

It's Getting Dark, But We Will See: Gaining Collective Momentum in Face of Existential Environmental Threat

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Abstract

Collective action to protect the environment is increasingly moving into the focus of environmental psychology. Also policy makers are well-advised to consider the dynamics of collective environmental action as a vehicle to swift ecological transformations of societies. A sense of collective environmental agency (vs. treating citizens as reluctant consumers) is proposed to drive people supporting collective ecological transformations and engaging in personal and political action against large-scale environmental crises, such as climate change. The Global Environmental Psychology special section, "Responding to the Socio-Ecological Crisis: Collective Action and Activism", presents nine empirical research articles that help to assess the antecedences and consequences of collective environmental agency. The present commentary discusses what the specific contributions of these papers are to better understand the emergence of collective environmental agency and what their implications are for future research in the field of social environmental psychology.

Keywords

collective action, pro-environmental behavior, climate change, collective agency, social identity

Climate change is here. When I started working in the field of environmental psychology back in the late 1990s, psychologists used to investigate people's personal environmental decisions, such as taking the bus instead of going to work by car. At that time, prominent



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approaches considered pro-environmental behavior to be a form of prosocial and moral action (e.g., the norm-activation model, later extended to value-belief-norm theory, Stern, 2000), motivated by concern for others outside the self: for nature or for some yet unborn people living in a distant future and at distant places. Today, everything is just changing dramatically. The symptoms of large-scale environmental crises, such as climate change, have become tangible for an increasing number of people across the globe, including populations in the wealthy high-emission countries who face increasingly extreme weather conditions, associated with droughts, wildfires, and devastating flooding, consensually attributed to human-made climate change (IPCC, 2021). And climate scientists communicate small time windows of just a few decades for preventing irrevocable tipping dynamics in the earth's system, setting the course to global hell (Armstrong McKay et al., 2022). It has become clear to a majority of policy makers, business leaders, and scientists that all societies need urgent transformation on a systemic and a structural level. For environmental psychologists this means a shift in interest: away from private personal environmental behaviors to those kinds of action that affect, or are part of, the "Great Transformation" (Bamberg et al., 2015; Barth et al., 2021). Instead of focusing all efforts on understanding people's everyday decisions whether to take the bus or not, novel research programs currently emerge in environmental psychology that inquire the conditions of people's collectively relevant actions, such as accepting green policies (Bergquist et al., 2022), investing money in green businesses (Marder et al., 2023), or participating in, or creating, political movements (Bamberg et al., 2015). The current GEP special issue, "Responding to the Socio-Ecological Crisis: Collective Action and Activism" presents an up-to date snapshot of this revolution in the field and gives a flavor of where the field is moving to so quickly. Most of the current articles present research on when people participate in collective activist actions or movements in response to the environmental crisis (e.g., climate change). They investigate personal *pull factors* of collective environmental action, such as envisioning a sustainable future (Bosone et al., 2024, this section; Daysh et al., 2024, this section), thinking of the world as one (Loy et al., 2024, this section) or being emotionally moved by climate protests (Landmann & Naumann, 2024, this section) and its personal *push factors*, such as personal experiences of extreme weather events (Ettinger et al., 2024, this section) or perceptions of injustice and inertial outgroups (Jansma et al., 2024, this section). And they consider under what societal boundary conditions people translate their personal or collective motivation into collective action, such as how much effective environmental policies and freedom of political articulation are implemented in the governance of a country (Uysal et al., 2024, this section) or whether radical environmental movements exist (Dasch et al., 2024, this section). What also marks a novel development in environmental psychology is an interest in the *effects* of collective activism (see also Gulliver et al., 2021), especially of the recently emerging radical, "non-normative" forms of activism initiated by groups, such as, Extinction Rebellion (Kenward & Brick, 2024, this section) or Last Generation

(Dasch et al., 2024, this section). These radical climate change groups are a rather recent phenomenon which seems to be a response to the perceived urgency and extremity of the climate crisis, as Jansma's and colleagues' (2024, this section) qualitative work on Extinction Rebellion activists suggests.

This research, and the research that will follow along these lines, has the capacity to illuminate the possible behavioral pathways to the Green Transformation and, at the same time, has unique potential to uncover the basic socio-psychological processes of large-scale social coordination under conditions of existential personal and collective threat. This is what I will explain and discuss in the remainder of this commentary.

