RESEARCH ARTICLE

Feeling and thought in collective action on social issues: Toward a systems perspective

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Abstract

Theories of action have tended to view it—and its basis in thought and feeling—as static, discrete, mechanistic, and decontextualized. Moreover, studies of action have tended to be fragmented in academic silos. The consequences of these problems include a lack of cumulative and contextualized theory-building, and an inability to recognize emergent, dynamic, and non-linear causality, especially across levels of analysis. We argue that such problems could be partly alleviated with increased engagement with a meta-theoretical perspective that has long been advocated for in psychology—the systems approach. In this view, thought, feeling, motivation, action, and context can be viewed as co-evolving, inextricably linked, systems of systems. We illustrate the need for and benefit of this approach in the domain of collective action on social issues. We conclude that systems perspectives allow more contextualized, generalizable, conceptually rich, and applied directions for research in this domain.

1 | INTRODUCTION

"Emotions are not just the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism of a reasoning creature, they are parts, highly complex and messy parts, of this creature's reasoning itself. Martha Nussbaum"

Action is important. Whether it is cooperation or conflict, conservation or destruction, help or hurt, psychologists seek to understand what we do and why. The action psychologists' study is important to the health and well-being of

individuals (e.g., diet, exercise), couples and families (e.g., constructive communication, housing security), communities (e.g., poverty, crime), and the world at large (e.g., climate change, disease, war). Such action is multi-leveled, complex, dynamic, and socially situated (see Nowak et al., 2017; Schill et al., 2019; Smith & Semin, 2004). Yet theories of social action have tended to view it—and its basis in thought and feeling—as static, discrete, mechanistic, and decontextualized. This mismatch between the reality of action and our approaches to understanding it has hampered the development of cumulative, generalizable theory, and empirical knowledge (e.g., Ellemers, 2013).

We argue that many problems in the psychological study of action could be alleviated by increased engagement with a systems meta-theoretical approach, which has long been advocated for in psychology and greatly benefitted other areas (e.g., Bou Zeineddine & Pratto, 2017; Leach & Bou Zeineddine, in press-a; Lowe et al., 2019; Markus & Hamedani, 2007; Meagher, 2020; Nowak et al., 2017; Pessoa, 2019; Schill et al., 2019; Sosnowska et al., 2020; Witherington, 2007). This meta-theory suggests that (human) agents and environments co-evolve as a unitary system and that this co-evolution produces a self-organized emergent order, that is, unstable and nonlinear in its change (e.g., Eidelson, 1997). Systems can co-evolve with other systems to form higher-order assemblies, with their own higher-order system dynamics and structure (e.g., Nowak et al., 2017). In other words, systems meta-theory allows us to view our key concepts not as static, discrete, unitary variables, but as situated and synchronized assemblies of a host of lower-order components (Nowak et al., 2017).

This approach has several advantages. It allows research that integrates different kinds of data across levels of analysis. It forces us to be more specific and formal in our descriptions of contexts (relational, social, political, cultural, etc.). It allows us to view causality as emergent from the synchronization of components, rather than as a mechanistic one-to-one linearity of cause to effect, and to model systems over time in recursive, non-linear, discontinuous, probabilistic, and stochastic (i.e., noisy) ways. It allows us to update our work so that it fits with the latest theories of emotion and cognition (e.g., constructionist theory of emotions, Hoemann & Feldman-Barrett, 2019; component process model of appraisal, Sander et al., 2005; process model of emotion poly-regulation, Ford et al., 2019). It can unify our understanding of the associations between state and trait (bridging personality and social psychology at a deeper level), individual and collective (bridging cognitive and social psychology), action and inaction (painting a richer picture of individual and collective behaviors), and agent and context (bridging structural and psychological levels of analysis). While our arguments apply to research on any action, here we focus on collective action on social issues, and what a systems approach enables in this important domain of scholarship (see Table 1).

Generally, collective action models in social psychology focus on protest behavior, and emphasize three causal factors, presumed to increase the likelihood of such behavior: (a) anger or other displeasure at believed injustice, (b) group identification, and (c) beliefs about group efficacy to address the injustice (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008). There are multiple problems in this classical approach. Yet, despite the availability of theoretical frameworks of action on sociopolitical issues suited to systems approaches (e.g., J. C. Becker & Tausch, 2015; Bou Zeineddine & Pratto, 2017; Fritsche et al., 2018; Louis et al., 2020; Prentice & Levy-Paluck, 2020; van Zomeren, Leach, et al., 2012; Vollhardt et al., 2020), calls to adopt them have gone largely unanswered.

We begin by identifying some of the ways in which feeling and thought are much more extensively and intricately connected to each other and to collective action than this classical view implies. We then dissect the concept of collective action itself, showing how a broader conceptualization can be handled through systems approaches. Finally, we present some examples and suggestions for the use of systems approaches in collective action.

2 | CLASSICAL APPROACHES TO EMOTION, MOTIVATION, AND THOUGHT IN (COLLECTIVE) ACTION

In the Western tradition of thought, it has long been believed that social action is a product of thought and feeling being translated into motivation and ultimately action (for reviews, see Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). Their temporal and causal sequence has been hotly debated. Often this debate was really about the rationality of human action, with some arguing that feeling was a primitive, irrational, and impulsive basis for motivation and action, and

