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Title: “Communities Change When Individuals Change”: The Sustainability of System-Challenging Collective Action

Abstract: People who challenge the status quo through collective action face tremendous obstacles—not just practically, but in their ways of thinking, existing, and relating to others. This article addresses how collective actors sustain their engagement in the face of such high costs. System-challenging collective actors must reimagine and enact new, non-normative ways of thinking, existing, and relating that transform the status quo. This article explores the social psychological processes underlying sustained system-challenging collective action through activists’ narratives of politicization, experiences of identity change, and reimagination of social structures. We draw from contributions from social psychological theories of system justification and social identity to examine how system-challenging collective action is motivated and sustained. Through interviews with Chicago-based activists and organizers engaged in system-challenging collective action, we implement a qualitative thematic analysis to propose that sustainability arises from three integrated factors: shared identity, system-challenging ideology, and intentional community.

Keywords: collective action, imagined communities, shared reality, social identity, system justification.

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Introduction

The Psychology of Collective Action

We live in the age of social movements. From global activism for climate justice to sustained protests against police brutality across American cities, collective oppression is met with collective uprising. While each protest, sit-in, and march is a collective effort, they require the involvement of individuals who decide to demand change and challenge the system. The motivations of these system-challenging collective actors provide valuable insights into the psychology underlying social change. This study explores how collective actors sustain their involvement despite the stresses that arise from efforts to challenge the status quo.

Collective action participation is a fruitful source of scholarship across the social sciences and the phenomenon is of particular relevance to the field of psychology for two primary reasons. First, psychological factors are key to understanding how ordinary people initiate and sustain collective action that challenges the status quo. Second, understanding the psychology that motivates individual collective actors has significant implications for examining the overall trajectory of system-challenging social movements. The study of collective action is intimately concerned with many of the central topics in psychology, including identity, ideology, and group dynamics. Here, we draw from Becker and Tausch (2015, p. 4) to define collective action as extending beyond protest and encompassing “any action that promotes the interests of one’s group or is conducted in political solidarity.” This research is specifically concerned with system-challenging collective action that seeks to change the social, economic, and/or political status quo rather than forms of collective action that defend the prevailing social order (e.g. the conservative Tea Party movement, see Hennes et al., 2015). The rest of this introduction reviews existing psychological theories of collective action and defines this article’s theoretical contribution to the psychology of collective action.

Theories of Collective Action

The question of why people initially engage in system-challenging collective action has received much attention in the social sciences (see Drury & Reicher, 2009; Power, 2020a; Tarrow, 2011; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013 for theoretical overviews and van Zomeren et al., 2008 for a meta-analytical overview). A general consensus emerges from the literature: a substantive

alteration in an individual's self-conception is the key to motivating beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in favor of collective action for social change. A sampling of the various terms tied to this phenomenon include: "cognitive liberation" (McAdam, 1982), "psychological empowerment" (Drury & Reicher, 2009), and "intersectional political consciousness" (Curtin, Stewart, & Cole, 2015; Greenwood, 2008; Nair, 2016). While each of these designations comes from different literatures—social movements, social identity, and feminist psychology, respectively—they all refer to the same general concept: a subjective shift in understanding the shape of society, one's position within it, and collective potential to create change. These definitions implicitly or explicitly draw from a number of psychological phenomena, including: shared social identity, system justification, shared reality, and relational organizing. Among these, social identity theory and system justification theory represent two major psychological schools of thought that address the motivations underlying system-challenging collective action.

Social identity theories of collective action (Drury & Reicher, 2000; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) are concerned with identity-based psychological factors that initiate action for social change. Meanwhile, system justification theory explores the reasons that most people *do not* challenge the status quo, even when they are disadvantaged by it (Jost et al., 2017), and the alternate circumstances under which some people do act for social change (Osborne et al., 2019). Both theories provide important insight into the psychological factors that motivate sustained collective action.

Social Identity & Politicized Identity. Social identity theorists have identified several psychological factors that motivate collective actors. A shared social identity constructed in relation to cultural and social power structures is foundational for collective action (Reicher, 2004). However, while a shared in-group identity is necessary, it is not sufficient to explain engagement in collective action. The Social Identity Model of Collective Action or SIMCA (van Zomeren, 2008) integrates the proposed predictors of collective action: social in-group identification, perceived injustice or morality, group-based anger or emotion, and perceived group efficacy (cf. van Zomeren, 2013). These predictors for initiating collective action have been further mapped by Dixon et al.'s (2017) model of social change, which integrates the psychological theories of social identity and collective action. This model shows these factors animate individuals "to act together to challenge the status quo directly, that is, to become a group not only of but also for itself" (Dixon et al., 2017, p. 488).

Building on social identity, politicized identity involves a sense of injustice born from the perception of systemic group-based disadvantage or inequality (Klandermans, 2014; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). In this theorization, collective action is understood as a commitment to act on behalf of one's in-group (Curtin, Kende, & Kende, 2016). Politicized identity is cultivated through the understanding of the relationship between systemic inequality and shared grievances, which catalyzes action for social change. Regardless of whether a collective actor is politicized on behalf of their in-group or a disadvantaged out-group, their politicization must entail a cognizance of and ideological reaction to the structural, political context of group-based privilege and deprivation (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010).

