

Forthcoming in *Current Opinion in Psychology*

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Acting for whom, against what? Group membership and multiple paths to engagement in social
change

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Acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge support from the National Science Foundation (NSF-BCS-1823840).

Word Count = 2394 (main text) + 28 footnote = 2422 total

Abstract

In a connected and politically-engaged world, it is essential to understand how, why, and when people from diverse backgrounds may support social action. Integrating findings from the collective action, solidarity, and allyship literatures, we present working models of how the lenses through which individuals possessing different group memberships may psychologically identify (as part of the targeted group, an inclusive stigmatized identity, or the societally-dominant group) and perceive injustice (as exclusively affecting the targeted group, inclusively affecting the target group and one's ingroup, or perceiving ingroup privileges) may shape social change efforts. We highlight disparate effects of positive (and negative) contact between groups on the mobilization of socially-dominant and stigmatized groups that may provide challenges to diverse coalitions seeking social change.

Keywords: intergroup relations, solidarity, allyship, collective action, social change

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Over the last three decades, 70% of the world's population experienced growing disparities in income and opportunity among different social groups[1]. From Chile to Puerto Rico, India to Lebanon, internationally-catalyzing collective action has emerged as people protest across social and economic divides to seek social change. In an age of social media, these movements and activists have unparalleled reach[2]. Given this context, understanding when and why individuals of diverse backgrounds seek social change is of paramount importance.

The antecedents of support for social action are a prominent area of inquiry within social scientific research. This review integrates emergent psychological research investigating individuals' support of social change from multiple perspectives: the perspective of people who are part of the group targeted by a perceived injustice as well as the perspectives of members of groups varying in social status who may not be directly targeted by the perceived injustice, but support social change nonetheless (i.e., socially-dominant and stigmatized group allies).

Although the proposed working models and processes may operate among a variety of social groups and contexts, to aid comprehension, we focus on an example from race relations within the multiethnic context of the United States to illustrate the different perspectives—specifically, what processes might lead Black (targeted group), Hispanic (stigmatized-group ally), and White Americans (dominant-group ally) to act to reduce perceived anti-Black injustice? We highlight how group membership and the different lenses through which individuals view perceived injustice and their own multiple social identities may shape support for social action. Finally, we consider how contact among groups may moderate these processes and the circumstances that could facilitate individuals of diverse social groups coalescing to enact social change.

1. When Do Individuals Support Social Change? Considering Multiple Perspectives

Multiple approaches to understanding when individuals seek to enact social change have developed within psychological research: most notably, research on collective action, solidarity, and allyship. While conceptually related, these literatures have largely developed in separate silos, making an integration of approaches vital. Individuals from various social groups may seek to reduce perceived injustice, regardless of whether their group is directly negatively impacted. While longstanding research on collective action has focused (and continues to focus[3-5]) on the precursors to action among people directly affected by an injustice, more recent work considers when members of the socially-dominant group[6,7] and members of groups stigmatized (culturally-devalued) in similar (but not identical) ways[8,9] may take action. This work reveals that members of different social groups may take disparate paths to act against perceived injustice, depending on the lenses through which they view that injustice and their own social identities.

1.1 Collective action through psychological identification with the targeted group

The path by which people identify with a group directly targeted by a perceived injustice (i.e., the targeted group) and then engage in collective action is well-examined. Collective action is often defined as behaviors (e.g., signing a petition, protesting) enacted with the goal of ameliorating perceived disadvantages faced by *one's psychological ingroup*[10]. As such, collective action research typically includes samples of individuals who demographically belong to the group seen as facing an injustice (e.g., Black Americans facing anti-Black racism[11,12]; however, see[13]). Much research considers socially identifying with a targeted group as a crucial precursor to feeling a sense of group-based injustice, which predicts support for acting collectively on behalf of that group¹[10,14-17]. Further, perceiving injustice against one's group

can elicit emotional responses that motivate collective action through the experience of anger[18,19] and other emotions (e.g., hope[21]).

