Global Environmental Psychology

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Invited Comment

Imagination, Disruption and Complexity: Strengthening Psychological Scholarship of Activism and Collective Action

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Global Environmental Psychology, 2024, Vol. 2, Article e12999, https://doi.org/10.5964/gep.12999

Received: 2023-10-10 • **Accepted:** 2023-10-17 • **Published (VoR):** 2024-04-30

Handling Editor: Sara Vestergren, University of Keele, Keele, United Kingdom

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Related: This article is part of the GEP Special Topic "Responding to the Socio-Ecological Crisis: Collective Action and Activism", Guest Editors: Sara Vestergren, Sebastian Bamberg, & Winnifred Louis. Global Environmental Psychology. https://doi.org/10.5964/gep.arco2

Abstract

This special issue brings together studies that focus on psychological, social and societal factors related to activism and collective action in the context of the environmental and climate crisis. The special issue builds on an underdeveloped psychological literature on mobilisation, cohesion, collective action and resistance. This perspective article synthesises the key theoretical, methodological, and policy insights of articles in the special issue. The article discusses how the studies contribute to our knowledge of imagination, disruptive tactics, psychological distance and geopolitical context. The article also discusses ways to extend existing scholarship through justice, participatory methods, and inclusive scholarship.

Our planet is facing unprecedented global heating with impacts on, among others, health, mental health, economic sustainability, adverse weather patterns, property loss, biodiversity, displacement and conflict. The climate and ecological emergency intersects with historically wicked problems such as economic inequalities, patriarchy, poverty, racism, and ableism (Wretched of the Earth, 2019). The climate crisis also exacerbates existing ecological concerns associated with fossil fuel reliance, industrialisation and extractivism. In response, collective action and activism have become increasingly important to raise awareness, change behaviours, and influence policy change. Activist groups are motivated by the dire planetary health outlook, lack of urgency by govern-

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ments and large polluting industries that operate with impunity, and inadequate climate diplomacy and policy. Youth activist groups have played an increasingly important role in climate activism (O'Brien et al., 2018) through global social movements such as Fridays for Future. Some collective action has also resorted to disruptive, anarchist and violent tactics to raise awareness of climate change (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020). Climate activist groups have developed alliances, for example, with other social movements to address multiple and intersecting political, social and ecological threats (Hirsch, 2016).

Collective action, however, is complex and dynamic, differing in formality (from fluid grassroots community movements to formal organisations with a global footprint), funding, public support, tactics, alliances, politics, focus and composition. Importantly, activist organisations differ in their conceptualisations of climate and ecological (in)justice, which span ecological, social, structural, and distributive justice. Activist groups also experience internal conflict and disagreements, for example, the use of disruptive tactics. There have also been allegations of exclusionary practices in some groups (Sharma, 2019). Activists suffer from psychological distress through concern for the planet, exclusionary practices, violence, and threats of litigation that threaten sustained action (Godden et al., 2021, Menton & Le Billon, 2021). Activism, however, can also serve as a buffer to the mental health impacts of climate change (Schwartz et al., 2023). Activist groups also rely on the media and public opinion to take up their advocacy. Thus, activism and collective action (individuals, groups and organisations) are complex and require much-needed research to understand the correlates of sustained individual and collective action. There is also the important question of whether activism and collective action impact mitigation and adaptation to climate change. How can psychological research build on the scholarship of activism and collective action worldwide?

In response, this special issue brings together studies that add much-needed insights on important psychological, social and, to some extent, moral questions about environmental and climate change activism. The special issue builds on a growing yet underdeveloped literature on mobilisation, cohesion, collective action and resistance written by psychologists (see, for example, Adams, 2021, Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2020, Riemer & Reich, 2011) by attempting to answer important questions, such as how can reimagining the future influence collective action? To what extent do radical tactics benefit or harm public perceptions of climate activism? Does having an extreme arm within organisations promote or harm activism? How do activists justify disruptive tactics breaking the law? How does experiencing adverse weather events affect climate activism? What role do emotions, identity and efficacy play in climate activism? To what extent does associating with others across the globe influence activism? How do broader political contexts, for example, repressive governments, influence activism beliefs?

Through interesting methodological designs that highlight complex relationships and theoretical framings, mostly from social psychology, the collection of studies brings several cross-cutting insights to the study of activism and collective action. Congratulations

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to the editors and authors on a very interesting special issue. In the following section, I summarise what the studies contribute to the extant literature, followed by thoughts about future work.

How do the Studies Build on What We Know?