In addition, a strong in-group identity is not only a necessary prerequisite for collective action but can also be one of its outcomes. Participating in collective action can lead to stronger in-group affiliation or even a redefinition of identity. Specifically, engagement in collective action can lead to a re-assessment of one's own identity in relation to the political context and result in a "virtuous cycle" of psychological empowerment that deepens social identity and collective resistance in tandem (Drury & Reicher, 2009, p. 722).

System Justification & Structural Awareness. While also concerned with individuals' interactions with social structures, system justification theory indicates that people are motivated to defend and justify the social status quo (Jost, 2020; Osborne et al., 2019). According to system justification theory, most people are inclined to believe in the integrity of the social, economic, and political systems they inhabit, sometimes even if their self-interest is at odds with established status quo (Becker & Wright, 2011; Friesen et al., 2018; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Sengupta, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015).

System justification serves a subjective palliative function by allowing individuals to reduce uncertainty, assuage existential threats, and maintain social relationships and a sense of shared reality (Jost, 2019). These epistemic, existential, and relational palliatives result in a political predisposition to defend the status quo. System justification is grounded in the concept of false consciousness, in which powerful groups shape cultural norms so that the political ideology of the disadvantaged reflects the interests of the dominant social order over their own (Gramsci 1971; Marx & Engels, 1846). Several aspects of false consciousness—denying injustice, rationalizing social roles, and

misattributing causes of deprivation—are also key attributes of system justification and related concepts, such as belief in a just world (Godfrey & Wolf, 2016; Kay & Jost, 2003; Lerner, 1980).

According to system justification perspectives on collective action, system-challenging collective actors must counteract the palliatives of system justifying motivations through SIMCA factors: identity, morality, emotions, and efficacy (Jost et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2019). Thus, a system-challenging collective actor rejects false consciousness and defies the prevailing social structure by adopting a political ideology that supports social change (Hennes et al., 2012). System-challenging activists incur a considerable cost by rejecting the status quo and losing access to the palliative functions of system justification. They must cope with the resulting lack of control, certainty, security and loss of connections with mainstream society (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). Therefore, a necessary prerequisite to adopting a system-challenging ideology is structural awareness—the attribution of inequality and injustice to social structures rather than individual ability (Curtin, Stewart, & Cole, 2015; Martorana, Galinsky, & Rao, 2005; Tran & Curtin, 2017). Studies have found that structural awareness mediates the relationship between experiences of discrimination and participation in collective action (Duncan, 1999; Tran & Curtin, 2017). Furthermore, when individuals act collectively for social change, they express not only structural awareness but structural reimagination. Drury & Reicher (2009) emphasize the centrality of ideology and imagination for system-challenging collective action:

“To realize in the here and now aspects of a world that does not yet exist (e.g., freedom, authenticity, equality) is to bring that world closer—through empowering its agents with the belief that they can create it. In a very concrete sense, then, social movement activists need to be architects of the imagination.” (p. 722)

Shared Reality & Relational Needs. Besides identity and ideology, another key component to the psychology of collective action are stable relationships that foster a sense of shared reality. Shared reality theory proposes that people desire a mutual understanding with others to satisfy affiliative needs and inhabit stable, comprehensible environments (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Integrating system justification and shared reality theory, Jost et al. (2008) note that shared perception of an unjust status quo may be a necessary prerequisite for individuals to band together to engage in system-challenging

collective action. Therefore, a system-challenging collective actor must find relationships that affirm their non-normative ideology in order to maintain shared reality and fulfill affiliative needs.

One way social movement organizations satisfy innate needs for shared reality and affiliation is through the practice of relational organizing (Divakaran & Nerbonne, 2017). Relational organizing prioritizes the development of strong interpersonal bonds for the success of the social movement. Indeed, many individuals join social movements because of personal relationships, and social movements themselves become the site of relationship-building. By creating an intentional community of like-minded individuals with a shared purpose, relational organizers create a sense of collective shared values and commitment to the organization and cause (Ganz, 2004).

The Current Study

Understanding the abiding motivations of individuals who engage in long-term collective organizing can provide insight about the overall sustainability of movements for social change. Much of the reviewed research on collective action has focused on the initial psychological change that motivates participation. However, the psychology of sustaining system-challenging collective action has received less attention. Of the work on this topic, both empirical cross-sectional research (Louis et al., 2016) and longitudinal, ethnographic research (Vestergren, Drury, & Chiriac, 2018) find that the key elements for continued engagement are activist identity, political knowledge, and increased network size of fellow activists.

The current study uses interview data to explore psychological motivations for continued engagement in system-challenging collective action. We explore how a novel group—Chicago-based activists and organizers seeking social change through collective action—sustain their involvement while negotiating individual identity, intergroup relations, and societal systems. In-depth interviews provide access to activists' narratives and meaning-making of their experiences (Bruner, 1990). Personal narratives represent the process of individual identity and ideology formation that is constructed and reconstructed in relation to the narratives of a given social order (Hammack, 2008; Schiff, 2017). This qualitative analysis of collective actors' narratives provides a window into the process of social change and repudiation of the status quo.

