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Published in:
New Ideas in Psychology

DOI:
[10.1016/j.newideapsych.2015.04.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2015.04.001)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Zomeren, M. (2015). Collective action as relational interaction: A new relational hypothesis on how non-activists become activists. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 39, 1-11.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2015.04.001>

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Collective action as relational interaction: A new relational hypothesis on how non-activists become activists

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 September 2014

Received in revised form 2 April 2015

Accepted 26 April 2015

Available online 23 May 2015

Keywords:

Collective action

Social identity

Social relationships

Relational models

Activism

ABSTRACT

Theory and research documents but does not explain the empirically observed different motivational profiles of activists and non-activists. For this reason, little is known about how non-activists *become* activists. Building on a broad literature that views humans as relational beings, I propose to reconceptualize collective action as social interaction that *regulates social relationships* (i.e., which relationships are individuals regulating, and how?) This facilitates an integrative understanding of the *different motivational profiles* for activists and non-activists (based in Fiske's (1991) notion of different relational models with associated taboos and obligations to guide their regulation), which enables the development of a *new relational hypothesis* about how non-activists become activists (namely through two specific changes in relational models with one's ingroup and outgroup, authority, or system, in response to taboo violations in social interaction). I discuss implications of this relational perspective for theory and research on collective action and psychological and social change.

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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

— Attributed to M. Mead in: Frank G. Sommers and Tana Dineen (1984). *Curing Nuclear Madness*. (p. 158).

As exemplified by successful social movements such as the US civil rights movement (e.g., McAdam, 1996), progressive social change depends in part on individuals' joint efforts to achieve collective goals (e.g., mass protests, petitions, strikes, sit-ins, etc.). *Collective action* is typically defined as any action that individuals engage in on behalf of a group to improve the conditions of that group (Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990; see also Van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). Of course, not all individuals are equally prone to engage in collective action. Activists (defined objectively as members of social movements or action groups) are

obviously more 'active' than non-activists (defined objectively as members of a disadvantaged group that are not members of social movements or action groups). Although surprisingly little is known about how non-activists become activists, it is clear that when they do, a *qualitative psychological change* occurs (e.g., Livingstone, 2014) that changes their empirically observed motivational profile, including changes in their self-concept and a drop in the motivational power of their anger (e.g., Stürmer & Simon, 2004).

But how and why does this happen? The currently popular explanation for this qualitative shift revolves around changes in the self-concept¹ (e.g., from a non-

¹ Throughout the paper, I use the terms 'self', 'self-concept' and 'identity' interchangeably. Furthermore, when I use terminology like 'when non-activists become activists' I do not imply that this is a desired, stationary outcome. What I mean by this is that there is a qualitative change in how individuals relate to the world, which has implications for how they see themselves and their world, and for their self-based motivations to change that world.

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politicized to a politicized group identity; Drury & Reicher, 2009; McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Simon et al., 1998; Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009; Turner-Zwinkels, Van Zomeren, & Postmes, 2015). This fits with theoretical assumptions that the core motivations for collective action are self-based (i.e., group identification, group-based emotions, and group efficacy beliefs; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; see also Thomas et al., 2009; Thomas, Mavor, & McGarty, 2012; Van Zomeren, 2013). Individuals who identify with Greenpeace, for instance, are understood as having a politicized group identity; yet it remains unclear how and why individuals with an unpoliticized group identity (e.g., identifying with 'greenies') become politicized.

In this article, I propose a new and integrative relational explanation for this qualitative shift in self-based motivational profiles. A relational perspective (Van Zomeren, *in press*; Fiske, 1991, 1992, 2004; Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Van Zomeren, 2014) suggests that individuals are generally motivated to regulate (that is, to generate or maintain) relationships². Such relationship regulation revolves around the prevention of *taboo violations* and the enactment of *obligations* through relational interaction. Although there can be many ways to regulate a relationship, Fiske's (1991, 1992) *relational models theory* identifies four universal ways to relate, each associated with qualitatively different taboos and obligations (i.e., what one ought to do, and what one should never do) to guide their regulation. This is important because taboo violations (e.g., an authority acting out of line; an ingroup member betraying the group) may lead individuals to change or even reject relationships. It follows that non-activists become activists when they perceive, through social interaction with their ingroup or outgroup, that taboos underlying relationships with their ingroup and/or outgroup have been violated. As a consequence, they need to change their way of regulating those relationships, either by changing the relational model involved, or by rejecting the relationship altogether.

For instance, one may be called upon by a friend to join a mass demonstration – a decline of which would violate the underlying relationship. Similarly, when a government official publicly announces to raise taxes among the poor, this may be perceived as violating a particular way of relating with an authority that should protect the weakest and neediest in society. As such, one may now reject any previously considered obligation to defer to the

government's authority, and feel committed to those fighting for those in need (e.g., an action group or a social movement). This already illustrates how reconceptualizing collective action as relational interaction explains the qualitative shift from non-activists to activists through a qualitative shift in relational models (and associated taboos and obligations). This relational view enriches the currently popular self-based perspective on collective action because shifts in relational models can bring along shifts in self-concept and thus self-based motivational profiles (e.g., from an individualistic 'I' to a communal 'us'). As such, a relational perspective on collective action suggests that the underlying reason for why groups of committed citizens can change the world, as Margaret Mead purportedly suggested, is that they have *changed the way they relate* to others in that world through social interaction.