Creating Collective Momentum for a Green Transformation

Currently, in anticipation of the dramatic changes required for a Green Transformation, many environmental policy makers seem to fearfully wonder how, and whether, demanding pro-environmental policies will be accepted by the people, such as laws or tax policies forcing individuals to quickly insulate their private homes, to abandon their private cars for shared or public mobility solutions, or to strongly reduce consumption of animal products. A current common strategy how policy makers communicate the transformation is to downplay or even deny the magnitude of personal change and reduction in personal wealth and comfort required for a collective climate emergency breaking. Also, they typically assure that policy makers will get things done silently in the background without bothering anyone in the population with serious individual demands (for instance, providing the funding needed for insulating private homes or buying electric cars). This is what the German journalist, Bernd Ulrich (2023), recently called “smurfication of the people”: Papa Smurf delivers the ecological transformation while watching over life in Smurf village and taking care that life doesn't change (he might suspect that, otherwise, the nice Smurfs could turn into ravaging vandals smashing social order and civility in Smurf village). This strategy is unlikely to work out in the long run, as in fact, the required changes mean *less* consumption (at least for some decades) and not just consuming *different* things. Also, public budgets will not suffice to compensate citizens for any hardship. Finally, the premise seems shaky that personal demands and burdens reduce people's pro-social orientation and elicit anti-social action. Quite the opposite seems true, as indicated by experimental research showing that under conditions of personal threat, people are more willing to join in collective efforts, as indicated by increased conformity to salient ingroup norms (Stollberg et al., 2017) and collective action intentions (Fritsche et al., 2013). As a more suitable and realistic approach, policy makers might stop presenting themselves as the silent service providers of the ecologic transformation. Instead, from the perspective of a new collective look in environmental psychology, a collective action strategy that involves people as collective

actors might work better to motivate them to accept and support the transformation and may alleviate widespread sense of personal helplessness in face of global environmental crisis.

People are social beings. They are adapted to social life and social coordination has guaranteed the human race's prosperity (and survival!) in the ancient past. They easily relate to others and define themselves in terms of a salient collective, which has been described as people's "social self" by social identity theorists (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When people identify with a salient ingroup, such as their own nation, their gender, or their generation, the properties they ascribe to their ingroup, such as certain norms or collective efficacy beliefs, subjectively become properties of their own self, determining if, and how, people act. Group membership and group-based action also seem functional for individuals to satisfy their basic psychological needs (Correll & Park, 2005), such as those for autonomy and control (Fritsche, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Specifically, when people perceive their personal control to be low (e.g., in case of climate helplessness), they tend to increase their identification with agentic ingroups and to act in line with group norms and goals, which in turn elevates their perceptions of control through their (social) self and well-being (see the work on group-based control theory; Fritsche, 2022; Relke et al., 2022). Thus, experiencing personal helplessness to effectively tackle large-scale environmental crises, such as climate change, can lead people to cling more strongly to their salient group identity and support collective causes (Barth et al., 2018). These effects have been demonstrated to be automatic and, thus, unintended and unconscious in nature (Fritsche et al., 2012). At the same time, groups should also become more important for people as a rational and deliberative response to realizing that coordinated collective action could tackle specific relevant problems more effectively than the individual, as it is true for large-scale environmental crises, such as climate change (Fritsche et al., 2018).

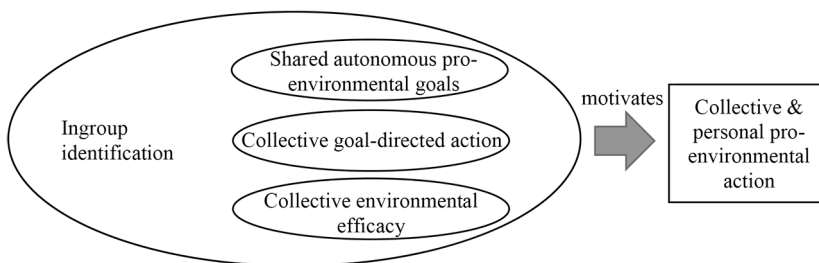
This implies that people might not just be willing to engage in group-serving action under conditions of perceived environmental threat but that they might even be *eager* to do so (see Jansma et al., 2024, this section), as this is a palliative means to downregulate a sense of personal helplessness and to demonstrate agency through the self. Smurfication policies deny this collective potential and miss out the opportunity to get people's approval for demanding collective efforts, due to intrinsic collective motivation under conditions of threat.