TABLE 1 Classical versus systems approaches to collective action

	Classical approach	Systems approach
Causation	Uni-directional associations of cause to effect (e.g., anger to action)	Emergent, stochastic, bi-directional associations (e.g., anger and action emergent from noisy cycles of association between them over time/events)
Level of analysis	Individual; moderated by contextual factors (e.g., anger leads to action except when political system is repressive)	Multi-level; lower levels constructing and constrained by higher levels (e.g., anger leads to action depending on a constellation of individual and contextual factors formed through action over time, such as subjective norms, social trust, cultural normative strength, political institutions)
Temporal dynamics	Linear change (e.g., steady increase of action with increase of efficacy)	Non-linear change (e.g., tipping point in action with increase of efficacy)
Context	Absent/thin theoretical and empirical specification, interactionist relation to psychology (e.g., cross-cultural moderations by individualism)	Rich/thick theoretical and empirical specification, co-constitutive with psychology (e.g., ecological explanations of cross-cultural variation in effects of norms on action)
Conceptualization		
Emotion	Discrete, individual, independent or interactive. Focus on anger/outrage as motivator	Fuzzy, multi-level, emergent. Can be motivator, goal, or outcome. Multiple, concurrent emotions (e.g., anger, fear, sadness, hope)
Efficacy	Individual, subjective (e.g., self-reported participative efficacy belief). Largely involved in the instrumental calculus motivating action	Multi-level, emergent from subjective and structural affordances and constraints (e.g., individual, societal coping potentials). Involved in both instrumental and emotional pathways
Group identification	Subjective, intuitive definition of group/category. Single identity or shift from one to another identity as motivator (e.g., higher national identification leads to stronger protest intentions against immigration)	Emergent (e.g., from subjective, relational, contextual processes) definition of group/category. Multiple, intersecting, concurrent identities, as motivators and outcomes (e.g., national, ethnic, class, religious, activist identification combinations intersect and produce a non-linear effect on intentions to protest against immigration)
Action	Public, group, extra-institutional, contention dynamic, societal support, or change goal (e.g., protest)	Any action with the goal of adapting to collective or societal disadvantage or insufficiency (e.g., lifestyle politics, everyday resistance)

therefore inferior to thought (e.g., Tiedens & Leach, 2004). But there is nothing inherently rational about thought or feeling (e.g., Damásio, 1994). Indeed, as the philosopher of emotion, Martha Nussbaum, suggests in our opening quote, it is possible that feeling and thought are, in some ways, one and the same.

2.1 | Emotion

Averill (1982) defined emotion as a "syndrome" of inter-related components that combine to make the phenomenon (see also, Frijda, 1986). These components are as follows: physiological activation (in body and/or brain),

subjective experience of feeling, motor expression (e.g., body posture, facial expression), readiness to act (e.g., simple fight or flight response), and cognitive appraisal (i.e., the thought required to interpret people and events and render them meaningful). None of these components are said to be necessary to emotion, and any combination of them could be sufficient for emotion.

Thus, the conceptualization of emotion as a syndrome of components is very flexible since it allows researchers to study emotion in many ways. However, this flexibility comes at a price. Conceptualized as a syndrome, emotion includes different things without specifying how exactly they relate to one another. One proposed solution to the difficulties inherent in conceptualizing emotion as a syndrome has been to assume that the cognitive appraisal component is logically/temporally primary. Cognitive appraisal theory argues that emotions exist to orient us to people and events that are relevant to our values and goals. Thus, emotion must be based, in part, on a cognitive appraisal (interpretation) of how these people and events are likely to affect us (for a review, see Leach, 2020). Simple appraisals—for example, whether a stray dog looks dangerous—may be quick, automatic, and beyond our notice (e.g., Reinka & Leach, 2018; for a review, see Scherer et al., 2001). It stands to reason that there is little purpose in the feeling, thinking, and gearing up to act in emotion, if there is no genuine "concern at stake" (Frijda, 1986). Why respond at all, if the stray dog is behind a fence?

Nevertheless, thoughts, feelings, contexts, and cultures are deeply intertwined in how we feel regarding social issues (e.g., Cohen-Chen et al., 2020). When we examine cases of protest, for instance, we see that there is an underlying assumption that the relationships between the stakeholders are in some way broken. Whether and how we express anger in protest already seems to involve not just the individual processes constructing anger, or the degree of that anger, but our beliefs that the relationship to those being confronted is antagonistic (Leach, 2016) and that expressing anger is the most constructive avenue to engage this antagonism and its consequences (e.g., Mackie et al., 2000). Likely, these beliefs are also shaped by our subjective norms on these matters, a factor that is sensitive to a variety of individual and contextual factors (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2017).

Hope appears to lead to emotion-focused coping—but not action—in environmental protest (van Zomeren et al., 2019), while generating both emotional coping and action in political protest (e.g., Wlodarczyk et al., 2017), but only in some ways and some contexts (e.g., Hasan-Aslih et al., 2019). Likewise, sociopolitical action undertaken by racially marginalized youth in the U.S. appears contingent on things like repressive school climates, lifetime experiences of discrimination, and socialization (Anyiwo et al., 2020). Have our identities, socialization, or life experiences sensitized us to social injustice (e.g., Baumert & Schmitt, 2016; Lim & de Steno, 2016)? Does our culture foster confronting authority and power (e.g., power distance, Cohen & Valencia, 2008), or facilitate change in norms (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2017)? These complexities show just how intermeshed thoughts, contexts, and cultures are to every aspect of how we feel regarding social issues and injustices.

In addition, whether, how, and for what purpose we engage in collective action are antecedents and consequences of a variety of thoughts and feelings, and these dynamics are highly context-sensitive (see also, Louis et al., 2020). Tausch and Becker (2013) show that failure or success of collective action can spur greater action, through anger and pride respectively. In this instance, anger is both a driver and outcome of failed action. Lizzio-Wilson et al. (2021) expand further, showing that failure can lead to withdrawal, increased action, or tactical innovation or change, depending on the levels of one's anger and the circumstances. Ayanian and Tausch (2016) showed that among Egyptian protesters, beliefs about the likelihood of future repression made protestors angrier identify more strongly with the movement, more likely to downplay risks of further repression, and believe that they had a greater chance at success. But this depended on which movement they were part of, its relationship to authority, and the flow of events (see also, Selvanathan & Jetten, 2020). How would we react, if we are initially sympathetic to a movement, but protesters started bombing government buildings, calling for regional secession, or for the assassination of the political class? Such questions, to be answered, also require us to know more about the situation, the groups involved, the injustice, the government, what other people think, how we were raised, and so on. Thus, whether and how we get angry at our governments, and whether and how this anger translates into protest, is complicated, and a far cry from the simple sequence of *injustice → anger → collective action*.

