

# When Social Hierarchy, Power, and Collective Autonomy Motivate Social Movement and Counter-Movement Mobilization Among Disadvantaged and Advantaged Groups

Personality and Social Psychology Review  
1–26

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DOI: 10.1177/10888683241305662

pspr.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

What happens when disadvantaged group members try to gain power in an attempt to protect their collective autonomy? The present integrative review outlines dynamic social processes and conditions under which efforts to restrict a group's collective autonomy motivate social movement mobilization among disadvantaged groups to challenge social hierarchies that limit their power. This, in turn, threatens advantaged groups' perceptions of their access to power and, by extension, their sense of collective autonomy, motivating them to reaffirm the existing social hierarchy by mobilizing counter-movements. We propose a theoretical model, called the Movement Mobilization Model of Collective Autonomy, to articulate these dynamic processes by integrating sociological, psychological, and organizational science literatures. The model specifies the conditions under which social movements and counter-movements are activated, psychological processes that drive action, how they play off each other, and offer directions for future research.

## Public Abstract

What happens when disadvantaged groups feel that their freedom to define and practice their collective identity (i.e., collective autonomy) is restricted? The present theoretical review outlines the conditions under which social inequality activates the feelings of collective autonomy restriction among disadvantaged group members and motivates the mobilization of social movements seeking social equality. As these social movements gain traction, advantaged group members may feel that their privileged position and collective autonomy are threatened. These feelings of threat and collective autonomy restriction among advantaged groups in turn motivate them to mobilize counter-movements that seek to protect social hierarchy and their privileged position within it. The process outlined in this case is relevant to individuals from both marginalized and privileged backgrounds, as it illustrates the different ways in which real-world power structures shape the way they experience and navigate social movements and counter-movements as they unfold in real time.

## Keywords

group processes, intergroup relations, social identity, social influence/power, social status, structural inequality, collective autonomy

## Introduction

All humans share a universal desire for autonomy in determining their goals, decisions, and actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Decades of research on self-determination have linked human motivation, emotion, well-being, and action to individuals' ability to fulfill their needs for *personal autonomy* (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Extending this to the intergroup realm, recent research has demonstrated that people also have a psychological need for autonomy at a *group* level (Kachanoff, 2017). This relatively new idea, coined

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*collective autonomy*, describes group member's desire to define and practice their own social identity without interference from other groups (Kachanoff, 2017; Kachanoff et al., 2019, 2020).

According to the "threat and defense" hypothesis of collective autonomy, the desire to defend collective autonomy motivates group members to either challenge or protect the social hierarchy depending on their group's position within it (Kachanoff et al., 2022). For disadvantaged groups, less access to power, resources, and social influence leave them vulnerable to informal norms and practices, and formal rules, regulations, and policies that sometimes restrict their ability to exercise collective autonomy (Kachanoff, 2017; Kachanoff et al., 2019; Kachanoff et al., 2020; Keltner et al., 2003; Pratto, 2016; Pratto et al., 2008). As a result, perceived collective autonomy restriction has been found to motivate disadvantaged groups to act in ways that challenge hierarchies that disenfranchise them (Kachanoff et al., 2019; Kachanoff et al., 2022). In comparison, advantaged groups that possess greater access to power, resources, and influence are less likely to experience restrictions to their collective autonomy. However, research indicates that some advantaged group members may believe that their group's collective autonomy is restricted, despite their privileged position within the social hierarchy (Kachanoff et al., 2020). For them, perceived collective autonomy restriction motivates actions and efforts to protect and preserve the existing hierarchy by leveraging their group's privileged access to power, resources and influence (Kachanoff et al., 2019; Kachanoff, Kteily & Gray, 2022).

One way that disadvantaged groups try to challenge social hierarchy and gain greater power, resources, and influence to protect their collective autonomy is by mobilizing social movements. Conversely, advantaged groups may seek to preserve social hierarchy and the power it affords them through the mobilization of counter-movements. The "threat and defense" hypothesis proposes that the desire to protect collective autonomy motivates the mobilization of social movements among disadvantaged groups, and counter-movements among advantaged groups (Kachanoff et al., 2019, 2022). However, the "threat and defense" hypothesis does not distinguish between antecedent conditions that make disadvantaged versus advantaged group members feel their collective autonomy is at risk of being restricted. It also does not specify the individual-level psychological processes that influence perceived collective autonomy restriction or drive group-based mobilization. The present review fills this gap by integrating the "threat and defense" hypothesis with psychological theories of identity and intergroup relations, sociological concepts (hierarchy [in]stability, legitimacy, resource mobility, and network science), and historical accounts of collective action to theorize about specific conditions under which experiencing collective autonomy may motivate collective action. To better describe how these conditions and processes might differ as a function of group

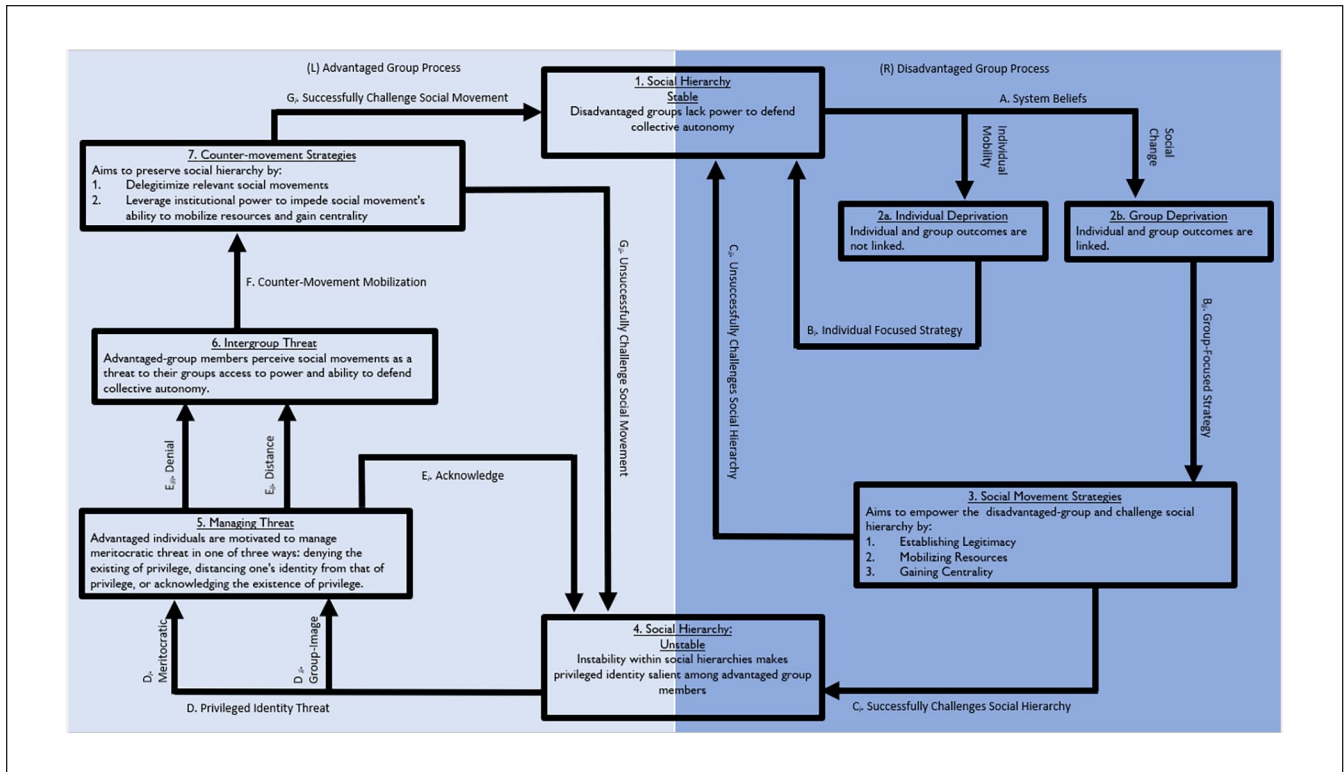
status, we propose a cyclical process of social movement and counter-movement mobilization where advantaged and disadvantaged group members' perceptions of collective autonomy, social hierarchy, and motivations to mobilize are influenced by one another.

Given the comprehensiveness of this model, future researchers might choose to focus on partial segments of the model based on their interests. Some might be interested in investigating how individual differences shape experiences of collective autonomy restriction and motivate collective action. Others might be interested in investigating whether external changes in the stability of social and economic systems activate psychological processes at the individual level. Still others might focus their attention on the cyclical processes between movements and counter-movements outlined in our model. We hope that the model we propose will inspire new research investigating the role of social hierarchy, structural power, and collective autonomy in motivating collective action. We call this cyclical process model the Movement Mobilization Model of Collective Autonomy (MMMCA, see Figure 1)

## The MMMCA

The MMMCA describes two separate but interrelated processes. The right half of the model in Figure 1 describes the processes through which the stability and legitimacy of existing social hierarchies induce feelings of collective autonomy restriction among disadvantaged group members and motivate them to participate in social movements to challenge the status quo. The left half of the model outlines the processes through which system instability brought about by social movements that challenge the legitimacy of the existing hierarchy induces feelings of collective autonomy restriction among advantaged group members, motivating them to engage in counter-movements that aim to protect and preserve the status quo.