Recent work reveals that members of groups not directly targeted by a perceived injustice may also engage in collective action due to feelings of psychological closeness and identification with the targeted group[22-25]. For example, in the Israeli-Palestinian context, the more psychologically-fused (i.e., psychological overlap between oneself and a group) Israelis were with the Palestinian outgroup, the greater their willingness to engage in protests to support Palestinians[23]. Additionally, in the Netherlands, moral convictions that discrimination targeting a stigmatized group (Dutch Muslims) is wrong predict socially-dominant group (non-Muslim Dutch) members' identification with the stigmatized group, which in turn, predicts support for collective action[13]. That is, despite that individuals may *demographically* belong to the socially-dominant social group, their moral convictions against injustice predict *psychologically* identifying as part of the stigmatized outgroup.

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, one route to collective action to support a group perceived to face injustice is through psychological identification with that targeted group. While this process may occur more frequently among individuals who belong to the targeted group, prior research[13,23] suggests that it can occur for members of other social groups who are not direct targets of the perceived injustice (i.e., allies). An important caveat is that highlighting social disparities can lead to the legitimization of those disparities (e.g., through system justification—the tendency for individuals to justify and bolster the status quo), in which case individuals are unlikely to act to reduce disparities and may instead work to maintain the status quo[26,27].

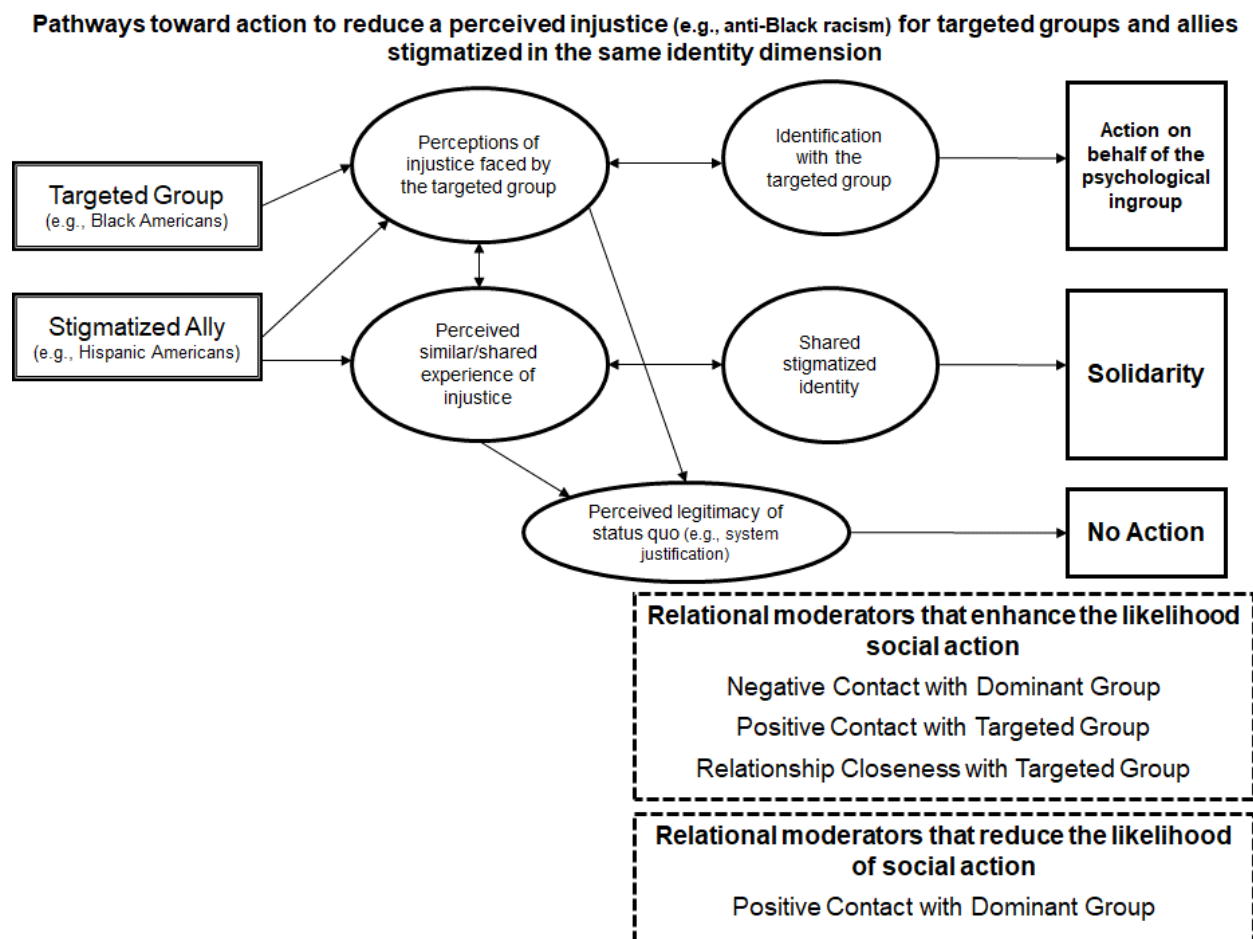


Figure 1. A working model of different pathways to support for action (or inaction) to reduce a perceived injustice for members of groups stigmatized in a dimension of identity (the targeted group and stigmatized allies). Classic collective action research focuses on the top path of individuals supporting social change through identification with their own group (the targeted group), however stigmatized allies may also take this path if they psychologically-identify as part of the targeted group (e.g., via perceived closeness or identity fusion). A solidarity-based pathway may occur for members of other groups who are stigmatized within the same dimension of identity (e.g., within race), if a sense of shared stigmatized identity is active. Dotted boxes indicate moderating variables relating to intergroup relations and intergroup contact.

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1.2 Pathways to solidarity through perceptions of shared experiences and inclusive identity

