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Doing Democracy: The Social Psychological Mobilization and Consequences of Collective Action

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Abstract

Participating in collective actions, or acts of social protest, is one of the primary means that citizens have of participating in democracy and seeking social change. In this paper we outline the ways in which: social identity provides a psychological foundation for collective actions; social norms shape the mobilization and particular direction (disruptive vs. conventional) of that protest; and participating in collective actions is psychologically consequential and socio-politically complex. We use this platform to put forward a series of practical implications for activists, social movement and non-governmental groups, and authorities, who seek to mobilize consequential collective action. We conclude that collective action is a fundamental tool in the battle for social equality and justice. In order to better understand, and engage with this phenomenon, policy makers and practitioners need to attend to its origins in collective, group-based psychology.
Doing Democracy: The Social Psychological Mobilization and Consequences of Collective Action

Much of what we hear about in the daily media concerns people acting collectively to try and change (or maintain) a state of affairs. Writing in 2011-2012, the news is dominated by the wave of pro-democracy protests sweeping the Middle East and northern Africa. The 99% Occupy Wall Street protests sparked an international movement against the financial greed and corruption of the world’s richest. In the USA, Tea Party activists have campaigned strongly, changing the dynamics of American elections. Protests against austerity measures to bring Greek debt under control witnessed rallies of hundreds of thousands, as well as widespread property destruction. And the 2011 *Time magazine* Person of the Year was The Protester. In short, it sometimes seems that the whole world is on the march (to paraphrase Blackwood & Louis, 2012).

Two things are particularly striking about these examples, and illustrate some of the complexities of the ‘complicated phenomenon’ that is collective action (van Zomeren, Spears, Leach & Fischer, 2004, p. 649; Klandermans, 1997). Firstly, even at the height of protest movements, the people who participate in these actions typically represent a small minority of a broader disadvantaged or disgruntled group. Given that participating in protest and other forms of collective action is the primary means (apart from voting) that ordinary people have of participating in the democratic process in Western liberalized democracies, what differentiates those who participate from those who do not? Many social problems are widely recognized yet persist for decades in the face of widespread disengagement: the unequal treatment of Indigenous populations, environmental degradation, global poverty, and unaddressed fiscal and social crises that will arise from the ageing population, for example. Here, many non-governmental and
activist organizations spend time and effort garnering support to challenge the status quo. For example, grassroots international social movement Avaaz (http://www.avaaz.org/en) is a global web movement seeking to “bring people power to decisions everywhere”; since its inception in 2007 it has registered over 15 million members internationally. In this context, then, overcoming apathy and inaction to promote productive participation in actions to achieve (or subvert) social progress is an important priority of governments and non-governmental (activist) organizations alike.

A second striking feature of these examples is the very different strategies that actors have chosen to highlight their plight. Hunger strikes, rallies, petitions, demonstrations and acts of vandalism all seek to protest an existing, or anticipated, state of affairs but use very different means to do so. Some of these strategies are more conventional, mainstream and ‘accepted’ than others. Yet governments expend significant resources controlling even peaceful democratic protests. For example, the first few months of the Occupy Wall Street movement cost authorities an estimated $13 million to police, across the various American cities where demonstrations and sit-ins took place (‘Occupying all the way to the bank’, 2011). Authorities spend even more (and much expense of spirit!) trying to control more violent or disruptive forms of protest, such as ‘direct action’ in the form of blockades, property destruction and so on. The 2011 London riots cost an estimated £34 million, an amount comparable to the cost of policing all the major public order events combined between April 2010 and March 2011 (Miller, 2011). Beyond the economic costs, this control can, itself, impose costs on activists and civil society as seen in debate over arrests, censorship, and police violence. And control perceived as illegitimate can itself be a source of radicalization (see Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher & Stott, 2011). The distinction between conventional and disruptive protest, then, belies a further complexity: that
people can choose what avenues of collective action and civic participation they would like to engage in. How do people decide what social strategies to pursue in their fight for social justice? And what are the consequences of these decisions for the overall effectiveness of their appeal?

In all, the social and political landscape is complex. On the one hand we see declining rates of civic engagement and political participation (e.g. Galston, 2001), speaking to a widespread government failure to politically engage their constituents while urgent social crises cry out for action. On the other hand, we see political action which is costly to authorities and to participants (regarding investments of time as well as other resources). Given this perplexing context, it is not surprising that understanding the factors that motivate and sustain participation in collective action for social change has also been an important field of inquiry (Klandermans, 1997; Thomas, McGarty & Mavor, 2009a; van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008). In this paper we adopt a temporal perspective to study the social mobilization and consequences of collective action.

Regarding the *social mobilization* of action, we begin our discussion by making the point that collective action implies the existence of social groups. All the examples considered thus far have the common feature that they involve groups of people, coming together, to voice a shared concern. These examples are also *collective actions* in that they generally seek to improve the circumstances of a group as a whole (Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990). For the purposes of this paper, collective actions are those which: “aim to challenge or protect the status quo and can be conducted by low-status groups, high-status groups, or groups not distinguished by status position” (Becker, 2012, p.1). Given the centrality of group processes to defining and understanding collective action we will begin by discussing the psychological basis of group membership: how do people come to develop common cause? What are the group processes
which shape participation? Having described the social mobilization of collective action, we then consider the psychological and socio-political consequences of collective action. Some actions are likely to be more palatable to a bystander public (not to mention authorities) than others. If recent insights from the sociological and political science literatures are accurate, then one of the most important factors in successful collective action is the extent to which it influences broader public opinion (see Louis, 2009c). What are the consequences of decisions about protest strategy for activists, bystanders and social justice outcomes? We use this empirical basis of the social mobilization and consequences of collective action to develop a series of pragmatic and policy implications in the section that follows; these are summarized in Table 1.