Our model starts with a point in time when social hierarchy is stable, with an unequal distribution of power in favor of advantaged groups over disadvantaged groups. Consistent with the "threat and defense" hypothesis of collective autonomy restriction, the right half of the MMMCA (Figure 1, [R] Panel) illustrates how a stable hierarchy with an unequal distribution of power renders disadvantaged groups vulnerable to collective autonomy restriction (Figure 1, Box 1). Using research drawn from social identity theory and relative deprivation, we hypothesize that whether or not collective autonomy restriction motivates disadvantaged group members to challenge the status quo depends on their system beliefs (Figure 1, A Path). System beliefs—defined as the degree to which individuals believe that the social system in which they live is legitimate, fair, and permeable—influence whether disadvantaged individuals adopt an individualistic orientation, comparing their circumstances and access to



**Figure 1.** Movement Mobilization Model of Collective Autonomy.

Note. **Box 1:** Stable social hierarchy leaves disadvantaged groups vulnerable to collective autonomy restriction. **Path A:** System beliefs refer to whether disadvantaged group members believe that social stratification is fair, legitimate, and permeable. **Box2a:** Individuals who endorse individual mobility beliefs are likely to see individual versus group mobility as independent from one another, leading them to compare their personal access to power and autonomy to that of others. **Box2b:** Individuals endorsing social change beliefs are likely to see individual and group mobility as linked, leading them to compare their ingroup’s access to power, and their ability to protect their collective autonomy, to that of outgroups. **Path B:** Individual strategies manage unsatisfactory comparisons of personal autonomy to that of others but do little to challenge social hierarchy. **Path B<sub>ii</sub>:** Group-based strategies motivate the desire to challenge social hierarchy through social movement mobilization. **Box 3:** Strategies that social movements adopt to effectively empower disadvantaged groups and challenge social hierarchy include establishing movement legitimacy, mobilizing resources, and gaining centrality. **Path C<sub>i</sub>:** Social movements that effectively establish legitimacy, mobilize resources, and gain centrality make the social hierarchy unstable. **Path C<sub>ii</sub>:** Social movements that fail to establish legitimacy, mobilize resources, and gain centrality struggle to challenge social hierarchy, which remains stable. **Box 4:** As social movements gain legitimacy in society, advantaged group members’ privileges become increasing salient. **Path D:** Increased salience of privilege threatens advantaged group members’ sense of competence (meritocratic threat) or reputation (group-image threat). **Box 5:** Advantaged group members manage threats from privilege in one of three ways: (a) by acknowledging their privilege and supporting the dismantling of social hierarchies; (b) by cognitively distancing themselves from group-based privilege; and (c) by denying privilege. **Path E<sub>i</sub>:** advantaged group members who acknowledge their privilege may seek to rebuild their groups’ reputation by becoming allies to the disadvantaged group-led social movement, further contributing to hierarchy instability. **Path E<sub>ii</sub> and Path E<sub>iii</sub>:** advantaged group members who distance themselves from privilege or deny the existence of privilege are more likely to perceive social movements as illegitimate and are motivated to defend their ingroup’s collective autonomy. **Path F:** Perceived threat to power and collective autonomy motivate advantaged group members to mobilize counter-movements. **Box 7:** Counter-movements seek to resist social change by delegitimizing social movements in the eyes of the public and leveraging institutional power to impede social mobilization. **Path G<sub>i</sub>:** Counter-movements that successfully resist social movements make social hierarchy stable. **Path G<sub>ii</sub>:** Failure to resist social change further destabilizes social hierarchy.

power and resources to that of other individuals (i.e., personal deprivation; Figure 1, Box 2a), or adopt a collective orientation, comparing their ingroup’s circumstances and access to power to that of other groups (i.e., group deprivation; Figure 1, Box 2a). The next part of our model articulates how disadvantaged group members manage dissatisfaction with individual deprivation versus group deprivation. We hypothesize that while individual identity management strategies help disadvantaged individuals handle dissatisfaction with their personal access to power and

autonomy, they do little to challenge social hierarchies that cause deprivation of collective autonomy (see Figure 1, B<sub>i</sub> Path). However, group-based identity management strategies motivate the mobilization of social movements that attempt to improve the position of the disadvantaged group by challenging the status quo (Figure 1, B<sub>ii</sub> Path). We then integrate theory and empirical research on movement mobilization and organizational behavior to identify specific strategies that disadvantaged group-led social movements use to challenge social hierarchies. These include promoting the

movement's legitimacy, mobilizing resources, and gaining centrality within societal networks (Figure 1, Box 3).

The left half of the model (Figure 1, [L] Panel) assumes a context where social hierarchy has been rendered unstable by effective mobilization efforts of social movements led by disadvantaged groups (see Figure 1, Box 4). We draw on privileged identity and threat management research to propose that hierarchy instability increases the salience of ingroup privilege among advantaged group members, eliciting meritocratic and group-image threats (Figure 1, D Paths). We hypothesize that the way in which advantaged group members appraise these threats will influence their subsequent behavior. Advantaged group members who acknowledge their privilege are more likely to see social movements that challenge social hierarchy as legitimate and, as a result, may seek to manage threat from ingroup privilege by becoming allies to the social movement (Figure 1, E<sub>i</sub> Path). In comparison, advantaged group members who cognitively distance themselves from ingroup privilege (Figure 1, E<sub>ii</sub> Path), or deny ingroup privilege (Figure 1, E<sub>iii</sub> Path), are more likely to view hierarchy-challenging social movements as illegitimate and threatening to the ingroup's collective autonomy. Perceived threat to collective autonomy, in turn, is likely to mobilize counter-movements to preserve the status quo by delegitimizing social movements and capitalizing on institutional power (Figure 1, F Path). The extent to which counter-movements are successful influences the subsequent stability (Figure 1, G<sub>i</sub> Path), or instability of the social hierarchy (Figure 1, G<sub>ii</sub> Path). In the sections that follow, we elaborate on the research literatures that have contributed to the development of this model and the paths included therein. These literatures include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and other relevant sources documenting historical accounts of collective action to articulate the intergroup processes described in our model. Although much of the research referenced throughout this work was conducted in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries, the authors were intentionally mindful to incorporate research and historical accounts from non-WEIRD countries whenever possible. The constraints that this causes to the generalizability of this work are discussed in the "Conclusion" section.

### **Social Hierarchy and the Unequal Distribution of Power and Resources Leaves Disadvantaged Groups Vulnerable to Collective Autonomy Restriction**

As societies become increasingly complex, they create order by developing social institutions to allocate tangible resources (e.g., food, water, land, housing, education, health care) and intangible resources (e.g., political representation, social influence, cultural capital) across members of the

society (Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994; Halevy et al., 2011; Sapolsky, 2005; Schwalbe et al., 2000). The distribution of these resources is often guided by social hierarchy, such that higher-status groups are afforded greater access to resources at the cost of lower-status groups, which makes the former increasingly more advantaged than the latter (Halevy et al., 2011; Koski et al., 2015; Sapolsky, 2005). Inequality in the distribution of basic resources (food, housing, education, health care, and political rights) creates inequality in socioeconomic and political power, allowing advantaged groups to control disadvantaged groups' access to other tangible and intangible resources (Anderson et al., 2015).

Restricting disadvantaged groups' access to tangible resources—for example, through geographic segregation that confines their members to less-desirable land or less-desirable parts of town, or by restricting their access to high-quality education, nutritious food, and housing—negatively affects disadvantaged group members' health, social mobility, and quality of life (Feagin & Cobas, 2015; Gee & Ford, 2011; Gee & Hicken, 2021; Gee & Ro, 2009; Martínez et al., 2021; Phelan & Link, 2015). Similarly, restricting disadvantaged groups' access to intangible resources—for example, by pressuring them to assimilate to the norms and culture of the advantaged group or by limiting their political rights—negatively affects disadvantaged group members' ability to practice their own culture and can harm their feelings of self-worth and subjective well-being (Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994; Schwalbe et al., 2000).

The "threat and defense" hypothesis of collective autonomy restriction proposes that whether a group has collective autonomy depends on its position within the social hierarchy and access to tangible and intangible resources. Groups at the top of the hierarchy enjoy access to many tangible and intangible resources, which they use to protect their collective autonomy, whereas groups at the bottom of the hierarchy have fewer resources, leaving them vulnerable to collective autonomy restriction (Kachanoff, 2017; Kachanoff et al., 2019; Kachanoff et al., 2020; Kachanoff et al., 2022). Given this hypothesis, one might expect that limited access to power and resources and resulting collective autonomy restriction would motivate all disadvantaged group members to challenge social hierarchies that constrain them and engage in collective action to challenge social hierarchy and empower their own group (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Reicher, 1996). However, the story is not that simple.

### **Under What Conditions Do Disadvantaged Groups Engage in Social Movements?**

Decades of social psychological research indicate that disadvantaged group members' decisions to engage in collective action depend on their beliefs about existing social hierarchies along three dimensions: (a) whether the social system is

perceived to be *fair and legitimate* or unfair and illegitimate; (b) whether it is perceived to be *permeable* such that individuals can get ahead, or *impermeable* in that they are prevented from moving up the status hierarchy; and (c) whether the system appears to be *stable and pervasive*, such that inequality is the common fate for most or all members of the group, or whether there is potential for the status of the group to change. People's opinions on these three dimensions comprise their system beliefs (Jost & Van der Toorn, 2012; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). We propose that system beliefs shape perceptions of collective autonomy restriction among members of disadvantaged groups. Specifically, disadvantaged group members who see their fate as linked to that of their broader social group (i.e., social change beliefs; Figure 1, A Path) are more likely to experience group-based restrictions to collective autonomy (Figure 1, Panel 2b) and, as a result, to mobilize collectively to ameliorate inequality (Figure 1, B<sub>ii</sub> Path).

