

THE STUDY OF COLLECTIVE ACTION AMONG OLDER PEOPLE: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a research project about collective action among older people in the UK. The research aimed to investigate the social issues older people are concerned about, to identify the types of collective action that they are likely to take, and to examine perceived barriers to engaging in collective action. This work was framed within two social psychological theories, Identity Process Theory [1] and Social Representations Theory [2]. An innovative approach was adopted by incorporating the construct of subjective barriers. This article presents some findings derived from two studies of the project (focus groups and questionnaire). It is shown that older people perceive a need for social change for a wide variety of social issues. A re-definition of the concept of collective action is provided and the factors that can either facilitate or hinder willingness to participate in collective action are highlighted. This research contributed towards the development of a social psychological theory of collective action; extended the understanding of social psychological processes operating in older people's identity structure and belief systems, and has implications for future development of social policy.

Keywords: older people, collective action, identity processes, social representations, and barriers to action.

1 INTRODUCTION

This research is concerned with understanding some of the factors and processes which may influence older people's willingness to participate in collective action. *Collective action* was conceptualised as any activity which aims to bring about social change and is regarded as collective action as long as it is perceived to be as such by an individual or group of individuals, i.e. the subjective meaning attached to different types of action.

In particular, this research focused on identifying the social issues that older people are concerned about,

establishing the types of collective action older people are likely to engage in and examining potential barriers to engaging in collective action. Unlike previous models of collective action, this work intended to contribute to the development of an integrative model by using two social psychological theories, Identity Process Theory [1] [3] [4] [5] and Social Representations Theory [6] [2] [7], which are explained in the second section of this article.

There are various reasons why this research studied older people in the context of collective action. In terms of demographics, the percentage of older people in Europe has remarkably increased in proportion. In January 1993 in the fifteen countries constituting the EU there were 117 million people aged 50 years and over (32% of the total population of the EU) and nearly 75 million people aged 60 and over (20%) [8]. This specific section of the population is expected to increase even more in the next twenty years and constitute more than one-quarter of the population. Those people aged 65 and over in the fifteen EU Member States will double from 34 to 69 million, while the population as a whole will have increased from 315 to 385 million [9]. The present and future demographic changes are dramatic and have no precedent in history [10]. In the UK in 1961, 12% of the total population was aged 65 years old and over; in 1991 this proportion was 16%. It has been estimated that by the year 2021 it will rise to 20% [11].

From a societal point of view, older people are characterised by a higher life expectancy; likely to remain healthier and active until a very advanced age; are more educated; and more consumerist in orientation than previous cohorts [12]. These changes implicate a vast range of areas - medical, economical, political, cultural, social and psychological. Each of them is likely to lead to a new definition of what ageing means. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that older people are both interested in politics and concerned with the community (e.g. [13]) and that they are potential contributors to the political process, e.g. in the form of lobbying groups (e.g. [14]), not simply with issues related to age (e.g. [15]).

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From a social psychological point of view, the context of collective action seems to be an original and relatively novel framework to further our understanding of both collective action and the social psychological processes operating in older people's identity structure and belief systems.

2 STATE-OF-THE ART LITERATURE ON OLDER PEOPLE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Some specific problems with regard to the existing literature on both older people and on the theory of collective action need to be taken into consideration.

2.1 Older People

Social science has paid much attention to aspects of pathology and disability among older people but rarely has it acknowledged and considered research on healthy older people [16] [17]. Additionally, much of existing social psychological research in this area is on processes of stereotyping and ageism, in which older people have been rarely asked about their views, thus becoming targets of generalised attitudes [18]. This has contributed to the homogenisation of older people (e.g. [16] [19]) and to the definition of older people as a minority group in the modern industrialised countries of the world. It has affected prevailing theoretical assumptions in which minorities are regarded as powerless targets of influence, which may function to render social change as impossible, even when it is explicitly theorised [20]. Similarly, older people have been often overlooked in terms of their potential and actual political contribution [21]. The need to consider other aspects rather than age in older people and the fact that age alone is not an influential factor in determining political behaviour has been noted in previous literature (e.g. [22] [23]).