Of course, people not just join *any* collective action. Even more so, often people are quite hesitant to comply with the collective "plans for everyone". It needs collective momentum for creating large-scale collective responses to environmental crises, as it could be observed in some phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in some societies (Bilewicz et al., 2023). Vast majorities visibly supported quite demanding collective regulations by wearing facemasks, staying at home, or getting vaccinated. What it needs to create collective action opportunities that entrain people and restore their sense of control

is the potential and experience of *collective agency* (Fritsche & Masson, 2021; for an illustration see Figure 1). For collective agency beliefs to emerge, first, it needs a collective, people identify with. Second, people should feel that the group has shared (pro-environmental) goals (i.e., injunctive norms) that represent the group's intrinsic will. Third, they should perceive ongoing collective, joint, activities (i.e., descriptive norms) to pursue these goals. Fourth, the belief that the group can have an effect on their environment (i.e., collective efficacy) is the final ingredient to collective agency perceptions. As a result, people should perceive to be a member of a collective *agent* and not just of a descriptive *category*. In fact, empirical research shows that ingroup identification, perceived pro-environmental ingroup norms, and collective environmental efficacy beliefs determine people's intention to act for the environment, both in private and collective settings (Fritsche et al., 2018; Masson & Fritsche, 2021). The research of the present special issue helps to better understand when and why collective environmental agency emerges. I will elaborate on this for each of the four ingredients of collective environmental agency in the following.

Figure 1

The Ingredients of Collective Environmental Agency



Note. Adapted from Fritsche & Masson, 2021.

Ingroup Identification: It Needs the We, But Which One?

Large-scale environmental crises require coordination in maximally large groups, such as “humanity”. This is why social environmental psychologists became interested in whether and when people identify with all humanity as a relevant action group (Loy et al., 2024, this section; McFarland et al., 2019). However, maximally large groups are rarely the ones that people prefer to choose as identifiers of the self, as these groups typically lack distinctiveness. Also, the agency of large groups is ambiguous: Although large groups should usually affect their environment more strongly than smaller groups, they are less likely to attain consensus on shared goals (see Heck et al., 2022). In fact, this might be one reason why Loy et al. (2024, this section) did not find any effects of their global ingroup identity manipulation on global identity or pro-environmental

action intentions. Making people to adopt a global identity might require either a salient intergroup conflict with a non-human entity (e.g., Mars attacks!) or an extremely agentic version of “humanity”. However, Loy and colleagues’ experimental induction of a salient global ingroup was rather likely to elicit *low* sense of humanity’s environmental agency: In their experiment the researchers presented protest posters with systematically varying content to participants aiming at manipulating global identity salience being either high or low. While some of the protest posters the authors used to induce global identity appealed to humanity’s common climate fate, others highlighted that “we” do not “take the environmental problem seriously” and that “we treat the earth as if we had a second one”, suggesting that humanity is at least equivocal about the goal of climate protection and is not making any joint effort to pursue it. As once pointed out nicely by Robert Cialdini (2003), normative appeals backfire if complaints about misconduct suggest a negative descriptive norm (e.g., that it is typical, and thus normative, for humans to treat the earth as if they had a second one). Instead, people may adopt a “human” identity in face of threatening climate change when humans undoubtedly share *and* pursue a joint goal, as they likely did if Martians attacked (or, alternatively, some threatening virus; Reese et al., 2020).

Fostering environmental action motivation in large parts of the population needs inclusive collective environmental agents that many people identify with. While it is difficult to create an agentic ingroup on the level of humanity, this might work better for nations or generations as those groups often appear as political agents in public discourse. The formation of opinion-based action groups that share a joint concern for the environment is a further way to allow people to feel collective agency and motivate them to act (Schulte et al., 2020). Societies and governments that allow and support the formation of those groups thus raise pro-environmental action indirectly, at least in individuals who are concerned about the environment. This is what Uysal’s and colleagues’ (2024, this section) analysis across 12 countries suggests: The degree of state repression in a country moderated the association of people’s personal environmental concern and their self-reported support of, or participation in, political environmental action. Personal environmental concern was a stronger predictor of people’s political environmental action in countries with low (vs. those with high) state repression. It would have been interesting to extend this analysis to personal pro-environmental action as opportunities for pro-environmental collectives to form might also motivate *private* pro-environmental action of their members.