### *Individual Differences in System Beliefs, Social Comparisons, and Relative Deprivation at the Individual versus Group Level*

It is well documented that individuals who identify strongly with their social group are more likely to participate in social movements to address dissatisfaction with their group's position, compared with others who view themselves as individual agents free from group ties (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Whether people navigate social situations thinking of themselves as individuals versus group members is partially shaped by their system beliefs, comprising perceived system legitimacy, permeability, and attributions about the causes of inequality (Ellemers & Bos, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner et al., 1987). The perceived legitimacy of a social hierarchy refers to an individual's beliefs that the hierarchy is fair, just, and upholds the norms, values, and beliefs shared by the broader society (Brandt & Reyna, 2017; Tyler, 2006). People may believe that social hierarchy and inequality are the natural consequences of individual and group differences in talent, effort, and deservingness and that such sorting creates a desirable and orderly society in which everyone has a place best suited for their talents and contributions, and is the essence of social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 1994). At the same time, individuals may be motivated to justify or rationalize social hierarchy and inequality to establish a sense of safety, certainty, and social belongingness within society (see system justification theory; Jost et al., 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost & Van der Toorn, 2012). Both social dominance and system justification are strongly associated with hierarchy-legitimizing beliefs, such as a strong faith in meritocracy (the belief that success is a product of hard work and ability alone) and belief in a just world (the idea that

individual outcomes—positive or negative—happen for good reason, and positive actions are justly rewarded while negative ones are punished; Day & Fiske, 2017; Jost et al., 2003, 2009; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

The perceived legitimacy of a system is also related to people's beliefs about its permeability, or the extent to which individuals can freely move from one stratum of society to another through individual ability and effort. Links between social dominance, system-justifying beliefs, and perceptions of individual mobility are well documented, with research repeatedly finding that the more people believe that a social hierarchy is legitimate the more they overestimate how easily individuals can get ahead within that hierarchy (Bizer et al., 2012; Chambers et al., 2013, 2015; Day & Fiske, 2019). We propose that trust in the legitimacy of social hierarchy and faith that its permeability will allow for individual mobility within it are likely to make people think of themselves primarily in individualistic terms, as free agents separate from other people, rather than as members of social groups (Figure 1, A Path).

Research on system justification shows that members of disadvantaged groups who endorse system-justifying beliefs are motivated to reconcile the dissonance between their belief that social hierarchy is fair and legitimate, and dissatisfaction with their own group's disadvantaged position within it (Jost et al., 2004). One way they resolve this dissonance is by distancing themselves from their disadvantaged group and doubling down on meritocratic beliefs (Jost et al., 2003; McCoy & Major, 2007). In other words, when disadvantaged group members believe that the social hierarchy and individuals' positions within it are fair and deserved, and that upward mobility can be achieved through talent and hard work as individuals, they are more likely to view their own life circumstances as independent from others in their group, and are more inclined to compare their individual outcomes to that of other individuals (Cook et al., 1977; Crosby, 1976; Smith et al., 2012; see Figure 1, Box 2a). In contrast, disadvantaged group members who see the social hierarchy as illegitimate do not experience the same dissonance or need to reconcile their system beliefs with the recognition of their group's disadvantaged status. Instead, they are likely to feel that the system, as it exists, is designed to disenfranchise the members of their group and impede them from getting ahead. They are also inclined to view their personal fate as inextricably linked to that of others in their group, such that upward mobility would be more achievable through collective effort that challenges the system (Cook et al., 1977; Crosby, 1976; Smith et al., 2012; see Figure 1 Box 2b).

Applying past research to our model, we hypothesize that individual variability in system beliefs shapes disadvantaged group members' orientations toward, and willingness to defend, their individual versus collective autonomy. Disadvantaged group members who see their personal fate as independent of their social group (i.e., who have faith in

individual mobility) are more likely to orient toward personal autonomy and adopt individual-focused identity management strategies to manage dissatisfaction about their access to power to defend their personal autonomy (see Figure 1, Box 2a). If individual-focused strategies are effective in managing dissatisfaction and protecting personal autonomy, then individual members of disadvantaged groups should be less motivated to defend their group's collective autonomy. In contrast, other group members who see their personal fate as inextricably linked to their group's fate will be more motivated to defend their group's collective autonomy (see Figure 1, Box 2b). In the next section, we review literature on relative deprivation and theorize about when and how dissatisfaction about a disadvantaged group's access to power and ability to defend its collective autonomy motivates group members to engage in social movement mobilization.

### *Identity Management Strategies and Social Movement Engagement*

Individuals adopt a range of identity management strategies to cope with dissatisfactory social comparisons (Ellemers & Bos, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 2004) that can be categorized based on their mode of response and target of change (see Blanz et al., 1998). Mode of response refers to whether the identity management strategy is mostly a cognitive or behavioral process, while the target of change refers to whether the identity management strategy occurs at the individual or group level.

Examples of cognitively based identity management strategies include individualization and changing comparison dimensions. Individualization focuses on protecting the individual's self-esteem from harmful stereotypes and stigma associated with their disadvantaged group by cognitively distancing the self from the group (Ng, 1989; Turner et al., 1987); as such, it is an individual-focused strategy, in that it functions by shifting the individual's thoughts and feelings in relation to their group membership. Changing comparison dimensions is instead a group-focused cognitive strategy that protects disadvantaged group members' self-esteem through a collective shift in group values, for example, by rejecting or reversing the value associated with intergroup comparison dimensions or by changing the dimension of intergroup comparison (Tajfel, 1978). Although cognitive identity management strategies are useful ways of protecting individuals' self-image and psychological well-being, they do little to confront structural inequality.

Individuals who seek to address unsatisfactory social comparisons may also choose to engage in behavioral identity management strategies. Examples include individual mobility and realistic competition. As previously discussed, individual mobility relies on individual effort and action toward social advancement and improved material

outcomes (Tajfel, 1978; Taylor & McKirnan, 1984; S. C. Wright et al., 1990). If the individual is successful, they will gain increased access to resources, status, and power, thereby satisfying the psychological need for more favorable social comparisons relative to other individuals. In contrast, realistic competition operates at the group level. It involves a collective effort to improve outcomes for one's group as a whole by competing for greater group access to resources, status, and power (Sherif, 1966; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). When groups successfully engage in realistic competition, increases in their group's access to resources may satisfy previously unsatisfactory social comparisons in relation to other groups.

Disadvantaged group members' system beliefs influence the type of identity management strategies they use to cope with dissatisfactory social comparisons (Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers & Bos, 1998; Ellemers et al., 1990, 1993). The likelihood of adopting individual-focused identity management strategies compared with group-focused ones increases when individual mobility beliefs are high. Indeed, Taylor and McKirnan's (1984) five-stage model of intergroup relations argues that individuals from disadvantaged groups typically first attempt to advance through individual mobility if they perceive societal hierarchies to be permeable (see also Jackson et al., 1997; S. C. Wright et al., 1990). Other research shows that disadvantaged group members who hold individual mobility beliefs prefer to engage in individual-focused management strategies, even when they are difficult or selective (Lalonde & Silverman, 1994; S. C. Wright et al., 1990). Disadvantaged group members who hold strong social change beliefs, however, are more likely to adopt group-focused strategies. For example, prior research shows that women (a relatively disadvantaged group in the gender hierarchy) were found to be more likely to adopt group-focused identity management strategies if they endorsed strong social change beliefs relative to individual mobility beliefs (Jackson et al., 1997).

We propose that a similar process unfolds when disadvantaged group members contend with their lower position within an existing hierarchy and limited access to power, in ways that have implications for their ability to defend their personal and collective autonomy. We predict that those who perceive existing hierarchies as legitimate and permeable will be more likely to use individual-focused strategies—such as individuation and individual mobility—to manage dissatisfaction with their limited access to power and restrictions to their personal autonomy. Although these strategies may be effective in assuaging dissatisfaction at the individual level, they do little to challenge existing social hierarchies (Figure 1, B<sub>1</sub> Path). In contrast, those who hold social change beliefs, and are dissatisfied with their group's access to power and ability to defend the group's collective autonomy, will be more likely to adopt group-focused identity management strategies, such as realistic competition, that

aim to challenge existing social hierarchies through social movement mobilization (Figure 1, B<sub>ii</sub> Path).

### ***System Beliefs, Benevolent Sexism, and Collective Autonomy***

Beyond finding support for this view from the literature cited above (see, e.g., Ellemers et al., 1990; Jackson et al., 1997; Lalonde & Silverman, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 2004), further support for this hypothesis comes from research on ambivalent sexism theory, which show how individual differences in women's system-justifying beliefs about patriarchy differentially motivate their adoption of individual-focused or group-focused strategies in response to perceived restrictions to collective autonomy. In their theory of ambivalent sexism, Glick and Fiske (2018) propose that sexism manifests in two complimentary ways within patriarchal societies: hostile sexism and ambivalent sexism. Although both forms of sexism aim to preserve a gender hierarchy that benefits men over women, the way they operate is different. Whereas hostile sexism embodies overt prejudice and discrimination against women who challenge patriarchy, benevolent sexism preserves patriarchy by promoting a world view that emphasizes the value of "traditional" gender roles (Connelly & Heesacker, 2012). More specifically, benevolent sexism promotes three core beliefs about men and women's roles within patriarchal societies (Glick & Fiske, 2018). The first belief is gender differentiation: the idea that women are purer, more moral, more empathetic, and better suited for caregiving roles than men, whereas men are more dominant, competent, and better suited for protection and provider roles than women. The second belief is hegemonic heterosexuality: the belief that men are incomplete without women and need intimate relationships with women to lead fulfilling lives. Finally, the third belief is protective paternalism: the notion that women deserve protection by men so long as they adhere to patriarchy-designated gender roles.

The associative links between individuals' system beliefs and benevolent sexism are well documented (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Glick & Raberg, 2018; Sibley et al., 2007). To date, much of the extant literature has shown how benevolent sexism is used to justify gender inequality and restrict women's autonomy within patriarchal societies (e.g., restricting women's reproductive rights, Huang et al., 2016; Sutton et al., 2011). Other research has demonstrated that benevolent sexism ideologies also function as an individual-focused strategy to manage dissonance between women's system-justifying beliefs about patriarchy and their disadvantaged position within it (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Radke et al., 2018; Sibley & Overall, 2011).