2.2 Collective Action

In relation to theory available on explaining the generation of collective action, two main problems have been identified. Firstly, the concept of collective action has been studied within diverse theoretical traditions, in which different operational definitions have been provided. This has led to a variety of findings and interpretations. For instance, existing theories of collective action using a rationalistic approach (e.g. [24] [25]) have defined collective action from a list of activities rather than acknowledging the subjective meaning attached to different types of collective actions. Moreover, sometimes studies are not comparable because they measure the outcome of collective action in different ways (either by past behaviour or intentional behaviour exclusively) and they do not acknowledge that collective action may differ according to the populations being studied and context specificity.

Secondly, a variety of social psychological factors

situated from an individual to a group level have been taken into account as possible predictors of both actual and intentional behaviour. However, there is no explicit recognition of the potential role of factors other than the ones they focus on, nor upon an explicit recognition of factors being located at different levels and the way in which they may interact.

2.3 Identity Process Theory and Social Representations Theory

Identity Process Theory (IPT) [1] [3] [4] [5] proposes that identity is the dynamic social product of an interaction between the capacities of memory, consciousness and organised constructs. These are characteristic of the biological organism - with the physical and societal structures and influence processes that constitute the social context, along a temporal dimension. Identity is manifested through thought, action and affect in a context of personal and social power relationships, and can be described in terms of its structure and processes.

The structure of identity includes both content and value dimensions. The content dimension - understood as dynamically organised and dependent on the social context - includes the characteristics defining identity; in other words, those traits that make the individual unique. This comprises attitudes and belief systems, behavioural styles, self-ascribed attributes and belief systems, and group memberships. The content dimension ignores the distinction between elements that have been arbitrarily labelled personal (e.g. values, motives, emotions, attitudes) and social identity (e.g. group memberships, roles, interpersonal relationships), since it is assumed that the content dimension is "*continually present across time and is cumulative*" [1, p. 18]. Each element in the content dimension has a specific value attached to it, either positive or negative, subject to change according to changes in social value systems and the individual's social position. Hence, the value dimension of identity comprises the values attached to each element of the identity. Evaluations change over time because of changes in the individual or in the external social world, which characterises identity as dynamic. In this research, a person's identity does not only encompass who an older person is today, but also who the person was in the past and who this person may become [26], which is in constant development. Furthermore, age is not viewed as the only definition of identity and other non-age-oriented aspects need to be examined in the study of collective action among older people.

According to Breakwell [1], the structure of identity is regulated by the cognitive processes of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation, which are deemed by IPT to be universal psychological processes, i.e. not culturally dependent. They are both parts of the same processes that mould respectively the content and value dimensions of identity structure, interacting dynamically with each

other. Assimilation is associated with the incorporation of new components into the identity structure, and accommodation refers to the adjustment made by the existing structure to incorporate new elements. Evaluation leads to the allocation of meaning and value to existing identity contents. Both processes of assimilation/accommodation and evaluation interact to determine the content and value of identity over time. These processes of identity are guided by four motivational principles, which define desirable states for the structure of identity. They are integrated within a single framework. Unlike the processes, they are culturally and temporally specific. In Western industrialised cultures they are continuity; self-esteem; distinctiveness [1] and in further publications an efficacy principle has been added [4] [5]. Each of these principles manifests itself across the life span of the individual.

Social Representations Theory (SRT) [6][2][7] addresses particular aspects of group processes and the general mechanisms through which people collectively construct shared realities. Social representations are a specific type of everyday knowledge by which people interpret their world and make it meaningful; its origin remaining in the activity carried out by social groups and those individuals constituting them.

Both content and processes, interwoven with each other, define social representations. Content provides the social meaning of the objects, people or events (e.g. attitudes, context) and processes include 'anchoring' and 'objectification', which are the means by which the generation and transformation of social representations and their relationship with behaviour is understood. The process of objectification is the mechanism by which abstract objects (e.g. love, friendship, and education) are made concrete, and in terms of SRT it involves making something unfamiliar familiar. Examples of objectification within SRT literature can be found in the context of the phenomena of AIDS (see [27] for a review). On the other hand, anchoring is the means by which something novel becomes integrated into existing ways of thinking. In Moscovici's [2] words, "*to anchor is to classify and to name something*" (p. 30). Markova & Wilkie [27] have suggested that essentially, it is equivalent to the process of assimilation in the sense that anchoring is an active process concerned with the modification of existing cognitive structures. At the same time, anchoring embeds new representations in pre-existing ones, integrating social reality.