1. Aims and argument

My specific aims in this article are to (I) outline how a relational perspective *reconceptualizes* collective action as relational interaction (Van Zomeren, 2014); this enables (II) outlining an integrative understanding of empirically observed *different motivational profiles* for activists and non-activists, in order to (III) outline a *new relational hypothesis* about how non-activists become activists. This new and integrative understanding of collective action implies that such action should be understood as aimed at regulating relationships; that changes in the self-concept and other self-based motivations follow from changes in relational models (and their associated taboos and obligations); and that future theorizing and research on collective action and psychological change will benefit from adopting a relational perspective.

A relational perspective rejects reductionist individualist or collectivist perspectives on human motivation (e.g., Fiske, 1991; Gergen, 2009; Gilligan, 1982, 1986; Goffman, 1971; Mead, 1934; Slife, 2004; Slife & Richardson, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Instead, it advocates an essentially relational view of human beings (Van Zomeren, *in press*; Van Zomeren, 2014), which implies that it posits an essential need among individuals to relate and thus regulate (that is, maintain or generate) social relationships (Rai & Fiske, 2011).

Although a relational perspective reflects a new perspective on theory and research on collective action, the more general notion of a relational perspective in psychology has not been invisible (e.g., Fiske, 1991, 1992; Gergen, 2009; Slife, 2004; Slife & Richardson, 2008; see also Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), in important part because of developments in cultural psychology (e.g., Adams, 2005; Adams, Bruckmüller, & Decker, 2012; Adams & Markus, 2004; Fiske, 1992; Heine, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2004; Rai & Fiske, 2011). In fact, within the domain of intra- and inter-group processes that embeds much social-psychological work on collective action, there appears to be a trend toward considering the importance of social relationships (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Drury & Reicher, 2009; Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013; Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005; Swann, Jetten,

² The social identity perspective was a response to more individualistic and instrumental approaches to intergroup conflict such as realistic conflict theory (e.g., Sherif & Sherif, 1953). The logic of the social identity perspective is that when individuals subjectively identify with a group, even when there is no clear self-interest motive present or possible, the resulting social identity becomes self-defining and a basis for group-based perception, feeling, and action (e.g., Smith, 1993; Van Zomeren et al., 2012). This perspective is grounded in the assumption that individuals are motivated to generate or maintain a positive self-concept. Although this is an entrenched assumption in psychology (e.g., Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O'Mara, & Gebauer, 2013), many seem skeptical because it seems a 'Western' projection (Adams, 2005; Fiske, 1992; Heine, 2005; Heine et al., 1999; Kitayama et al., 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2004; Van Zomeren, *in press*).

Gomez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012; Vignoles, 2011). In the current article, I push this trend further in order to facilitate the generation of new ideas and hypotheses for theory and research in the domain of collective action. Although my specific argument is about explaining how non-activists become activists, a relational perspective is applicable to broader phenomena in this domain.

I note that a relational perspective enriches a self-based perspective on collective action (Van Zomeren, *in press*; Van Zomeren, 2014). Indeed, from a relational perspective, self-based motivations for collective action (such as group identification, group-based anger, and group efficacy; Van Zomeren et al., 2008) are absolutely pivotal in understanding why individuals engage in collective action. A relational perspective enriches this line of thought by suggesting that changes in relational models lead to changes in the self-concept and self-based motivations for collective action. For instance, a change in relational models can lead to seeing oneself as similar to, rather than distinct from, fellow group members; similarly, a change in relational models can lead to seeing oneself as free of, rather than as subordinate to, an outgroup, authority, or system. As such, it posits that relational models (and its associated taboos and regulations) help to *explain* how the self-concept is continuously produced and reproduced through social interaction (Gergen, 2009).

Against this theoretical backdrop, individuals' participation in collective action is not just only an outcome of a motivational process (see Drury & Reicher, 2009; Louis, 2009), but a constituent part of the dynamic process of relationship regulation through social interaction. Participation in collective action itself is the medium through which individuals can interact with ingroup members or representatives as well as with outgroup members or representatives. For instance, mass demonstrations offer ample opportunities to interact with fellow group members, whereas those representing the outgroup, the authorities, or the system may also be present (e.g., a government official giving a speech; members of the police force). Such social interaction affords the opportunity to maintain relationships (e.g., interacting with similar-minded people), but also to generate new ones (e.g., to feel committed to activists in particular). A government official's speech may assuage any concerns about how the ingroup is treated by the government (e.g., feeling respected, being heard), but it may also violate taboos (e.g., abuse of power by the police force) and thus motivate individuals to change or even reject their relationship with the government.

A relational perspective therefore asks two core questions about any individual engaging in collective action: First, *which* social relationship is being regulated (e.g., with the ingroup or the outgroup)? And second, *how* is that relationship regulated (i.e., which obligations need to be enacted and which taboo violations need to be prevented in order to regulate relationships)? Indeed, taboo violations require individuals to change the relevant relational model, or reject the relationship altogether. Specifically, I propose that non-activists become activists when two specific changes in relational models follow from taboo violations that lead individuals to change or reject those relationships

— one change is in how one relates to the broader ingroup, whereas the second change is in how one relates to the outgroup, authority, or system; the result of which is the generation of a new relationship with specifically those within the broader ingroup that reject the authority of the outgroup, authority or system (i.e., activists).