There is accumulating evidence, then, that emotion is a dynamic system embedded in a broader system of systems governing sociopolitical behavior (e.g., Leach & Bou Zeineddine, in press-a). Prominent theories of emotion (Hoemann & Feldman-Barrett, 2019) and emotional regulation (Ford et al., 2019) already use such systems perspectives. There are clear benefits in collective action researchers conceptualizing emotion in this way too.

2.2 | Motivation

The meaning cognitive appraisals convey already implies the possible actions that people might take in response to an event. This is why Roseman (2008) states that emotions are "emotivational". And, why Frijda (1986) argued that each emotion has a specific state of action readiness that begins to prepare the person to act in ways consistent with the meaning that emotion gives to the situation. However, motivation is more complex than the emotional impulse or readiness to act.

In his analyses of episodes of anger, Averill (1982) found that it is typical for people to experience the impulse to verbally aggress against, or to take something beneficial away from, the target of their anger. This can be conceived as the impulsive action readiness to confront in anger. Action readiness may be an intimate part of anger, but motivation to confront requires attention to and appraisal of many things besides the feeling of anger and the impulse to confront. Indeed, the action tendency often does not lead to the expected motivation. Averill (1982) found that individuals who experienced anger actually verbally aggressed against the target half the time, despite the fact that they consciously felt the *impulse* to verbally aggress over 80% of the time. Because physical aggression is an even more effortful and consequential action, it is no surprise that individuals aggressed physically only 10% of the time when angered, although they felt the impulse 40% of the time. There can be multiple, potentially opposing, appraisals and motivations directed toward the same target agent or event (e.g., Hodges & Geyer, 2006; Leach, 2016).

There are numerous examples of such a gap between the (impulsive) action readiness that often comes with an emotion and actual motivation and action. For example, although it is clear that avoidant disengagement is a common action readiness of fear (e.g., hiding, running), humans and many other species freeze instead (e.g., Barrett, 2006; Frijda, 1986). Whether cornered by an angry dog, a difficult examination, a demanding boss, or an unjust government, having the impulse to run is very different from wanting to run or actually running. One reason for this is not always knowing where to run, or whether we can outrun the cause of our fear (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Parkinson et al., 2005; Roseman, 2008; Scherer et al., 2001). Another is that emotions themselves can also be ambivalent and complex, and people can feel multiple emotions with different impulses simultaneously (e.g., Bericat, 2016). For example, encountering a stray dog may make one feel fear, frustration, *and* pity, if it is a starving stray blocking one's way to work. How those emotions play out together in motivation and action is not straightforward, and will differ between people, settings, and cultures.

Such complexities are illustrated in Ayanian et al.'s (2020) studies on intentions to engage in collective action in repressive contexts. They show that anger and fear at state repression do not always relate as expected to intentions to protest; those intending to protest in the Ukraine and Hong Kong were not angrier than others, but they were in Russia and Turkey. In Turkey, those intending to protest were actually *more* likely to be afraid, whereas fear made no difference at all in participants' intentions to protest in Hong Kong and Ukraine, and those who were less afraid were more likely to want to protest in Russia.

In addition, emotions are dynamic—they are episodes that occur over time and are influenced by what is prior, subsequent, and contemporaneous (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Leach, 2016; Parkinson et al., 2005; Scherer et al., 2001). Part of what makes emotions—and their link to action and thought—dynamic and complex, is that all emotion is embedded in a web of social meaning and social relations (e.g., Leach, 2016; Parkinson et al., 2005; Smith & Semin, 2004; Tiedens & Leach, 2004). To be ashamed, for example, is to be sad about failing to meet a social standard shared by others where one's reputation as competent or moral may be at stake. The social nature of shame, in this case, introduces myriad other concerns that can influence the quality of the emotion and its

translation into motivation or action (see Leach, 2016). This is why shame can lead to avoidant disengagement, or, to constructive engagement, depending on whether the ashamed can identify a way to repair their failure or their image in the eyes of others (Leach, 2020).

The links between thought, emotion, motivation, and action can also be influenced by the fact that any of these can be socially shared with others, and others can thus constrain or embolden one's action with their own action readiness and motivations (for reviews, see Parkinson et al., 2005; Tiedens & Leach, 2004). Norms and beliefs about the feelings and beliefs of others are important in collective action (e.g., Fritsche et al., 2018; Prentice & Levy-Paluck, 2020). If you think (accurately or not) that no one but you and a few others care that the government is corrupt, you are unlikely to engage in costly or risky action, however angry you may be. But if everybody suddenly seemed up in arms against the government for daring to put a price on mobile data for social network usage, your anger at the government may drive you to join their protests, even if you do not care about this specific issue.

This socially rooted nature of human behavior is fundamental to psychology's explorations of motivational states (for a self-determination theory systems perspective on motivation, see Chame et al., 2019). It is also essential to the formation of the cognitive concept of a group category (e.g., through sequences of observation and interaction among multiple actors, Pietraszewski, in press), the multiplicity and intersectionality of social identification in action (e.g., Curtin et al., 2016), and the psychology of multi-party intergroup behaviors (e.g., Dixon et al., 2020). Louis et al.'s (2020) model of collective action volatility theorizes how (dis)identification, intersectionality, and self-determination (each multiply determined at different levels) can be involved in motivational dynamics that lead to changes in the degree, type, and innovativeness of collective action mobilization and its tactics, at both the individual and social movement levels. For example, if one is part of an environmental movement that has long used protest to pressure government to adopt sustainable policies, to no effect, one might disidentify with the movement, attempt to start one's own, or join others attempting different tactics. Which option would be chosen, ultimately, depends on whether the movement refuses to change, whether one is living in a region, class, or minority that happens to be bearing the brunt of the government's policies, to what extent one also identifies as an environmental activist, and whether the alternative tactics are more aggressive or novel in the way they exert pressure (e.g., sabotaging construction of a dam). One's motivation for adopting sabotage, here, is based on a constellation of identities and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and constraints that are intertwined with our beliefs and feelings. This constellation could shape one's choices in such a way that one would engage in sabotage, even when they may prefer not to. Adopting a systems approach to collective action would enable us to better theorize and test such complex motivational dynamics.