Identity processes will contribute to determine which social representations an individual adopts (through influencing exposure, acceptance and use of social representations) but in parallel social representations will contribute to the definition of identity (both its content and evaluation). In this research, social representations - in particular social representations of older people - were expected to provide meaning to what it is being an older

person and at the same time specify and re-define both content and value of individuals' identity. It was also assumed that identity processes affect the individual's willingness to accept and use social representations.

2.4 The Study of Collective Action by Integrating Identity and Social Representations

Social representations and identity processes may have an impact on whether older people participate in collective action and on the type of action they are likely to adopt. Within this research, the construct of 'subjective barriers' was incorporated and these included elements addressed by both IPT and SRT.

When reviewing existing literature on perceived barriers and collective action, it seems that barriers have not only been under-researched, but also the ways barriers have been conceptualised presents some limitations. They are either (i) previously defined by the researcher; and/or (ii) refer to personal costs and benefits [28] [29] without taking into account subjective conceptualisations of barriers. In this research an attempt was made in order to address these limitations.

3 THE RESEARCH

All of the participants in this research programme were older people. They were asked for their views about collective action. However, not only chronological age was explored as predicting their willingness to participate in collective action. Secondly, the work developed was designed to facilitate a re-definition of the concept of collective action. The interactions and relationships between a number of factors which have been shown by others to be significant in explaining participation in collective action were examined (e.g. identification with older people, collective orientation, collective efficacy, political trust). In addition, possible interrelationships between age-specific factors with non-specific ones were investigated, which contributed to further our understanding on the social psychological processes and socio-cognitive effects of ageing.

Thirdly, in this research collective action was explored within a particular context by considering "social issues" (also referred to as "instances of social change"), which are understood to be any social matter people are concerned with. These can vary from addressing aspects such as the environment, law and order, or family. The nature of the action was also taken in consideration and related to various instances of social change and the fact that several social psychological factors might be specific to particular types of actions was also addressed.

A multi-methodological approach was used in response to theoretical demands, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This approach has been acclaimed for its potential to produce theoretical advancement within social psychology (e.g. [5] [30] [31]). This was done for various reasons: (i) in order to address

the theoretical innovative approach adopted in this project and (ii) nature of the sample (few studies reporting on older people's views about themselves and various social issues). The research reported here comprises results obtained from two main studies, conducted among older people; each of the studies provided different types of information thus complementing each other.

3.1 *The use of focus groups*

A series of thirteen focus groups were conducted with a total of 59 participants from Surrey (UK). All participants had been screened from a previous study in which respondents had been contacted in several organisations (the response rate was 70.2%). Ages ranged from 59¹ to 87 years (mean age of 70.96 years). The sample comprised 38 women and 21 men.

The focus group schedule followed a 'funnelling approach'[32] [33]. First, general questions were asked about issues participants were concerned with, allowing them to discuss and provide detailed views on these issues before moving on to the specific research questions. In this way, it was expected that collective action and related themes would be mentioned spontaneously by participants before direct questions were asked. An example of a general question was "...please tell me about some of the issues that you feel strongly about or that, if you could, you would do something to change..." This question was followed by others such as "For all these sort of things you are discussing, do you think you could do something to change the situation?"; "Are there any difficulties in doing this? If so, what are they?". However, due to the nature of the focus groups, the guide was used in a flexible way. Key issues were addressed slightly differently in each of the focus groups according to the dynamics evolving in them.

The analysis focused on three central issues: (i) the instances of social change with which participants were concerned, (ii) participants' views of options available to them for bringing about social change, and (iii) participants' accounts of barriers preventing them from engaging in action to bring about social change.