Solidarity represents advocacy on behalf of others perceived to share common cause, similar experiences, or broader inclusive group membership[9,28-30]. For example, perceiving one's experiences with discrimination as similar to that of another stigmatized group can facilitate political solidarity with that group[9,31]. How is solidarity different from action taken on behalf of the psychological ingroup, as described in section 1.1? Rather than identification as part of the targeted group spurring action on behalf of that group, with solidarity, individuals may connect their own group's experiences (e.g., with discrimination) with those of the targeted outgroup while maintaining subgroup boundaries (e.g., Black and Hispanic Americans can identify as distinct ethnic groups, yet perceiving similar discrimination experiences due to shared status as "racial minorities" in the US which can elicit action in support of one another).

Prior work reveals that highlighting similar forms of discrimination (e.g., anti-Black and anti-Hispanic racism) or shared aspects of different forms of discrimination (e.g., homophobia, racism) can elicit positive attitudes and expressed solidarity[32-34]. Importantly, considering one's own group's discrimination experiences does not invariably elicit coalitional attitudes toward stigmatized outgroups[35], but can lead to the derogation of groups facing discrimination along a different dimension of identity[36]. For example, among heterosexual Hispanic Americans, while making anti-Hispanic racism salient can elicit perceived similarity and positivity towards Black Americans (another racial minority group[32]), it has also been found to lead to *less* support for gay civil rights (a group stigmatized in terms of sexuality, rather than race[37,38]).

Given that individuals hold multiple, intersecting social identities[39-41], the path to solidarity with a target of perceived injustice (e.g., solidarity with Black Americans to reduce anti-Black racism) may occur for members of groups who are similarly-stigmatized within an

identity dimension (e.g., Hispanic Americans, see Figure 1) or for members of the socially-dominant group (e.g., White Americans, see Figure 2). That is, individuals who are socially-dominant in one dimension may face discrimination along another dimension (e.g., White women are members of a socially-dominant racial group, but a stigmatized gender group). Indeed, if people consider social disparities that advantage their group in one identity dimension, they report facing greater discrimination due to their *other* identities and greater willingness to work with oppressed outgroups to pursue common cause[42].

This is consistent with work suggesting that highlighting shared aspects of discrimination experiences can facilitate solidarity between groups stigmatized across different dimensions of identity. For instance, connecting past racial discrimination to recent forms of discrimination toward sexual minorities (e.g., marriage laws) amplifies straight racial minority group members' support for political positions that would benefit sexual minorities[8]. Thus, due to individuals' multiple social identities, both socially-dominant and stigmatized allies can perceive common cause, similar experiences, or inclusive group membership (e.g., as “stigmatized”) which can spark solidarity toward an outgroup perceived to face injustice.