2.3 | Thought

At some level, any sort of thought can influence emotion and action (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Parkinson et al., 2005; Roseman, 2008; Scherer et al., 2001). Thoughts can modulate emotions by altering either the emotion itself or the process of cognitive appraisal tied to the emotion (for a review, see Tiedens & Leach, 2004). We can also tell ourselves what we should feel and control our surroundings to feel what we want to feel (e.g., Zaki, 2014). Through normative and relational dynamics, this motivated process is itself socially informed. An example of this is Badaan et al.'s (2020) analysis of utopian thinking and the complex ways in which it can shape efficacy beliefs. They argue that people who are motivated to imagine better societies in the future, in doing so, experience greater social hope, and see such utopian visions as more concrete and proximal in time and practice. They are also less likely to legitimize status quo systems and more likely to engage in social justice-oriented collective action. A culture with looser norms might be among the factors that make such motivation and utopian thinking more likely, socially shared, and explored in practice among people (e.g., De et al., 2017).

Likewise, what, who, and for what goals we protest might be a function of our skill in thinking critically and deliberatively, as critical consciousness theory suggests (e.g., Watts et al., 2011). If we always need (or are given) a

concrete politician or party to blame—rather than understanding and confronting systemic foundations of the injustices we are aggrieved about—this likely influences how we feel, when we go out to protest, and for what aims. Indeed, Anyiwo et al. (2020) suggest that critical systemic thinking is an important element in the sociopolitical development and actions of racially marginalized youth in the USA. But, it is neither necessary nor sufficient (e.g., Rosales & Langhout, 2020). When such an association is found, it is contingent on critical agency—a combination of motivations and efficacy beliefs (Anyiwo et al., 2020).

These factors aside, cognitive appraisal is the most common form of thought examined in studies of emotion. Scherer et al. (2001) argue that cognitive appraisal proceeds in time from early unconscious appraisals of novelty and pleasantness to increasingly cognitively elaborated and conscious appraisals of: goal relevance, goal condu-civeness, control, power, and potential to act effectively. Thus, each emotion has a characteristic pattern of cognitive appraisal that helps define and differentiate it from other emotions (see also, Frijda, 1986; Rose-man, 2008). Lazarus (1991) calls the overarching characteristic pattern of cognitive appraisal the "core relational theme" of an emotion (see Table 2).

In these core relational themes of emotion, cognitive appraisal gives nuance to the psychological meaning of an emotion state. By summarizing the thought in emotion in this way, cognitive appraisal theory adds much-needed definitional precision to emotion concepts. And, by specifying the thought in emotion, cognitive appraisal also provides more specificity to the likely action tendencies that accompany the emotion. Envy and jealousy can be distinguished (Table 1). A demeaning offense calls for some sort of confrontation. An irrevocable loss calls for an inward-turned lament. But the eventual (in)action that may result from emotion is not necessarily implied by the cognitive appraisal in emotion, despite being able to identify a range of possibilities and specify courses of action that are unlikely in most circumstances. Other kinds of thought can influence appraisals, feelings, and actions, and their association with each other.

Research in collective action shows that many kinds of thought are important to both the instrumental and emotional dynamics of collective action and to our preferences in the means and goals of such action. Among these are beliefs, including: moral (e.g., van Zomeren, Postmes, et al., 2012), ideological (e.g., Jost et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2019), efficacy (e.g., van Zomeren, Leach, et al., 2012), and normative beliefs (e.g., Fritsche et al., 2018; Prentice & Levy-Paluck, 2020). Individual differences in cognitive processes and orientations are similarly relevant, including: cognitive rigidity, perceptual strategies, and executive functioning (Zmigrod & Goldenberg, in press), and needs for certainty and security (Jost et al., 2017). Yet, relevant cognitive theories of decision-making remain largely separated from collective action research in social psychology. The Theoretical Domains Framework (e.g., Atkins et al., 2017), for example, places feeling and thought alongside norms, roles, identities, cues, and context in

TABLE 2 Examples of Lazarus's core relational themes of emotion

Emotion	Core relational theme
Shame	Failing to live up to an ego-ideal
Anger	A demeaning offense against me and mine
Envy	Coveting what someone else has
Jealousy	Resenting a third party for (potential) loss of another's affection
Disgust	Taking in, or being too close, to an indigestible object or idea
Happiness	Making reasonable progress toward realization of a goal
Pride	Ego enhancement by taking credit for a valued object or achievement
Fear	Facing an immediate, concrete, and overwhelming danger
Anxiety	Facing uncertain, existential threat
Sadness	Irrevocable loss

their influence on social behaviors, including collective action. In deciding whether we go out to protest, it matters if we are open to changing our minds about the issue, whether we believe that protesting is consonant with our identities or values or with the opinions of others, what we think authority's response to protest is going to be, the pride or fear or guilt we feel in participating or abstaining. On the other hand, if we identify with others strongly enough, or are outraged or afraid or proud enough, under the right conditions, it is possible that none of these thoughts would matter—we would protest regardless (e.g., Adra et al., 2020; Ayanian & Tausch, 2016).

This is one major benefit of a systems approach, then; that we can consider the constellation or system of thought, emotion, and motivation, as a whole. We can recognize this system of systems as subserving actions that adapt the individual to the dynamics of a given social situation (see also, Smith & Semin, 2004). This allows us to see appraisals, and cognition more broadly, as neither independent or primary in action. Rather, the psychological system co-evolves with socio-cultural and bio-physical contexts to manifest action (Schill et al., 2019).