2. Why a relational perspective on collective action is enriching

In this section, I outline how a relational perspective enriches the currently popular self-based perspective on collective action. I first discuss the benefits and limits of the self-based perspective, after which I discuss how a relational perspective, through Fiske's (1991, 1992) notion of four qualitatively different relational models, explains what may underlie changes in the self-concept and self-based motivations for collective action.

2.1. The currently popular self-based perspective

From the currently popular self-based perspective in the collective action literature, participation in collective action can be viewed as an outcome of self-based motivations (such as group identification, group-based anger, and group efficacy; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). As such, it is no surprise that the main explanation for how non-activists become activists has focused on a presumed change in the self-concept (Drury & Reicher, 2009; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Thomas et al., 2009; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015). This implies that the reason for why non-activists become activists — a shift believed to be qualitative (Livingstone, 2014; Simon & Klandermans, 2001) — is that they perceive themselves more as an activist than as a non-activist.

This reliance on the self-concept for explaining this form of qualitative psychological change is limiting because it (a) describes rather than explains such change, and (b) in doing so assumes that individuals are generally motivated to maintain or generate a positive self-evaluation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The first notion is problematic because it does not answer the question of what *leads* non-activists to start seeing themselves as an activist (or how this occurs). The second notion is problematic because cross-cultural research has cast strong doubt about whether individuals universally seek positive self-evaluation (e.g., Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; see also Heine, 2005; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Vignoles, 2011). Furthermore, even if individuals would universally seek positive self-evaluation, then individuals should be motivated to maintain, not change, their group identity.

At the same time, there is much to appreciate about this self-based perspective on collective action. For one, its reliance on the self-concept enabled attempts at theoretical integration (e.g., Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999; Simon et al., 1998; Van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012), which have resulted in a view of quite different motivations (e.g., emotions and efficacy beliefs) as psychologically grounded in the self-concept. Furthermore,

this perspective brought along a situationist perspective, which conceptualizes the self-concept as flexible and context-sensitive. For instance, even individuals who may not identify strongly with a group may increase their identification if there are powerful cues to group identity in the situation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Finally, recent theorizing and research have emphasized the importance of group interaction in increasing individuals' commitment to a cause (e.g., Thomas et al., 2009). As such, the currently popular self-based perspective on collective action has certainly led to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (for reviews see Duncan, 2012; Van Zomeren, 2014; Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, its limits become apparent when considering questions of how non-activists become activists, and why they are observed to have different motivational profiles. A self-based perspective explains this as a qualitative change in the self-concept, but it necessarily relies for its explanation for this change on the very same self-concept that individuals are theoretically assumed to seek to maintain. This state of affairs requires, I believe, a 'next step' to transcend those limits. That next step is to adopt a relational perspective that enriches the self-based perspective.

2.2. A relational perspective

Humans are an ultra-social species (e.g., Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003). Indeed, few would dispute that individuals have a strong need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), have the ability to empathize with others in need (Batson, 1990), and suffer psychologically and physically from loneliness (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). At birth – long before any self-concept arises – we are already able to relate (Ainsworth, 1979, 1989; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a, 2007b), using specific attachment behavior that generates and maintains that relationship (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969; see also Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The psychological ties that result from such social interaction (e.g., in interpersonal networks; Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013; Vignoles, 2011) provide us with 'safe havens' (to retreat in) or 'secure bases' (on which to explore the world; see Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a, 2007b).

More generally, humans fear social exclusion and social loss (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). In fact, a robust finding in the literature is that social exclusion is experienced, in the brain, as social pain (Williams, 2007; see also Eisenberger, 2012; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Other work may suggest why: A lack of social relationships increases mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010), while social loss increases the risk of severe depression (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005). Furthermore, individuals are sensitive about preventing social exclusion by not transgressing taboos (Fiske, 1992) and respond intensely to such transgressions by others (Tetlock, 2002). Individuals are even willing to punish others for transgressing norms without receiving anything in return (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003), which again

emphasizes the importance of taboos and obligations in relationship regulation.

The other side of the same coin is that social relationships provide instrumental and emotional support that help one cope with stress (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Schut, 1996). Being embedded in social networks similarly buffers individuals from the effects of negative life events (Berkman, Glass, Seeman, & Brissette, 2000; Heaney & Israel, 2008); identification with groups can have positive effects on one's mental and physical health (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009); and feeling 'fused' with one's groups appears to rely on family-like relationships with ingroup members, which predicts willingness to sacrifice oneself for the group (Swann et al., 2012). Finally, social relationships bring along obligations that maintain the relevant relationship (Rai & Fiske, 2011). As such, the enactment of any relationship through social interaction necessarily includes being intuitively geared towards the underlying taboos and obligations.