Methods

Sampling Procedure. Participants (N = 21 of 24 individuals contacted) who met the criteria of being 18 years or older and self-identifying as social movement activists and/or organizers were selected through a mix of convenience and snowball sampling. The initial convenience sample was selected through the first authors' contacts involved in social movement work in Chicago, and additional participants were collected through contacts solicited from the first round of interviews (see Appendix A). Participants were sampled in order to meet quota minimums (see Appendix B). These quotas somewhat offset the inherent bias of the snowball sample by ensuring representation across demographics of age, gender, and race.

All participants were based in the Chicago metropolitan area (see Appendix C). Participants consisted of 6 male, 14 female, and 3 non-binary individuals, with some participants identifying as both female and non-binary. Sixteen of the participants identified as non-white, and the average age was 30 years (range of 18-61 years). Of the participants, 12 were engaged in paid activism or organizing work as a part of their job, but all 21 were involved with voluntary activism work (see Table 1). Participants were engaged in a variety of system-challenging movements and campaigns (including racial and immigrant justice, Palestinian rights, reproductive justice, and prison abolition) that aimed to change existing inequalities. A diverse range of collective action involvement was intentionally sampled to facilitate the exploration of participants' involvement across different types of system-challenging collective action. Participants' length of involvement in collective action ranged from under a year to 25 years. Length of involvement was not a criteria for inclusion, rather, a broad range of experience with collective action served as a proxy for less and more sustained involvement. We further discuss the possible limitations of the cross-sectional, exploratory nature of this research in the discussion.

Interview Procedure. Interviews took place at a location chosen by the participants, usually a local cafe or restaurant, but occasionally participants' homes. Participants were not given any monetary compensation, but if the interview was located at a cafe, they were offered a cup of coffee or tea as a gesture of thanks. Interviews were semi-structured and covered participants' demographic information, background in collective action, and their experiences and identities related to activism or organizing (see Appendix D). Interviews ranged from 31.4 to 132.5 minutes (M = 68.4 min). All interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the first author.

Analytical Procedure. The interview data was coded according to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Pseudonymized interview transcripts were imported into NVivo qualitative analysis software for data organization and analysis. After reading through all transcripts, an initial set of codes were developed both inductively—based on themes that were developed from the interview data—and deductively, from theoretical concepts in the literature. During the first round of coding, 45 preliminary codes were identified (for example: Racial/Ethnic Identity; Structural Awareness; Intergroup Solidarity). Incorporating the reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun et al., 2019), the second round of coding evolved the initial set of codes by splitting, collapsing, and grouping them based on interpreted patterns of meaning. After the second round of coding, most of the remaining 37 codes were grouped into overarching themes that are each presented as a sub-section in the analysis below. As the research question focused on criteria for sustained involvement in collective action, the final codebook consists of 25 codes relevant to the general findings (see Appendix E). All participants were sent the draft article to confirm consent and solicit feedback; no alterations to the content, format, or distribution of the article were requested by the participants.

Analysis

Collective actors from varied backgrounds (see Table 1) presented distinctly patterned narratives of becoming and staying involved in system-challenging movements for social change. This section summarizes the thematic analysis of the motivations that sustain collective actors' involvement in social change movements. We categorize the evidence from interview transcripts into three overarching themes of motivation—identity, ideology, and community. Each theme is further analyzed through subthemes that capture how these motivations sustain involvement in collective action. For each motivation, we also describe related tensions that threaten collective actors' sustained engagement. The analysis is divided into three broad themes, however, the concepts illustrated by representative interview data are interrelated and overlapping across concepts of identity, ideology, and community. The importance of these three factors was apparent in many, but not all collective actors' narratives—the findings below represent the most salient themes from the interview data as a whole. All collective actors' names are pseudonymized and any identifying information has been removed.

Shared Social Identity

Identity is the first frequently cited motivation for sustaining collective action. Collective actors often described experiences of identity change that influenced their politicization and trajectory of activism. Themes related to identity included: selecting instrumental identities that inform collective action involvement, transforming a politicized identity, and forging a new identity: as an activist, organizer, or community builder. Each subtheme related to identity is analyzed through a representative quote from a collective actor.

Instrumentality of identity categories. As suggested by many models of own-group activism or collective identity-based activism (Klandermans, 2014; Polletta & Jasper, 2001), collective actors specified identity as an important reason for their initial and continued involvement. Collective actors described experiences in which identities triggered specific social change concerns, acted as a point of commonality for identity-based organizing, and even sparked the inspiration for new ideas and approaches to collective action. The types of identities most often specified were categories of race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and religion. For example, Jess, who worked for an immigrant justice group and identified herself as the child of immigrants, drew on her parents' experiences of marginalization to inform the issues she was most passionate about.

Jess: Yeah, like I care a lot about language access. And even just fair wages, I guess. Or, just like, it's a weird way to say it, but everything that comes with being an immigrant of color, basically. Just because the way that my mom and dad operate is so, so informed by things that are out of their control.

Jess then went on to emphasize that her approach to activism is, "I'm just showing my people how much I love them and care for them." Her identification with immigrants motivates Jess to engage in collective action work as an expression of care for the community she shares an identity with.