Although the existence of environmental action groups should motivate group members’ environmental action, this might not apply to those parts of society that do not identify as environmentalists. Even more so, it can be detrimental to activating whole nations or generations as pro-environmental collective agents if most people perceive that environmentalism is confined to the group of environmental activists (instead of the whole nation or generation). Then, protecting the environment is not about the self

but about some other group of people (i.e., the Greenies). Once those representations are widespread in a society, diffusion of environmental action into society should strongly depend on processes of *minority influence*. According to earlier work, for a minority to influence majority norms it is crucial that it does not appear as a bunch of crazy people (e.g., because they have a rigid negotiation style or use non-normative means, such as violence; Mugny & Papastamou, 1980) but as having an important message. Dasch et al. (2024, this section) contribute to the extension of this research and to its application to the climate movement. Specifically, they reveal that attitudes towards an environmental group do not just depend on how members of the group behave in public themselves (as classic minority influence research suggested) but also on how *other* (environmental) groups behave in comparison. Specifically, the authors demonstrate that people's intended support for a nonviolent environmentalist group improved when a violent (vs. a non-violent) environmental comparison group was made salient, at least in those people who already sympathized with the environmental cause. For less supportive participants the existence of such a "radical flank" did not affect their attitudes towards the nonviolent environmentalists. This indicates that basic self-categorization dynamics of intergroup comparison, once discovered by Turner et al. (1987), can determine people's support of environmental movements, resulting in a rarely discussed ironic benefit a *radical flank* can have on sympathizer's involvement with environmental movements.

Collective Goals: Where Do We Want to Be?

People should likely develop a sense of collective agency when they perceive a group they are highly identified with to have shared and intrinsic collective goals. A considerable body of research shows that the perception of such collectively shared prescriptive norms motivates personal environmental action (Fritsche et al., 2018; Pořkus, 2016). It is a crucial, but rarely investigated, question when such shared goals, or prescriptive norms (Fritsche & Masson, 2021), emerge in groups. Previous collective action research stressed that people have to communicate, and find out, about a shared concern that then leads to the formation of opinion-based groups (Thomas et al., 2016). The current research on visioning socio-ecological futures, or utopias, (Bosone et al., 2024, this section; Daysh et al., 2024, this section) points to a complementary mechanism that just involves individuals' cognition and does not necessarily rest on interpersonal communication. According to this emerging line of experimental(!) research (see Fernando et al., 2018 for some initial work) just imagining a future scenario in which socio-ecological crises have been solved by society increases people's intentions to personally engage in private-sphere and activist pro-environmental actions (Bosone et al., 2024, this section; Daysh et al., 2024, this section). Mediation analyses suggest that positive visions indeed seem to work through creating collective agency beliefs as they foster the perception of collective goals. Specifically, Bosone et al. (2024, this section) found that imagining a green future increased individuals' perceived ability to imagine an ecological future and ways to

get there. This represents an important precondition for, or may even elicit, people to define specific goals and sub-goals (i.e., means) for their collective (i.e., society). In a similar vein, Daysh et al. (2024, this section) revealed that people reported more hope and optimism following utopian thinking which should be accompanied by a cognitive focus on positive end states. Future research should connect these findings and directly test the possibility that utopian thinking increases people's sense of collective goals in their group or society. Visioning tasks seem promising as interventions to foster the development and personal recognition of collective goals. However, as a cautionary note, experimental paradigms have to be improved to test this properly: Research often contrasted utopian thinking tasks with experimental control groups in which people did not solve *any* task (Bosone et al., 2024, this section; Daysh et al., 2024, this section). This may lead to an overestimation of the visioning effect, as it is not clear whether the effect indeed rests on imagining a positive future ecological scenario or whether nonspecific factors explain the effect, such as the salience of ecological problems or even cognitive exhaustion. The incremental value of visioning tasks has still to be proven in a more rigorous fashion.