This analysis fits well with the notion of relational models, as proposed in Fiske's (1991, 1992) relational models theory (see also Fiske, 2004; Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rai & Fiske, 2011). This theory differentiates four universal and qualitatively different *relational models* that are culturally learned, developed, and applied through social interaction and, when shared by those involved, facilitate smooth social interaction and harmony³. Relational models thus reflect aspects of social structure in which individuals are embedded. Thus, individuals are assumed to be motivated to regulate (that is, generate or maintain) their social relationships, but can do so on the basis of *four* qualitative different ways to relate to others (Rai & Fiske, 2011). For instance, a child can relate to one's mother in terms of unity (from which a strong sense of "we"-ness follows), or in terms of authority (from which a strong sense of respect and submissive behavior follows). Importantly, the qualitatively different nature of the four relational models implies that each relational model has unique taboos and obligations embedded in it to guide how the underlying social relationship should be regulated (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Individuals who enact relational obligations and stay clear from violating relational taboos will run the least risk of social exclusion while enjoying the safety and security of social inclusion. In this way, relational models and their specific taboos and obligations are essential for effective relationship regulation.

³ According to Fiske (1992, p. 689), "The relational models theory explains social life as a process of seeking, making, sustaining, repairing, adjusting, judging, construing, and sanctioning relationships. It postulates that people are oriented to relationships as such, that people generally want to relate to each other, feel committed to the basic types of relationships, regard themselves as obligated to abide by them, and impose them on other people (including third parties)." This makes relational models less situationally malleable than, for instance, the currently popular perspective's dynamic view of the self-concept. Moreover, it is possible to apply qualitatively different relational models to the same relationship, which offers more scope for explaining qualitative changes in the self-concept, especially through the notion of taboo violations that can potentiate relational change.

There are four qualitatively different relational models (Fiske, 1991, 1992). Those models have a universal structure, but individuals can learn how to apply and value them differently in different cultures and in different situations. First, *communal sharing* is a relational model defined by collectivism, unity, oneness, solidarity, and loyalty (see also Fiske, 1992; Van Zomeren, 2014). Whereas caring for others in the group is the core obligation in this relational model, *individualism* is its core taboo. Communal sharing is often found in communist ideology, communes, traditional tribe-like societies, patriotism, and the initial parent-child bond (Fiske, 1992). It has strong similarities with the experience of strong group identification, which is one of the core motivations for collective action (Ellemers, 2012; Swann et al., 2012; Van Zomeren et al., 2008, 2012).

A second relational model is *authority ranking*, which is characterized by mutual acceptance of a power differential which involves offering precedence to the powerful and inviting submissive behavior from the less powerful (Fiske, 1992; see also Van Zomeren, in press). Its core obligation is mutual respect and its underlying taboo is *disrespect for hierarchy*. Indeed, authority ranking is often found in hierarchical societies, organizations, and other systems; and it can be easily recognized in notions of system justification, social dominance and again a form that the parent-child bond takes. Authority ranking is associated with a world of leaders and followers where power, authority, responsibility and respect are strongly interwoven. Indeed, the more authorities treat individuals fairly, the more likely they are to accept negative outcomes (e.g., Tyler, Degoe, & Smith, 1996).

Third, *equality matching* is characterized by reciprocal behavior such as tit-for-tat-like interactions, and a focus on equality and balance (Fiske, 1992; see also Van Zomeren, in press). Within this relational model, the core obligation is to reciprocate and the underlying taboo is a *lack of reciprocity*. Equality matching is often found in alliances or coalitions, but can also be identified in other forms of cooperation that depend on each actor's repeated input to be reciprocated (e.g., I will cook today if you will cook tomorrow). Equality matching is thus very much about balancing the relationship, such that equality is achieved and indebtedness is avoided. This requires, however, that what is reciprocated is equal, such as when one sends a birthday card to someone who has also sent one a birthday card before.

Finally, *market pricing* is a relational model defined by individualism, proportionality, uniqueness, autarky, and transaction (Fiske, 1992; see also Van Zomeren, 2014). Whereas proportionality (e.g., a fair transaction) is the core obligation in this relational model, *defection* (from a fair transaction) is its core taboo. Within, individuals view themselves as detached and different from others and believe that they should calculate the value of themselves and others and even translate that into a single currency (which differentiates it from equality matching). Market pricing is often found in individualistic, market-driven societies and is easily associated with capitalist ideology, individualism, and the parent-child bond after the child has come of age (Fiske, 1992). It has strong similarities with a rational actor perspective, in which collective action is

viewed as a social dilemma (e.g., Klandermans, 1984, 2002; Olson, 1965; Opp, 2009) – importantly however, in Fiske's view, even such 'individualism' serves to regulate relationships. Market pricing is thus an equally 'relational' model as the other three.

I note that Fiske (1992) also differentiates the category of *null relationships*, in which individuals use other individuals as dehumanized means to egoistic ends. Although one can certainly conceive of some 'individualists' as those who typically enact null relationships, my assumption is that, for most people and most of the time, individuals regulate relationships that are not null (Fiske & Rai, 2015). This is line with the observation that humans are an ultra-social species (e.g., Batson, 1990; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003). For this reason, I will only briefly consider null relationships in my analysis and application of the theory below.