3 | COLLECTIVE ACTION

Social issues such as poverty, racial injustice, sexism, or the environmental crisis, affect many aspects of the systems in which people exist. From a macro perspective, Snow (2004) defined collective action as a collective challenge to systems of authority, whether institutional, organizational, cultural, or political. This brings collective action close to conceptualizations of social movements, resistance, contention, and rebellion (e.g., Leach & Livingstone, 2015; Rosales & Langhout, 2020; Snow et al., 2004). In contrast, social psychologists have tended to refer to most action in response to social issues as "collective action": the use of voice or force by (groups of) individuals to benefit a group or society at large (e.g., Wright & Taylor, 1998). Most of the time this boils down to mass public protest against governments in the West. But this view is a rather limited construction emergent from the history, biases, and fragmentation of psychology research on this topic in the West (Bou Zeineddine et al., in press; Rosales & Langhout, 2020; Snow, 2004). For example, why has our conceptualization of collective action not considered until recently collective action *in support of* a system (Jost et al., 2017), when social movement scholars have long argued that this was important (for a review, see Snow et al., 2004)? Why have we not theorized the variety of sources, targets, tactics, goals, and issues in which collective action is relevant (Leach & Livingstone, 2015; Snow, 2004)? Likewise, when we know that trust, reciprocity norms, and other forms of social capital are central to collective action (e.g., McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014), why are such factors left unexamined in our models? So long as we continue to operate in disciplinary, theoretical, and topical silos using traditional approaches, our models cannot bridge important levels, processes, topical domains, and contexts.

Greater breadth is needed in collective action research because: (a) the distinction between individual and collective is fuzzy (van Zomeren, 2014, 2015), (b) the distinction between agent and context is likewise blurred, and (c) (safe) protest is often a privilege afforded to those with a certain degree of power, and other kinds of (in)action are not exceptional, rare, or insignificant.

As the differential treatment of protests in the U.S. demonstrates (e.g., the additional scrutiny directed at the Black Lives Matter movement), protest is often a privileged collective action permitted to some but frowned upon for others (e.g., Banks, 2018). And actions beyond protest are often much more available, pervasive, or influential in response to both collective grievances (e.g., Gillespie, 2020; Leach & Livingstone, 2015; Rosales & Langhout, 2020), and in everyday meaning-making and well-being (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2020). It is not reasonable to assume that systemic change can only be accomplished by a large number of individuals, that protest is an equally viable option for all people, or even that systemic change is the only path to relieving a collective disadvantage or addressing a social issue. Our almost exclusive focus on protest does injustice to many groups and to the effort to understand collective action or address social issues in holistic and generalizable ways.

Consider what individuals are able to do by superspreading infection, social conflict, political polarization, and environmental burdens—especially those at the top of societies' hierarchies (e.g., Piff et al., 2018). Findings in a

variety of domains are increasingly showing that action on social issues and collective injustices is just as much about individuals' and small groups' behaviors as it is about mass mobilizations, public opinion, or social structures (e.g., Ackermann & Gundelach, 2020; Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021; Dornschneider, 2021; Heberer & Schubert, 2019; Uysal & Akfirat, 2021; van Zomeren, 2014). Likewise, covert and non-contentious forms of collective action are important, and their absence from our conceptualization is not justified (see also, Bou Zeineddine, 2015; Nations et al., 1997; Vollhardt et al., 2020; von Boemcken et al., 2018). For instance, through institutional innovation and change, parallel or alternative networks and institutions constitute collective challenges to authority (e.g., isolationist, secessionist, or communal networks; Burke & Arjona, 2013; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006; Leach & Livingstone, 2015; National Intelligence Council, 2021; Snow, 2004). Furthermore, the absence of a phenomenon can be just as important an object of study as its presence. *Inaction* can be just as collective—and just as impactful on social issues—as action (e.g., Ackermann & Gundelach, 2020; de la Sablonniere & Taylor, 2020; Leach & Livingstone, 2015; Murray & Durrheim, 2019).

Aside from the form of action, it is unclear why we have restricted ourselves theoretically to contentious action in societal support or change. Collective action can have social goals beyond these. Such goals include pro-sociality (e.g., Fattori et al., 2015), collective effervescence (Zumeta et al., 2020), coping (van Zomeren, Postmes, et al., 2012), and self-determination, self-sufficiency, and support for moral-political convictions (Roux-Rosier et al., 2018). Indeed, within the same movement, there can be different types of goals and values driving different kinds of action. Sloot et al. (2018) found that, among environmental activists, individual/community-based actions were related to biospheric values (primary goal of redressing harms against nature), protest was related to altruistic values (primary goal of redressing harm against others due to environmental degradation), and advocacy/lobbying were related to egoistic values (primary goal of self-enhancement, achievement, and power in the environmental movement). Likewise, researchers have argued that collective action among conservatives and liberals are activated by different purposes - for conservatives, moral rectification of societal breakdown, and for liberals, social and environmental justice (Choma et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2017). Such differences can also be interpreted as differing manifestations of the same goals such as expressing pro-sociality towards groups in wider or narrower circles (i.e., parochial altruism among ideologues, van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020) or defense of different moral convictions (e.g., Skitka et al., 2015). Social goals in collective action are neither fixed nor independent of each other or of context; multiple goals can be concurrently held and can change within people according to context—predispositions notwithstanding (e.g., van Lange & Joireman, 2008).

