on collective action, such as individualism (Triandis, 1995), self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010), values (Schwartz, 1992), and, although typically not interpreted in cultural-psychological terms, system justification (Osborne et al., in press). Doing so would enable our theories, models and studies to take the abundance of cultural variance seriously, while solidifying the core motivations of collective action. Moreover, doing so would reflect a move toward a proper cultural psychology of collective action that does justice to the core motivations as well as to an abundance of cultural variance.

## Conclusion

I have reviewed and discussed the key findings and insights from the three intriguing contributions to this special thematic section, based on data from Japan, China, Indonesia and the Philippines. Through a focus on the core motivations for collective action, I raised the questions about just how “core” these motivations are and what a proper cultural psychology of collective action should look like. I answered them by outlining a number of suggestions for connecting cultural-psychological variables to the core motivations of collective action, so as to do justice to both cultural variance and core motivations. Building such a major bridge will benefit the field and generate theory and research on collective action that takes culture more seriously than is currently the case — that is, as cultural *psychology* rather than geography.

My view is that taking this direction will likely lead us to conclude that the core motivations for collective action are “core” to the extent that they will predict collective action for most people, most of the time — but only when the cultural context makes psychologically relevant the moral convictions, group identities, feelings of anger and beliefs about the group’s efficacy that motivate people to engage in collective action. A proper cultural psychology of collective action will therefore be able to offer a much more comprehensive psychological account of *when* collective action is more or less likely to happen in the first place, and how this materializes (through the psychological processes reflected in the four core motivations). Compared to the state of our current psychology of collective action, building this major bridge would be a major step forward for the field. I look forward to building this bridge collectively.

## Endnote

- 1 Other work has already moved somewhat into this direction. For instance, Turner-Zwinkels, Van Zomeren, and Postmes (2015, 2018) have developed a non-reactive measure of identity content, which allows us insights into what it means when people self-report that they identify strongly with a group in the context of collective action. This work found, for instance, that when people politicize over time (i.e. in the context of a political campaign), their personal and political identity content converge; moreover, people use more moral terms to define themselves. These findings fit with the idea that moral convictions can powerfully shape group identities, and that the notion of morality more broadly seems key to understanding this (Van Zomeren et al., 2018). In this sense, understanding what the default value priorities are within a culture — with an eye to both moral conviction and group identification — seems absolutely pivotal.

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