Collective Goal-Directed Action: Is There Some Movement Going On?

A third ingredient of collective agency is the observation or anticipation of goal-directed group action. That is, when people learn about group-based activities of other group members or themselves they should consider their group to be more agentic and increase their readiness to join group-based environmental action. It might be one of the most important functions of public protest action to create such perceptions of goal-directed collective action going on. Kenward & Brick (2024, this section) investigated the longitudinal and experimental effects of (media) exposure to disruptive climate protests by the organization, Extinction Rebellion, on attitudes and collective action intentions in two representative samples of UK citizens. Overall, disruptive climate protests seemed to increase approval of these protests and individual activism intentions for some people (probably those who were already supportive of the movement) but not for others. This differential response to disruptive protests supports an ingroup agency account: For people identifying as part of the environmental movement, observing other group-members to act should translate into the perception that “we act” (i.e., collective agency belief), thus motivating personal collective action. As an important caveat, people who do not identify with the environmental movement may perceive such protests as out-group action either not affecting themselves or even challenging the relative agency of their opinion-based ingroup, instigating intergroup conflict and counter-action. Future research is warranted to look more closely at the psychological boundary conditions and processes of public protest action to increase people's sense of joint collective agency.

Kenward and Brick (2024, this section) did not find any effect of disruptive climate protests on responses to an item that asked about participants' belief that "people are capable of working together to solve big social problems". This, on first glance, contradicts a collective agency route of explaining public protest effects. However, poor measurement quality might explain the lack of any effect, given that there was only one item and that the wording of this item was not group-specific: "The people" might either refer to environmental activists (i.e., a personal ingroup or outgroup) or to the general public (whose inability or unwillingness to coordinate in face of climate crisis is what the protestors pointed at). Thus, depending on participants' interpretation, high consent scores on this item may indicate quite different cognitions, ranging from ingroup or outgroup efficacy to low agreement with the movement's propositions. Thus, future studies require a more rigorous, and group-specific, investigation of the psychological processes driving the effects of salient public protests on motivating people to act for the environment (or to join the protests).

Collective Efficacy: Do We Make a Difference?

The perception that "we can have an effect on the environment" (i.e., collective efficacy) should constitute a fourth cornerstone of collective agency beliefs. Research has found evidence that collective (and personal) environmental efficacy beliefs are positively associated with people's environmental action intentions (Fritsche & Masson, 2021). However, we do not know much about the conditions under which collective efficacy beliefs occur, indicated, for instance, by various failed efforts to experimentally manipulate collective efficacy (e.g., Hamann & Reese, 2020; Hornsey et al., 2021; for weak effects see Jugert et al., 2016). In this regard, the findings by Bosone et al. (2024, this section) and Daysh et al. (2024, this section) on the effects of utopian thinking tasks are remarkable: Indeed, their ecological visioning tasks seemed to elevate people's collective efficacy beliefs. While the first authors demonstrate this for a direct measure of collective efficacy, Daysh et al.'s findings on increased hope and optimism also support that after thinking about visions of an ecological future people more strongly believe that society's environmental efforts could have an effect. This is consistent with Kahneman's and Tversky's (1982) classic work on the simulation heuristic, suggesting that counterfactual simulation of an event (i.e., visioning) increases people's subjective likelihood of this event. It seems that elaborating on an ideal ecological future collective scenario is an effective way to strengthen perceptions of efficacy in psychological experiments and might thus be an effective intervention in the field. This should be tested in future studies.

Beyond this cognitive route to collective environmental efficacy, emotions may play a role as well. When my colleagues and I reviewed research on collective environmental cognition and motivation factors five years ago (Fritsche et al., 2018), we found just a small number of studies on (collective) environmental emotions (e.g., collective guilt,

