Theoretical Articles

Activism as a Heroic Quest for Symbolic Immortality: An Existential Perspective on Collective Action

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Abstract

Excellent research exists on the conditions that generate political and social activism. Yet a central issue has remained perplexing: how does the personal need to stand out as unique and heroic interact with the concern for the positive image of the group, and the desire to protect and bolster its status, goals and shared values, in propelling collective action? Inspired by existential theory and research, this paper proposes an existential perspective on activism that identifies the human desire for a sense of meaning and significance as an important motivation underlying individuals' choice to engage in collective action. This study outlines an integrative model of collective action, combining insights from existential psychology with insights from the social identity perspective, to bridge together needs and concerns associated with both personal identity and group identity into a single model of collective action through the concept of death-anxiety buffering mechanisms. This model suggests that collective action is an effective means to satisfy existential needs through bolstering and protecting group interests and values on the one hand, and realizing the activist's heroism project on the other. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: collective action, violent activism, social identity theory, terror management theory, existential psychology

In the last decades, protest politics have become an increasingly popular tool for political expression, and their effects potentially override the ones of public apathy (Furedi, 1999). As was evident in recent waves of social protests, such as the large-scale social and political protests in the Arab world from 2010 onwards, the occupy Wall street movement of 2011, the Israeli social protest of 2011, and more recent waves of social unrest in Ukraine, Bulgaria, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Turkey, the widespread use of social media has further fueled this process, so that collective action has become a virtually contagious phenomenon (Martin, 2007).

Activism can be broadly defined as any behavior advocating some group-based political or social cause (Corning & Myers, 2002). The varieties of activism that have been offered by scholars range from conventional, institutionalized acts such as starting a petition, to high-risk unconventional behaviors, such as civil disobedience, rallying, and hunger strikes (Corning & Myers, 2002). Activism can assume the form of non-violent protests, noncooperation

and boycotts, as well as take the shape of violent demonstrations, sabotage, and even terrorist acts (Norris, 2002). Activists' causes may range anywhere from the local to the global; from the social to the political (Omoto, Snyder, & Hackett, 2010). Some activists engage in "direct action" while others engage in support work, usually performed behind the scenes. Some take part in large social movements, while others operate in small groups or even on their own, largely or entirely independent of groups (Martin, 2007).

Despite its many varieties, the general conditions under which people engage in collective struggle to advance social and political causes have been extensively studied. Consequently, scholars from various disciplines have suggested a wide range of individual- and group-level factors that can give rise to social and political activism. Nevertheless, the question of the motivations underlying the willingness to engage in collective action remains particularly perplexing in view of the high personal price it often entails: what motivates individuals to make considerable personal sacrifices, sometimes even risking their lives, for the sake of advancing group-based goals and interests?

This question, among others, has been at the core of the existential approach, which has in the last decades generated a large body of empirical psychological research into topics highly relevant for social and political activism. Based on Ernest Becker's seminal works, the Denial of Death (1973) and Escape from Evil (1975), existential psychologists have shown that individual activities in the social sphere are essentially rooted in matters of life and death, or in other words, in the anxiety of death inherent in human existence. According to Becker, to protect themselves from death awareness, human beings strive for a sense of "symbolic immortality": the sense that one is a valuable part of a cultural meaning system (a cultural worldview) that is larger, and more significant, than one's individual existence. To achieve symbolic immortality, which imbues life with a sense of meaning and significance, individuals rely on two main defense mechanisms: (1) maintaining faith in their cultural worldview, and (2) obtaining self-esteem by living up to the standards of value prescribed by that worldview.

According to Becker, the universal pursuit of symbolic immortality gives rise to an existential paradox: to achieve a guarantee of symbolic immortality individuals seek a constant balance between what he calls "twin ontological motives" (Becker, 1973): self-distinction on the one hand, and inclusion into a collective meaning system on the other. Both of these seemingly opposing existential needs, however, stem from the same basic human desire for symbolic immortality in the face of inevitable and pervasive existential anxiety.

Although applied to related phenomena such as risky behaviors and support for terrorism, interestingly enough the existential perspective has so far not been applied to activism as such, possibly because some of the extant research on activism has already investigated motivational factors typically of interest to the existentialist perspective, like bolstering one's self-esteem, increasing the group's positive image and validating the in-group's values.