3. Application and hypothesis generation

In this section, I apply a relational perspective to explain how non-activists become activists, and how this entails a shift in self-based motivational profiles. I first outline the empirically observed different motivational profiles of non-activists and activists, after which I outline a new relational hypothesis on how non-activists become activists.

3.1. Different motivational profiles

The question of how non-activists become activists starts with the question of how individuals become active in the first place. Indeed, Olson's (1965) analysis of 'the logic of collective action' as a social dilemma choice of rational actors suggests that individuals should typically decide to remain *inactive* while hoping that others will act, thus allowing for a 'win-win' situation in which the individual bears no costs but does benefit from the participation of others (i.e., free-riding or social loafing). This analysis focuses heavily on intra-group processes, within which individuals carefully calculate the costs and benefits of their own participation (i.e., a very individualistic and instrumental 'logic' of collective action). Most research since Olson's (1965) influential book has endeavored to understand how individuals can overcome this dilemma that gives rise to collective inaction (e.g., through increased group identification, group-based anger, and group efficacy; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Because this research typically focuses on either non-activists (e.g., surveys of sympathizers) or activists (e.g., surveys of social movement members), explicit comparisons between the two groups are rare.

Across the board, however, it is clear that the motivational profiles of non-activists and activists are not identical. For instance, a first aspect of their motivational profiles revolves around *group identification*, although the specific identity (unpoliticized or politicized) differs and its associated effect size is different. In Van Zomeren et al.'s (2008) meta-analysis, the average effect size for the relationship between non-politicized identification and collective action was $r = .34$, which is considerably lower than that between politicized identification and collective action ($r = .43$). This is because non-activists require a

psychological basis for their perception and understanding of the group events that befall them: The more strongly they identify with the group, the more they will see the situation in terms of their group membership (e.g., in terms of 'we' instead of 'I') and the more they will act on behalf of the group to achieve its goals. But for activists, it is their identification with the more specific action group or social movement that predicts their engagement in collective action (Duncan, 2012; Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer & Simon, 2004). Such a politicized group identity presumably has a more clearly moralized and action-oriented connotation (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015; Van Zomeren et al., 2008) and incorporates an engrained sense of grievance and adversarial attribution, but also a strategic awareness of the public arena in which one's struggle is fought out (Simon & Klandermans, 2001)⁴.

A second aspect of non-activists' and activists' motivational profile is the importance of *self-efficacy beliefs*, typically operationalized as group efficacy beliefs (which refer to individuals' belief that they can achieve collective goals through collective effort; Bandura, 1997; Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Saguy, & Van Zomeren, 2014; Hornsey et al., 2006; Mummendey et al., 1999; Van Zomeren et al., 2012). Indeed, meta-analytic evidence showed an average effect size of $r = .34$ (Van Zomeren et al., 2008) of the relationship between group efficacy and collective action. Although activists and non-activists may focus on different aspects of their self-efficacy beliefs, the general process should be quite similar. For instance, activists seem motivated more through *personal* expectations about the achievement of personally valued goals through collective action (Giguère & Lalonde, 2010; Mazzoni, Van Zomeren, & Cicognani, in press; Stürmer & Simon, 2004), whereas for non-activists, group efficacy beliefs may have more predictive power (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995; Louis, Taylor, & Neil, 2004). One explanation for this is that activists' politicized identity is based in an overlap between their personal and political self (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015), thus making the political quite literally personal.

A third aspect concerns individuals' moral motivation to participate (Van Zomeren, 2013). Stürmer and Simon (2004) showed, for instance, that activists' sense of 'inner obligation to participate' explained the relationship between politicized group identification and collective action. This suggests that activists have a *group-based* moral motivation. By contrast, non-activists' moral motivations are grounded in their *personal* self (Skitka, 2010; Van Zomeren, 2013). For them, moral motivation serves as the social glue between themselves and a group of similar-minded people, whereas for activists moral motivation flows from their identification with a politicized group (Stürmer & Simon, 2004). Again, this may be due to the stronger overlap between personal and political self for

activists, compared to non-activists (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015).

The most striking difference between activists' and non-activists' motivational profiles, however, involves the motivational power of perceived group-based unfairness and felt group-based anger ($r = .34$ and $.49$, respectively, in Van Zomeren et al.'s meta-analysis). This is a core motivation for non-activists to engage in collective action (e.g., Tausch et al., 2011; see also Miller, Cronin, Garcia, & Branscombe, 2009; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012), yet activists appear less motivated by their feelings of group-based anger about perceived group-based unfairness (Stürmer & Simon, 2004, 2009; see also Van Zomeren et al., 2012). The paradox is this: Activists no doubt care much about redressing unfairness (Duncan, 2012; Van Zomeren et al., 2012); yet their emotional experience of it does not seem to explain their engagement in collective action (Stürmer & Simon, 2004, 2009).

There may be different, non-competing explanations for this striking difference. A first explanation is that when non-activists become activists, they simply care less about group-based unfairness and the group-based anger. This explanation seems rather unlikely because perceived unfairness and felt anger should be *more* important to activists than to non-activists (as observed in personal narratives of activists; Duncan, 2012). A second explanation is that activists may still experience group-based unfairness and anger but it has reached ceiling levels, leaving too little variance in anger to predict variance in collective action. This explanation seems also unlikely, because it does not readily explain why activists' group-based anger rises to ceiling levels so quickly, whereas other self-based motivations (such as group identification) do not.