(Re)discovering identity through collective action. In some cases, collective actors found their involvement in movement work activated and politicized a previously dormant or unremarkable part of their identity. Here, Diane reflects that she only connected her Jewish identity to social justice after working at an organization that explicitly promoted social justice in the Jewish population.

Diane: Before I started working at [my organization], I really didn't care that much about Judaism and social justice as a combined concept. It wasn't something that I grew up - it wasn't like I grew up in a Judaism that upheld social justice as a core value. So it's really through my work that I've come to feel like... the work that I feel called to do is also inextricably linked with the identity that I feel most closely tied to.

By combining her lifelong Jewish identity with a more recent vocational identity as an organizer, Diane assumed a new, aggregate identity as a Jewish social justice organizer that carries greater motivation to seek social justice than either identity in isolation. Diane links this new self-concept to feeling "called" to her work as an organizer, suggesting sustained investment in collective action can be achieved by tying identity as a collective actor to a core identity. An instantiation of the 'activist identity' concept identified by social identity theorists (Blackwood & Louis, 2012; Curtin, Kende, & Kende, 2016; Vestergren, Drury, & Chiriac, 2018), this becomes a cornerstone in an individual's self-concept, and a sustaining force for their involvement. The importance of the activist identity emerged through many interviewees' nuanced terminology for their self-identifications. The difference between an organizer, an activist, a community builder, or other self-identifying term was a crucial distinction that came up in 15 (71.4%) interviews. For instance, Luna contrasts their identity as an organizer against activism, as they find the term 'organizing' reflects a more collectivist approach.

Luna: So for me organizing is sort of like an alternate way of thinking about activism. In that like organizing is not about the individual, inherently. Organizing is about the collective, it's about people coming together, it's people taking power together, it's people taking action together.

The weight given to the label that individuals used to define their involvement with a movement or cause reflects their deep personal stake in it. While Luna focuses on the collective over the individual, their emphasis on the designation of organizer versus activist reveals the importance of individual identity in collective action. Through narrativization (Hammack, 2008; Schiff, 2017), the significance attached to being identified correctly as an organizer suggests a strong linkage between an individual's politicized self-concept and their commitment to social change.

Transforming and politicizing identity. A common narrative for activation was the transformation of an identity that was once derogated or hidden into a politicized identity, that subsequently forms the basis for collective action. In this excerpt, Jason describes how his self-concept as Asian American shifted paradigmatically.

Jason: Asian American people organizing for Asian American people, it was the first time I saw that, I thought that was really powerful. Because I still kind of subscribed to this whole model minority myth to a certain extent, and always felt like other groups were being affected more, so that's where we should be focusing our energy. But seeing people so fervently, not only supporting their community, but connecting their own struggle with it, was really empowering. [...] Yeah, I think that also really politicized me in terms of my identity. I think that's really important because that's still a strong reason as to why I organize today.

For Jason, seeing fellow Asian Americans organizing transformed his understanding of his Asian American identity from undeserving “model minority” into a radicalized self-concept (Drury & Reicher, 2000) and the site of politicization for community-building and organizing work. For many of the participants like Jason, when this radicalized self-concept was realized through a long-standing, deeply-held identity, their engagement in a cause was more grounded and likely to continue.

Identity related tensions: grappling with privilege. While discussing identities in movement work, collective actors would frequently bring up privilege as a tension. They described their struggle to reconcile their own privileged identities with their intention to reduce privilege and inequality. As Isabella does below, interviewees would often list the various identities that they considered to be privileged.

Isabella: I think my class, my race, my gender identity also - I'm a cis-gendered straight woman. There's a lot that doesn't necessarily - sometimes I struggle to relate to a lot of these issues, but it doesn't mean I can't empathize.

Here, Isabella follows her itemization of privileged identities by suggesting that empathy can mitigate the tensions caused by her privileges within collective action work. However, empathy may not be a sufficient curative for the dilemma of identity and power that privileged collective actors face. This issue is particularly salient when identity and power is a central concern in the social

change that collective actors seek. As discussed above, many collective actors only found movement work sustainable when it was rooted in a sense of shared identity with the affected community. Just like Isabella, Amari itemizes his various privileged identities.

Amari: I'm able-bodied, I'm cis-male, I'm heterosexual. So because of all those societal power constructs of what's valued and what isn't, I align closer to proximity to cis-white males that are in power. My blackness being the only barrier that I have from that power dynamic. So, that means I have access to certain spaces. That means I have the ability to talk about certain things and actually be heard, not ignored or dismissed. So, being very intentional and strategic on how I use my voice and my power, to either move out the way or shift the attention and focus on other marginalized groups.

Crucially, Amari differs from Isabella by first acknowledging these privileges and then specifying how he is able to leverage his powerful identities to give a platform to more marginalized groups. Amari transforms privilege from a tension to an opportunity to manipulate societal power structures in favor of systemic change. Amari differs from Isabella in both age—he was 38, she was 19—and experience—he had been involved in movement work for about 10 years, she for just 1. Amari's more experienced, more nuanced perspective on privileged identities could be the outcome of sustaining system-challenging action over the long-term. This aligns with findings that while younger collective actors tend to have more biographical availability, older people with greater structural investment in political engagement may express more sustained involvement. (Schussman & Soule, 2005).