The current approach is informed by insights of social identity theory (Tajfel & J.C. Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (J.C. Turner et al., 1987). The social identity approach is an influential theory of group processes and intergroup relations, and early work in this tradition sought to shed lights on efforts to form common cause to resist oppression (Reicher, 1984, 1996). It is useful to consider briefly the contributions of this approach in the context of other contemporary (primarily sociological) approaches to understanding collective action and social movement participation. These tend to fall into one of two categories. The first emphasized access to structural resources and rational cost-benefit calculations in decision making (most notably resource mobilization theory; e.g. McCarthy & Zald, 1976; Zald & McCarthy, 1979). From this perspective, collective action will occur when a collective has access to sufficient resources and the weight of judgment suggests that actions will be successful. However, this approach was criticized for its neglect of the individual and, in particular, the ways
that social interactions amongst individuals shape willingness to participate (Klandermans, 1984).

Conversely, the second approach emphasized the co-production of narratives and frames which shape meaning, and therefore action, among constituents, antagonists and bystanders (the social movement ‘framing’ approach; e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000). Collective action frames are “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Snow & Benford, 2000, p.614). Research in this tradition sought to identify various frames which engender participation in action, but also the discursive and rhetorical practices through which these are negotiated and made meaningful (Snow & Benford, 2000). Collective identity was understood to be central to the framing process (e.g. Gamson, 1995; Hunt & Benford, 2004, for a review), however, identity was primarily considered as a property of groups (Snow & McAdam, 2000). There was a need for an underlying theory of self and identity that could specify how collective framing processes take effect in the minds of individuals. It is in this context that the social identity tradition provides a particularly useful perspective on collective action. As we will see below, it emphasizes the functionality of group action (as per resource mobilization theory) but also the ways that these processes are driven by the social generation of meaning (as per framing).

**The Mobilization of Collective Action**

**Groups Provide a Psychological Platform**

The social identity approach emphasizes the psychological reality of social groups (J.C. Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994). That is, rather than seeing groups as an aggregate or collection of individuals, the social identity approach suggests that group processes occupy a meaningful place in human psychology through identity. A key insight of these approaches is
that the self-concept is comprised of both personal identities (things that relate to “me” and “you”) and social identities (things that relate to “us” and “them”). More formally, social identities are commonly defined as “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his or her knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and the emotional significance attached to it” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). When a personal identity is salient (or psychologically operative), behavior will be defined by individual-level interactions; however when a social identity is salient behavior will be defined by group-level interactions.

A core insight from the social identity perspective is that it is social identity, rather than one’s sense of individual or personal identity, per se, that underpin collective efforts to ameliorate social inequality (Reicher, 1987). Social identity is understood to act as the conceptual and psychological link between individual and society and, thus, it is through identity that social systems – social structures, social hierarchies – exert an impact on human psychology. Conversely, it is through identity that individual minds make up society (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2010).

Consistent with these arguments, it has been shown that a common social identity can facilitate greater cooperation in social dilemmas (e.g., de Cremer & van Vugt, 1999), group-based helping (e.g. Dovidio, Gaertner, Validzic, Matoka, Johnson & Frazier, 1997; Levine, Prosser, Evans & Reicher, 2005; Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins & Levine, 2006), and inferred trust based on the shared social relationship (e.g., Tanis & Postmes, 2005). Thus, when people identify with a group, they will tend to cooperate with, and advocate for, fellow ingroup members.

These ideas have significant implications for civic participation generally and have been studied extensively in relation to collective action participation (see Thomas et al., 2009a, for a
review). Collective or social identification has been shown to foster protest participation in the context of South African peace protests, Dutch farmers, and the elderly (Klandermans, 2002). Similarly, identifying as a woman predicts action to promote equality for fellow women (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995). More recently, the social identity model of collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2008) emphasizes the importance of social identity in shaping how injustice is perceived, and calculations about the efficacy of action (group efficacy; following Bandura, 2000), which both in turn foster collective action. This is most true when an identity has become politicized, or embedded in a meaningful socio-political context (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Other research has shown that participating in collective action is derived from a sense of inner obligation stemming from identity (Stürmer & Simon, 2004) and affirms one’s identity as a supporter of change (Simon, Trotschel & Dahne, 2008).

Thus, social identity transforms decision making from the locus of the purely individual ‘self’ to a group or social self. These ideas are perhaps most explicitly organized in the agentic normative influence model (Louis, Taylor & Neil, 2004; Louis, Taylor & Douglas, 2005). For example, Louis et al. (2004) showed, in the context of English-French relations in Canada, that when group members identify with a group, they derive the individual-level costs and benefits that shape their “rational” decision-making from group-level costs and benefits (see also, Packer, 2008; Packer & Chasteen, 2010). Group members’ perceptions of benefits to the group mediated a relationship between identification and the perceived benefits to the self of engaging in collective action. Those who identify strongly with the group perceive benefits to helping other group members (it is rewarding) and costs from harming others (it is aversive). Even where (especially when) it is difficult or costly for individuals to act, it is meaningful and moral to sacrifice for the group. Sacrifice of individuals to benefit a wider group is widespread, not just
in warrior contexts (e.g., Louis & Taylor, 2002; Louis, 2009a, 2009b) but among all groups, from academics reviewing journal articles to citizens taking the time to vote. This dynamic is highly important in any collective enterprise.

**Group Norms Shape Action**

Moreover, groups often teach members explicitly which benefits and costs to the group are important: they may teach members to focus on long-term versus short-term benefits, for example (e.g., Hornsey et al., 2005), or to see certain symbolic or economic threats as urgent and harmful (e.g., cartoons of a religious leader). Louis and colleagues (2005; see also Blackwood & Louis, 2012) showed that perceptions of the benefits and costs to a group of engaging in one type of collective action versus another were associated with perceptions of what norms both ingroup and outgroup supported (e.g., Anglophone and Francophone Québécois). The political intergroup context thus links identities, norms, and cost-benefit calculations such that one’s own group norms, and the benefits of conforming to or violating other groups’ norms impact on what is seen as beneficial or harmful to the self.