1.3 Pathway to allyship through power-cognizant dominant-group identification

Allyship examines when socially-dominant group members support action to reduce social-disparities that benefit their own group (e.g., Whites support of reducing the race-wealth gap). A key distinction between allyship and solidarity is that with allyship, socially-dominant group members take action due to values or norms, rather than a sense of shared group identity with the group targeted by a perceived injustice[28].

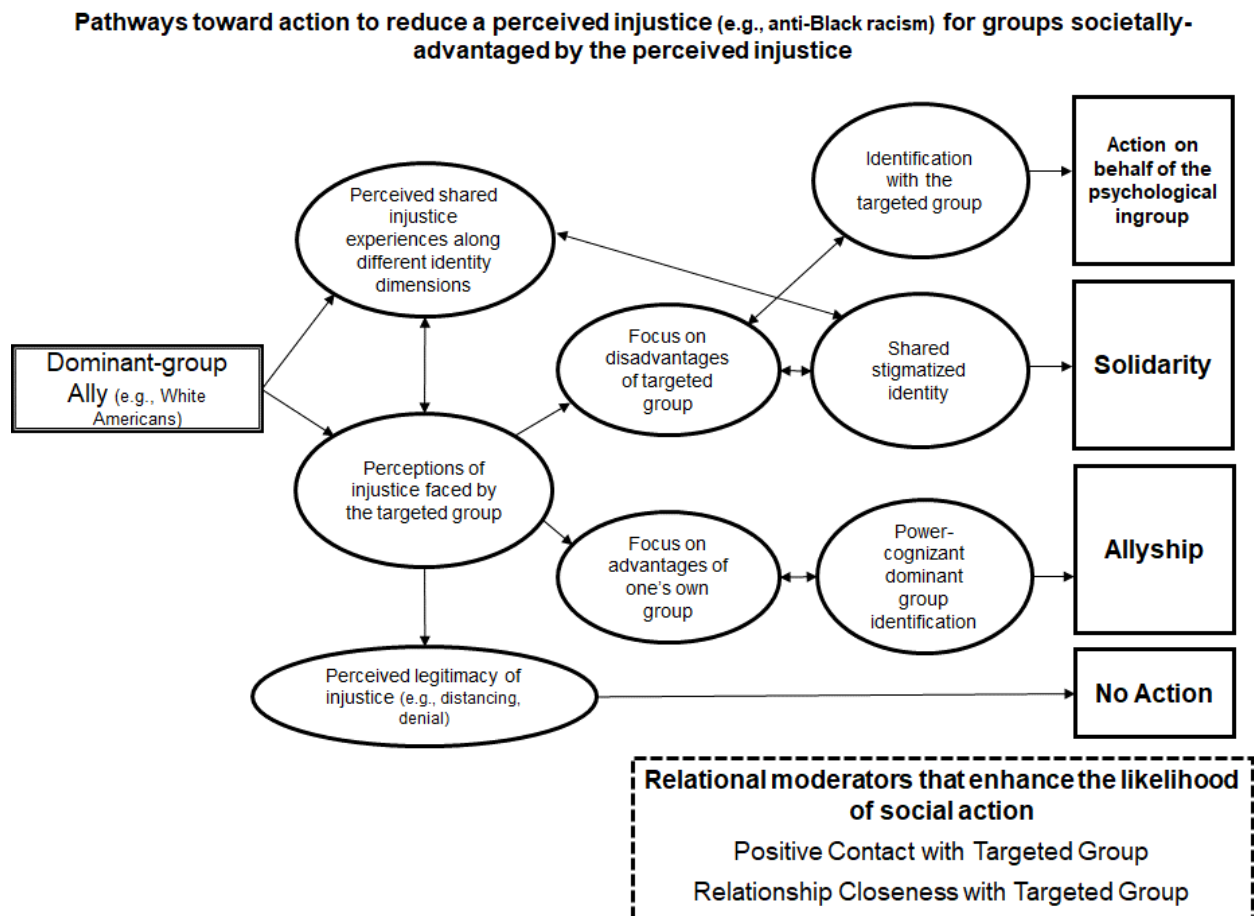


Figure 2. A working model of different pathways to support for action (or inaction) to reduce a perceived injustice for groups socially-dominant in that dimension of identity (dominant-group allies). Dominant-group allies may engage in action if they psychologically-identify a) as part of the targeted group (e.g., through perceived closeness or identity fusion), b) as an outgroup member stigmatized in another identity dimension (e.g., through perceived similarity of injustice experiences), or c) with a power-cognizant dominant-group identity (e.g., via privilege acknowledgment). Dotted boxes indicate moderating variables relating to intergroup relations and intergroup contact.

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Advantaged group allies may maintain a high level of identification with their dominant group identity while critiquing the existing power structure, leading to political engagement in support of a disadvantaged outgroup[43-45]. Indeed, allies often strongly identify with their

socially-dominant ingroup, but importantly are “power-cognizant”—i.e., perceive their group to possess unearned societal privileges and power[43, 46-48]—and seek to dismantle systems viewed as unjust[26]. Accordingly, criticism, rather than legitimization, of the status quo as well as perceiving that their group has privileges in society are essential components of this identification pathway to spur action[26,27,48].

Importantly, strong identification with a socially-dominant group *without* beliefs that the ingroup has unearned privileges can undermine allyship behavior. The psychological processes underlying support for collective action to improve ingroup status are strikingly similar for socially-dominant and stigmatized group members: strength of ingroup identification and perceptions that one’s ingroup faces injustice motivate ingroup-enhancing collective action[49,50]. While for stigmatized group members this implies support for action to improve their group’s low status, in the case of socially-dominant group members, this means support for action to *maintain* their group’s high-status[27,49]. Thus, power-cognizance and perceiving that one’s group unfairly benefits from a system are essential components for how socially-dominant group identification may facilitate action to reduce perceived injustice faced by stigmatized outgroups.