Across the topic of identity, collective actors expressed the importance of the politicization of their self-concept in relation to their understanding of social issues. Their narratives of incorporating the political into personal identity were consistently connected to the altered set of beliefs or ideology that motivated and sustained engagement in system-challenging collective action.

System-challenging Ideology

Another commonly cited motivation for sustaining system-challenging collective action was ideology, or the set of concepts and worldview that determine what collective actors believe in. The anti-system justifying ideologies of the individuals interviewed reflected their involvement in collective action work meant to bring about social change (Jost & Banaji 1994; Jost et al., 2012; Jost

et al., 2017). Collective actors often emphasized the importance of understanding structural inequality in tandem with reimagining social structures for a better world. The subthemes related to system-challenging ideology are examined via representative extracts from collective actors' interview transcripts.

Structural & intersectional awareness. When discussing how their thinking had changed over the course of working for social change, collective actors noted the importance of understanding their personal position in social structures.

Jason: I remember having to unlearn a lot of these really toxic and pretty violent ways of thinking. [...] Even things like playing to cis privilege, masculinity, being light-skinned, that I really had to work through. Because I think, I also realized that a lot of these personal attributes that I had, or behaviors that I had, are also perpetuating these systems that continue to oppress our people.

Jason emphasizes the importance of connecting his individual identity and positionality to systems of oppression. The realization he describes is a foundational component of system-challenging ideology, that an individual's socially constructed identity categories—such as race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.—determine their position in social hierarchies. Crucially, these politicized identity categories operate in conjunction to determine an individual's unique experience as well as defining a personal, moral approach to structural inequalities (cf. van Zomeren et al., 2018). This latter understanding has been dubbed intersectional awareness by feminist social psychologists (Greenwood, 2008; Curtin et al., 2015), after the theory of intersectionality pioneered by black feminist scholars (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). The experiences relayed by collective actors showed their general structural awareness of societal inequality as well as specific intersectional awareness about the interrelated functioning of multiple disadvantages. For instance, Marie's belief system displays not only structural but also intersectional awareness.

Marie: I think it's important to see the different ways that communities have been pitted up against each other, but have been pitted up against each other because of racism, because of patriarchy, all these different things. So, I think having a sense of history is important, because then you will see that our communities have experienced oppression that's tied or connected with other communities.

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According to Marie, the interrelated nature of oppression stems from an understanding of the history of structural inequality, and prompts solidarity with other oppressed groups. Marie went on to explain how this perspective motivates not only her work on reproductive justice in Asian American communities, but also her participation in campaigns for reparations for Black Americans. Her intersectional awareness provides the basis for building cross-identity solidarity between movement groups (Liu & Opatow, 2020). Marie expresses that “a sense of history” or collective remembering (Power, 2020b) is fundamentally connected to the importance of community, specifically her Asian American community, for motivating sustained engagement in collective action.

Imagining better social structures. After describing their awakening to the oppression perpetrated by social structures, participants would often describe striving for an alternative, better world. Similar to utopian thinking (Fernando et al., 2018; Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018; Langman, 2013), the imaginative component of collective actors’ ideology provides a guiding, inspiring beacon for movements for social change.

Luna: Organizing is about, again, the collective, but it’s also, thinking about what comes after we destroy everything. What kind of world do we want to live in after we destroy like systems of oppression, abolish prisons and the police or whatever. It’s about building the world you want to live in. And so, of course, whatever - organizing is about thinking about your vision long-term. Thinking about like, oh what is the world we want to live in, what is a better world for us and for our children, our children’s children.

Luna’s narrative of striving towards a better world for future generations is a common refrain, echoed by collective actors in diverse scenarios (Power, 2018, p. 229-230). Many collective actors expressed doubt that the radical change could be feasibly accomplished within their lifetimes. Instead, they focused on thinking radically while acting longitudinally, to lay the foundation for future utopian worlds (Hawlina, Pedersen, & Zittoun, 2020). By imagining a better world, collective actors can sustain their involvement in a movement even when their actions lack immediate efficacy and the realization of their demands seems unlikely in the near term.

Ideology related tensions: fear of reproducing harmful hierarchies. A frequent tension expressed by many collective actors was the fear of perpetuating harmful hierarchies even within movement spaces dedicated to challenging the status quo. When faced with someone who engages in

harmful behaviors, Luna takes a conciliatory approach, advocating for people with problematic beliefs to be engaged rather than rejected.

Luna: Like, for example, if someone is homophobic, not demonizing them for the fact that they're homophobic, but realizing like, where are they coming from, like whatever, what have they internalized? So thinking about – Ok how do we learn to struggle together? Because we all come from different places, because we all marinate in the ideas that come from whatever environment we're from. And so I think that's something really important to recognize, especially for people who think they have radical politics or whatever. Because if you believe in like restorative justice, if you believe in prison abolition, that means you inherently believe that people can grow, and people can learn and be able to grow, and we were all, in the end, one community. And we can all in the end, we can all build toward a world that we want to live in.