Social norms are sometimes seen as coercive, constraining “free will”, but as individuals internalize the norms of groups they identify with, they come to feel the behavior is chosen freely and expresses their authentic preferences (cf., Amiot, Sansfaçon, Louis, & Yelle, 2011). In explaining how group behavior takes particular directions, the social identity perspective stresses the active construction of social norms or standards for group behavior. These norms or standards are elsewhere referred to as identity content (e.g. Livingstone & Haslam, 2008; Subašić et al., 2008) but the central message is that norms are intricately connected to identity because they define the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral meaning of the identity (Terry &
Hogg, 1996; J.C. Turner, Wetherell & Hogg, 1989). Thus, decisions to mobilize are responsive to group norms about who “we” are, and what “we” do (Thomas et al., 2009a).

One demonstration of the important role of norms and identity in understanding socio-political action comes from research on opinion-based groups. The opinion-based group concept suggests that people can use opinions (for example, about social justice issues such as pro-life, pro-choice) to form social identities (McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas & Bongiorno, 2009). McGarty and colleagues argue that groups based on shared opinions (opinion-based groups: Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds & Muntele, 2007) are more likely to mobilize action because such groups prescribe clear norms for action. That is, if you identify with a group that has a pro-life or pro-choice opinion as its defining characteristic, then it often has clear prescriptions for actions such as voting and demonstrating in line with that identity (Bliuc et al., 2007; O’Brien & McGarty, 2009; Russell, 2011). For example, Thomas, Mavor and McGarty (2012) showed that social identification with an anti-poverty opinion-based group (“I feel connected to other people who support an end to global poverty”, “being someone who supports an end to global poverty is an important part of who I am”; Cameron, 2004) strongly predicted collective action amongst advantaged group members (people in a developed country) to support people in developing countries, as well as relevant justice-oriented emotional reactions (outrage at the situation) and beliefs (group efficacy; that group actions can be effective).

Thomas, McGarty and Mavor (2009a) go further in noting that emotions and beliefs may also be adopted as norms, as shown in instances of communal grieving, celebration, and outrage enacted collectively in 2011 following the deaths of civilian protesters, of Kim Jong Il, or Osama bin Laden (Thomas & McGarty, 2009; Thomas, McGarty & Mavor, 2009b; see Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012, for a review). A key insight of the normative alignment model is that, in order to
motivate engagement in sustainable or long-term collective action, an identity needs to be characterized by a relevant and motivating pattern of norms for action (“we can act”), emotion (“we feel outraged”) and belief (“we believe action can be effective”). Where a social identity becomes linked to de-motivating emotion norms of self-pity or fear, or linked to normative beliefs in the inefficacy of action, this can undermine concerted collective action. The implication of the normative alignment model is that norms about who “we” are, what we feel, believe and do all combine to facilitate or subvert participation in collective action.

A final insight relates to the distinction between norms about what we actually do (descriptive norms) and prescriptions about what a group should do or ideally would do (injunctive norms) (Cialdini et al., 1990, 1991; see also, Smith & Louis, 2008, 2009). Injunctive and descriptive norms can tap different sources of motivation. Some have argued that injunctive norms evoke needs to be liked by group members and do what is moral, whereas descriptive norms evoke the perception that this action works for your group, which is often a snap judgment (e.g., Jacobsen, Mortensen, & Cialdini, 2011). There is evidence from both correlational and experimental research that descriptive and injunctive norms have independent effects on intentions and behavior (e.g., Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000; Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993; Manning, 2009; Rivis & Sheeran, 2003). They also interact (Gockeritz et al., 2010; Smith & Louis, 2009): whether people conform to what their group does depend upon whether they perceive it is what their group should do, and vice versa. Both in the case of student protests and in the case of environmental behavior, it has been found that when a behavior is seen as widespread (descriptively normative), making salient a contrary injunctive norm can actually consolidate the problem behavior (e.g., Smith & Louis, 2008, Experiment 2; Smith, Louis, Terry, Greenaway, Clarke, et al., 2012). Conversely, among those highly invested in change,
incongruent norms can be motivating (McDonald, Fielding, & Louis, 2012; Smith & Louis, Experiment 1). It is precisely when descriptive and injunctive group norms are at odds that collective action is most likely to arise: collective actors are often trying to bring a descriptive norm into line with an injunctive norm (Christie & Louis, in press; Smith & Louis, 2009; Thomas et al., 2009).

If Group Norms Mobilize Action, Where Do They Come From?

Mass social influence: Norms for action can be mobilized through leadership. One line of research which highlights the fluid ways that identity can be shaped through norms comes from research on social identity and leadership. The idea here is that leaders can act as agents of influence, and can actively construct the subjective meaning (norms) of an identity to meet various political and social ends (Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; Reicher, Hopkins, Levine & Rath, 2005; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). Reicher, Haslam and colleagues have called these leaders entrepreneurs of identity and have argued that mass influence of leadership is possible when leaders actively promote a vision of social identity that redefines reality in line with relevant goals (see also Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2010).

For example, the social identity model of helping and solidarity (Reicher et al., 2006) analyzed public documents used to mobilize Bulgarians against the deportation of Jews during World War II. The research outlined the ways that Bulgarian leaders represented identity concerns such that: a) the Jews were treated as part of a common Bulgarian national ingroup, e.g. “Bulgaria’s Jews speak and think in Bulgarian”; b) the category norms for the Bulgarian identity prescribed support for a persecuted people, e.g. “Bulgarians are civilised, tolerant and humane”; c) the Bulgarian ingroup would be threatened by not helping, e.g. “This will be harmful to our people”. Thus, category inclusiveness (a), group norms (b), and category interests (c) are
proposed to be *deployed strategically* to re-shape identity by leaders seeking to shape pro-social social action. Conversely, it has been argued that similar processes underpin the formation of extreme negative social behaviors (e.g. genocide, Reicher et al., 2008; Reicher et al., 2005b). Reicher et al.’s five step model of the development of collective hate argues that the horrific events of the Holocaust can also be understood as an outcome of the ways in which category boundaries, ingroup interests and concerns (particularly as they relate to ingroup virtue and morality) were constructed by influential group leaders.

Overall, then, entrepreneurs of identity can rhetorically create a shared vision of who is “ingroup” and “outgroup”, and are successful to the extent that they can successfully align their vision (their “projects”) with the norms and values of the group. In all, accounts of self-stereotyping and entrepreneurship of identity provide an account of the ways that societal processes shape identity in ways that are consequential for good (e.g., helping; Reicher et al., 2006) or for evil (e.g., Reicher et al., 2008).