Several studies in the special issue focused on the role of **imagination** in activism and collective action. Previous studies have shown the important role of imagination in climate change activism (see, for example, Hopkins, 2019). How can a reimagined future impact thoughts, opinions, emotions, behaviours and collective action? How can we theorise the role of imagination? Papers in this special issue contribute to a growing body of literature focusing on future-oriented cognitions and emotions, for example, radical imagination (Scurr & Bowden, 2021), positive visioning, imagining alternative futures and climate science fiction (Death, 2022) in encouraging environmental and climate action. In an interesting study in this special issue, Bosone et al. (2024) focused on the association between positive visioning of a decarbonated future on imagining cognitive alternatives and individual and collective behavioural intentions. The authors were also interested in how perceptions of environmental distance and environmental identity may moderate the relationships. The positive envisioning exercise was based on two aspects of an existing French programme that encourages thinking about different futures.

The authors were also interested in investigating whether two aspects of positive visioning, namely, eco-sufficiency (focusing on mitigation behaviours) and eco-efficiency (focusing on green technologies), had any positive association with cognitive alternatives and intentions. Using an experimental design (N = 300) with three arms (positive visioning about eco-efficiency, eco-sufficiency and a control group, the authors found positive associations between the two types of positive visioning and cognitive alternatives and individual and collective behavioural intentions. The relationship appears to be moderated by environmental identity and distance. The paper illuminates the underlying mechanisms that may influence the impact of interventions that encourage people to dream about the future. I was particularly inspired by the fact that the interventions were based on parts of an existing real-world programme rather than on a made-for-study intervention that does not exist outside of academia. The study demonstrates the potential role of visioning exercises in environmental education and behaviour change programmes.

Daysh et al. (2024) explored how future thinking may influence climate action intentions. They asked whether envisioning a positive utopian or dystopian future may influence climate action intentions. In addition, how do hope and fear explain the relationship between utopian and dystopian futures and collective climate action intentions? At its most basic form, people may engage in climate action when envisioning a utopian future

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because they feel hopeful. On the other hand, people may engage in climate action when they envisage a dystopian future because of fear. The scholarly starting point for the paper is that previous studies have either looked at utopian/dystopian and the role of hope/fear. However, a strength of this study is that it considers how hope and fear may work *simultaneously* when considering utopian and dystopian futures.

Using an experimental design based on two studies in the United States of America, participants were assigned to a utopian, dystopian or control group. Study Two included a fourth, more active comparison group. The study found that utopian thinking was associated with increased hope, which, in turn, was associated with climate action intentions in both studies. In Study One, there was a strong association between utopian thinking, increased hope, and collective climate intentions. However, in Study Two, utopian thinking was associated with reduced fear, which may have a counteracting effect on climate action intentions. The relationship between dystopian thinking was mixed. In Study Two, dystopian thinking was associated with increased climate action intentions through increased fear *and* reduced hope. The study adds evidence to the role of imagining alternative futures in influencing climate action intentions. Importantly, the study is particularly interesting because it showed the possible counteracting effect of emotions in the relationship between imagination and climate action intentions. By foregrounding complexity and interacting impacts, the authors raise the critical question of how we understand these emotions as interacting and possibly countering each other as people imagine the future.

Articles in the special issue also contribute to scholarly understanding of **disruptive tactics**, including the impacts of varying degrees of violence. To what extent does lawbreaking, violence or having a radical component of an organisation influence public support for the organisation? Can violence be justified? Radical tactics are an important area of focus for climate and environmental movements. However, there needs to be public support, and radicality may strengthen or hamper that support. These questions fit in with a broader study of violence in land, environment and climate defending. Not only are activists subjected to violence (including extreme violence and murder in some parts of the world) (Menton & Le Billon, 2021), but activists may also resort to violent tactics that they justify in various ways.

Using a creative methodological design, Dasch et al. (2024) investigated public support (defined as the intention to participate in those movements, provide financial support, and share information on social media) for violent or radical tactics *within* social movements. Some people may be put off by radicality, while others may support those tactics. However, public support of radical tactics may be much more complicated than previously thought. The authors tested the idea that public support may be influenced by the contrast between having a moderate and radical flank in the same movement (a contrasting effect) and the degree to which violence plays a role in public support for those movements. They were also interested in whether personal affiliation

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to these movements mediated those relationships. Using an experimental design using two studies, one in the UK and one in the USA, the authors included participants in three conditions: one non-violent (both main and flank groups used non-violent tactics), violent (the main and radical flank groups used varying degrees of violence and the radical flank condition (where the main group used non-violent tactics while the flank group used violent tactics).