The claim of this paper is that this has led to the point where an important contribution of existential thought to the understanding of activism has been missed: namely, that applying Ernest Becker's notion of the "twin ontological motives" to collective action could offer great insight into the existential motivations underlying the choice to engage in such acts. In existential terms, engaging in collective action constitutes a very effective integration between the two seemingly opposing existential needs of self-distinction and inclusion, as it allows individuals to stand out from others while fighting to protect and preserve the positive image of the group. In particular, this hypothesis could be helpful in explaining some of the more extreme forms of activism and the often-considerable personal cost for activists who are willing to risk financial and personal loss and incarceration to engage in their cause.

Although the personal benefits and rewards entailed in collective action have been widely recognized by activism research (e.g., Leach, Mosquera, Vliek, & Hirt, 2010; Snyder & Omoto, 2008), models or theories that identify the desire to satisfy needs associated with one's individual image and status as underlying the struggle to advance group-based goals are generally seen as reductionist, and are largely absent from the academic discourse on activism which considers individuals' motivation for action on behalf of the group as almost strictly group-based.

In social psychological research, dominant models and theories of activism emphasize group identity as key in mobilizing collective action. According to social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which constitute the building blocks of the social identity perspective, personal identity is associated with concerns for the unique and positive image of the individual in relation to other individuals, whereas social or group identity is associated with concerns for the positive image, status and interests of the group in relation to other groups. Thus, from a social identity perspective, group identity concerns must override personal identity concerns in order to motivate individuals to operate to advance group-based goals (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Extending the basic assumptions of the social identity perspective, optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991, 1993) focuses on the personal needs that underlie group identification. According to the theory, the strength of in-group identification is a function of the extent to which a group is successful in satisfying, or reconciling, individuals' needs to belong to social groups on the one hand, and to achieve a sense of uniqueness and differentiation on the other. According to this theory, the need for differentiation is achieved through intergroup comparisons that highlight the distinctiveness of the in-group from out-groups. Based on these assumptions, ODT offers a general model of collective action, in which the interaction between personal needs and group characteristics predicts in-group identification, which in turn predicts group members' loyalty to the group and their willingness to make sacrifices on its behalf (Brewer & Silver, 2000). Although ODT acknowledges the important role of personal needs in predicting group identification, it maintains that the personal need for differentiation is met in the intergroup level, namely, through group membership and the resulting distinction between the in-group and out-groups. Thus, it considers intergroup, rather than interpersonal, comparisons as key in motivating the engagement in collective action (Brewer & Silver, 2000).

Existential theory also distinguishes personal identity from group identity, only that in existential terms, personal identity concerns stem from the human need for self-distinction in the interpersonal sense (individual vs. others), namely, the need to stand out from others as heroic and unique. Group identity concerns, on the other hand, stem from the existential need for inclusion into a larger whole, namely, to be embedded in a cultural meaning system that protects the individual from the anxiety inherent in the awareness to mortality. According to the existential point of view, personal identity concerns and group identity concerns are intertwined: To gain a sense of symbolic immortality most effectively, individuals must pursue the satisfaction of their need for self-distinction within the context of their cultural meaning system. Leaving a personal mark on one's meaning system by acting to advance and protect its values and goals allows the individual to stand out as heroic and unique, and at the same time preserve the anxiety-buffering function of the meaning system that satisfies his or her need for inclusion.

The purpose of this paper is thus to propose an integrative model of collective action that combines both personal identity concerns and group identity concerns in a comprehensive framework of the motivations underlying collective action, integrating insights from social identity perspectives with insights derived from existential theory and research. The proposed integrative model is illustrated in Figure 1. The details of the model will be provided in later sections.
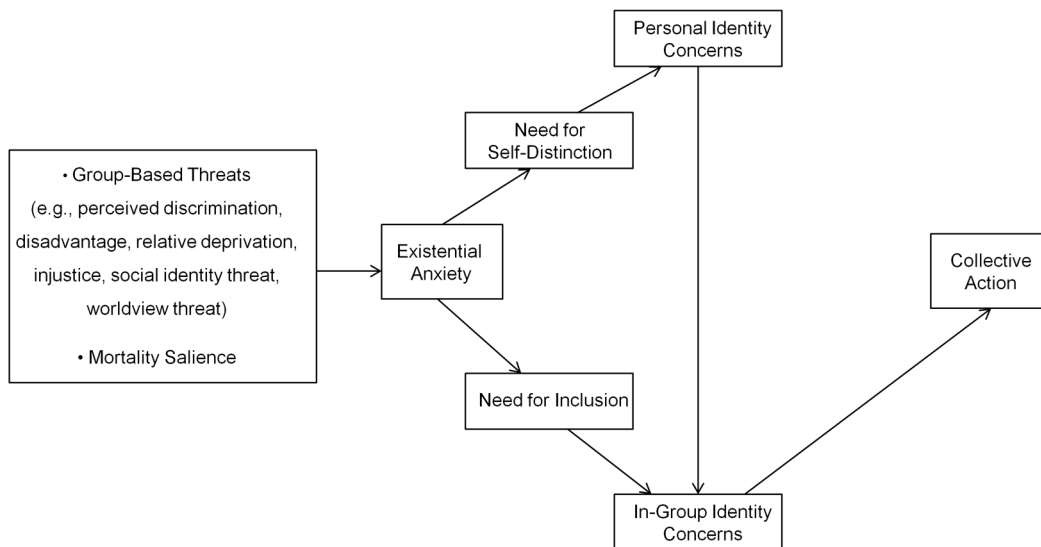
Figure 1. Integrative model of collective action.