**Inductive social change: Norms for action can be created through social interaction.** In addition to being shaped by leaders from the top down, there are also circumstances where individuals’ attributes and orientations can act to define a group. Postmes, Haslam and Swaab (2005; also Postmes, Speras, Lee & Novak, 2005) draw attention to an *inductive* route of norm formation, whereby group members induce and generate a shared social identity from traits, beliefs, or behaviors which are perceived to be shared. Individuals strive to discover what they have in common through social interaction, and these shared values or actions become embraced as emergent norms. Imagine a group of friends discuss a topic of concern (perhaps the mistreatment of immigrants or refugees) and all then agree to do something to raise their concerns with a relevant official or minister. In their small group discussion, this group has developed new
norms for collective action. Long-standing research in social psychology has demonstrated that humans are driven to reach agreement or consensus in their social interactions (e.g. Festinger, 1950, 1954) and this is often a vital catalyst for action. Small group discussions can precipitate the formation of hostile norms towards an outgroup (e.g. immigrants; Smith & Postmes, 2009), as well as more pro-social forms of behavior like advocacy for the mentally ill (Gee, Khalaf & McGarty, 2007), and international aid activism (Thomas & McGarty, 2009).

The opinion-based group interaction method creates an experimental paradigm to model this situation (McGarty et al., 2009). Thomas and McGarty (2009) brought a group of only nominally committed people together to engage in a 30 minute interaction about strategies to promote safe drinking water for people in developing countries. They showed that through group interaction and the establishment of a social consensus, participants were able to form new norms for anti-poverty action such that, relative to a group of people who had developed strategies in the absence of interaction. Participants who had engaged in interaction subsequently reported greater anti-poverty action intentions, experienced greater moral reactions to the injustice (moral outrage), and also believed that their combined actions could be successful (group efficacy). By active intragroup communication, discussion and dialog people come to new understandings of themselves as potential participants in collective action.

It is also the case that it is through discussion and interaction that group members develop consensus around the particular protest strategies that they pursue: Should petitions be employed, or rallies? Should a city square be occupied? Thomas, McGarty and Louis (2012) had participants engage in small group interaction (or solo reflection) about ways to bring an end to battery farming of chickens (the practice of detaining chickens in unnaturally small cages). Prior to interaction, participants were given information that either suggested the efficacy of appeal to
mainstream political processes (changing public opinion, lobbying decision makers) or information that suggested that more extreme, direct actions would be effective (blockades and investigations exposing cruelty; see Tausch, Becker, Spears Christ, Saab et al., 2011). Results suggested that, through interaction, participants came to consensus around the most effective route to achieve social change, and the strategies were markedly different depending on the information that they had been primed with prior to interaction. Specifically, those who had been given information endorsing ‘mainstream’ protest subsequently endorsed more traditional forms of activist actions; those who had been given reason to think that direct methods were more impactful subsequently endorsed those radical methods more. Importantly, this was true only where small group interaction took place. Thus, interaction acted to catalyze activism – but also radicalism – in this animal liberation context.

In all, reaching a consensus through a small group discussion can shape both pro-social and more hostile expressions of civic participation (see Thomas, Smith, McGarty & Postmes, 2010). The broader implication is that consensus is not a “pre-given state of collective unity” (see Sani & Reicher, 2000, p.626). Instead, the process of reaching a consensus can effectively shape emergent social norms, attitudes and social decision making (Smith & Postmes, 2009; Thomas et al., 2009a).

**The Consequences of Collective Action**

Having considered the mobilization of action, we now come to considering the consequences of collective action. This, after all, is one of the primary objectives for participating in various forms of collective action: to be consequential. Here, though, we find ourselves on thinner empirical ground and, with a handful of exceptions, there remains a dearth
of empirical literature relating to the psychological and socio-political outcomes of participating in action.

**The Psychological Consequences of Action**

Recent work suggests that participation in action has important consequences for participants’ emotional experience, and the way that the overall self-construct is negotiated and experienced. Participating in action gives actors the opportunity to actualize their identities (Drury & Reicher, 1999), and in doing so can boost efficacy (Cocking & Drury, 2004) and a sense of psychological empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005). For example, Drury and Reicher (2005) described the feelings of joy and empowerment that arise from having participated in crowd events, and documented the important psychological transformation that this brings, such that people were more likely to participate in the future. Other research shows that participating in collective action is a positive predictor of well-being (Boehnke & Wong, 2011; Klar & Kasser, 2009). Becker, Tausch and Wagner (2011) showed that participating in action promotes outgroup-directed emotions of anger and contempt, but also positive self-directed emotions of satisfaction and happiness. Participating in collective action is good for emotional well-being!

Participating in action also has consequences for the overall sense of self and identity. Through interviews with the controversial “direct action” activist group the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, Stuart, Thomas, Donaghue and Russell (in press) consider the ways that belonging to an activist group, but particularly a more radical activist group, can impact on one’s overall sense of self. In particular, they showed that these politically engaged actors had developed particular rhetorical strategies for negotiating identity conflicts resulting from the group identity (such as being seen as “pirates” and “hardline vegans”). Other research shows that
identifying with a group and participating in action in line with that group precipitates a re-description of personal costs and benefits. Blackwood and Louis (2012) report the results of a longitudinal survey of peace activists’ intentions and perceptions. At Time 1, activist identification was linked to higher intentions to engage in collective action protesting the Iraq war, both directly and indirectly via perceptions of group efficacy. Group efficacy, in turn, was linked to intentions both directly and indirectly via perceptions of the benefits of collective action for the self. At Time 2, identification was associated with differences in the dimensions on which the movement’s success was evaluated. In the context of the movement’s failure to achieve its stated objectives of stopping the war, those with strong activist identity placed less importance on influencing government decision making (see also Hornsey et al., 2006, on anti-globalization protestors’ construction of effectiveness). Activists are thus able to re-interpret disempowering events in a way that allows them to view those events more positively (Barr & Drury, 2009). A similar re-interpretation allowed those who originally supported the invasion of Iraq as justified to destroy Weapons of Mass Destruction, later to support its continuation to promote régime change.