A final explanation concerns a qualitative change in activists' *experience* of group-based anger. Groves (1995), for instance, suggests that activists learn to strategically experience and express their emotions in appropriate ways, which implies that their emotional experience and expression will be very sensitive to the different audiences and contexts they encounter in social interaction. In a similar vein, Thomas et al. (2009) suggest that activists may experience group-based anger or outrage as a group norm rather than as an emotional state. In their view, an opinion-based group identity that encapsulates norms about feeling anger and believing in efficacy can emerge through group interaction, thus motivating individuals to engage in collective action through their identification with that group (rather than through their anger or efficacy beliefs; Thomas et al., 2012).

Although all the above explanations are possible, my new relational hypothesis uniquely identifies an underlying relational process for *why* a shift in self occurs in the first place. It suggests that social interaction, for instance within the ingroup or with both ingroup and outgroup members, provides the opportunity for obligations to be enacted but also for taboos to be violated, the latter of which requires individuals to change or reject the relevant relationship. Below I outline two specific changes that I hypothesize to change non-activists' self-based motivations, including a qualitative change in group

⁴ Unfortunately, research typically operationalized this elaborate line of thought in terms of simply measuring identification with the social movement (Stürmer & Simon, 2004), thus leaving a considerable gap between the theorized content and the empirical measure of politicized identity. As such, the measure cannot support an analysis of qualitative change in the self-concept (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015).

identity and a drop in predictive power of group-based anger.

3.2. A new relational hypothesis on how non-activists become activists

My point of departure is that [Olson's \(1965\)](#) potential free-riders reflect either individuals who perceive a *null relationship* with the group (i.e., using the group for personal ends), or individuals who are regulating a *market pricing* relationship with their group (and thus are looking for a fair deal for their investments). Furthermore, I assume that their relationship with the outgroup, authority, or system is either absent, or based in an *authority ranking* relationship. On this basis, I hypothesize that when non-activists become activists, two relational models require change: First, one's *ingroup* relational model needs to change from null or market pricing to *communal sharing*; and second, one's *outgroup* relational model needs to change from null or authority ranking to a clear *rejection of authority ranking*. The net effect of those changes is the generation of a new relationship with specifically those in the broader ingroup that also reject the authority of the outgroup, authority or system. I first outline what these changes entail and then discuss which taboo violations can bring them about.

The first qualitative change concerns a change toward a *communal sharing* relationship with the ingroup. This fits with the motivational power among non-activists of increased identification with the broader group in predicting collective action ([Van Zomeren et al., 2008](#)) as well as increased anger about the unfair treatment of the group ([Smith, 1993](#); [Van Zomeren et al., 2012](#)), and an increased sense of group efficacy ([Mummendey et al., 1999](#)). Furthermore, this fits with an associated reduced reliance among higher identifiers on their more individualistic expectancy beliefs ([Louis et al., 2004](#); [Van Zomeren et al., 2008](#)). However, stronger identification with the broader group is not enough for non-activists to become activists – a qualitative change is required ([Livingstone, 2014](#)).

This is why a second qualitative change in relational models is needed, which concerns non-activists' relationship with the outgroup, authority, or system. Specifically, this change entails a *rejection* of the authority ranking relationship. This fits with the notion that authority ranking includes trust in authorities to care or cater for one's needs (e.g., [Tyler et al., 1996](#)). If authorities violate that trust, perceived and emotionally felt unfairness is the result (e.g., [Smith et al., 2012](#)). Such anger is not aimed at changing the system, however, but at voicing one's feeling of being mistreated *within the relationship*, such that the other ought to respond with attention and redress ([Bowlby, 1969](#); [De Vos, Van Zomeren, Gordijn, & Postmes, 2013](#)). Indeed, as [Bowlby \(1973, p. 287\)](#) put it: "Anger acts to promote, and not to disrupt, the bond." Thus, such anger should be understood as *serving to regulate the relationship* with the outgroup, authority, or system.

This explains why activists' group-based anger may no longer motivate their engagement in collective action. Indeed, when non-activists *reject* the authority-ranking relationship with the outgroup, authority or system, this

entails accepting that the outgroup or system has no intentions to respectfully care for them through attention and redress – the rejection of that relationship implies that they can be relied upon to be unreliable. As a consequence, activists' experience of group-based anger may certainly not cease, but it can no longer motivate them to *regulate that relationship*.

Importantly, the net effect is the generation of a new communal sharing relationship with specifically those within the broader ingroup who reject an authority relationship with the outgroup, authority, or system (i.e., activists). As a consequence, the self-concept changes from moving from an 'unpoliticized' to 'politicized' group identity. This politicized group identity brings along communal sharing taboos and obligations (with respect to other activists), which explains why individuals' moral motivation flows from their politicized identity (whereas for non-activists it flows from their personal moral convictions; [Van Zomeren, 2013](#)), and why their self-efficacy beliefs focus more on their own actions than of those of the broader group ([Giguère & Lalonde, 2010](#); [Mazzoni et al., in press](#); [Stürmer & Simon, 2004](#)). As such, applying a relational perspective to explaining how non-activists become activists leads to a new relational hypothesis, and to a new explanation of why activists' and non-activists' motivational profiles are observed to be different⁵.