Luna's method of managing this tension is to accept the imperfections and epistemic baggage all people carry—which is often a product of social structures—and “struggle together” towards new ways of knowing. Here, the prioritization of “growth” emphasizes the need for long-term involvement to foster that growth and learning. Luna invokes the better, future world that is the goal of the struggle, linking back to the previously discussed criteria for sustainability: the imagination of collective futures that represent the solutions to present-day problems. Their emphasis on struggling and building together also points towards the last criteria for sustainability: the relational network or community.

Intentional Community

The final salient sustaining factor for collective actors was community-building, based in acquiring stable relationships with other like-minded individuals. This is achieved through finding a community that acts as a network for support and motivation in collective action. Finding family, friends, and mentors through movement communities creates relational ties that more closely bind collective actors to their work. Furthermore, communities form the basis for the collective power required for movements to effectively act for social change.

New social relationships. Collective actors described finding friendship, love, mentorship, and other relational connections and emotional fulfillment through social movement groups. The resulting

relationships—often predicated on the activities that make-up movement work—further commit individuals to stay involved. For instance, both Luna and Jason speak to the importance of family and community for their involvement.

Luna: I think, really centering it and rooting the reason why I do organizing, what gets me out of bed every day is my love for my family and community.

Jason: I think because for a lot of us, speaking specifically in the queer Asian American community, because a lot of us came from a place of severe isolation in terms of how we felt, being a part of a social support network is really, more empowering than just having a group of friends.

Jason found a community through his organizing work while Luna was spurred to organize to defend the community she loves. Whether collective actors are motivated by their original family or found family, relational ties are vital to sustaining their involvement. Jason's emphasis on the importance of having a community as not merely as a group of friends but as a 'social support network' reveals the instrumentality of community for collective actors. The community acts as a backbone of support, providing collective actors with the resilience to remain engaged despite the difficulties posed by challenging the status quo. When collective actors lose the support of their original communities or families due to their newly embraced identities and ideologies, they can find an alternative social support network among their system-challenging fellows. Ben discusses another instrumental purpose served by relationships among collective actors: modeling new group norms and mentoring newcomers.

Ben: I think being in close proximity with people who are so dedicated to these movements, really helps. Seeing people around you willing to take certain risks, helped me take those risks, that I think I had wanted to take before but I had been very risk-averse. And I think seeing them do it was very, was good role modeling for me.

A necessary component of challenging systemic inequality is taking risks—which can vary from the risk of psychological distress to arrest or violence. Being surrounded by like-minded individuals who mentored newcomers and modeled risk-taking behavior encouraged Ben to engage in non-normative, risky actions.

Belief in group efficacy. Communities and social networks are sites for gathering the collective power required to bring about social change. When collective actors belong to a robust community of like-minded others invested in the movement or cause, their belief in group efficacy is strengthened.

Luna's perspective is emblematic of this belief.

Luna: [Social movements and organizing] is not just an individual thing, it's a collective thing. It's a collective take of power. [...] whether it's talking to friends or talking to coworkers or whoever you're trying to organize - you realize through conversations, through building relationships, that there's power in being able to realize you can do something about the problems in your life, and you can demand something from people who have decision-making power, and be able to take that power.

According to Luna, the collective is more powerful and can bring about change where an isolated individual cannot. Her strategy for organizing is reflective of the relational organizing style (Divakarak & Nerbonne, 2017; Ganz, 2012). For collective actors, the relationships they build through organizing are both personal and political, a distinction that often blurs as friends and coworkers also become co-organizers and activists.

Relational tensions: maintaining social cohesion. The social networks and communities required for collective action are constituted of dynamic relationships. Often, these relationships are tested by interpersonal conflict that threatens the social cohesion of a collective. Resonating with the hierarchy-reproducing tensions discussed previously, relational tensions can cause communities of collective actors to fall into disarray. Rashida describes her experiences with harmful behavior, perpetuated by the church-going community she works with.

Rashida: Me and the other organizer - they're nonbinary, I'm gender nonconforming. And for church folks that can be a lot, specific to our base. And there's not always that respect. I think there's a solidarity, but there's not a respect. If that makes sense. So let's say - you're oppressed and I get that, but fuck pronouns for example.

Rashida draws a distinction between solidarity and respect, by specifying that individuals or groups who are part of a collective or movement may not fully align with fellow collective actors' values and may even actively offend them. However, their presence could be vital to achieve the goal

of the movement for social change, especially one that is framed around a universal goal such as collective liberation. Indeed, Rashida later remarked on the importance of the solidarity of these same disrespectful community members.

Rashida: I think the biggest, most positive thing about organizing is seeing how many people are working for your liberation every day, that you don't know about. Those same black pastors that aren't gonna use your pronouns, and are going to lecture you about going to hell, are the same people - literally - the same people - that do this shit for free, every day.

Managing the different personalities, needs, and viewpoints that manifest in collective action organizing presents a daunting task. Yet the work of building solidarity, community, and power through many individuals joined together requires substantial social and psychological cohesion (Craig, Badaan, & Brown, 2020). Interpersonal disagreements and tensions often arise from differences in politicized identity and ideological stances, and bear a substantial threat to the success of groups of collective actors unless swiftly resolved. The importance of the individual to the collective was cogently summed up by Marie.