The former studies show identification associated with more favorable psychological consequences of and attitudes toward collective action, but the relationships also depend on the type of collective action one has engaged in. Becker, Tausch, Spears and Christ (2011) showed that, while participating in both moderate and radical forms of collective action increases identification with a protest movement, participating in radical collective action fosters dis-identification from the broader disadvantaged group (see also van Stekelenberg & Klandermans, 2011). That is, radical group members psychologically break away from the group that the action was ostensibly on behalf of, in part because of a perceived lack of solidarity and commitment.
from their less radical colleagues. Thus, different types of participation can precipitate different psychological consequences (see also Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005).

**Socio-political Consequences: Collective Action Is an Influence Attempt**

Whether and when collective action works is a contested issue (see Louis, 2009c for a review). Piven and Cloward (1977, 1991) argued that conventional protest actually reinforces the status quo, by providing the illusion of control and by diverting activists’ energy into innocuous if not vacuous activity. Others (e.g., Burstein and colleagues, 2002, 2005, 2006) have argued that collective action is generally irrelevant and epiphenomenal to public opinion change. Critiquing this work, Louis (2009c) suggests that collective action may play a significant indirect role in effecting social change through *the changing dynamics of public opinion*. Indeed, a triangulation process such that targeting third parties (bystanders or authorities) is central to Simon and Klandermans’ (2001) model of the politicization of identity (see also, Subašić et al., 2008, 2011).

One approach is to focus on winning over the broader society: a protest event *x* can be successful to the extent that it garners widespread public support for change. In this vein, Olsen (1968) reasoned that social protest movements must gain widespread support in order to be successful, and showed that a bystander public find public meetings the most palatable form of protest, while direct actions like strikes, sit-ins and mass demonstrations were much less accepted forms of action (see also R. Turner, 1969). Multiple tensions confront protest organizers who must simultaneously attract attention and protest in a way that does not necessarily adhere to the conventions of a majority or dominant system, at the same time as remaining palatable to a bystander public (see also Stuart et al., in press).
The question of how protest is commonly represented and used to facilitate or, more commonly, undermine support for the protest goals has also been a key focus in the communications and journalism literature. This literature shows that many protests fail to gain any media attention at all, but where reporting does take place protests are commonly represented as deviant (McLeod, 1995), ridiculous or eccentric (Shoemaker, 1982). Other research shows that even unprovocative behavior on the part of protesters is often depicted as violent and unruly (Santa Ana, Lõpez & Munguía, 2010) and that the media implicitly manipulate public opinion (through depictions of low bystander support or high opposition to the protest) in a way that is detrimental to public support for that protest (McLeod & Detenber, 1999).

Our recent empirical research draws on this literature, but also on recent developments in the social psychology of collective action regarding the role of legitimacy and efficacy to explore when collective action effectively influences a bystander public. Thomas and Louis (2012) presented bystander members of the public with newspaper articles ostensibly reporting on violent or non-violent protest events. Violent protest (e.g. the direct actions of activists against whaling; against mining) were routinely seen as less legitimate and effective, and were less effective in fostering a sense that the overall situation was illegitimate, than non-violent protests (e.g., those where more conventional advertising or diplomatic campaigns were used; Experiment 1). However, Thomas et al. also identified an important moderator of this preference: perceived corruption in a governing system or authority. Where bystanders believe that a governing system is corrupt, they lose political efficacy and come to endorse more radical (potentially aggressive) solutions to social problems (Experiment 2).
In all, engaging in collective action and other forms of civic participation certainly seems to impact on one’s (social) psychology with regards to identity, empowerment and self- hood. What is less clear – perhaps because the question itself is so complex and the moderators so numerous – is when collective action will successfully influence a bystander public so as to effectively promote social change (vis à vis policy reform). In a democracy, it may also be true that support for change among politically influential swing voters is the most important target of collective actors. We consider these points in more detail below.

Mobilizing Consequential Collective Action in Practice

Given the important social issues and policy implications of this research, it is timely to consider the social psychological conditions that lead to increased participation in collective action for social change and the practical measures that may be taken to bring these about. As can be seen in Table 1, the theoretical platform provided above allows us to provide a series of suggestions for practitioners, advocates, authorities and policy-makers regarding engagement in collective action; how groups develop an orientation towards collective action; and the likely consequences of collective action.

Lesson 1: Move beyond individual “self” interest

In Western social and political contexts, human behavior is often understood in overtly individualistic terms. Indeed, Margaret Thatchers’s assertion that “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women” implies a limited if not entirely illusory role for group processes! Similarly, in policy circles, individualistic models have exerted – and continue to exert – a considerable impact on political and policy decisions where policy efforts are often justified in terms of individual self-interest (Bazerman & Malhotra, 2006), often to the detriment of social change outcomes (the ‘crowding out’ effect; e.g. Frey & Jegen, 2001).
In contrast, the social identity approach suggests a complementary focus on self-interest where ‘self’ is defined at the level of the group. Collective action is, by its very nature, a collective, group enterprise. As we described in the section above, empirical evidence from the social identity tradition shows very clearly that group, coordinated action is premised in a social self-definition (defining self as a group member), not pure individual self-interest (see Blackwood & Louis, 2012; Baray, Postmes & Jetten, 2009 for more nuanced views). In short, the group is the locus of social action and efforts to appeal to collective self-interest are ultimately likely to be more fruitful.

**Lesson 2: Harness group processes**

A second enduring idea is that groups, and group processes, are primitive and irrational at best; and at worst, unruly and dangerous. This idea has old roots, for example in the writings of Le Bon (1895 / 1947) who argued that crowds are “only powerful for destruction”. One only needs to read popular accounts of the 2011 London riots to be reminded of the continued currency of models of the mad collective (see Reicher & Stott, 2011, for a review and critique). As noted above, communication scholars have shown that media representations of peaceful protests often present protest as irrational and unruly (e.g. McLeod, 1995; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Reading such accounts, activists and policy makers could be forgiven for believing that collective events and group psychology should be avoided at all costs. The assumption is that group processes speak to all that is dysfunctional and antisocial about human psychology (Spears, 2010). If the locus of rationality is individuality, then the only way to reason with the masses is to focus at the level of the individual.