For example, Radke and colleagues (2018) found that women who endorsed social dominance, believing that hierarchy is natural and desirable, were more likely to see patriarchy as legitimate and believe that men need to protect and provide for women. They were also more likely to endorse a benevolent sexist ideology that reveres women who adhere

to traditional gender norms and demand protection from men (Radke et al., 2018). There are two interpretations of these findings. One is that endorsement of benevolent sexism among women is self-protective, as challenging patriarchy can be psychologically harmful and physically dangerous (Expósito et al., 2010; Fischer, 2006). The second interpretation, consistent with system justification and cognitive dissonance theories, is that women who view patriarchy as legitimate endorse benevolent sexism as an individual-focused strategy that affords them some access to status and resources, and resolves dissonance by attracting social value, approval, and special benefits from men (Fischer, 2006; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jost et al., 2003, 2004; Sibley & Overall, 2011).

Whether through hostile or benevolent sexism, justification of unequal power relations between men and women within patriarchal hierarchies creates conditions where many women may feel restricted in their ability to express themselves freely (Bell, 2016; Jack & Dill, 1992; Swim et al., 2010). Recent evidence also suggests that these conditions may similarly restrict women's sense of expressive freedom at the collective level as well (i.e., collective autonomy). For example, research conducted in the United Kingdom found that women who witnessed the restriction of another woman's autonomy (i.e., their ability to express themselves freely) increased in their desire for self-expression (Al-Khouja et al., 2021). In turn, this desire for self-expression motivated these women to write longer reflections articulating their thoughts and feelings about an unrelated, but consequential political topic (i.e., Brexit).

Although often not considered a direct form of collective action within social psychology, extant research from public health proposes that self-expression in response to traumatic experiences may function as a form of support-seeking that helps recipients cope with stressful situations (House et al., 1988; K. Wright, 2016). In the context of our proposed model, we hypothesize that women's motivations to self-express in this study may reflect a form of collective action that seeks to affirm their sense of collective autonomy, after being threatened by witnessing the restriction of another ingroup members' autonomy. However, due to the design of this study, it remains unclear whether greater self-expression among women who experienced collective autonomy restriction was motivated by the desire to affirm their individual or collective autonomy. To further strengthen this hypothesis, we integrate theories of benevolent sexism with the research outlined above in the context of the #MeToo Movement.

### ***Collective Autonomy Restriction Motivates Self-Expression as a Form of Collective Action: Evidence From the #MeToo Movement***

#MeToo is a social movement that went viral on Twitter in 2017 to call attention to sexual abuse, harassment, and rape against women. By leveraging the MeToo hashtag, women around the world shared their own stories, expressed regret

and outrage, and shared resources to support victims of sexual violence and harassment (Hosterman et al., 2018). Recent research on the #MeToo movement provides compelling evidence to suggest that women used self-expression on Twitter as a group-focused strategy to provide support and legitimize the experiences of victims of sexual assault, violence, and harassment (Gallagher et al., 2019; Hosterman et al., 2018; Mueller et al., 2021). Longitudinal data testing the impact of the #MeToo movement on public opinion about sexual assault in the United States showed an overall decrease in the tendency to dismiss sexual assault that persisted overtime (Szekeres et al., 2020; see also Levy & Mattsson, 2023). Importantly, this decrease was moderated by individual differences in social dominance orientation and gender. Among men, decreases in the dismissal of sexual assault were only significant among those who were low or moderate in social dominance, whereas rates remained unchanged among men who were high in social dominance. Among women, this pattern was reversed. Women low in social dominance were already unlikely to dismiss sexual assault and showed no change in dismissal rates. However, as the #MeToo movement gained steam, women who were moderate or high in social dominance orientation became less likely to dismiss reports of sexual assault.

These findings, particularly among women, are consistent with our model and support the hypothesis that system beliefs may shape disadvantaged group members' orientation toward individual versus collective autonomy restriction, and subsequent motivations to engage in individual versus group-focused strategies to affirm their sense of autonomy. At the same time, these findings emphasize the cyclical relationship—between disadvantaged group members' system beliefs, perceived access to power, perceptions of collective autonomy restriction, and motivations to challenge inequality through collective action—not explicitly outlined in our model. They suggest that while system beliefs may function as pre-existing individual differences that influence whether disadvantaged group members orient toward the individual versus the group, the reverse may also be true. Group-based strategies that challenge the status quo, such as the #MeToo movement, can shift disadvantaged group members' system beliefs (e.g., that sexual assault is a pervasive issue in society perpetuated by patriarchy). Although more research is needed to directly test this hypothesis, extant social identity and collective action theories suggest that people's pre-existing system beliefs may change when (a) witnessing or learning about the abuse of power by authority figures and (b) perceiving that the existing social hierarchy is becoming unstable (Martorana et al., 2005; Turner & Brown, 1978). Whereas the former condition shifts people's perceptions of the legitimacy of existing social hierarchies, the latter may shift beliefs about their ability to challenge it successfully.

These conditions are reflected in the #MeToo movement (Luo & Zhang, 2022), whose origins can be traced back to activist Tarana Burke who founded the movement in 2006. It

was not until 2017, however, that the movement became viral on a global scale when women started using the hashtag to speak publicly about their experiences with, or witnessing of, sexual misconduct by men in positions of power, spurring conversations about the role of gender hierarchy as a root cause for such abuse (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017). In addition to outing the level of sexual abuse by authority figures to the broader public, the fact that the #MeToo movement went viral may have also shifted women's perceptions of the stability of the gender hierarchy and their ability to challenge it. For example, data collected across several countries found a 10% increase in the reporting of sex crimes during the first 6 months following the #MeToo movement, suggesting that shifts in women's system beliefs contributed to the greater reporting of sexual abuse (Batut et al., 2021; "Ipsos Ipsos/NPR Examine How Views on Sexual Harassment," 2018; Levy & Mattsson, 2023). Under these conditions, women may have felt more confident to stand up to systems oppressing them, even at the risk of harm or personal cost. Such conditions are perhaps best illustrated in countries such as China where the #MeToo movement has been successful in empowering women to speak up despite an authoritarian regime that uses censorship and the threat of political violence to discredit the movement (Fan, 2018; Fincher, 2021; Lin & Yang, 2019; Zoo, 2019). In the next section, we further explore the strategies that disadvantaged group-led social movements adopt to effectively challenge social systems that disenfranchise them.

## **Social Movement Efficacy: Strategies to Empower Disadvantaged Groups**

How do grassroots social movements challenge social hierarchy effectively despite limited access to power and resources? To address this question, this section synthesizes psychological and sociological research on social movement efficacy with research in organizational behavior on the strategic actions of low-status groups that sit within larger organizational hierarchies. From this synthesis, we identify three key strategies that are hypothesized to increase the efficacy of social movements: (a) achieving greater legitimacy, (b) mobilizing resources to support the movement, and (c) gaining centrality within social networks (for a review, see the work by Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008). We incorporate these into our model to hypothesize that social movement efficacy, operationalized as empowering disadvantaged group members and challenging social hierarchy, depends on the ability of the movement to successfully put these strategies in action (Figure 1, Box 3).

### ***Achieving Legitimacy***

From the perspective of organizational science, legitimacy refers to the extent to which the structural organization of any hierarchical system is perceived to be congruent with the goals, objectives, and behaviors of a critical mass of entities

that comprise the hierarchy (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995; Weber, 1947). Applying this definition to social (rather than organizational) hierarchies, legitimacy refers to the extent to which the distribution of power is perceived as congruent with the norms, values, and beliefs of a critical mass of groups within a population (Subašić et al., 2008; Suchman, 1995; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). According to organizational behavior, a group's access to power is directly proportional to the extent to which others perceive the values, beliefs, and actions of that group to be congruent with those of the broader organizational system (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995; Weber, 1947). Thus, if low-status entities (or disadvantaged groups) desire greater access to power, they ought to aim to increase their perceived legitimacy in the eyes of other entities (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Mitchel et al., 1997; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). This strategy of gaining power by appealing to norms, values, and beliefs congruent within the broader social system (a process referred to as social approval; Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008) parallels the ways in which social movements led by disadvantaged groups seek to establish their legitimacy within a broader society.

Extensive research has documented how social movements gain legitimacy by aligning their goals, values, and principles with those of the broader society (Andrews et al., 2016; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Moyer, 2001; Suchman, 1995; Weber, 1947). Yet when considering legitimacy in the context of social movements, it is important to distinguish between internal and external form of legitimacy, as both are important determinants of social movement efficacy (Kwok & Chan, 2017; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Rao et al., 2000; Zald & Ash, 1966).

Internal legitimacy refers to the degree to which the goals and leadership of a social movement are aligned with the interests of constituents participating in the movement (Kwok & Chan, 2017; Zald & Ash, 1966). If at any point the goals of a social movement shift and cease to be aligned with its constituency, it risks losing members (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Zald & Ash, 1966). Maintaining internal legitimacy is therefore crucial for keeping a social movement alive because an active constituency is necessary for social movement efficacy, as we will discuss further in the next section.

External legitimacy refers to the extent to which the norms, values, and beliefs of a social movement are aligned with the values and principles of the broader society (Andrews et al., 2016; Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995; Weber, 1947). The primary way social movements establish external legitimacy is by raising public awareness about social injustices via protests and demonstrations; attempting to convince the public that institutions of power have failed to address this issue; and that lack of resolution violates societally shared and cherished values and principles (Andrews et al., 2016; Kwok & Chan, 2017; Moyer, 2001; Zald & Ash, 1966).