All of the focus groups were taped and transcribed. Themes and patterns were identified, paying specific attention to both re-occurrence within transcripts and co-occurrence across transcripts. The coding procedure combined elements of 'grounded theory', where a priori hypotheses about the data should not influence coding [34] and 'structured content analysis' [35]. The reliability of the coding scheme was checked. A second researcher analysed two of the focus groups and similar conclusions were obtained.

3.2 *The use of a questionnaire*

A total number of 345 questionnaires were completed out of 608 (response rate = 56.7%). The sample contained 187 females and 158 males. Ages ranged from 57² to 89 (mean of 72 years). Most of the participants were contacted through a variety of organisations in the South East of England. Participants were asked about themes related to collective action and which had been shown to be important in the focus groups. The relationships between the following factors were investigated: tractability of instances of social change; identification of the most important issues to solve; presentation of four actions - for each action, respondents were asked about previous experience of collective action, willingness to participate in collective action, perceived effectiveness of collective action and perceived barriers to action. Other variables included political efficacy; political trust; collective orientation; identification with older people; collective efficacy; self-efficacy; importance and evaluation of several aspects of older people's identity structure; social representations of older people; and age.

Table 1 summarises the variables of relevance here. The constructs were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale, apart from previous experience (Yes/No); willingness to participate in collective action (Yes/No) and age (years).

The constructions of 'willingness to participate in collective action' and 'perception of barriers' are complex and are thus described below.

Guttman scalogram analysis was used to derive an overall score of 'willingness to participate in collective action'. This type of analysis is a cumulative scaling procedure which "demands that a sequence of questions should represent a series of 'bench marks' along a single attitudinal continuum, each item representing a unique order of difficulty" [36, p. 245]. This included information on each of the four types of actions used in the questionnaire. The consistency coefficients of reproducibility (.91) and scalability (.73) proved to be good. On the basis of this, a 'willingness to participate in collective action' variable was created. This variable ranged from 0 to 4, '0' meaning that the participant did not show willingness to participate in any of the activities and '4' meaning that the participant showed willingness to participate in all four activities.

For the 'perception of barriers' variable, respondents were asked to indicate if the barrier applied to them (Yes/No) and, if it did, they were asked about perceived permeability of the barrier, i.e. "Do you expect this barrier will remain permanent or that it will be removed?". This was measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from '1' - "It will remain permanent" to '5' - "It will be removed", with the mid point of 3 being labelled "Unsure". The variables of applicability

¹ People aged between 59 and 64 were also retired. They were only 9 people, which constituted the 15.2% of the sample.

² People aged between 57 and 64 were also retired. They were 27 people (7.8% of the sample).

Table 1: Summary of scales created for this study.

Name variable	Measure	No. of Items	Examples	Reliability
Previous experience	-Yes/No.	2 (4 actions)	• “Since you have been 65 or over, have you ever taken this action?”	--
Willingness to participate in collective action	-Yes/No.	2 (4 actions)	• “If you have never taken this action, would you take it in the future?”	--
Perceived effectiveness of collective action	‘1’ “Very ineffective” to ‘5’ “Very effective”.	1 (4 actions)	• “How effective do you think this action is?”	.73
Perception of barriers (5 levels)	-Applicable: Yes/No. -Permeability: ‘1’ - “It will remain permanent” to ‘5’ “It will be removed.”	2 for each level (4 actions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intraindividual: “I am not the sort of person who does this kind of thing.” • Interpersonal: “I find it difficult to communicate my point of view to others.” • Intragroup: “People of my age are not united in seeking change in this way.” • Intergroup: “Others think that older people should not take this type of action.” • Group/societal: “The way society is organised discourages older people from taking this action.” 	.78 .81 .79 .85 .88
Importance of Age	1 - “Not important at all” to 5 - “Very important.”	1	• “How important is age for you?”	--
Evaluation of Age	‘1’ “Very negative” to ‘5’ “Very positive.”	1	• “Do you see age as positive or negative?”	--
Political Efficacy	‘1’ “Strongly disagree” to ‘5’ “Strongly agree”.	5	• “People like me have no say in what government does.”	.83
Political Trust	‘1’ “Almost never” to ‘5’ “Just about always”.	4	• “When people in politics speak on television... how much do they tell the truth?”	.80
Collective Orientation	‘1’ “Strongly disagree” to ‘5’ “Strongly agree”.	5	• “Old people must act as a group rather than as individuals.”	.53
Identification with older people	‘1’ “Strongly disagree” to ‘5’ “Strongly agree”.	4	• “I feel strong ties with old people.”	.77
Collective Efficacy	‘1’ “Not at all” to ‘5’ “To a great extent”.	7	• “Old people believe they can be very effective at bringing about changes in society.”	.84
General Self-efficacy	‘1’ “Strongly disagree” to ‘5’ “Strongly agree”.	6	• “I do not know how to handle social gatherings.”	.71
Physical self-efficacy	‘1’ “Strongly disagree” to ‘5’ “Strongly agree”.	3	• “My physical fitness is good enough to tackle any problem.”	.61
Social Representations of Older People	‘1’ - “Strongly disagree” to ‘5’ - “Strongly agree”.	28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Social Representations: “Most people think that old people have the desire to influence what is happening in society.” • Negative Social Representations: “Most people think that old people have no views in common with young people.” 	.70 .88