These ideas have been extensively critiqued (see Reicher, 1984, 1996; Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995). Irrationalist explanations deny that crowds (and, by extension, group processes)
have any meaningful or coherent basis, and they also imply that the group is inherently subversive of self-hood (Reicher, 1984; Reicher at al., 1995). On the contrary, the insights derived from the social identity tradition show very clearly that group processes operate in ways that are largely structured and meaningful to the participants involved, and that group processes involve a redefinition of the self at the group level (rather than a loss of self-hood per se). That is, rather than descending to an unthinking or primitive version of self, in groups people self-define as group members and thus activate a collective social identity. People immersed in groups act in ways that are responsive to social or group-standards but that these are nevertheless still controlled and meaningful (Reicher et al., 1995). Collective processes should be drawn on to direct socially meaningful behavior.

**Lesson 3: Leader rhetoric can be a tool of mass influence**

Regarding the direction of socially meaningful behavior, our analysis above (‘mass social influence’) points to the signal importance of leadership, but particularly leader rhetoric in shaping responses to social justice, which Haslam et al. (2010) argue is “world making”. Research on the framing of social movements (e.g. Snow & Benford, 1998), positioning theory (e.g. Harré & Moghaddam, 2003) and recent extensions to the intergroup domain (intergroup positioning theory; Louis, 2008) have pointed to the ways that social interactions are temporal, constructed and contested through narratives. Thus, positioning theorists point to the ways that one can deliberately position oneself as powerful or powerless, dominant and subordinate (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Similarly, *speech acts* create rhetorical dictionaries for those involved in a social movement; and *storylines* with which to direct behavior and interpret events. All of these choices will impact on the dynamics of leadership and followership and, consistent with the insights of the social identity approach, are actively constructed and co-constructed (see
Reicher et al., 2005). What then are the practical strategies for advocates, policy makers, or leaders seeking to use their voice to construct positions, acts and storylines for mass influence?

**Know thy group.** Our first piece of advice relates to the importance of identifying the group-based (identity) fault lines of action. Is this an issue of men versus women? Feminists versus traditionalists? Or are the groups defined along opinion-based lines: people who support workplace gender equality versus those that do not (see Bliuc, McGarty, Hartley & Muntele-Hendres, in press; McGarty et al., 2009)? Elsewhere, it has been argued that – despite appearances of conflict between broad national or other social categories – these fault lines are indeed often opinion-based (Bliuc et al., in press). That is, even though conflicts sometimes ostensibly stem between conflicts of, for example, Palestinians and Israelis, these can often too be understood in terms of opinion-based, or ideological, fault-lines (e.g. Doves and Hawks; Sharvit, Bar-Tal, Raviv, Raviv & Gurevich, 2010).

A central project of entrepreneurs of identity is often the quest to associate an opinion group identity with a broader social category, so that the wider group is mobilized to join one side of the political contest (e.g. Bliuc at al., in press). The construction of the ‘we’ can define group boundaries (who is ingroup and who is outgroup) in a way that promotes solidarity (if they are in the ‘ingroup’; Reicher et al., 2006) or hate (if they are in the ‘outgroup’; Reicher et al., 2008). However, there is not a straightforward relationship between the use of ‘we’ language and support or mobilization. Hornsey, Blackwood and O’Brien (2005) found that advocates’ use of collective language (“we believe”) was no more supported than personal language (“I believe”) and speculated that this is because collective language often cannot account for sub-group differences and schisms within a broader collective. Thus, knowing the basis of the group to which one is appealing is an important if not vital tool for a would-be identity entrepreneur.
**Beware the label.** In similar vein, advocates should also be mindful of the rhetorical baggage that can accompany different labels. In the stereotype content model (e.g. Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2008), ‘feminists’ fall low in both stereotypes of competence and warmth. Stuart et al.’s (in press) analysis of the Sea Shepherd Conservation group identity, tellingly titled ‘we may be pirates but we are not protesters’ showed that even highly committed activists do not readily take on activist, radical or even ‘protester’ labels without a degree of negotiation. People can resist the ‘feminist’ and ‘activist’ label and advocates should keep this in mind in their rhetoric.

**Lesson 4: Overcoming apathy through targeted social interaction**

Resistance sometimes appears to emerge in a relatively spontaneous, so-called ‘grassroots’, way. In the section above (‘inductive social change’) we described the ways that people are driven to know what relevant others think, and how this process of reaching agreement with others through social interaction provides a platform for the emergence of new norms for action (Thomas et al., 2009). How, then, can advocates and policy makers use these insights to promote engagement amongst an apathetic public?

Perhaps the most important advice for overcoming apathy is to begin to engage sympathizers in processes of discussion and debate about a state of affairs (Thomas & McGarty, 2009). People are unlikely to act in a social vacuum: it is difficult to imagine anyone taking steps towards action, let alone concerted social action, without first discussing it with other people (Lyons & Kashima, 2003). To the extent that people can become aware of a developing consensus of opinion and action on a particular topic, this may fruitfully boost engagement (Klandermans, 1984). In practical terms, one way of achieving this is through carefully orchestrated small group interaction, where people can be brought together to discuss and debate their position on a social issue but perhaps more importantly, what specific actions may be
employed to change it (Thomas et al., 2012). Indeed, research from the opinion-based group interaction (OOGIM; Thomas & McGarty, 2009) paradigm suggests a particularly important role for a discussion about specific strategies for action rather than discussion about the existence of social injustice per se. This is because positions on social issues can sometimes be divisive: we may not all agree on the causes or politics of climate change or global poverty, but we can all agree that we should take action to combat it. Evidence suggests that where people get bogged down in discussion of the inequality itself – rather than a potentially empowering discussion of plausible steps towards solutions – the positive effects of group interaction may be offset because they undermine the very consensus people need to act (see, for example, Farrar, Green, Green, Nickerson, & Shewfelt, 2009).