Marie: Organizing, or social movements, I think the really key thing about them is communities, whole communities change because individuals change. And when I started organizing I started changing myself.

The power of individuals is realized upon uniting as a community with shared identities and ideologies. By constructing such imagined, intentional communities (Anderson, 1983), collective actors lay the foundation to form broader movements with national or even global implications (Power, 2018; 2020b). The emphasis placed by Marie and others on the process of simultaneous individual and group change, necessarily occurring over an extended time period, indicates the importance of relational ties between collective actors for sustained involvement.

Discussion

Sustaining Collective Action Involvement

This study explored the experiences of Chicago-based activists and organizers contextualized by models of the psychology of collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2009; Becker & Tausch, 2015; Vestergren et al., 2017; Blackwood & Louis, 2012). Each collective actor

who was interviewed engaged in intensive meaning-making and narrativization to account for their non-normative beliefs and behavior that challenged the status quo. Collective actors' narratives—making sense of their experiences working for social change—provide a glimpse into their process of constructing an interrelated identity-ideology that is personal, collective, and political (Hammack, 2008; Power & Velez, 2020). Based on both the explicit and implicit motivations revealed by their self-theorizations, three key themes characterize collective actors' sustained commitment to challenging and transforming hegemonic social structures. These are: politicized identity, system-challenging ideology, and intentional community.

First, we found that a politicized social identity—often one that was previously **derogated** or suppressed—is foundational to collective actors' commitments to identity-specific issues and organizations. Rather than a separate activist identity, we found that the sustainability of collective actors' involvement stemmed from the merging of this radicalized self-concept with a cause or movement. The second criteria is a system-challenging ideology rooted in an understanding of structural inequality and directed towards a transformative, utopian future. This system-challenging ideology is closely associated with the politicization and moralization of collective actors' identity (van Zomeren et al., 2018). Along with a strong moral reaction to structural inequality, we found that an ideology of imagining a better world through collective action was more important than perceived political efficacy for sustained engagement (Drury & Reicher, 2005).

Third, a social support network or community of fellow collective actors is crucial for binding group members more closely to their cause while also modeling system-challenging behavior and providing the 'collective' required for collective action. In fact, collective actors seek to build a community that creates a *shared reality* (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). A shared reality provides epistemic certainty and a sense of existential stability, which collective actors must reconstruct after breaking with the status quo. While the importance of a large network of activists has been previously documented (Louis et al., 2015; Vestergren et al., 2018), we further find that individuals' engagement in collective action is better sustained when they are embedded in a community of collective actors with certain shared identities and ideologies that form a shared reality.

The importance of shared identity and ideology to collective action communities is grounded in the integration between these three factors. While we presented the themes as discrete categories, most of the illustrative quotes for each—identity, ideology, or community—invoke more than one theme. In fact, we propose that all components are highly bound together, even inseparable. As previously reviewed, many theorizations of the psychology of collective action have integrated identity and ideology to propose that a qualitative shift in self-concept in relation to social structures is necessary for engaging in collective action (Klandermans, 2014; van Zomeren et al., 2018). While supporting these findings, our research additionally emphasizes that sustained engagement is contingent on the relational ties a community of collective actors that also share a politicized identity, future imaginations, and system-challenging ideology.

Collective actors' identity, ideology, and community are entirely contingent upon each other. After all, an organization, group, or community of collective actors consists of relationships formed between ingroup members who share a politicized social identity. Experiences of systemic inequality based on a shared social identity informs a unique ideology about social structures and one's place within them. Holding system-challenging beliefs cause collective actors to seek out like-minded others with whom to inhabit a shared reality, bringing the phenomena full-circle. The narratives of collective actors suggest this process acts more as a recursive feedback loop. Identity, ideology, and community evolve in conjunction with each other, integrating the personal and political through the radicalization of the individual and collective towards a commitment act for social change by challenging the status quo.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of organizing with and for a community of individuals that share both identity and ideology. For collective actors, their communities not only provide a sense of belonging but also normalize their system-challenging beliefs, which become the de facto position adopted throughout their new social sphere. The intentional communities that spring up from social movements echo Anderson's (1983) imagined communities brought about by collective consciousness and shared identity, which, he argues, become the blueprint for modern nationalism. While forming a nation-state is an extreme case, imagined communities of collective actors do gain the potential to shift cultural values at the micro-level towards a rejection of the status quo (Akkuş et al., 2020). These micro-communities can go on to have a significant impact by forming

links with like-minded groups and generating widespread movements for social change. As Marie notes, “*whole communities change when individuals change.*”

Besides capturing the types of motivations that sustain system-challenging collective action, each of the three thematic categories also include corresponding tensions or challenges faced by collective actors. The tensions that arise from collective action work—such as privileged identities, dissonant beliefs, and interpersonal conflict—also reflect the three aspects of the framework. The narratives of collective actors suggest that each of the three components of identity, ideology, and community must not only be fulfilled but must be integrated and function in tandem for an individual to sustain system-challenging collective action.