There is growing evidence that the putative causes of collective action (e.g., positive group identity) are themselves affected by collective action, and that individual experiences of societal disadvantage are affected by meso- and macro-level factors such as social support in emotion and/or efficacy by like-minded others (Leach & Bou Zeineddine, in press-b; van Zomeren, Leach, et al., 2012; van Zomeren, Postmes, et al., 2012). It is also clear that many different emotions may be experienced about societal disadvantage (see Leach & Bou Zeineddine, in press-a), that anger does not always lead to confrontational action (see Leach, 2016), and that there are many different ways to respond to societal disadvantage (Leach, 2020), some of which may appear to be passive, dysfunctional, or nonsensical unless their operation within the broader context of macro systems is considered (see Leach & Livingstone, 2015). The literature increasingly suggests that self and other, individual and collective, agent and environment—and thoughts, feelings, motivation, and action in its diverse forms—are not independent of each other. Rather, the relationships between them are mutually constitutive. Researchers are also calling for more diverse and intersectional examinations of actions, contexts, and populations (e.g., Anyiwo et al., 2020; Ayanian et al., 2020; Newson et al., 2020; Rosales & Langhout, 2020). Broad shifts in meta-theory, to perspectives that "denaturalize" (e.g., Adams et al., 2015) decontextualized and mechanistic approaches' hegemony of the field, are one important path forward (e.g., Bou Zeineddine et al., in press). This requires that we go beyond describing bits and pieces of this puzzle and move the field forward in describing the complex picture the puzzle depicts (see also, Ellemers, 2013; Nowak et al., 2017). Systems approaches allow us to begin to do so.

4 | TOWARD A SYSTEMS APPROACH IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

Often, the argument against systems approaches is that we lack the capacities to attempt them. But there is already theoretical and empirical proof-of-concept in social psychology for systems approaches using a variety of methods. For example, methods derived from design sciences, such as experimental games and agent-based models, are well-suited for systems analysis (e.g., Reilly, 2020; van Dijk & de Dreu, 2021). Nowak and Vallacher (2019) use non-linear dynamic modeling of agent-based simulations and real-world data to show how societal norms and attitudes change during rapid societal transitions. Their model predicts that societies in the midst of rapid change are characterized by both rapid normative change in their central tendency and clusters of strong, resilient opposition to the change. They attribute this to the fact that people tend to communicate with, and be most influenced by, a relatively small proportion of others and thus develop divergent social realities. Furthermore, reactionary movements that reversing this change can emerge because, in rapid change, the clusters that converge on resistance to the new tend to be stronger and more extreme in their attitudes. They observe this in empirical data in Poland; although people with favorable views of socialism were marginalized as the Soviet empire collapsed, they were able to quickly rebound. This, they argue, was because the free-market transformations did not meet expectations, which led to a non-linear, tipping-point shift in normative bias in society that favored these clusters. Such nuances are unlikely to emerge using traditional approaches focused largely on the individual level.

Consider, for example, how these findings might be integrated with Louis et al.'s (2020) model of collective action volatility, and Becker and Tausch's (2015) model of normative and non-normative collective action. Systems models of collective action tactical preferences and change would be better able to take into account the concurrent and persistent presence of new and old norms and the potential for reversing normative change that Nowak and Vallacher observe. They be better able to predict how and when "non-normative" clusters might mobilize people into reactionary or radical movements, where and when tipping points in such normative change regarding action tactics might occur, and which tactics such movements might be most likely to adopt. For instance, the USA's current normative climate seems to be increasingly permissive to both secessionist and militant positions by various groups (e.g., Tomlinson & Torrance, 2020; Wilson, 2021). One can implement a system of systems analysis, built through a series of simulations, experimental games, and rich qualitative studies, predicting how likely secessionist and militant action orientations are to become more normative and manifest in the future, and specifying where, when, and to what extent such change might occur.

But complex agent-based models are not the only approach to construct or test a system-informed theoretical framework. Another approach is incorporating rigorous mixed and qualitative methods across a diversity of domains and contexts, inducing more general complex adaptive systems theories (see also, Eidelson, 1997). For example, Hammad and Tribe (2020) used an emic qualitative approach to map a recursive system of adaptive coping and revealed novel forms of coping in the context of the protracted conflict and blockade in Gaza. Specifically, they found that the use of resistance and *sumud* (being steadfast and persevering), alongside religious faith and patience, was dynamically interrelated to adaptive responses and coping in culturally and contextually specific ways. They show that these context-bound dynamics connect to more commonly examined factors in coping such as the use of relationships, hope, future orientation, and cognitive reappraisal. Their findings challenge the notion that people living in war zones are ill-functioning or that resilience and resistance in such contexts are emotionally rooted in negativistic (e.g., outrage) cycles. Following a systems meta-theoretical perspective, series of such emic models of coping could inform broader systems theories of coping capable of predicting people's coping potential and strategies across a variety of challenges, contexts, and forms of action. Here, we present an example of what such a framework might look like—a systems model of the dynamic dual pathways of coping with societal disadvantage (Figure 1).