Group interaction is not a panacea for apathy, in other words. If groups come to develop demobilizing norms (“we should all feel passively mournful about this state of affairs”) this will surely undermine collective participation. Or imagine a group discussion around the pointlessness of action! Moreover, debates over tactics can destroy the group from within and undermine its credibility to outsiders. Practitioners will need to find a balance between allowing group dynamics to unfold in an unfettered way (none of the group interaction research discussed above was moderated) and imposing enough structure that group dynamics do not disempower, divide, and disengage.

Lesson 5: Attend to the descriptive and injunctive normative aspects of action

Another barrier to overcoming apathy is the negative descriptive norm: by definition, overcoming apathy means that what other group members are doing is not acting. We do not recommend – as so many activist groups and community interventions tend to do – drawing attention to the scope and depth of the problem. Increasing the salience of widespread racism, of
obesity, of unsustainable energy, water, and waste consumption, or of political alienation should, all other things being equal, reinforce the problem behavior (Cialdini et al., 1990, 1991; Smith et al., 2012). Being motivated and energized by others’ inaction is comparatively rare but can occur if individuals are highly committed to the issue (Smith & Louis, 2008) or members of other groups with more activist norms (McDonald et al., 2012). Focusing on a positive injunctive norm alone may be one way forward in some cases (Blanton, Köblitz, & McCaul, 2008; Smith & Louis, 2009).

We also speculate (although are aware of no evidence) that drawing a temporal distinction between the ‘old group’ which used to do harmful behavior x and the ‘new group’ which is changing for the better could work, or focusing attention on the core values of the group, which support y, versus peripheral values, which allow x. These hypotheses for the most part await empirical testing, although recent scholarship is increasingly interested in processes that underpin successful dissent (Jetten & Hornsey, 2010; Packer, 2009; Packer & Chasteen, 2010).

Lesson 6: Activists should take action that is palatable to the bystander public

Authorities and activist group members face multiple unstable tensions as they strive for social change or social stability, and the hearts and minds of the bystander public (Christie & Louis, in press). Collective action is usually about seeking change, and frequently this can only be achieved to the extent that the cause enjoys the support of a bystander public or other authorities (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Subašić et al., 2011). Media representations which present pro-change (but not pro-status quo) protest as irrational and illogical (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Shoemaker, 1984), as well as an asymmetrical preference for non-violent tactics mean that, from an activists’ point of view, conventional tactics will be much more likely to gain
the sympathy of bystander group members. Indeed, it seems likely that if you want to sway a supportive bystander public then you need to take action that is palatable (seen as legitimate and effective) to that public (Thomas & Louis, 2012). Usually these are actions that fall within the laws and bounds of mainstream society.

A tension here is that such actions are easier for authorities to ignore, and can reinforce the norms and values of a dominant political system instead of creating social change (Piven & Cloward, 1977, 1991). Similarly, if the issue is marginal to public debate, then non-disruptive conventional tactics may not attract the kind of attention that the cause needs to build a basic awareness from which other actions and methods can snowball. Moderates alone may evoke sympathy without others’ taking action, as suggested in the findings by Burstein et al. (2002, 2005, 2006) that collective action is broadly ineffective. Militants alone may also increase polarization and provoke the marginalization of their social or opinion group, or counter-mobilisation by political opponents (Louis, 2009). Accordingly, successful social change may require both moderate and militant groups of activists – moderate activists using conventional protest to gain the sympathy of advantaged group members and undermine ideologies that legitimize the status quo, while militant activists destabilize the status quo and the power-holders’ consensus.

Thus, there are some contexts in which activists may strategically and willfully deploy more extreme protest methods to highlight their plight. Our (Thomas & Louis, 2012) empirical research identified at least two important moderators that speak to boundary conditions of bystanders’ aversion to extreme methods. The degree to which an overarching authority or political system is deemed to be corrupt, and the degree to which the broader public was believed to have supported those more extreme actions, both may increase support for radical protests.
Thus, if there is a dysfunction in the political system (corruption), it is important that this is communicated to a bystander public as a basis for the more extreme forms of action. Given that the media routinely represents even non-violent protest as unruly and irrational, explaining the rational basis for a specific strategy is particularly important for unconventional methods. Similarly, to the extent that activist groups can portray their activities as widely endorsed and supported in the community, then that may also help to sway supportive public opinion.

**Lesson 7: Authorities should respond to collective action with circumspection**

Given the potential economic and social fallout from collective action, authorities may have a powerful motive to stifle dissent. On the other hand, policy positions are often representative and as such decision makers have an obligation to promote the views and engagement of constituents. Whether or not policy makers opt to stifle or promote dissent may depend to a large extent on the degree to which that protest is disruptive and therefore economically costly (e.g. in terms of policing) and socially costly (e.g. in terms of reputation, political dynamics).

In Piven and Cloward’s dissensus theory, disruptive behavior gains momentum when authorities’ repressive reaction fractures the unity of the advantaged group and provokes moderates to shift support from the authorities towards the protesting group. This implies that when authorities do react repressively and suppress the wider social group in a way that is indiscriminate, this will be seen as illegitimate and will push the bystander public towards being more supportive of the disruptive actions (see Drury & Reicher, 2000, for an empirical demonstration of this point in crowd dynamics). That is, disruptive tactics that elicit a disproportionate response from authorities may provoke the wider population to reject authorities and delegitimize the authorities’ position. On the other hand, to the extent that authorities’
response is measured and clearly distinguishes disruptive political opponents from conventional and passive opponents, no such fracture of unity need be anticipated. This is more likely when that disproportionate response includes collective punishment of people who were not involved in the original disruptive protest, evoking illegitimacy. According to Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson (2007)’s signaling theory, groups such as terrorists try to provoke reprisals in the hope of evoking popular opinion change that could eventually lead to a political change of power. Researchers have argued that this dynamic worked successfully in Ireland and South Africa (e.g., Callaway & Harrelson-Stephens, 2006). At the same time, examples of terrorism and political violence campaigns which have been ineffective for decades are also to be found. These tactics can alienate supporters and third-parties, and run the risk of entrenching or escalating opponents’ intergroup hatred (see Louis & Taylor, 2002; Louis, 2009a). Put simply then, it is vital that authorities differentiate between those that utilize disruptive tactics to voice their grievance, and those that utilize more conventional, acceptable tactics.