The external legitimacy of a social movement is also shaped by perceptions of its morality, particularly in relation to an outside perceiver's own values, and the rights and well-being of others in society (Verkuyten, Adelman, & Yogeeswaran, 2020; Verkuyten, Yogeeswaran, & Adelman, 2020). When collective action conflicts with a person's core values or worldview, they are more likely to see the movement as illegitimate. For example, beliefs about sex and the sanctity of life often motivate opposition to social movements that advocate for women's reproductive freedom (Rodriguez & Ditto, 2020). Individuals are also more likely to judge a social movement as illegitimate if they perceive it as inciting violence or stripping others of their rights. This is supported by research conducted in Australia that tested how violent versus non-violent protest influenced bystanders' perceptions of the legitimacy of movements that aimed to challenge the use of coalbed gas mining, a controversial social and environmental issue in Australia (Thomas & Louis, 2014). Results showed that protests were seen as more legitimate and efficacious when they were non-violent as opposed to violent. Non-violent (compared with violent) protests were also more effective in convincing bystanders that coalbed gas mining in Queensland, Australia is socially and environmentally harmful. In turn, perceiving non-violent protest as legitimate and efficacious, and coalbed gas mining as illegitimate, increased bystanders' support for the social movement (Thomas & Louis, 2014).

Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (and similar women-led movements in Chile, Uruguay, and El Salvador) also provides excellent real-world evidence of how social movements can effectively challenge powerful institutions by gaining external legitimacy in the eyes of the public. This social movement, which marked a major shift in Argentina's transition toward democracy, challenged the authoritarian state and demanded democracy and the release of young Argentinians who were taken as political prisoners by the military dictatorship in power at the time. Through countless non-violent protests in La Plaza de Mayo, Las Madres successfully educated the public about the transgressions the Argentinian government had committed against political activists advocating for democracy. Much of its success is attributed to its ability to gain legitimacy by appealing to Catholic symbols and values related to motherhood and family (Feijóo & Nari, 1994; Safa, 1990). By framing the social injustices perpetrated by the authoritarian government as a violation of these religious symbols and family values, and the movement's goal as fighting to protect them, these women were able to empower themselves and effectively challenge an authoritarian regime by enhancing the legitimacy of their movement in the eyes of the general population.

### **Resource Mobilization**

The success of any complex structural organization, whether it be a multinational corporation or existing social hierarchy,

depends on its ability to access and distribute limited resources to its constituents (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1990; Schwalbe et al., 2000). Resource distribution in hierarchical organizations creates systems of unequal power and dependency within, such that lower-status groups depend on more powerful groups to access these resources (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Although high-status groups exercise more control over critical resources within organizational systems, low-status groups usually have access and control over some limited resource that can be exchanged and bartered with higher-status groups for access to other resources; as one example, labor unions can control the pace of work among its members and use this as leverage when negotiating with employers for better working conditions and compensation. Thus, within hierarchical organizational systems, low-status entities may tighten their control over any limited resources to which they have access as a second strategy to negotiate increased access to other resources (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008).

This strategy of controlling and leveraging resources to gain power within an organizational system parallels the ways in which disadvantaged social groups collectively pool and secure resources to affect social change—a process referred to as resource mobilization (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Oberschall, 1973). Social movements seek to secure resources that either facilitate movement mobilization (e.g., by increasing the number of constituents, facilities, and equipment that aid the organization of its constituents) or that can be leveraged to pressure high-status actors or institutions to address the grievances and demands of the movement (Jenkins, 1983). These resources may be tangible (e.g., money, land, facilities, equipment etc.) or intangible (e.g., organizational and legal skills, public support, and labor from affiliated activists) (Jenkins, 1983).

Proponents of resource mobilization theory emphasize two types of Social Movement Organizations (SMOs): the “classical” (or grassroots) SMO and the “professional” SMO that facilitate the organization and mobilization of resources (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Classical SMOs are grassroots organizations that are started and led by constituents directly affected by the structural inequality the movement seeks to address (Jenkins, 1983). Classical SMOs focus efforts on the organization and mobilization of tangible and intangible resources that play pivotal roles in establishing legitimacy (Jenkins, 1983; Perrow, 1979). For example, classical SMOs may seek to secure tangible resources, such as facilities, equipment, and money to establish a base of operations. They may also seek to mobilize intangible resources like their constituents to organize public demonstrations, protests, and acts of civil disobedience to help establish legitimacy. Professional SMOs also seek to organize and mobilize tangible and intangible resources. Unlike classical

SMOs, however, professional SMOs focus on the mobilization of technical and professional resources that exert pressure on institutions to address social injustices (Aveni, 1978; Barkan, 1984; Jenkins & Perrow, 1977). For example, professional SMOs may directly or indirectly work with politicians to pass legislation to address social injustice at an institutional level or fund legal counsel to force institutions to pay reparations through the court system. In sum, the success of a social movement depends in part on its ability to pool both tangible and intangible resources. The mobilization of these resources is further facilitated by classical and professional SMOs which work to secure and leverage resources at the ground and institutional levels, respectively.

### *Gaining Centrality*

Organizational hierarchies are typically conceptualized as social networks (Astley & Sachdeva, 1984). Groups that are well connected within the broader social organization are best positioned to leverage resources that they control to gain and maintain power (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Hickson et al., 1971). By being well connected (i.e., central), they have direct and indirect links to high-status groups that control the exchange of valuable resources (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1990; Ghoshal & Nohria, 1989; Krackhardt, 1990). Conversely, entities that lack direct links to high-status groups (i.e., peripheral groups) also tend to lack power. This is, in part, because their ability to freely exchange valuable resources with high-status entities is limited and controlled by “middlemen” who broker exchange of resources between peripheral groups and high-status entities (Bouquet, 2005; Krackhardt, 1990). Thus, a third strategy that low-status entities adopt to gain power within organizational systems is to *gain centrality* within the broader organizational system (Boje & Whetten, 1981; Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Brass, 1984; Dubin, 1957; Hickson et al., 1971).

Just as low-status groups seek to gain power by creating connections with high-status groups within the broader social network, so to do social movements. Indeed, Moyer (2001) argues that the effectiveness of any social movement hinges on its ability to gain the support of the general public and establish connections with institutional organizations (e.g., professional SMOs) that exercise power and influence at a systemic level. Several qualitative case studies of social movement campaigns have documented the important role played by social networks in establishing connections with both the general public and institutional organizations (Cable & Benson, 1993; Kitts, 2000; Mueller, 1997; Pfaff, 1996; Snow et al., 1980). These findings suggest that social movement efficacy depends on the movement’s ability to make connections with the broader public and institutional organizations to stand the best chance of successfully challenging social hierarchy.

Social movements can gain centrality with the public in several ways. They may mobilize constituents to respond to a highly publicized incident of social injustice with non-violent social theater (e.g., protests, marches, demonstrations) to raise public awareness of social injustice (Moyer, 2001). This, in turn, may help them gain additional support and sympathy from individuals directly affected by social injustice (i.e., constituents), and others who are not directly affected, but who nonetheless support the social movement's demands for reparation (i.e., allies) (Jenkins, 1983). At the organizational level, SMOs may leverage existing social networks to recruit constituents and allies from other organizations (Bolton, 1972; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Oberschall, 1973). At the interpersonal level, research shows the larger the number and strength of interpersonal ties (i.e., ties with friends, family, and neighbors), the more a social movement grows at the local level (Kitts, 2000). As a social movement gains centrality within social networks and amasses active and passive support from the general public, a slow cultural shift begins to occur (Moyer, 2001). This cultural shift leads to changing social norms, beliefs, ideologies, and cultural practices that enhance its legitimacy and social capital that can be leveraged to pressure institutions of power to address the issues of inequality (Darnovsky et al., 1995; Polletta, 1996).

Social movements may also gain centrality in political and institutional networks. As previously discussed, grass-root social movements often lead to the development of classical and professional SMOs that are uniquely positioned to create connections with powerful individuals and institutions that can help them push their agenda and achieve their goals (Aveni, 1978; Barkan, 1984; Jenkins & Perrow, 1977). For example, SMOs such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) leverage professional networks with lawyers, congressional committees, legislators, and their staff to support legislation that aims to address social injustice at an institutional level. Similarly, political figures such as Harvey Milk and Nelson Mandela exemplify how individual constituents can gain centrality within political networks to affect systemic change.

### Summary

The strategies adopted by social movements that seek to empower disadvantaged groups parallel the strategies used by low-status groups seeking greater power within any organizational system. These strategies include (a) aligning movement goals, beliefs, and ideologies with those of the broader society (i.e., establishing legitimacy), (b) securing and leveraging tangible and intangible resources (i.e., resource mobilization), and (c) establishing connections within social networks at the cultural and institutional level (i.e., gaining centrality). The extent to which a social movement can empower its constituents and challenge existing

social hierarchies depends on how effectively it executes these three strategies (Figure 1, Box 3).

### Advantaged Group Members' Reactions to Social Movements and Hierarchy Instability

Our model suggests that when social movements challenge social hierarchy effectively by gaining legitimacy, centrality, and mobilizing resources, they destabilize the social hierarchy (Figure 1, C<sub>i</sub> Path). We propose that advantaged group members are likely to respond to this instability in one of two ways. Some may acknowledge the legitimacy of disadvantaged group's claims and be open to supporting the disadvantaged group's efforts. Others may deny the legitimacy of social movements and become protective of social hierarchy and their advantaged position within it. What factors influence the tendency to deny or acknowledge the legitimacy of disadvantaged group-led social movements? In the proposed model, we argue that social hierarchy instability increases salience of ingroup privilege among advantaged group members and threatens their self-image (Figure 1, D paths). The way people manage threats to self-image is predicted to influence whether they acknowledge or deny inequality and the legitimacy of social movements that challenge it (Figure 1, Panel 5).