Ferguson & Branscombe, 2010) and virtually no research on the power of *positive* emotions (but see Harth et al., 2013). In the meantime, this has markedly changed. First, the novel construct of “climate anxiety” (Clayton, 2020) grabbed the attention of both scientists and the public. It seemed to express the underlying sentiment of the global Fridays for Future movement of young people who will experience the consequences of climate change in the year 2100 (to which the different future IPCC scenarios refer). At the same time, it is discussed as a potential driver of environmental action (for intercultural data see Ogunbode et al., 2022). However, in line with emotion research, one might rather assume that experiencing anxiety should often lead to inaction, as it is the result of low personal efficacy perceptions to deal with a relevant demand (i.e., threat). Climate anxiety might trigger automatic defensive processes that turn anxious inhibition into positive activation (Stollberg et al., 2024) and membership in agentic groups should play a crucial role here, as I will sketch in the section below. However, other emotions might drive (collective) action in a more proximal fashion, especially those that indicate positive activation, associated with an individual’s agency (Stollberg et al., 2024). Indeed, research on positive emotions as determinants of collective action is currently gaining traction, for instance research on hope (e.g., Bury et al., 2020; Daysh et al., 2024, this section). One of these newly investigated positive emotions that seems to be of high relevance for collective efficacy processes is the emotion of “being moved” by possible collective action (Landmann & Rohmann, 2020). In their current article, Landmann and Naumann (2024, this section), follow up on recent previous research by conceptually replicating that the experience of collective efficacy predicts collective environmental action intentions mediated through people’s emotional experience of being moved. Advancing previous research, their results point to the decisive role of *positive* activation, as efficacy beliefs and collective action intentions were only associated with participants being positively, but not negatively, moved. Seemingly, being positively moved is the emotional companion of collective efficacy beliefs. It seems premature to decide upon whether experiences of efficacy drive the emotion of being moved or vice versa or if both causal directions exist. Nevertheless, this research opens up the perspective that collective agency beliefs are linked to a specific basic emotional experience that is relevant for energizing group-based action. It seems that the pursuit of big (i.e., collective) goals elicits, and is driven, by big positive feelings.

Out of the Dark: How the Experience of Collective Agency Motivates Collective Environmental Action and Protects People From Despair

A sense of collective agency, composed of people’s perceptions that their ingroup has shared intrinsic goals, is pursuing goals, and can have actual effects, drives people’s collective action intentions. The empirical papers of the present special issue demonstrate this and help to explain when collective agency emerges. This is good to know for

gauging and supporting people's support of collective ecological transitions in societies. However, there is yet a further important implication of experienced collective agency and pursuing collective projects: It might be a form of social cure (Jetten et al., 2012; Relke et al., 2022). People often experience a threat to their sense of control, be it due to basic existential constraints (e.g., everyone will die), personal circumstances (e.g., career setbacks), or societal crisis (e.g., climate change). Defining the self via an agentic ingroup or joining group-based action has been shown to work as a buffer of threat through elevating people's sense of control through the (collective) self (Fritsche, 2022; Greenaway et al., 2015) and by replacing a state of behavioral inhibition by behavioral activation and positive affect (Stollberg et al., 2024) and well-being (Relke et al., 2022). This may explain positive associations of climate anxiety and collective action intention (Ogunbode et al., 2022) and answer the question how people may stay healthy under conditions of feared collective doom. This is illustrated in a qualitative case study by Ettinger et al. (2024, this section), who interviewed previous Australian climate activists whose personal property had directly been affected by bushfires. Of those former activists who continued their climate activism after this event of personal control deprivation, several reported that climate activism helped them to cope with personal trauma. Taken together, collective environmental action might not just be a problem-focused response to mitigate environmental crises, such as climate change, but might also represent a psychological adaptation to environmental crises for people to maintain or restore their mental health. Thus, supporting and enabling people to contribute to collective climate action should complement societies' adaptation efforts beyond enhancing dikes, preventing erosion of arable land, or protecting people from heat waves.

Conclusion

It is getting dark in Smurf village and Papa Smurf would be well-advised to tell the Smurfs that there will be no easy way out, but that they could approach the situation jointly. However, maybe, the whole story should not be about Papa Smurf, but about the identified inhabitants of Smurf town, recognizing shared goals in their community, ongoing community efforts, and the chance to eventually solve the crisis through joint action. In response to crisis, this perception of collective agency may then increase the Smurfs' personal efforts, their political engagement, their acceptance of policies to fight the crisis, and smurfy well-being. And perhaps, the story should not be about Smurfs but about humans. This is because the current special issue presents encouraging, and rapidly evolving, research on *humans* and their capacity to effectively respond to threatening environmental change when they define themselves as members of agentic collectives. Let's show the Smurfs who we are!

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