**Lesson 8: Authorities should consider ways of promoting peaceful participation**

Recent work identifies a lack of efficacy in a routine ‘normative’ political process as a determinant of support for more extreme or disruptive forms of action (e.g. Tausch et al., 2011; see also Louis, 2009b). Other research shows that after joint decision-making, groups often shift further in the direction of individuals’ initial views: conventional groups may become more staid, but radical groups become more radical. For example, Thomas et al. (2012) showed that small group interaction can be an important catalyst of shifts towards more extreme measures, but only under conditions where groups had been primed with the legitimacy of such methods. Similarly, Thomas and Louis’ (2012) research showed that a bystander public will be more supportive of extreme tactics where they understand that there is corruption and inefficacy in a functioning
political system. This suggests that authorities must treat the protesters with respect, convey the sense that they are being listened to, and even make concessions if they wish to prevent perceptions of illegitimacy, disidentification from the wider group, and radicalization by the activists (see also, Drury & Reicher, 2000; Platow et al., 2008, 2009; Subašić et al., 2011). Authorities must work to prove that participating in a peaceful and conventional fashion can be a viable way to effect social change.

**Conclusions**

This paper has presented a social psychological analysis of the mobilization and consequences of collective action. While recent theoretical reviews have shed light on the motivational factors underpinning participation (e.g. Thomas et al., 2009a, b; van Zomeren et al., 2008), in the current paper we adopt a unique longer-term temporal perspective to consider the both the mobilization and consequences of collective action. Adopting an insight informed by the social identity perspective, we have described the ways in which social identity provides a psychological foundation for collective actions; social norms shape the mobilization of action; and participating in collective actions is psychologically consequential but socio-politically complex.

We adopted this temporal perspective partly as a practical means of simplifying what is a dense and crowded literature but also as a way of breaking down some of the questions that we have both encountered in our work with activist groups, non-governmental organizations, and policy makers (as in Table 1). Beyond its practical utility, however, this approach may also have useful theoretical implications for future directions in this field. In particular, we believe there is much greater scope for a consideration of the trajectories and pathways people walk as they participate in action, and thus greater scope for a more dynamic and iterative examination of
collective action. For example, participation in (un)succesful collective action may affect whether or not one will continue to identify with the group and therefore affect mobilization (see Becker et al., 2011; Blackwood & Louis, 2012). Similarly, participation in prior action and its success or failure will affect the specific strategies that will be pursued in the next instance, if at all (Barr & Drury, 2009). While social psychology, sociology and cognate disciplines have made excellent progress in identifying the predictors and processes underpinning engagement in collective action, a more iterative, longitudinal and temporal perspective will be an essential next step.

We began this paper by seeking to highlight the pervasive nature of collective action and social protest in our daily lives. We also considered some of the complexities for practitioners trying to overcome apathy and promote civic participation, but also to promote more peaceful (and therefore less costly!) forms of social participation. After all, collective action and everyday acts of protest are one of the main ways that everyday people can participate in democracy. Although we have discussed on what might be considered more ‘liberal’ social movements (e.g. environmental behavior, anti-poverty, the Arab Spring), we believe that similar processes underpin the emergence of conservative social movements such as the Tea Party, or extremist right-wing groups (e.g., Baray et al., 2009; Klandermans & Mayer, 2005). Collective action is a fundamental tool in the battle for social change, equality and justice. Whatever the tactics, it is difficult to challenge an illegitimate, unequal or unfair system of relations without collective action. Put another way, despite the complexities in the exact relationship between protest and social change, social change is unlikely to be created unless there is collective mobilization.

In order to better understand and engage with this phenomenon, policy makers and practitioners need to attend to its origins in collective, group-based psychology. By illuminating
the social identity processes involved, the paper has identified implications for policy makers and agents of change, who may simultaneously seek to mobilize or constrain collective action, and to channel it towards more or less disruptive and effective forms of change.
References


Stuart, A., Thomas, E.F., Donaghue, N. & Russell, A. (in press). ‘We may be pirates, but we are not protesters’: Identity in the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. *Political Psychology*.


### Table 1. Overview of key questions, theoretical insights and practical implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The mobilization of collective action</th>
<th>In theory</th>
<th>In practice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do people in engage in action?</td>
<td>People engage in collective action because they identify with groups. A social identity acts to link individual and group.</td>
<td>Practitioners and policy makers need to move beyond appeals to individual self-interest because the group self-interest is where the action is (L1). Group processes are rational and not to be feared (L2).</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do groups develop an orientation towards participation?</td>
<td>Once a person identifies with a group, norms direct action – and the particular type of action that is taken.</td>
<td>Norms can undermine action if groups are chronically aware of a dysfunctional descriptive norm and / or come to develop norms that are de-motivating (L5). Leader rhetoric can shape a sense of ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do.’ (L3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do groups decide what action strategies to pursue?</td>
<td>Norms can be shaped for mass social influence through leader rhetoric. They can also be inductively derived through social interaction and social consensus</td>
<td>Providing avenues for (structured) social interaction can boost engagement through social agreement and validation (L4).</td>
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### The consequences of collective action

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<th>In theory</th>
<th>In practice</th>
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<tr>
<td>What are the psychological consequences of participation?</td>
<td>Participating in collective action affects identity, self-hood, emotions and well-being.</td>
<td>All collective action is an influence attempt. For activists: Action must be palatable to that public in order to influential and/ or clear moderating conditions need to be communicated (L6).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socio-political consequences: What is “productive” participation?</td>
<td>Socio-political outcomes seem to depend on (in democracies) on whether the action influences public opinion, particularly that of swing voters. The media act as gatekeepers of protest.</td>
<td>For authorities: Do not respond to collective action heavy-handedly (L7). Work to promote peaceful pathways by demonstrating political efficacy (L8).</td>
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