Though this paper by no means intends to argue that an existential interpretation of activism is the only, or the best, explanation of activism, it suggests that the existential perspective complements and expands social identity theories of activism in two important ways: First, by focusing on the existential roots and benefits of worldview bolstering and group membership, it proposes a distal explanation to the desire to maintain a positive group image and to protect the group's values, which are considered key predictors of activism in the social identity tradition. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the existential perspective on activism suggests that personal identity concerns complement and facilitate group identity concerns, and thus both play a role in mobilizing collective action.

The following section discusses the basic assumptions of the social identity perspective on collective action. The next section puts forward an existential interpretation of collective action, based on theoretical concepts and empirical findings derived from existential psychology. This section will focus on the role of existential anxiety, in-group identity concerns and personal identity concerns, in motivating collective action. Next, I present a detailed description of the integrative model of collective action, combining existential concepts with insights derived from the social identity perspective on activism. The final section applies the integrative model of collective action to understand violent activism, as a specific form of collective action.

Social Identity Perspective on Collective Action

In the past decades, social-psychological research on collective action has devoted much attention to understanding why people are willing to make sacrifices on behalf of the group, namely, to identify the motivational underpinnings of the choice to engage in such actions. The dominant social-psychological view on collective action emphasizes group identity, and the need to preserve and protect the image and status of one's in-group, as key motivators of collective action (Tausch et al., 2011; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which has inspired much of the social-psychological research on activism, individuals are generally motivated to maintain, or to achieve, a positive sense of self. Insofar

as they often define themselves in terms of their membership in social groups, people will strive to maintain a positive group image by achieving a positive differentiation between the ingroup and relevant outgroups on valued dimensions of comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When the need to be included in groups that are in a positive way distinctive from relevant out-groups is not met, and individuals perceive their in-group as inferior or disadvantaged relative to other groups, a state of social identity threat arises (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

SIT proposes three socio-structural variables that predict the strength of in-group identification and the preference for strategies to cope with a negative social identity (Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979): The permeability of group boundaries, the legitimacy of intergroup status differences, and their stability. When group members perceive group boundaries as permeable, they are more likely to opt for "individual mobility": psychologically disidentifying with the group to which they currently belong and engage in attempts to "move up" the social hierarchy. When status differences are perceived as stable and legitimate, group members may engage in social creativity strategies to attain a positive social identity, for example, comparing their group with another of lower status. Only when group boundaries are impermeable, and group members perceive the intergroup status differences to be illegitimate and unstable - such that an alternative status position for the group is likely to be realized - group members are likely to increase their identification with their group and engage in collective action to improve their group's relative status.

Whereas SIT links the willingness to engage in collective action to strong group identification (i.e., strong commitment to the group) (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999), SCT (Turner et al., 1987) focuses on the relative salience of one's personal and social identity and their role in guiding group-based behaviors. According to SCT, when social identity becomes more salient than personal identity, individuals perceive themselves in terms of a shared social identity, rather than in terms of their unique individual attributes. Whereas the salience of shared group identity is associated with inter-group comparison and it thus more likely to facilitate collective action, personal identity salience is associated with intra-group comparisons and is thus more likely to lead to actions directed at improving one's personal condition (Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Turner & Oakes, 1989).