### Managing Privileged Identity Threat

Much of the early literature on social identity shared the assumption that advantaged individuals navigate life unaware of their privileged social identity (Hartmann et al., 2009; McDermott & Samson, 2005). That perspective has changed over the years, thanks to research on the role of White identity in creating and maintaining the racial hierarchy in the United States (Frankenberg, 1993; Knowles & Peng, 2005; Lopez, 1997; P. Perry, 2002; Phinney, 1996; Wong & Cho, 2005). Since then, several studies have documented links between the strength of social identification with advantaged groups and the desire to maintain the group's advantaged position in existing social hierarchies (Branscombe et al., 2007; Hornsey et al., 2003; Lowery et al., 2006). Identification with an advantaged group could threaten one's self-image if the group's privilege was achieved through unfair advantages, such as through the illegitimate subjugation of other groups (Branscombe, 1998; Knowles et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2005). We propose that privileged identity threat is exacerbated when social movements effectively challenge social hierarchy by gaining legitimacy through the mobilization of cultural and institutional resources. Building on Knowles and colleagues' (2014) seminal research on privileged identity, we propose that increased privileged identity salience induces two distinct types of self-image threat (meritocratic and group-image threat) that influence whether advantaged

group members are likely to acknowledge versus deny the existence of inequality and the legitimacy of social movements.

**Meritocratic Threat.** The recognition of one's privilege can threaten advantaged individuals' attributions of personal merit for their status and resulting self-esteem (i.e., meritocratic threat) when they grapple with the reasons for their successes and failures (Knowles et al., 2014). Typically, people make self-serving attributions, such that success is attributed to personal merit and competence (i.e., internal attributions) while failure is attributed to situational forces that the individual cannot control (i.e., external attributions) (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Sedikides et al., 1998). When privilege is made salient, these self-serving attributions are challenged, as success may no longer be purely attributed to internal characteristics, nor failure be purely attributed to external circumstance. In other words, meritocratic threat results from situations where advantaged group members are confronted with the possibility that their life accomplishments were not fully earned by effort, merit, and personal character, but instead resulted, at least in part, from their privileged position in society that affords them greater access to power and resources that can be leveraged for success (Branscombe, 1998; Kelley, 1987; Morris & Larrick, 1995). Similarly, failures may become more threatening to advantaged group members as they grapple with the possibility that they failed despite their privilege (Branscombe, 1998; Kelley, 1987; Morris & Larrick, 1995).

**Group-Image Threat.** In addition to meritocratic threats, the prospect of privilege may also be threatening to advantaged groups' collective image (i.e., group-image threat) if their privileged status was achieved through unfair social advantage. For example, learning about historical racial transgressions committed by Whites in the United States may induce negative emotions, such as shame or guilt among White Americans grappling with the knowledge that their racial group's advantaged position resulted from the subjugation of other groups (Branscombe, 1998; Powell et al., 2005). In turn, these negative emotions and opinions may threaten disadvantaged individual's self-image as moral actors who value equality (Kachanoff, Kteily & Gray, 2022; Wohl et al., 2006).

**Strategies to Manage Threats From Privileged Identity.** Advantaged groups contend with these two types of threats by engaging in one or more of the following identity management strategies: (a) denial of privilege, (b) cognitive distancing of their self-concept from privileged identities, and (c) acknowledgment of privilege (see the work by Knowles et al., 2014 for a review). Denial of privilege is an identity management strategy adopted by advantaged group members to assuage meritocratic threat. Several studies show that

advantaged individuals deny privileges associated with their ingroup in situations where their merit or self-competence is threatened (Kachanoff, Kteily & Gray, 2022; Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Lowery et al., 2007; Unzueta et al., 2008). For example, one study indicates that White participants are more likely to deny the existence of racial inequality when their intelligence was challenged (vs. affirmed), presumably to reduce the sting of failure (Lowery et al., 2007).

Distancing or disidentifying with the advantaged ingroup is a second strategy that advantaged group members may adopt to manage meritocratic or group-image threats. Research indicates that distancing one's self-concept from the advantaged ingroup can help protect advantaged individuals' self-serving attributions of success and failure, as doing so helps them believe that privilege does not apply to them (Branscombe et al., 2007; Chow et al., 2008). By distancing themselves from the ingroup, advantaged group members can also protect themselves from experiencing threats associated with learning that the ingroup's advantaged position was achieved through unfair advantage (i.e., group-image threats) (Chow et al., 2008).

Finally, acknowledging privilege is a third identity management strategy that advantaged group members might adopt to cope with group-image threat. By acknowledging privilege, advantaged group members become more open to engaging in actions and endorsing policies that address group-based inequality (Kappen, 2000). In doing so, advantaged group members cope with feelings of guilt, shame, or embarrassment and seek to repair damage to their group's reputation (Powell et al., 2005).

### *When Do Advantaged Group Members Acknowledge versus Deny Their Privilege?*

Our proposed model suggests that the management strategies advantaged group members use to cope with privileged identity threat influence their support versus opposition to social movements led by disadvantaged groups. What factors determine whether advantaged individuals will feel motivated to support steps that dismantle hierarchies versus deny or distance themselves from it? Extant research suggests that group identity strength is an important predictor of the type of identity management strategy that advantaged group members adopt while grappling with the implications of their privilege (Branscombe et al., 2007; Hodson et al., 2022; Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Lowery et al., 2007). For example, a series of experiments by Lowery and colleagues (2007) found that whether or not White Americans denied the existence of White privilege depended on the extent to which they believed that they shared a common fate with their racial ingroup (a proxy for the strength of social identity), such that stronger belief in common fate predicted greater denial of privilege. In contrast, White Americans who reported weaker identification with their racial ingroup were

more likely to acknowledge the existence of social inequality and support social policies that promoted racial equity (Lowery et al., 2007).

### ***Managing Privileged Identity Threat in Response to Social Movements***

As we previously mentioned, our model proposes that disadvantaged group-led social movements increases the visibility of privilege among advantaged group members (Figure 1, Box 4; see Crandall et al., 2018; Ruisch & Ferguson, 2022 for related arguments). We also propose that the way in which advantaged group members manage their privileged identity is related to their acknowledgment or denial of the legitimacy of disadvantaged group-led social movements (Figure 1, Box 5). In support of this, research has shown that advantaged individuals who manage their social identity threat by acknowledging their privilege and the role that it plays in the creation and maintenance of social inequality are more empathetic toward disadvantaged groups and more supportive of efforts to achieve equality (Rios et al., 2022). Research also shows that the recognition of one's privilege motivates support for disadvantaged group-led social movements through allyship (Ashburn-Nardo, 2018; Radke et al., 2020). Conversely, advantaged group members who deny the existence of privilege or distance themselves from their privileged identity are much more likely to adopt negative attitudes and behaviors toward disadvantaged groups and social movements that challenge social hierarchy (Branscombe et al., 2007; Dobbs & Nicholson, 2024; McDermott & Samson, 2005; Phillips & Lowery, 2020). In its extreme form, denial of inequality or distancing one's self-concept from privilege may lead advantaged group members to also believe that they themselves are the victims of discrimination (claiming "reverse discrimination"; (Hartmann et al., 2009; Knowles et al., 2022; Norton & Sommers, 2011; Selvanathan et al., 2021; Sidanius et al., 2000).

In sum, integrating past findings, we argue that when social movements successfully challenge existing social hierarchies, advantaged group members are confronted with their privileged identity, which can be threatening to their self-image. Success may no longer be purely attributed to personal merit but instead may also be attributed to people's privilege (i.e., meritocratic threat). Confronting personal privilege also involves grappling with evidence that one's position within society resulted from the historical oppression of other groups (i.e., group-image threat). To manage these threats, advantaged group members may deny that privilege exists, distance themselves from their privileged identity, or acknowledge their privilege and actively work to dismantle the systems that afford them their advantage. In the proposed model, we argue that acknowledging privilege motivates advantaged group members to repair the moral reputation of the advantaged

ingroup by supporting disadvantaged group-led social movements (Figure 1,  $E_1$  Path). The denial of privilege, and the distancing of oneself from privilege, makes advantaged group members more likely to deny the legitimacy of disadvantaged group-led social movements. In their eyes, any inequality observed in society must be a result of individual merit or lack thereof.

### **Perceiving Social Movements as Illegitimate Induces Intergroup Threat and Collective Autonomy Restriction**

Denial of privilege and social movement legitimacy sets the stage for the next part of our model (Figure 1,  $E_{ii}$  and  $E_{iii}$  paths). We argue that advantaged group members, who deny the existence of privilege or cognitively distance their self-image from privilege, are likely to believe that dismantling of social hierarchy via social movement mobilization is an illegitimate course of action. Perceived illegitimacy, in turn, is predicted to make advantaged group members feel that their group is being unfairly stripped of the power and resources necessary to protect their collective autonomy (Figure 1, Box 6). Support for this portion of the model comes from group-based threat research.

### ***Integrated Threat in Response to Social Movements***

Several studies have shown that shifts in social norms, values, and beliefs induce feelings of threat among advantaged group members (see the work by Hodson et al., 2022 for a recent review). Perceived threat stems from the concern that changes to the social system will result in a loss of the ingroup's access to power, resources, and social influence (Butz & Yogeewaran, 2011; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Morrison et al., 2009; Morrison & Ybarra, 2008; Moss et al., 2019; Outten et al., 2012; Rivera-Rodriguez et al., 2022; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Xiao & Van Bavel, 2012). These may involve access to material resources (i.e., realistic threat), maintenance of the group's beliefs, values, and worldviews (i.e., symbolic threat), or the group's position in the social hierarchy relative to other groups (i.e., social status threat). In addition, there may be a temporal component to perceptions of threat, such that advantaged group members are threatened by perceptions of the ingroup's current position within existing social hierarchies, relative to a more advantaged position in the past (Earle & Hodson, 2022; Pettigrew et al., 2008; Reyna et al., 2022; Rivera-Rodriguez et al., 2022).