But which taboo violations in social interaction may lead to those changes? According to a relational perspective, the major catalyst for turning non-activists into activists is taboo violation in social interaction⁶. This is why it is important to conceptualize participation in collective action as not merely an outcome of self-based motivations, but as part of social interaction that serves to regulate relationships ([Rai & Fiske, 2011](#)). Moreover, this is why it is important that relational models are qualitatively different and revolve around qualitatively different taboos and obligations.

For the *first* required change (toward communal sharing with the ingroup), taboo violations may occur in social interaction with members of the ingroup or outgroup. For instance, a friend may ask and thus impose an obligation on oneself to participate in a demonstration, which may violate either a null (as there may be nothing to gain) or market pricing relationship (as this may not be perceived as

⁵ Implicit in this argument is the importance of considering how individuals regulate different relationships at the same time. [Fiske \(2012\)](#) has proposed the notion of *meta-relational models*, in which individuals, for instance, regulate one relationship through regulating another (see also [Fiske & Rai, 2015](#)). A full analysis of this notion is beyond the scope of this article, but my analysis implicitly makes use of it by suggesting that changes in two relational models (with ingroup and outgroup) result in the generation of a new relational model with those in the ingroup that reject an authority-ranking relationship with the outgroup, authority, or system.

⁶ Although my argument focuses on how non-activists become activists, my relational analysis also suggests that the same relational mechanism (taboo violation through social interaction) may lead to self-based motivational changes that turn activists into non-activists. For instance, an activist may leave the group because (s)he refuses to go along on a more violent path to achieve social change as proposed by an activist group leader.

a fair deal). If one wants to maintain the relationship with the friend, then obliging him or her implies a change in relational models. In fact, this may be why one the key predictors of engagement in collective action is to be asked by a friend (Klandermans, 1997). Similarly, a neighbor may express pride in being a free rider (i.e., staying at home so that others can do the heavy lifting), which violates a market pricing relationship (in which a fair transaction would be to receive nothing for providing nothing). Also, one can be moved toward a communal sharing relationship with the ingroup by hearing outgroup members violate relational taboos (e.g., on television), for instance through disrespecting the ingroup, or through unequal or disproportional treatment.

For the *second* required change (toward rejection of authority ranking with the outgroup), participation in collective action itself may include social interaction with both ingroup and outgroup members. For instance, at a demonstration there will be similar-minded people but also those who represent the outgroup, authority, or system. When a government official's speech communicates lack of care or respect toward the demonstrators, this may violate the authority ranking relationship; similarly, police actions to enforce 'law and order' during a demonstration may be perceived as abuse of power and thus of violating the authority ranking relationship. As a consequence, one may reject any previously considered obligation to defer to the government's authority. Because collective action events enable social interaction with those who also reject the authority, one can now generate a communal sharing relational model with those who also reject the outgroup, authority, or system as a legitimate authority (i.e., activists). Thus, my new relational hypothesis suggests that it takes taboo violations, through social interaction, to change or reject two specific (ingroup and outgroup) relational models in order for non-activists to become activists.

4. Coda

My aims in this article were to *reconceptualize* collective action as social interaction that regulates social relationships; to outline how this relational perspective enables an integrative understanding of the empirically observed *different motivational profiles* of activists and non-activists; in order to outline a *new relational hypothesis* about how non-activists become activists. Specifically, I proposed that changes in two (ingroup and outgroup) relational models, driven by taboo violations in social interaction, together lead to a qualitative shift in self-concept and self-based motivations for collective action. This implies that collective action is an essentially relational phenomenon (Van Zomeren, 2014); that changes in the self-concept and self-based motivation flow from changes in relational models; and that future theorizing and research on collective action and psychological change will benefit from adopting a relational perspective.

At least four key implications follow from my integrative line of thought. The first is that a deeper understanding of what motivates activists and non-activists to engage in collective action lies in better understanding *how* they

regulate *which* relationships. Rather than zooming in further on self-based motivations for collective action (Van Zomeren, 2013; Van Zomeren et al., 2008, 2012), theory and research on collective action that adopts a relational perspective opens the door to a deeper understanding of why individuals' self-concept is so important with respect to collective action in the first place, and how changes in self-concept can be explained by changes in relational models. Stepping through this door enables an enriching and theoretically integrative explanation of what it is, in essence, that motivates individuals for collective action: Their need to relate and regulate their social relationships (Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rai & Fiske, 2011).

I note that a relational perspective on collective action enriches a self-based perspective by conceptualizing changes in relational models as leading to changes in self-concept and self-based motivations for collective action. For instance, the importance of social interaction for collective action engagement is clearly visible in theory and research on opinion-based groups (e.g., McGarty et al., 2009; Smith, Thomas, & McGarty, in press). A relational perspective provides an underlying reason for why individuals want to be part of opinion-based groups and moreover generates new questions about *how* individuals regulate *which* relational models with the opinion-based group that may emerge from group interaction. This contributes to a broader and theoretically integrative analysis of collective action, which is in line with a general trend toward a broader and relational view on group processes and intergroup relations (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Drury & Reicher, 2009; Postmes et al., 2005; Swann et al., 2012; Van Zomeren, 2014; see also Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013; Vignoles, 2011).