and permeability were then conflated. That is, where a person indicated a barrier as being non-applicable it was assumed that it did not constitute a barrier, that is, it could be easily overcome. This was equated with the barrier being highly permeable. Although it is acknowledged that there may be other reasons for the non-applicability of a barrier, this strategy was deemed a reasonable way of dealing with the high percentage of 'non-applicable' responses.

Thus, a strong barrier equated with less permeability and more applicability and a weak barrier with more permeability and less applicability. An overall score for the perception of the barrier (including the four actions together) was created for each of the five levels of barriers, from 'intraindividual' to 'group/societal' levels (see Table 1).

4 SOCIAL ISSUES

The three sections below present some important findings emerging from the research.

In the focus groups, participants perceived a need for social change in eleven different areas. The issues raised were as follows: health, family, standard of living, law and order, rights and values, older people, international issues, Government, European Union, media and environment. Most importantly, these issues were not uniquely age oriented. Participants very often identified themselves with the group of older people when perceived potential for contribution to causes or maintenance of the problem was mentioned for a specific instance of social change. The two principles of identity which seemed to be strongly operating in tandem are **distinctiveness** and **efficacy** on a collective level. That is, participants, by identifying with the group of 'older people', differentiated themselves from others (e.g. younger people) and showed feelings of competence and control for bringing about social change, including positive evaluations of their membership with 'older people'. In this sense, both collective distinctiveness and collective efficacy operated as facilitators of social change. This was the case with the instances that referred to health, older people, law and order, rights and values, environment, media, international issues and family. One example is as follows, in which the social issue of environment is addressed:

"Well, I'm very concerned on the state of the environment, particularly as regards to transport and I think old people can do quite a lot... Or older people -I'd better be careful - can do a lot in that way because normally speaking older people have a little more time than younger ones." (Focus group no. 5; participant no.1).

5 RE-DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Derived from the focus groups, the meaning attached to

different types of action among older people was identified. Collective action responded to the distinction between type of action (individual-group) and type of goal (collective change-collective expression), as shown in Figure 1.

This illustrates the fact that there are types of collective actions which are not contemplated by previous research but which are perceived to be collective action by older people. Hence, the need to take into account the subjective meaning a particular action has for the individual emerged as an important theoretical contribution to the conceptualisation of collective action. Moreover, some of the identified actions highlight the fact that older people do not necessarily opt for the formal channels considered by most of the existing literature reporting on collective action amongst older people (e.g. [23] [37]).

This was also confirmed in the questionnaire, since it was shown how an action located at an individual-collective expression dimension (i.e. 'explain to other people about the importance of a problem') was associated with a high degree of willingness to participate in it. In addition, the distinction between individual and group actions seemed to be more powerful than the one between collective expression-collective change. The former distinction allowed for explanation of the differences encountered for each of the actions in terms of degree of willingness, perceived effectiveness of the actions and number of perceived barriers to engaging in each of the actions. For example, it was revealed that more willingness to participate in collective action followed the order from individual to group actions. The actions of 'writing to the MP' and 'explain to other people the importance of a problem' (located at an individual level) were mostly preferred than the actions of 'join an informal discussion group' and 'join a group demonstrating' (located at a group level).