Research shows that intergroup threats are activated by a variety of social contexts. For example, one study conducted in Austria found that exposing Austrian citizens to political propaganda portraying immigrants as sources of cheap labor activated concerns that the immigrant population would

restrict native-born Austrians' access to economic resources and job security (i.e., realistic threat) (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). The same study also found that political propaganda that called into question the morality of immigrant groups raised concerns that the values of incoming immigrants would conflict with traditional Austrian values and worldviews (i.e., symbolic threat) (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). Similar findings have been found in survey and laboratory-based studies in the United States (Dunwoody & Plane, 2019; Kachanoff, Kteily & Gray, 2022; Morrison et al., 2009; Morrison & Ybarra, 2008; Xiao & Van Bavel, 2012). For example, mere exposure to demographic trends indicating that the numeric advantage of White racial groups in multicultural nations, such as the United States and Canada, is declining and trending toward a "majority–minority" nation-induced realistic, symbolic, and social status threat among White Americans and Canadians (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Danbold & Huo, 2015; Major et al., 2018; Outten et al., 2012).

Applied to our proposed model, mounting evidence also indicates that advantaged group members also experience intergroup threat when social movements are effective in challenging the social hierarchy. For example, symbolic threat explains the backlash from religious majority groups in response to the progress made by the abortion rights movement in the United States (Gordon & Hunter, 1979; Karrer, 2011; Van Assendelft, 1999). Pro-life counter-movements argue that abortion threatens Christian beliefs and worldviews regarding family, reproduction, and the role of women in society. Another example comes from reactions to immigrant rights movements of the early 2000s, which elicited backlash from political elites and their constituents. This was motivated by the belief that immigration threatened Americans' access to economic resources (realistic threat), advantaged position within the hierarchy (social status threat), and undermined traditional American values (symbolic threat) (Steil & Vasi, 2014). Still more evidence from LGBTQ+ movements suggest that opposition to same-sex marriage among political conservatives was in part motivated by the belief that it undermined conservative beliefs regarding the "traditional family" and the "sanctity of marriage" (Fetner, 2001, 2008; Gaines & Garand, 2010; Sherkat et al., 2011; Van der Toorn et al., 2017). Within the context of gender hierarchy, research has examined whether inducing various types of group threats influence dominant groups' support of feminist social movements that challenge the gender hierarchy (Rivera-Rodriguez et al., 2022). Findings showed that leading men to believe that Americans value traditionally masculine traits (such as competitiveness) less today compared with 30 years ago induced greater symbolic and social status threat among men, which in turn predicted less support for feminist social movements such as the #MeToo movement and the Women's March. Finally, research has examined the roll of collective autonomy restriction and

privileged identity threat on White American's attitudes toward antiracist messaging about structural racism (Kachanoff, Kteily & Gray, 2022). Results showed that White Americans who interpreted the message "White Silence is Violence" (a common call for White allyship most often associated with the Black Lives Matter protests) as equating inaction or indifference toward the movement as a form of racism were more likely to experience privileged identity threat and collective autonomy restriction, were compared with White Americans who did not make such equivalencies. In turn, experiencing both privileged identity threat and collective autonomy restriction predicted greater denial of anti-Black systemic racism.

Applying these findings to our model, we propose that advantaged group members who deny the existence of social inequality and the legitimacy of social movements are the most likely to believe that challenges to existing social hierarchies threaten their group's access to resources (i.e., realistic threat), social influence (i.e., symbolic threat), and advantaged position within the hierarchy (i.e., social status threat) (Figure 1, E path). By extension, these perceived threats will likely cause advantaged group members to believe that their ability to preserve their collective autonomy is at risk (Figure 1, Box 6), motivating them to engage in compensatory counter-movements that oppose the disadvantaged group's social movement (Figure 1, F path). In the following section, we review literatures on collective autonomy restriction and counter-movement mobilization that provide support for the theorized link between intergroup threat, collective autonomy restriction, and advantaged group members' desire to protect the social hierarchy.

## **Perceived Restriction of Collective Autonomy Motivates Counter-Movement Mobilization to Preserve the Social Hierarchy**

### *Counter-Movements*

Counter-movements are "a conscious, collective, organized attempt to resist or reverse social change" (Mottl, 1980, p. 620). Counter-movements are often created by, or share common goals with, political and institutional elites who leverage their power to rally counter-movement constituents and oppose social movements (Germani, 1978; McVeigh, 2009; McVeigh et al., 2004; Mottl, 1980; Oberschall, 1973; Skocpol, 1979; Van Dyke & Soule, 2002). Although social movements typically mobilize from the bottom up, such that grassroots constituents self-organize to fight for representation at the institutional level, counter-movements typically mobilize from the top-down (Mottl, 1980). In other words, "[Social] movements challenge groups higher up in the stratification hierarchy, while counter-movements are oriented against challenges from below." (Mottl, 1980, p. 621).

These differences between advantaged and disadvantaged group's access to structural power are reflected in the strategies that counter-movements adopt to resist social change by impeding a social movement's ability to establish legitimacy, mobilize resources, and gain centrality. One way that counter-movements delegitimize social movements is by arguing that social hierarchies are based on legitimizing worldviews, such as meritocracy (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009; Lardier et al., 2019; Ledgerwood et al., 2011; Major et al., 2007), or "founder ownership," which is the belief that a nation's laws and institutions should be dictated by the group that descended from the nation's founders (Selvanathan et al., 2021). They may also seek to delegitimize social movements by arguing that challenges to existing social hierarchy constitute reverse discrimination that unfairly targets advantaged groups (Dovidio et al., 1989; Knowles et al., 2022; Norton & Sommers, 2011). In addition to delegitimizing attempts, counter-movements also leverage their institutional power to restrict the mobilization of resources by social movements and block their ability to gain centrality within institutional systems of power. Examples of such strategies include voter intimidation and voter suppression campaigns (Combs, 2016; S. L. Perry et al., 2022; Swirsky, 2001), mobilization of armed militias to overturn election results (Paulus & Kenworthy, 2022), and using political power to resist social change policies (D. S. Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Mottl, 1980).

### *Counter-Movement Mobilization Motivated by Collective Autonomy Restriction*

Building on the "threat and defense" hypothesis of collective autonomy restriction (Kachanoff et al., 2022), the MMMCA outlines a process where perceived threat from social movements motivates counter-movement activity among advantaged group members (Figure 1, F path). To our knowledge, very few studies have examined advantaged group members' perceptions of collective autonomy restriction (Kachanoff et al., 2020; Kachanoff, Kteily & Gray, 2022). One study, which focused on racial hierarchy in the United States, found that despite their advantaged position within the racial hierarchy, some White Americans believed that their racial group's collective autonomy was restricted by other groups. Furthermore, whereas collective autonomy restriction is typically associated with greater opposition to hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies among Black Americans, results from this study showed that collective autonomy restriction was associated with greater endorsement of hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies among White Americans, and support for the White Lives Matter counter-movement (Kachanoff et al., 2020). The link between collective autonomy restriction and greater endorsement of hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies among White Americans may reflect the belief that their advantaged position relative to Black Americans is

zero-sum, such that advantages gained by Black Americans results in disadvantage for White Americans (see also Norton & Sommers, 2011; Rasmussen et al., 2022 for related arguments). Within the context of collective autonomy, White Americans who perceive their racial groups' autonomy as restricted may be motivated to act to preserve a racial hierarchy that affords them privileged access to the power, resources, and status necessary to defend collective autonomy.

Observational case studies of historical social movements and counter-movements also provide evidence of the link between collective autonomy restriction and the mobilization of counter-movements among advantaged groups. One such example involves the antibusing counter-movement in Boston, Massachusetts, which first emerged in response to school desegregation ordinances that resulted from the civil rights movement (1963–1974) and the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Mottl, 1980). Although these ordinances were effectively resisted by local politicians on behalf of their constituents for some time, it was not until the desegregation of public school seemed imminent that White Bostonians began to mobilize in a last-ditch effort to resist social change. This mobilization is what ultimately led to the rise of the antibusing counter-movement in Boston that eventually spread to other American cities. Tactics used in the mobilization of the antibusing counter-movement included demonstrations and lobbying for the repeal of school desegregation laws, establishing a nationwide antibusing network, cutting school budgets to slow desegregation efforts, and the development of militant organizations to intimidate Blacks and supporters of school desegregation through acts of violence and terror, such as stoning school buses and inciting physical violence (Mottl, 1980).

Appeals to both realistic and symbolic threats were used to delegitimize the desegregation of public schools and mobilize the antibusing counter-movement. A combination of pervasive stereotypes associating Black people and neighborhoods with crime and a desire to keep White and Black communities separate contributed to the mobilization of the counter-movement (Mottl, 1980). However, the most pervasive ideology used to mobilize the antibusing counter-movement was the idea that forced desegregation was a violation of White parental autonomy (Mottl, 1980). This ideology eventually gave rise to Restore Our Alienated Rights (ROAR), one of the most powerful and militant antibusing organizations of the counter-movement. ROAR was a women-led counter-movement organization built around the ideology that the desegregation of the Boston public school system and forced busing violated White motherhood and parental autonomy (Nutter, 2010). Specifically, ROAR argued that school desegregation and forced busing violated White parents' right to choose which school their children would attend, and their decision as to who should have access

to their neighborhood's schools (Nutter, 2010; Williams & Lovin, 1978).

The belief that desegregation violated parental rights reflected an ideology of collective autonomy held by White Bostonians at the time, which included the defense of their right to make decisions regarding desegregation and busing independent from governmental influence, overriding racial integration and equality of education across race (Williams & Lovin, 1978). This ideology of White supremacy was further amplified by New England and Boston's tradition of "liberty and freedom" that emphasize individualism, independence, and personal choice above unwanted governmental influence (Williams & Lovin, 1978). We interpret the Boston antibusing counter-movement as evidence that White Bostonians perceived the desegregation of public schools and busing to be a restriction to their collective (racial) autonomy, which in turn motivated the mobilization of a militant counter-movement that sought to resist social change.