The basic assumptions of the social identity perspective (comprising SIT and SCT), provide the conceptual basis for a wide range of integrative models of collective action, in which group identity plays a central role in mobilizing collective action. Although some models, like the rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999), are consistent with the social identity perspective in proposing that perceived group-based threats increase identification with the ingroup (Stronge et al., 2015), other theories challenge this directional relationship between threat and group identity.

According to van Zomeren, Spears, and Leach (2008), for example, group members' responses to collective disadvantage is moderated by the relevance of their group identity (both in terms of identity salience and in terms of the strength of identification). When group identity is relatively relevant, it increases collective action tendencies through feelings of group-based anger about the group's disadvantage. When group identity is relatively less relevant, people focus more on instrumental needs, and cost-benefit considerations become more predictive of disadvantaged group members' collective action tendencies.

The dual pathway model of social movement participation that was developed by Simon and his colleagues (Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer & Simon, 2004) similarly suggests a dual path model to collective action. However, it considers group identification as only one of two paths to collective action. More specifically, the model distinguished the

instrumental pathway, that focuses on the costs and benefits of participation, from the identity pathway, guided by group identification (particularly with a social movement, i.e. politicized identity), and suggests that both have unique effects on the willingness to engage in collective action. Importantly, according to this model, perceived group-based threats do not predict collective action, but function as a constant, or contextual factor, under which collective action occurs.

The social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), on the other hand, suggests that group identity determines group members' appraisal of group-based threats. According to this model, members of disadvantaged or low status groups will engage in collective action when they experience strong affective reactions to injustice, perceive their group efficacy as high, and belong to social groups that can mobilize action. Importantly, SIMCA also recognizes the central role of social identity processes in the appraisal of group-based injustice and perceived group efficacy. In other words, it suggests that social identity (both in terms of group membership salience and strength of identification) is both a direct predictor of social action, and an indirect predictor, as a facilitator of perceived group-based injustice and efficacy.

In fact, some models inspired by the social identity perspective also challenge the directional relationship between group identity and collective action, by proposing that group identity not only facilitates collective action, but is also facilitated by it. More specifically, collective action can also help define and strengthen social identity by making it more salient to the activists directly, and also indirectly through others' reactions to their actions (e.g., Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2003; Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007).

Putting aside the different roles each model assigns to group identity and group-based threats in mobilizing collective action, all models inspired by the social identity perspective focus on individuals' self-definition in terms of social groups as key in mobilizing collective action. This does not imply, however, that the collective action literature does not acknowledge the role of collective action in fulfilling personal needs. Quite to the contrary, maintaining a positive image of one's group is central for individuals' personal well-being (e.g., Leach et al., 2010). Moreover, membership in an activist groups or participating in collective action on behalf of a group satisfy important personal needs, such as the need to belong to a social group (Harré, 2007; Lichter & Rothman, 1982; McClelland, 1961), and the need to learn and acquire new skills (e.g., Snyder & Omoto, 2008).

Activism is also a powerful way to experience one's life as more meaningful. Teske (1997) found that activists experience activism as highly meaningful and fully embraced into their core identity. Relatedly, engaging in collective action satisfies the need to express one's personal values publicly. Although value expression may help influence others and achieve group-based goals, value expression has a positive impact on individuals independent of instrumental considerations, in that it helps define one's own sense of self (Hornsey et al., 2006).

Although the personal benefits of participation are clearly acknowledged by activism researchers, they are often conceptualized as extrinsic rewards rather than intrinsic motivations (e.g., Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer & Simon, 2004). In fact, personal identity salience is often seen as undermining the willingness to engage in collective action, such that when people think of themselves in terms of their personal identity, they are less likely to choose collective action as a coping strategy with perceived group-based threat (Ellemers, 1993, 2001). But does the desire to satisfy personal needs indeed undermine, or come at the expense of, the desire to advance and protect the interests of one's group?

According to ODT (Brewer, 1991, 1993) group identification is in fact based on the extent to which a group is successful in satisfying group members' personal needs to belong in social groups on the one hand, and to achieve a sense of uniqueness and differentiation on the other (Brewer & Silver, 2000). Thus, ODT differs from the social identity perspective in its emphasis on personal need satisfaction as a key determinant of social categorization and identification. Notwithstanding this fundamental difference, both ODT and the social identity perspective share the assumption that the desire to satisfy personal needs is not directly involved in mobilizing group members for action aimed at advancing group-based goals.