Study One (UK) showed that violence by the radical flank was associated with increased identification with and support for the moderate group but no significant loss of support for the radical flank. In other words, the moderates benefited from having the radical flank. However, in Study Two, increased violence was associated with diminishing support for the flank group. In Study Two (USA), the magnitude of these effects was moderated by the level of sympathy for the movements.

The study has several implications for the study of public support for social movements and violence. It extends our knowledge about the complexity of public support. It is not simply about how the public views movements as a *whole* but rather the contrasting effects of violent radicality. In some contexts, having a radical flank may increase support; in others, it may work the other way. Social movements must be aware of how radicality may be received in particular contexts.

In keeping with disruptive tactics, do these have any association with public environmental attitudes and opinions? A real-world study by Kenward and Brick (2024) in the United Kingdom studied the opinions and attitudes of 812 participants before, during and after the 2019 Extinction Rebellion (XR) action in London. A second experimental study (n = 1441) exposed participants to media reports about the rebellion, while other participants were not exposed to those media reports. The first study showed that public concern about the media did increase, which, given the longitudinal nature of the study, *may* have been because of exposure to the rebellion. The percentage of people who had heard of XR increased significantly before, during and after the activism. However, the study showed that only certain media types influenced public opinion. For example, social media messaging from the activists increased the public's perceptions of government dissatisfaction. Some news outlets were associated with increased public support for activism, but others were associated with decreased support. The study raises several important questions, including questions of who to target in messaging, the media through which people are exposed and, importantly, how disruptive activism can translate into policy change.

How do activists justify lawbreaking, and to what extent do perceptions of climate, social and ecological-related injustices influence lawbreaking? Jansma et al. (2024) attempted to qualitatively understand how perceived injustice is associated with justifications for breaking the law. Very few studies have explored the link between perceived injustice and lawbreaking. They interviewed 106 XR activists in the Netherlands and explored how perceived injustice influenced climate activism and how activists justified

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breaking the law in climate action. The findings suggest that perceived injustice was an important motivator for climate action. Notably, the study showed the varied ways in which activists conceptualised injustice, including personal injustice (e.g., how climate change impacts participants and those close to them), injustice related to police brutality, social injustices (e.g., disproportionate impacts on people experiencing poverty and those in the global South), systemic injustices (e.g., capitalism, consumerism, fossil fuel industry lobbying), and ecological injustices (e.g., how humans interact with the natural world). The study also found that participants were willing to break *certain* laws based on perceptions of past effectiveness and for moral reasons, e.g., because laws are unjust and time is running out. Participants offered differing understandings of violence; for example, damaging large multinationals' property is justifiable, but violence against people is not.

An important contribution of this special issue is the role of emotions in disruptive tactics. Many studies have focused on the complicated role of emotions. However, Landmann and Naumann (2024) focused on the role of being positive or negatively moved on normative (peaceful protest) or non-normative action (e.g., property damage or personal injury risk). Previous research focused on being positively or negatively moved on normative *or* non-normative action, not together. The authors asked activists and non-activists (N = 223) aligned with Fridays for Future about their appraisals, feelings and intentions. Being positively moved was associated with normative actions. Being negatively moved was associated with neither normative nor non-normative action. However, non-normative action was associated with perceived injustices and low collective efficacy beliefs; in other words, people were more compelled to engage in more disruptive protests if they did not believe that peaceful protest would have an impact and they perceived that climate change was unfair. Similar to Kenward and Brick (2024), the perceived injustices of climate change interacted with beliefs about what activism works and does not.

The belief that climate change affects people and their loved ones directly, **psychological distance**, may influence climate activism. How close to home does climate change feel (for example, is this affecting me and those close to me personally, or is it other people's problem), and how does this influence action? Ettinger et al. (2024) qualitatively explored how exposure to wildfires in Australia influenced people's climate activism. The underlying question was whether psychological distance affects climate activism. Participants had direct experience with Australian wildfires, such as protecting their properties from damage. Participants were also all involved in climate activism. Participants were interviewed using semi-structured narrative interviews. Findings suggested that having direct experience with wildfires impacted their perceptions of climate change. Exposure to wildfires reduced psychological distance. Importantly, results indicated that 45% of participants increased their activism following direct wildfire exposure, with 27% indicating the psychological benefits of climate activism. Thirty-nine percent

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(39%) of participants maintained the same level of activism. Fifteen percent (15%) of participants reduced their activism because of trauma and the need to distance themselves psychologically from climate change. Other participants indicated they needed to recover from the physical toll of climate change. The study revealed implications for differing trauma responses for those who need help and for possible communication messaging about psychological distance and action.