This model incorporates a fuller range of bases of self-relevance by which individuals view societal disadvantage as mattering to them or mattering for them. It can also include emotions beyond anger, such as hope, faith, and fear. Our model also addresses a fuller range of action tendencies beyond protest (e.g., escaping to fight another day, coalescing for comfort or to strategize) and alternatives to action (e.g., freezing when
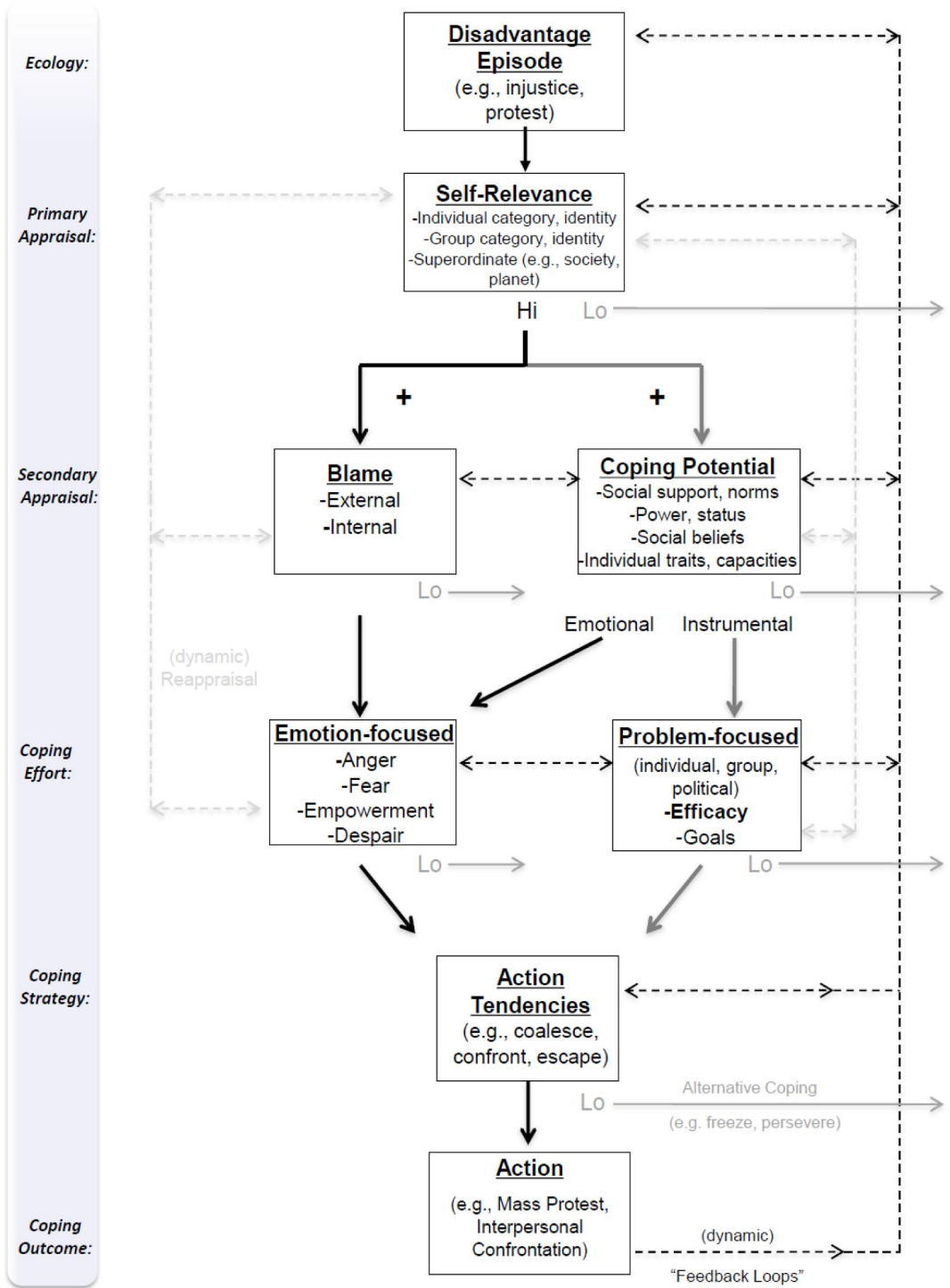
FIGURE 1 A multi-level systems model of the dynamic dual pathways of coping with societal disadvantage—level 1. Adapted from Leach and Bou Zeineddine (in press-b) and van Zomeren, Leach, et al. (2012)
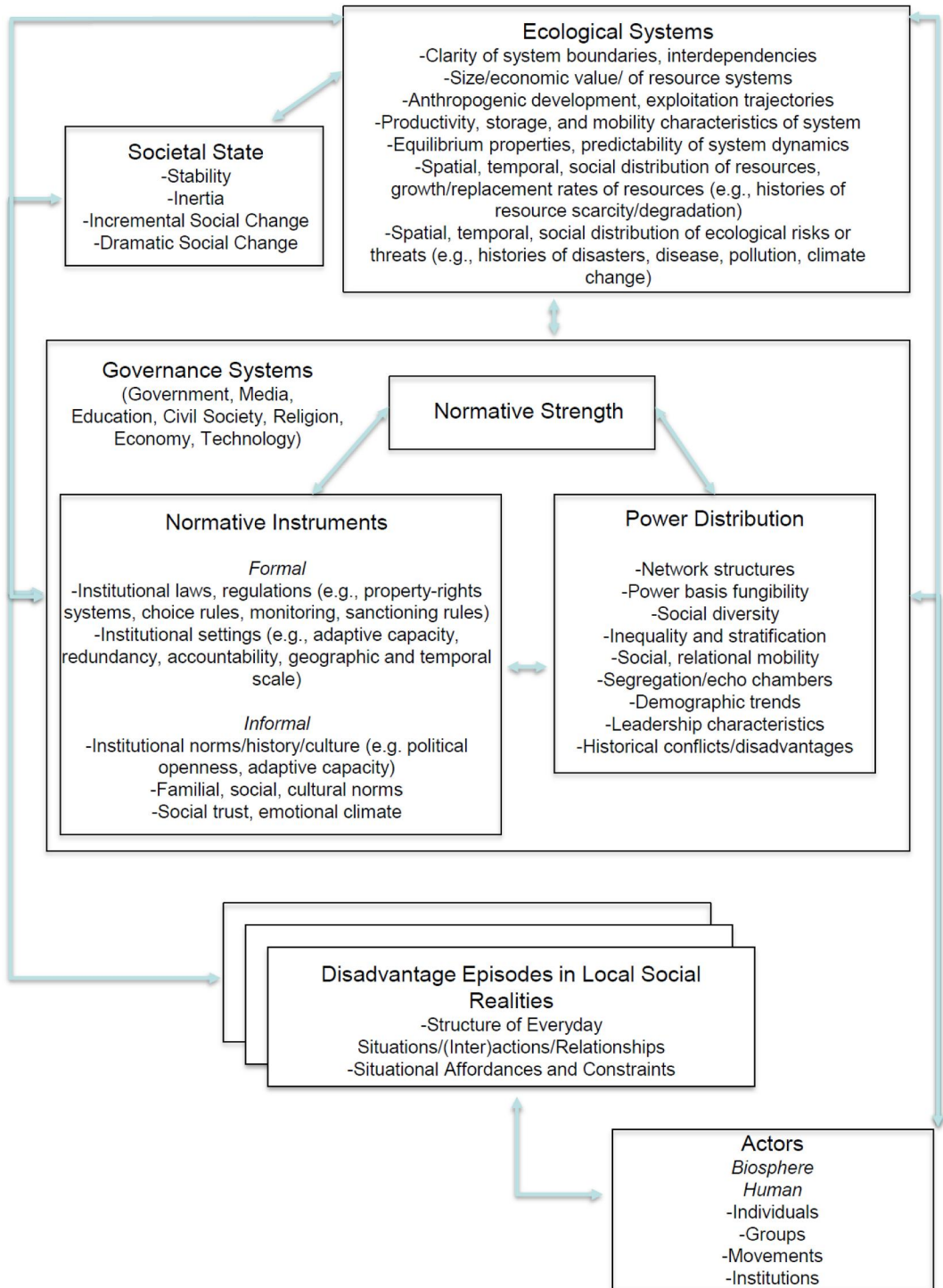
Ecological Systems
-Clarity of system boundaries, interdependencies
-Size/economic value/ of resource systems
-Anthropogenic development, exploitation trajectories
-Productivity, storage, and mobility characteristics of system
-Equilibrium properties, predictability of system dynamics
-Spatial, temporal, social distribution of resources,
growth/replacement rates of resources (e.g., histories of
resource scarcity/degradation)
-Spatial, temporal, social distribution of ecological risks or
threats (e.g., histories of disasters, disease, pollution, climate
change)