This raises an important question: could we allow for a comprehensive perspective of activism that combines needs and concerns associated with both personal and group identities as motivators of collective action? The broad theory of human motivation put forth by the existential school of thought may serve as a basis for such a theory of activism. Although existential theory has thus far not been directly applied to political and social activism, several of its central concepts can shed light on this phenomenon. More specifically, its emphasis on the desire to satisfy existential needs as a deep motivation underlying a wide range of collective behaviors, could help integrate the seemingly opposing needs of inclusion into a collective meaning system on the one hand, and of self-distinction on the other, in a comprehensive theory of collective action mobilization. Second, by identifying the existential mechanism underlying group identity concerns, it sheds more light on more distal reasons why individuals are willing to endure the personal risks and sacrifices often involved in collective activism, and thus offers further insight into the reasons that group membership, and the sense of self-esteem it provides, are so crucial to human existence.

An Existential View of Activism

Despite large differences in their positions, all existential thinkers – from Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche to Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber – see the search for meaning, through the belief in cultural meaning systems, as an integral part of the human condition (Crowell, 2015). Many existential, humanistic, and psychoanalytic theorists have espoused this view of human existence as a constant search for meaning. Most notably, Viktor Frankl's influential approach in existential psychology and psychotherapy (Frankl, 1959, 1969) is based on one crucial thesis: human beings are essentially and inextricably linked to meaning. Frankl actually defined human existence by its relation to meaning, and his work is mainly concerned with the restoration of meaning after loss and trauma.

Inspired primarily by psychoanalytic-existential scholars Otto Rank and Norman Brown, Ernest Becker reformulated some of these core ideas in an existential theory of culture. Becker's core assumption is that the human psyche cannot really bear the knowledge of death, and that one of the primary psychological functions of human civilization is to provide an elaborate, symbolic defense mechanism adopted to deny the inevitability of death (Becker, 1973, 1975). Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) turned Becker's thesis into the guiding hypothesis for an empirical research program that has been documenting the effects of existential anxiety on human behavior for over three decades.

Existential Anxiety as a Motivating Force

The most common approach used by TMT researchers to examine the concerns and behaviors stemming from the awareness of mortality has been via the mortality salience (MS) paradigm, in which people are primed with death-related thoughts. TMT uses various operationalizations of MS, from subliminal death primes such as prox-

imity to funeral homes and exposure to gory automobile-accident videos, to writing assignments in which participants are asked to ponder about their own death. Control groups, on the other hand, are exposed to neutral stimuli or to aversive stimuli that are unrelated to death, such as being asked to ponder physical pain or failure in exams (for reviews, see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004)[i].

Another paradigm that TMT researchers use to examine the effects of unconscious existential anxiety is known as the death thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis. Insofar as faith in one's cultural worldview buffers death anxiety, perceived threats to the group, its values or its interests destabilize its anxiety buffering function, and thus make thoughts of death more accessible to awareness (e.g., Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, & Vermeulen, 2009; Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010; Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008; Pyszczynski, Motyl, & Abdollahi, 2009; Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007). Similarly, insofar as self-esteem is defined as one's belief that one is living up to the standards of value prescribed by the worldview (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Arndt, 2012), direct threats to individuals' self-esteem were also shown to increase the accessibility of death related thoughts (Hayes, Schimel, Faucher, & Williams, 2008). However, death reminders, direct threats to one's self-esteem or challenges to one's group or cultural worldview are not necessary to trigger the strive for symbolic immortality: our vulnerability and mortality are always in the background, a constant reminder to the threat that our worldviews may not be valid in any absolute sense.

So how do individuals regulate or manage this potential existential anxiety? Alternatively, how do individuals cope with existential anxiety once it is brought to conscious awareness? According to Becker, to protect themselves against existential anxiety and achieve a sense of symbolic immortality, human beings strive to feel that their acts are heroic, in that they are timeless, meaningful and unique (Becker, 1973). The need to pursue the heroic quest for symbolic immortality motivates a person to "lay down his life for his country, his society, his family… choose to throw himself on a grenade to save his comrades; he is capable of the highest generosity and self-sacrifice" (Becker, 1973, p. 4). At the same time, however, existential anxiety gives rise to the fear of isolation, which compels individuals to merge themselves in a greater whole. Thus, to manage existential anxiety, individuals also strive for inclusion within an anxiety-buffering cultural worldview. The tension between the need for inclusion and the need for self-distinction, or the "twin ontological motives" as Becker calls them, compels human beings to face a constant existential paradox.