2. Disparate Effects of Intergroup Contact on Support for Social Change

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, members of different social groups may view their identities through multiple lenses that all facilitate engaging in action to reduce perceived injustice. However, contact among members of differently-statused groups can impact people’s support for collective action. Recent research highlighting how intergroup contact can shape individuals’ support for social change reveals a complicated picture.

For members of stigmatized groups, negative contact with dominant group members predicts greater engagement in collective action due to greater perceived discrimination and identification with the group targeted by a perceived injustice[7]. In contrast, positive contact with dominant group members can, at times, stifle both support for action to improve one's own group's position[3] and support for solidarity with another stigmatized group[51].

For members of the socially-dominant group, however, the opposite pattern emerges. Positive intergroup contact can enhance dominant group members' engagement in collective action to support the stigmatized group and negative contact can suppress support[7,52,53]. For example, positive contact with Black Americans predicts Whites' support for collective action through greater empathy and anger over perceived racial injustice[52]. Positive contact and perceived closeness with people targeted by prejudice predicted White women's reported willingness to participate in racial justice protests, with closeness predicting actual activism behavior[25]. Similarly, positive contact with sexual minorities predicts heterosexuals' activism in support of the LGB community[7]. Taken together, intergroup contact can have oppositional effects for motivating social change among members of socially-dominant and stigmatized groups.

Given these differences in what facilitates action to reduce disparities among members of differently-statused groups, under what circumstances would diverse coalitions cohesively work together? Importantly, not all positive contact is detrimental to stigmatized groups' support for social change. The dampening effect of positive dominant-group contact on social change engagement appears to be due to people's assumptions that dominant group members perceive the status quo as legitimate[3]. Indeed, if dominant group members engage in contact that highlights their disapproval of the status quo, positive intergroup contact does not reduce

stigmatized group members' collective action tendencies[3,54]. This implies that diverse coalitions may be particularly effective in motivating engagement, if there is close contact among both dominant-group and stigmatized coalition partners—which mobilizes dominant group members[24]—and dominant group members clearly signal that they reject the legitimacy of the status-quo—which prevents demobilization of stigmatized group members[3].