Societal State
-Stability
-Inertia
-Incremental Social Change
-Dramatic Social Change

Governance Systems
(Government, Media,
Education, Civil Society, Religion,
Economy, Technology)

Normative Strength

Normative Instruments

Formal
-Institutional laws, regulations (e.g., property-rights
systems, choice rules, monitoring, sanctioning rules)
-Institutional settings (e.g., adaptive capacity,
redundancy, accountability, geographic and temporal
scale)

Informal
-Institutional norms/history/culture (e.g. political
openness, adaptive capacity)
-Familial, social, cultural norms
-Social trust, emotional climate

Power Distribution

-Network structures
-Power basis fungibility
-Social diversity
-Inequality and stratification
-Social, relational mobility
-Segregation/echo chambers
-Demographic trends
-Leadership characteristics
-Historical conflicts/disadvantages

Disadvantage Episodes in Local Social Realities
-Structure of Everyday
Situations/(Inter)actions/Relationships
-Situational Affordances and Constraints

Actors
Biosphere
Human
-Individuals
-Groups
-Movements
-Institutions

FIGURE 2 A multi-level systems model of the dynamic dual pathways of coping with societal disadvantage—level 2. Adapted from Baker and Chapin (2018), de la Sablonniere and Taylor (2020), Gelfand et al. (2017), and McGinnis and Ostrom (2014)

overwhelmed, simply persevering in the face of overwhelming odds). We model feedback loops by which thought, feeling, or action at a particular "stage" of the process can lead individuals to re-think, re-feel, or re-act in the course of events and their experience of them. For instance, the experience of empowerment—perhaps aided by social support from like-minded others and a larger social movement or societal shift—can lead one to rethink blame such that one is "empowered" to hold an external agent, like the military, more responsible for mistreatment. Or, the experience of police brutality at a political March may lead individuals to rethink their action tendencies and thus redirect their coping effort to safer strategies (e.g., sabotage, internal movement organizing, legal claims, media campaigns).

We have suggested that collective action research examines a limited set of concerns and contexts in our research. But the problem is not just a lack of diversity in our study populations and contexts. Rather, we have not examined context in psychology in enough depth or detail despite knowing that context and culture matter to collective action (e.g., Greenaway et al., 2018; van Zomeren, 2015; van Zomeren & Louis, 2017). In a systems perspective, any psychological model of social action in response to collective disadvantage must also be a component of, and constrained by, a well-specified model of higher-level systems (Figure 2).

Figure 2 zooms out in examining episodes of disadvantage, to show how these episodes are themselves components and products of key sociological, political, cultural, and ecological systems. In our model, these systems themselves emerge out of a synchrony of a variety of key component systems. For example, in the governance system, we focus on three key component systems: (a) the sociocultural system defining a society's normative strength, or the degree to which norms are tightly defined, monitored, and enforced (Gelfand et al., 2017); (b) the sociopolitical system of interrelated instruments (e.g., laws, traditions) that society uses to enforce its norms and organize social behavior (e.g., S. O. Becker et al., 2016; Nowak & Vallacher, 2019); and (c) the system specifying how power is distributed and transacted in that society (Bou Zeineddine & Pratto, 2017). Out of the dynamics of these three systems, and the combination of their emergent states at a given time, emerges the overall macro-level governance system. Actors participate in—while being simultaneously constrained by—this system. Episodes in local social realities both characterize and are characterized by this system. And the governance system similarly shapes and is shaped by the societal state (e.g., rate and type of change, stability in society) and ecological systems it occupies. A theoretical framework, such as that sketched out in Figures 1 and 2, enables us to integrate much more of what we know about collective action across a variety of forms, functions, goals, contexts, and domains of action.

We cannot persist in relying solely on traditional approaches, as useful as they have been, without compromising continued growth in the validity and utility of our work. Neither can we afford to continue examining the narrow slice of actions, populations, and contexts that have characterized the research on the topic. Many advances across the social sciences suggest that thought, feeling, motivation, action, and context function together like a complex system of systems. So, let us examine them as such. To mangle the old adage, we cannot fully grasp either the trees or the forest if we neglect to study them both as parts of an ecosystem.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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