One of the significant contributions of this research is that the re-definition of the concept of collective action also permitted methodological development of the construct. This may have implications for the measurement of collective action in future larger scale research. This distinction of types of collective action was an important contribution to existing theorisations of the construct of collective action.

TYPE OF GOAL	
Collective Change	
<p>E.g. Issue: Environment policies. <i>"With regards to a long term policy for the environment, that is one way where it can work individually by writing to the MP's and ministry departments." (Focus group no. 5; participant no. 1).</i></p> <p>TYPE OF ACTION Individual</p>	<p>E.g. Issue: Government. <i>"Perhaps individually is very difficult to do something but I think collectively we will do something by choosing a political system that would address these problems. We would help and then if it doesn't, you vote them out again." (Focus group no. 1; participant no. 3).</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Societal/Group</p>
<p>E.g. Issue: Pollution. <i>"You can certainly operate at a personal level, and as you say not run a car if you can feel that strongly about it." (Focus group no. 5; participant no. 2).</i></p>	<p>E.g. Issue: Health. <i>"But quite a lot of the interest groups are trying to change people's attitudes. I'm an osteoporosis sufferer and the osteoporosis group isn't just helping those of us that have but trying to change attitudes. And I think that as a group you can." (Focus group no. 2; participant no. 4).</i></p>
Collective Expression	

Figure 1: Dimensions of the study of types of collective action.

6 SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

This section reports on three social psychological factors which emerged as important both in the qualitative study (focus groups) and that were further tested in the questionnaire: identity, social representations of older people and perceived barriers to action.

In the focus groups sessions, participants made past references and comparisons, referring to a lack of continuity. This was tied to the concept of reminiscence, in which participants by identifying specific instances of social change would re-examine past experiences, from making the past unique to revealing negative aspects of it. For instance, the definition and identification of the group of older people implied that there were shared social representations, in which several collective actions were included. In particular, the process of anchoring seemed to operate in the social representations of older people held by the participants. They incorporated and negotiated novel concepts of "older people" (e.g. active and young) into existing ways of thinking (e.g. older people as fragile and passive in our society), with explicit references to the past:

"I think that's one of the wonderful things about retirement now. I can think back to when my grandparents were the same age as I am and they seemed dreadfully old! (common agreement). They didn't do anything or go anywhere! It was just accepted that once you finished work you sat there in front of the fire knitting or doing a bit of gardening. That was your sphere of life! I think the wonderful thing is now that pensioners are able to do so many things and I think that pensioners now -maybe because I get older- but I don't think they seem old!" (Focus group no.1; participant no. 4).

In this study, it was shown how social representations

provide the meaning of being an old person, together with interpretation of both content and value of identity.

For instance, the novel concepts of "older people" described above seemed to allow participants to distinguish between "them" (older people who complain about their health; believe that past used to be better and who do not accept they are old) and "me/us" (older people who believe there are issues that need to be addressed and hence bring about social change; who accept they are old, but "active old" people):

"I find with elderly people... All I seem to get from them is a lot of complaints about their health; a lot of complaints that life isn't what it used to be, and life never was what it used to be and that becomes rather boring." (Focus group no.3; participant no. 5).

The strategies followed by the participants in order to manage ageism were mainly to negotiate new images of ageing [38] [39], in which they appeared to challenge the groundless assumptions of older people and the process of ageing.

The importance of incorporating levels of analysis in the study of collective action was finally confirmed when a model of collective action was tested using nested regression analysis. This analysis is based on the progressive building of a model through different stages or blocks. Movement from one stage to another is expected to be dependent on the effects obtained at the previous stage. This analysis not only makes it possible to determine the most important predictors of the final research outcome (here willingness to participate in collective action) but also provides an understanding of each of the relationships between the variables at each stage of the model [40] [41].

Table 2: Summary of sub-analyses for the path analyses of factors in the study of collective action.