A second implication of my theoretical analysis is that it invites an explicit comparison, in theory and/or research, between the motivational profiles of activists and non-activists. There has been seemingly little interest in this, presumably because activists and non-activists are typically thought of as 'apples and oranges'. This is exactly what one would expect in the absence of a theoretically integrative structure. But from a relational perspective, the apples and oranges reflect different pieces of fruit, which are comparable at that level, and which can help to explain even qualitative change. Indeed, a relational perspective explains why and how the motivational profiles of non-activists and activists are qualitatively different. Most strikingly, it explains why activists' experience of group-based anger toward the outgroup, authority, or system are no longer predictive of their participation in collective action: They have rejected their former authority ranking relationship. This reflects a new explanation for why the experience of group-based anger among activists has relatively little motivational power (for others see Groves, 1995; Thomas et al., 2009, 2012).

Furthermore, the notion of a committed ingroup of rejecters of the outgroup, authority, or system, potentially suggests a new definition and operationalization of what counts as an 'activist'. A relational perspective suggests that some often-used definitions may be too objective (i.e., whether one has formal membership in an action group or social movement), whereas others may be too subjective

(i.e., identification with an action group or social movement, or even self-perception as an activist; see Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015). A relational perspective suggests a relational definition of an activist that focuses on a *set of relationships* with different relational models, which takes into account ingroup and outgroup relationships *at the same time* (see also Fiske, 2012). This enables us to see much more than just individuals in groups – in fact, we see that these individuals are relational beings within networks of social relationships ().

A third implication of my analysis is that suggests new avenues for research. One can imagine different ways of testing the novel hypothesis I developed in this article. For instance, one can compare activists and non-activist samples cross-sectionally in order to compare their self-reported relational models and self-based motivations for collective action. One can also manipulate changes in relational models by confronting individuals with different ingroup and outgroup taboo violations in social interaction, and assess the effects of such a manipulation on the relevant variables. Furthermore, a longitudinal study in a political context (e.g., election, or protest in times of political turmoil) may be an ideal background against which to examine change in self-reported relational models, self-concept, and self-based motivations for collective action over time (e.g., Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015).

The current line of thought may also serve as a basis for generating other hypotheses based in changes in *other* relational models. For instance, some activists may believe themselves to be leaders enacting an authority ranking relationship with their ingroup, thus demanding their respect and deference (which is different from a communal sharing relationship). It may also be interesting to think about which relational models non-activists and activists want to *achieve* (Waldzus, Schubert, & Paladino, 2012). Some activists may want to change their authority ranking relationship with the outgroup to an equality matching one (e.g., wanting to be treated as equals by the government), whereas others may want to their ingroup to be in power (thus maintaining an authority ranking relationship but flipping the power balance). Although my focus in this article has been on the changes in the specific relational models that I hypothesize for non-activists and activists, Fiske's (1991, 1992) relational models theory is a rich source for generating novel and testable hypotheses about which relational models non-activists and activists may use and want to achieve.

Fourth and finally, when one pushes a relational perspective on collective action somewhat further, one may find potential practical real-world implications. For instance, a relational perspective suggests that those who seek to mobilize people should make use of specific taboo violations and obligations to 'push their buttons' in social interaction. Indeed, through my conceptualization of the two changes in ingroup and outgroup relational models that together lead to non-activists becoming activists, one can distill different practical messages.

One is that organizers can try to mobilize lower identifiers with the broader group by focusing on regulating their *market pricing* relationship through such action. This involves coming up with a 'fair deal' in exchange for their

participation (e.g., emphasizing personal benefits of participation, lowering personal costs of participation). But organizers can also try to increase their group identification through confronting them with a taboo violation (e.g., confront them with a proud free-rider). This should lead lower identifiers with the broader group to commit themselves more, in a communal sharing way, to those in the group who are not free riders.

Another practical message is that organizers can try to mobilize higher identifiers with the broader ingroup by focusing on regulating the communal sharing relationship with the ingroup through collective action (e.g., emphasize violations of personal moral convictions, group identification, group-based anger, group efficacy). But they can also try to politicize them by confronting them with the outgroup, authority, or system's violation of authority-ranking taboos. This should lead higher identifiers with the broader group to reject that authority ranking relationship, paving the way for the creation of a new relationship with those within the ingroup that reject the legitimate authority of the outgroup. Thus, the key practical implication of adopting a relational perspective on collective action is that it highlights the need to mobilize individuals *on the basis of their social relationships*.

I conclude this article by expressing my hope that scholars will consider and adopt a relational perspective on collective action, given that it enriches the currently popular self-based perspective in the literature; provides a new basis for theoretical integration in this particular field; and generates novel predictions to be tested in future research. Indeed, in line with the opening quote attributed to Margaret Mead, it is likely true that 'a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world', but particularly because they have changed their way to *relate* with others in that world through social interaction. Let us start theorizing and researching how precisely such relational change leads to psychological and even social change.

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