Limitations & Future Directions

A commonly cited limitation to qualitative social science research is a lack of generalizability which precludes systematic testing of theories (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, qualitative and mixed methods answer complex questions about meaning-making in the human experience (Power et al., 2018; Power & Velez, 2020), generate new avenues for experimentation, and augment existing quantitative approaches. In this article, we have explored collective actors’ experiences of sustained involvement against the background of social identity and system justification theories of collective action.

The sampled diversity of movements, identities, and goals presented a potential limitation for assessing precise processes of system-challenging collective action. Yet despite the varied backgrounds of collective actors, we found trends across experiences that suggest substantial, widespread phenomena that could not be inferred from a narrow case study. Another limitation of this study is the cross-sectional nature of the research. Collective actors were interviewed once, which did not allow for verification of their self-reported practices for sustained engagement. However, by interviewing collective actors who were at different stages in their involvement—ranging from under one year to over two decades—we were able to observe the variable effects of sustaining collective action over time. A future study that implemented longitudinal interviews or surveys following individuals over the course of collective action engagement (including those who leave or burn out) would help achieve a more comprehensive account of sustainability.

Recent work on the psychology of collective action in both social identity and system justification have called for greater theoretical integration (Jost, 2019; van Zomeren, 2013.) This has been taken up in studies such as Osborne and colleagues' (2019) model proposing that SIMCA factors mediate the relationship between system justification beliefs and support for collective action. Other studies have also demonstrated the integrative potential for the two theories by showing that collective deprivation and belief in social change are the moderating factors linking in-group identity and support for collective action (Abrams & Grant, 2012; Górska & Bilewicz, 2015). The current study indicates that politicized identity, system-challenging ideology, and a collective action community facilitate the construction of a shared reality necessary for escaping system justification beliefs and challenging the status quo.

Based on this research, future studies can pursue further integration across models of collective action to determine the precise relationships between the indicators of sustainability proposed here. For instance, when one or more of the three factors fails to be adequately fulfilled, does the challenge of maintaining collective action engagement cause stress or burnout? While the scope of study was intentionally constrained to contemporary, Chicago-based collective actors seeking to challenge the status quo, the findings could be extended to examine the importance of identity-ideology-community in social movements across historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. Motivations for engaging in collective action are contingent on culturally specific ways of experiencing, remembering, and imagining the relative change in social and economic conditions of the time (Power, 2020b). Furthermore, both cultural and historical specificities shape the available identities, ideologies, and communities that potential collective actors can access. Whether the framework proposed here can be applied across contexts or is specific to the cultural and spatiotemporal location remains to be determined.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined divergent literatures of social identity and system justification and explored the three processes used to sustain system-challenging collective action. We take a social psychological approach to social movements by examining individual motivations to remain involved in collective action despite the significant cognitive tolls incurred by challenging the status quo. We have implemented a qualitative analysis to identify three critical components—shared

social identity, system-challenging ideology, and a community of like-minded in-group members—that operate in conjunction to sustain collective actors' involvement. Capturing the factors for sustaining individual involvement has broader implications for understanding the trajectory of local and global social movements. Through shared identity and ideology, an individual collective actor can connect to their local community organization or group, thus forming a larger, imagined community with the collective power to bring about transformative social change.

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Data Accessibility: Deidentified raw data, coding information, and supplementary materials can be made available upon reasonable request to the first author. Shared data must be used exclusively for the purpose of non-commercial scientific research or for some other agreed-upon use.

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Table 1: Participant pseudonyms, corresponding length of involvement in organized social change efforts, and types of paid and unpaid social change causes and campaigns.

Pseudonym	Involvement in Years	Type(s) of Paid Involvement	Type(s) of Unpaid Involvement
Jess	3 years	Educational equity for Asian Americans	Criminal justice reform and prison abolition
Marie	10 years	Reproductive justice for Asian Americans	Immigrant rights
Becca	3 years	N/A	Palestinian rights
Amari	19 years	Community and youth organizing	Racial justice for Black youth
Angelina	2 years	N/A	Racial justice for Black youth
Leslie	3 years	N/A	Asian American feminist organizing
Isabella	1.5 years	N/A	Racial and economic justice
Susan	19 years	Latin American solidarity and aid	Immigrant and racial justice
Willa	5 years	Housing rights and aid	Racial and economic justice
Luis	9 years	Criminal justice reform	Immigrant rights and economic justice

Shea	3 years	N/A	Black feminist organizing
Kai	4 years	N/A	Immigrant rights and educational equity
Ajay	2 years	N/A	Democracy and electoral reform
Diane	4 years	Jewish community organizing	Racial justice
Jason	7 years	Immigrant rights	Asian American LGBTQ+ organizing and racial justice
Ben	1 year	N/A	Palestinian rights and criminal justice reform
Ivy	2 years	N/A	Immigrant rights and Asian American feminist organizing
Farhad	25 years	Immigrant rights, racial and economic justice	Environmental justice and Muslim rights
Luna	3 years	N/A	Immigrant rights and reproductive justice for Asian Americans
Rashida	5 years	Racial justice and criminal justice reform	LGBTQ+ disability justice
Rose	5 years	Criminal justice reform	Arts activism