3. Unanswered Questions

There are many unexplored questions vital to understanding when and why people from diverse backgrounds may seek social change. The working models presented in Figures 1 and 2 highlight several paths that may facilitate support for social action, however, different paths may prompt disparate emotional reactions and facilitate different types of action. For example, while recent research has revealed multiple unique emotions that spur collective action (e.g., hope, anger, guilt, sympathy[21, 55-57]), it is not yet clear how to predict which emotion will be activated. Based on our working model, one clear prediction is that an emotion such as guilt may be more related to a dominant group member adopting a power-cognizant identification in which they view their group's high status as unearned. As another example, empathy may be particularly relevant to the solidarity pathway.

Social change research often combines many types of action into one index of “collective action support” (e.g., attending protests, intentions to confront bias), so understanding when different forms of action are supported is relatively understudied and an avenue ripe for future research. A notable exception is the distinction between normative (e.g., peaceful protest) and non-normative (e.g., civil disobedience) political action, which has received increasing attention[6,58,59]. However additional distinctions regarding the types of action supported may be informative. Indeed, the salience of different social identities (see Figures 1-2) may elicit

support for different forms of action, as the salience of one's dominant-group identity may lead dominant-group allies to seek more affiliative behavior[60,61], compared with if they support action due to a sense of shared identity with the targeted group. Finally, most research considers support for social change within a single nation. Recent movements engaging in action on behalf of a group in another nation (e.g., campus movements within the US supporting social change in the Israeli-Palestinian context) underscore the need for further work on cross-cultural collective action. Future work should examine these intriguing possibilities by clarifying the antecedents to emotion-based action support, which specific actions are supported by allies and the targeted group, and the processes underlying individuals' support of international social change.

4. Conclusions

In a connected and politically-engaged world, it is essential to understand how, why, and when people from different groups support social change. While social change may be jointly sought both by members of socially-dominant and stigmatized groups, the lenses through which members of these groups identify and perceive injustice may shape how they act in efforts to enact change. Future research would benefit from understanding collective action, solidarity, and allyship as complementary (yet distinct) psychological processes through which diverse coalitions may engage in social change.

Annotated References

*Louis et al. (2019) (See References). This is a theoretical review that explores forms of intergroup prosociality, such as charitable giving, displays of empathy and affirmation (positive and supportive contact), allyship, and solidarity. This provides a comprehensive, accessible overview highlighting connections between and differences among the collective action, solidarity, and allyship literatures.

*Ostrove & Brown (2018) (See References). This paper empirically examines the qualities of allies. It empirically tests how socially-dominant group allies (as identified/nominated by people of color) exhibit characteristics of both affirming attitudes (e.g., lower prejudice and greater privilege awareness) and informed action, distinguishing them from non-nominated dominant group members and from nominated dominant group friends. This illustrates original empirical research on allyship.

*Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, & Sibley (2019) (See References). This paper empirically integrates system justification theory and social identity findings into a model of collective action that explains when members of socially-dominant and stigmatized groups act collectively to challenge or defend the status quo. This illustrates original empirical research on when socially-dominant and stigmatized group members engage in collective action to support their own groups.

*Tropp & Barlow (2018) (See References). This is a brief, accessible review of established and emerging research suggesting that intergroup contact contributes to socially-dominant group members' investment in social change.

*Cortland et al. (2017) (See References). This paper focuses on relations between members groups stigmatized along different dimensions of identity (e.g., racial and sexual minorities) and

finds that highlighting shared experiences of discrimination can improve intergroup outcomes between stigmatized groups across social identity dimensions. This illustrates original empirical research on solidarity.

*Reimer et al. (2017) (See References). These studies investigated the differential effects of positive and negative contact on collective action in stigmatized and socially-dominant groups. For stigmatized groups, negative contact with dominant groups was related to greater collective action. For dominant groups, negative and positive contact predicted less and more activism, respectively. This illustrates original empirical research on the disparate effects of valenced intergroup contact for dominant and stigmatized group members.

Footnote

¹For brevity, we do not discuss the essential role of perceived efficacy in positively predicting support for collective action, but acknowledge the robust literature supporting its importance (e.g.,[62]).

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