An interesting question is to what extent affiliation with a global identity influences action. A study by Loy et al. (2024) investigated the association between identifying with the global community and intentions to engage in climate activism, support for climate protective policies, and reduce climate change denial. They also explored an interesting question about the role of inclusive language (using words like we, us, and our, for example, “Our common house is on fire. Let’s put it out together”) in increasing global identity compared to exclusive (accusatory) language (using the words ’you’, for example, “your house is on fire. Why don’t you put it out?”). Based on a German sample (n = 307), the study compared an inclusive language group, an exclusive language group and a control group regarding global identity, pro-environmental activism, pro-environmental policy support, and climate change denial. Participants were exposed to placards with inclusive, exclusive language and then filled out a questionnaire with variables of interest. The control group were exposed to the placards after completing the questionnaire. The study found no significant relationship between language and global identity. However, strengthened global identity was associated with improved pro-environmental support, pro-environmental activism and weakened climate change denial. The authors conclude that fostering a global identity has several benefits for activism and collective action and should be encouraged.

Another theme relates to the interaction between the **geopolitical context and the individual**. An interesting study by Uysal et al. (2024) asked: How do broader geopolitical environments interact with environmental concern and environmental efficacy beliefs to influence environmental collective action engagement? Put differently, how do contextual and psychological variables interact to influence collective action engagement? The authors conducted multilevel modelling from 12 countries worldwide with a massive sample (N = 18,746). Countries had varying levels of environmental policy, repression, and governance. The study found that participants with a high environmental concern and a belief that they could make a difference in environmental issues were more likely to engage in environmental collective action. However, the relationships were influenced by that country’s political characteristics. For example, in countries with repressive governments, there was a weaker relationship between environmental concern, efficacy beliefs and environmental collective action engagement. The study pointed towards the need for system change to facilitate individual change.

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How Can We Strengthen Psychological Studies of Activism and Collective Action?

This special issue combines excellent papers with robust findings and important theoretical, methodological and practical implications. They add to a growing number of social and psychological research on climate action (see, for example, Masson & Fritsche, 2021). They set an excellent standard for the recently launched *Global Environmental Psychology* and offer valuable recommendations for future work. I was particularly impressed by the studies' quality, creativity and methodological rigour. I also appreciated how studies shed light on the complexities of psychological constructs and the *contexts* of activism and collective action. However, some areas of activism and collective action could be developed.

Most studies in the special issue were conducted in developed and westernised countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States of America. There was little discussion about collective action in the global South and climate issues affecting minorities in the global North (except for the Uysal et al.'s, 2024 study that references a range of countries and the Loy et al.'s 2024 study that referred to global identity). For the field to be truly inclusive, it is important to understand collective action in a *global* context. In addition to the moral imperative to be inclusive in knowledge production, a focus on marginalisation is important for our theorising about climate (in)justice (Kallhoff, 2021). While some of the articles referred to justice (for example, the papers by Jansma et al., 2024 as well as Ettinger et al., 2024 included a focus on perceptions of justice), there is scope to strengthen our theorising of climate injustice, particularly how perceptions of injustices may drive climate collective action in non-Western contexts (see, for example, Barnes et al., 2022). A focus on marginalisation also allows us to enhance important theoretical concepts, praxis and solidarity from intersectional LGBTQI, feminist, decolonial and disability activism that is increasingly useful in activism and collective action (Sultana, 2022).

The body of psychological work could be strengthened by using a more diverse range of methodologies, including qualitative, participatory, and mixed-method designs. I am not suggesting anything wrong with the current methodological choices (in fact, I was impressed by the methodological rigour of the papers) given the kinds of questions that were asked. However, future studies could qualitatively explore these and other questions in more depth. Participatory, critical and indigenous methodologies may also be useful in exploring justice-related research mentioned earlier and would add value to the growing work on climate justice by psychologists worldwide. Including more work focusing on the biodiversity and non-human dimensions of collective action would also be helpful (see, for example, Marais-Potgieter & Faraday, 2022). Finally, future studies could focus more strongly on interventions, action research and policy impacts, including questions about the extent to which collective action has an impact on climate change. The study by Kenward and Brick (2024) was powerful because it showed the

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effects of real-world activism as it unfolded. While exploring theoretical relationships is helpful, the climate crisis should compel us towards action and justice. There is no shortage of real-world activism and collective action; the critical question is how we can use psychological research to enhance those activism(s) before it is too late.

Openness and Transparency Statements

Acknowledgments. The author has no additional (i.e., non-financial) support to report.

Funding. The author has no funding to report.

Competing Interests. The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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