Outcome variable*	Adj R²	F Value	Significance
Identity and Representations:			
Importance of age	.02	7.90	<.01
Identification with older people	.10	40.64	<.001
Collective efficacy	.02	7.07	<.01
Physical self-efficacy	.10	38.29	<.001
Previous experience of collective action	.07	6.82	<.001
Perceived effectiveness of collective action	.30	24.88	<.001
Barriers:			
Intraindividual level	.20	15.22	<.001
Interpersonal level	.10	8.65	<.001
Intragroup level	.10	13.75	<.001
Intergroup level	.15	16.07	<.001
Societal level	.18	38.26	<.001
Willingness to participate in collective action	.57	63.63	<.001

* Only the outcome variables with the significant F-value are listed.

A summary of the sub-analyses that were carried out for the path analyses of factors in this study is shown in Table 2. The first block entered included identity and representational variables. These preceded previous experience of collective action, perceived effectiveness of collective action, perceived barriers and willingness to participate in collective action.

Perceived barriers at the intraindividual and intragroup levels were revealed as direct predictors of collective action, amongst others (political trust, previous experience, perceived effectiveness of collective action). Perception of strong barriers at the intraindividual level predicted less willingness to participate, whereas perception of strong barriers at the intragroup level predicted more willingness to engage in collective action. The latter finding suggests that when people are willing to engage in collective action, they can still perceive barriers. This added to the existing literature, which has mainly explored barriers to participation only when individuals had not engaged in collective action having previously shown their intention to participate [28].

These findings showed the need to recognise the different factors in relation to the level they account for. In this way, it was shown how both intraindividual and intragroup levels were predicted by political efficacy and collective efficacy and how other factors were distinctive predictors for only one of the levels. Age was a distinctive predictor of perceived barriers at the intragroup level and general self-efficacy was characteristic for perceived barriers at the intraindividual level. Moreover, each of five levels of barriers showed how they were predicted by factors accounting for both individual (e.g. age, evaluation of age, general self-efficacy) and societal elements (e.g. negative social

representations). Thus, the fact that barriers at the intraindividual and intragroup level emerged as direct predictors of collective action and that they seemed to operate as mediators of the effect of some identity factors (e.g. collective efficacy, general self-efficacy) upon willingness to participate in action, again enhanced the conceptual relevance of barriers as integrators of both identity and representational elements.

Finally, it was also shown how identity and social representational factors could either facilitate or hinder willingness to participate in collective action depending on the effect of perceived barriers. For example, low collective efficacy was related to perceived barriers at the intragroup level being stronger. These predicted more willingness to engage in action. High collective efficacy was related to weaker barriers at the intraindividual level. These also predicted more willingness to participate in collective action.

7 CONCLUSION

One important finding outlined here is that identified instances of social change are not uniquely age oriented, as suggested by previous literature [12]. In addition, many of the instances of social change identified by the participants showed that they had a high interest in politics and their concerns with the community, in which participants' citizenship was enhanced.

Secondly, each of the studies in this research supported the notion that although chronological age is not a valid factor for explaining collective action, other age-related factors need to be taken into account. These refer to both identity and attitudinal aspects (e.g. importance and evaluation of age; collective efficacy; social

representations of older people). Additionally, other aspects not directly referred to the process of ageing were also found important for explaining collective action. Examples of these were political efficacy and political trust. In conclusion, the prediction of collective action encompasses an overall identity-structure.

Thirdly, the significance of the current research also rests in the recognition of the need to differentiate between different levels of analysis when explaining the generation of collective action. In this research, an attempt was made to adopt more than one level of analysis in order to fully appreciate the nexus between the individual, the group and society. The concept of barriers accounted for the dynamic interaction of different aspects of the whole structure of identity (which is described in terms of both content and value dimensions and operating principles), and also to the dynamic nature of social representations of older people held by the participants.

Finally, this research has implications for future social policy decisions at a local, national and European level. Older people will increasingly need to participate in discussions and plans affecting a number of issues, many of which are commonly considered not to affect them. In order to do this, it is important to take into account the heterogeneous nature of this section of the population. In this way, the conditions for older people to achieve greater social integration can be created.

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