## Conclusion

In this review, we introduce the MMMCA to derive hypotheses about the social contexts and psychological processes that lead to the mobilization of social movements and counter-movements. Specifically, we hypothesize that hierarchy stability, social change beliefs, and dissatisfaction with group-based comparisons of power and the ingroup's ability to defend collective autonomy drive social movement mobilization among disadvantaged group members. Conversely, hierarchy instability, denial or distancing from social privilege, and various forms of intergroup threat increase perceptions of collective autonomy restriction and motivate counter-movement mobilization among advantaged group members.

## Directions for Future Research

This model makes several novel contributions that advance our understanding of the role of social hierarchy, power, identity, and social movement/counter-movement dynamics among disadvantaged group members. First, our model extends Kachanoff and colleagues' "threat and defense" hypothesis by proposing distinct psychological processes that predict (a) when disadvantaged and advantaged group members will perceive that their collective autonomy is restricted and (b) when disadvantaged and advantaged group members will mobilize to defend their collective autonomy via social movements and counter-movements. Future research can directly test the veracity of these psychological processes by examining whether system beliefs (i.e., perceptions of hierarchy as legitimate and permeable) shape perceptions of collective autonomy restriction among disadvantaged group members; and whether the denial of, and distancing from, privileged identities shapes perceptions of collective autonomy restriction among advantaged

group members. Future research can also test whether the use of group-focused (as opposed to individual-focused) identity management strategies increases the desire to protect collective autonomy via social movement mobilization among disadvantaged individuals; and whether perceptions of intergroup threat (realistic, symbolic, and social status threat) motivate the desire to protect collective autonomy via counter-movement mobilization among disadvantaged individuals.

Second, while extant research on collective autonomy and social movement mobilization tends to examine social movements and counter-movements separately, our model illustrates a dynamic process where advantaged and disadvantaged group members' perceptions of collective autonomy, social hierarchy, and decisions to mobilize are influenced by one another. We also synthesize research across disciplines (psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, history) to identify three strategies—increasing legitimacy, access to resources, and centrality within social and institutional networks—that allow social movements initiated by low-status groups to gain traction. This is especially relevant for future research on counter-movements, which traditionally focuses on advantaged individuals' perceptions of structural changes resulting from the later stages of social movements (Moyer, 2001). By considering the strategies that disadvantaged groups use to gain traction during the early stages of social movement development, future research can hypothesize how advantaged individuals' perceptions of a social movement's legitimacy, resource mobilization, and network centrality influence their perceptions of intergroup threat and collective autonomy restriction as social movements unfold in real time.

Third, our model considers the psychological processes that push disadvantaged group members away from social movement mobilization (i.e., individual-focused system beliefs, comparisons, and management strategies) and motivate advantaged individuals to support social movements as allies (i.e., acceptance of privilege and a desire to repair the ingroup's reputation). Research interested in social movement efficacy may consider additional psychological and societal factors that (a) increase social change beliefs among disadvantaged group members and (b) increase acceptance of privilege among advantaged group members.

Research on intergroup tolerance (i.e., acceptance or permissiveness toward dissenting outgroup practices or beliefs), for example, adds an additional layer of nuance to these research questions. Among advantaged group members, internal conflict between an individual's belief that all groups should have the right to determine their own way of life versus outrage they may feel toward an outgroup's collective actions or practices that conflict with their personal values further complicates our understanding of the psychological processes that shape perceptions of social movement legitimacy (Acar et al., 2024). Among disadvantaged group members, related research also suggests that the perception of

“being tolerated” by advantaged group may increase dissatisfaction with the group’s access to power (Bagci et al., 2020; Cvetkovska et al., 2020, 2021). Future research should explore these nuances and their implication for social movement/counter-movement mobilization within the context of the proposed model.

### *Constraints to Generality and Citations Statement*

It is important to acknowledge constraints to the generality of the present work. First, we review research examining a broad range of marginalized and privileged identities—including race, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and immigration status—and the ways in which they influence perceptions of social hierarchy, inequality, collective autonomy, and collective action. However, much of this research treats identity as binary, such that individuals are categorized as either advantaged or disadvantaged based on a single dimension of their social identity, with little attention given to the intersection of multiple identities. An important question for future research to consider is how individuals with intersecting social identities, some of which may be privileged and others of which may be marginalized, experience collective autonomy and perceive and engage in collective action.

Second, it is also important to note that the empirical research we draw on was mostly conducted using participant samples from the WEIRD nations, which may further constrain the generality of the present theorizing. Autonomy manifests differently across cultures. For example, research conducted with WEIRD samples emphasizes inner states and mental representations of autonomy that are oriented toward the individual, while research conducted with non-western and middle-class samples emphasizes mental representations of autonomy that orient toward community and the family unit (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Even within western societies, cultural differences between social groups can influence mental representations of autonomy. Research conducted in the United States, for example, shows that that low-SES individuals tend to emphasize social responsibility more so than individuation in their meaning of autonomy compared with high-SES individuals (Keller, 2012).

Considerations from cross-cultural research also suggest that individuals may be less likely to see social movements as an effective pathway toward equality within repressive societies with authoritarian governance (Morling & Evered, 2006). However, some research has begun documenting social and psychological forces that motivate individuals living in repressive societies to engage in collective action despite political systems that heavily disincentivize collective action through intimidation, incarceration, violence, and death (Messanga & Ekango Nzekaih, 2022). These constraints should be considered by future researchers interested in testing this model in non-WEIRD nations and cultures to

identify how much of this model is generalizable and identify its boundary conditions. By doing so, we stand to gain a better understanding of whether, when, and how the collective actions of individuals might change social hierarchies and structural inequality.

### *Positionality Statement*

The team of authors who wrote this case is diverse in racial–ethnic background, national origin, academic rank, and sub-disciplinary expertise. The team was intentionally mindful to incorporate research from outside of psychology, including sociology, organizational behavior, political science, philosophy, and history, to provide a comprehensive overview of how societal factors and power dynamics influence intra- and interpersonal psychological processes that drive collective action within intergroup settings. The theorizing in this review paper is informed by scholarly research and by the lived experiences of the authors.

### *What Makes a “Good Society”: Considerations for an Egalitarian Future*

In thinking about our collective future, social scientists, activists, and citizens will have to grapple with an age-old philosophical question—*what makes a good society?* For those of us oriented toward social equality, a “good society” is one that prioritizes our basic human needs to ensure that *all* people receive equal access to health care, food, employment, and education (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). In much of the industrialized world, however, these basic human needs are not being met, as neoliberal ideals rooted in capitalism have prioritized competition, rugged individualism, and profit maximization over social responsibility and connectedness, all in pursuit of unsustainable economic growth (Eppard et al., 2020; Hickel, 2020; Krause, 2020; Petridis et al., 2015; Saito, 2023; Schneider et al., 2010). These neoliberal ideals, which developed to legitimize capitalist systems that exploit humankind and the environments they live in, are deeply entrenched within our institutions, culture, and psyche (Adams et al., 2019; Monbiot, 2023; Sugarman, 2015). Thus, if we ever hope to live in a “good society,” we will first have to re-evaluate our relationship with capitalism and neoliberalism, both within our social institutions and in our daily lives (Saito, 2024). In doing so, we can then begin to reimagine our political, economic, and social institutions, ensuring that they work to serve the people, and not a few elites who control the majority of the world’s wealth. In the United States, for example, this would include reforming our political system to be a true democracy where leaders are chosen through an electoral process that gives every person an equal vote—as opposed to the current system which allows billionaires and corporations to influence our elections and policy through Super PACs (i.e., Political Action Committees that spend an unregulated

amount of money to support or oppose political policies or candidates) and lobbying—ensuring that politicians adhere to the will of people, and not to capitalist elites who exploit us for profit. (Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Shapiro & Jacobs, 2010; Winters & Page, 2009).

In imagining alternatives to capitalism, we highlight the concepts of *degrowth*, an interdisciplinary school of thought and burgeoning social movement grappling with the environmental, social, and economic crisis of the 21st century that capitalism has produced (Hickel, 2020; Krause, 2020; Petridis et al., 2015; Saito, 2023; Schneider et al., 2010). Degrowth movements—which aim to create a more equitable society by reducing emphasis on profit, excessive consumption, competition, and rugged individualism—are starting to provide alternatives to capitalism (Schneider et al., 2010; Treu et al., 2020). In cities such as Detroit, Copenhagen, and Barcelona, for example, these movements have begun to establish community-oriented social systems that provide community members with equitable access to food and housing (Cattaneo & Gavaldà, 2010; Saito, 2024). In these examples, a focus on community has been key to the success of these movements. However, if degrowth movements are to effect change at the systemic level, they will need to gain centrality within political institutions and push for social policies that would allow for a gradual transition away from current political and economic systems rooted in capitalism.

Critics of degrowth movements argue that the societal shifts they push for are too radical to gain widespread legitimacy, particularly in societies that value rugged individualism and excessive consumption over social responsibility and connectedness. In response, sociopolitical theorists have begun to critically examine the socioeconomic challenges that a societal shift away from capitalist systems would introduce, and the institutional policies that can help address these challenges (e.g., capping maximum income through taxing the rich, work-time reform, universal health care, and universal basic income) (Saito, 2024; Spangenberg, 2010, 2014). At the same time, psychological research is beginning to understand how neoliberal ideologies shape our social identity and orientations toward the individual versus the group, and the implications these orientations have on people's willingness to support such policies (Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004; Goudarzi et al., 2020; Matthey, 2010; Matthey & Dwenger, 2007). It is here that the framework outlined in the MMMCA can help guide future research and support degrowth movements that aim to educate the people about the social inequalities perpetuated by capitalism and legitimize the concepts of degrowth as an alternative to dominant neoliberal ideologies. Working toward such a society that is truly free of social inequality will be challenging, but the history of human civilization is one of the continuous struggles against systems that exploit us, and our collective efforts have and will continue to create a more equitable society for all.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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