As many existential thinkers emphasize, to manage existential anxiety individuals must find ways to live both ends of the existential equation. As the next sections will argue, activism may present itself as an activity that potentially satisfies both of these seemingly opposing needs simultaneously: to satisfy the need for self-distinction by pursuing a personal heroism project on the one hand, and to satisfy the need for inclusion by advancing and protecting the values prescribed by their cultural meaning system on the other.

Activism as a Means to Achieve Symbolic Immortality

Inspired by Rank (2004), Becker (1973) maintains that the need for self-distinction is primarily expressed in the human quest for heroism: engaging in heroic acts in the public sphere helps individuals realize their need to stand out as unique, and thus achieve a sense of symbolic immortality. Using the MS paradigm, TMT scholars have provided empirical support for the link between existential anxiety and individuals' strive for recognition through visible, heroic actions in the public sphere. For example, MS was shown to increase self-reported desire for fame (Greenberg, Kosloff, Solomon, Cohen, & Landau, 2010) and the appreciation of "heroes" who risk their own well-being to help others (e.g., Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989).

However, the idea that the hope of satisfying the need for self-distinction can motivate participation in collective action in and of itself is likely to raise possible objection: many activists would rightfully claim that they are genuinely concerned with the common good and put the group's interests before their own. Furthermore, the need to fulfill the need for self-distinction can be fulfilled by embarking on a variety of much "safer" endeavors, such as making a significant contribution to science, literature and art, or pursuing celebrity status in other domains.

Existential theory's great contribution to understanding collective behaviors lies in its ability to connect the need for self-distinction and the need for inclusion in a larger whole. As this review has shown, the psychological function of inclusion is a central component of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986): the groups to which people belong are an important component of their identity and sense of personal value. Existential theory identifies the root of this need to be embedded within a larger whole in the desire to protect the self from existential anxiety. Most importantly, in line with Becker's (1973) notion of the "twin ontological motives", it suggests that symbolic immortality is achieved most effectively when individuals' heroic actions allow them to contribute to the cultural meaning system within which they are embedded.

In line with this reasoning, TMT's most general hypothesis is that to manage the terror of death, people must first and foremost believe that their acts meet or exceed the standards of value prescribed by their cultural meaning system. Indeed, reminders of death were found to increase anxiety while performing behaviors that violate central cultural norms (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995), support for harsher punishment of moral transgressors (e.g., Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Rosenblatt et al., 1989), aggression towards critics of one's cultural beliefs (McGregor et al., 1998), and conformity to cultural standards (e.g., Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). Therefore, according to existential theory, individuals' heroic acts will not be existentially rewarding unless they are valued by individuals who share their cultural worldview. For example, insofar as norms of fairness and justice are cherished by one's cultural meaning system, engaging in collective action to advance social justice, even on behalf of disadvantaged out-groups, can be effective in buffering existential anxiety (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). In support of this proposition, MS was found to increase individuals' sensitivity to experiences of procedural injustice (e.g., van den Bos & Miedema, 2000). Indeed, social justice is itself a defining value of certain activist groups. For example, the social movements developed in the US in the 1960s in reaction to the racial injustice, conservatism and social conformity of the 1950s had a clear in-group "counterculture" promoting liberal values (Anders, 1990). Many of the members of the groups pursuing social revolution – in domains ranging from gay-rights to constitutional civil rights – were not members of the groups whose interests they were trying to protect. Standing against wrongdoing or injustices, even when directed towards an out-group, may at least in part be seen as an attempt to gain a sense of symbolic immortality by defending the values prescribed by one's cultural worldview.

Also, as most cultures value courage and bravery, it seems that the more substantial the personal risks involved in one's "heroic" actions, the more effective they are in engendering a sense of significance and self-worth(Hirschberger, Florian, Mikulincer, Goldenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Indeed, TMT-inspired studies indicate that death reminders increase the willingness to engage in a wide range of risky activities, from extreme sports to substance use (Hirschberger et al., 2002; Taubman - Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999). As activism often entails considerable personal costs and risks, and may even involve life-threatening activities, participation in such actions can be particularly appreciated by the group.

Importantly, as inclusion in a cultural meaning system provides a value structure within which individuals' heroism projects become possible, perceived threats to one's in-group or worldview may undermine this system's ability to buffer existential anxiety. Validating and defending one's meaning system from direct threat are thus essential for the protection of the self against the paralyzing awareness of mortality (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990). Indeed, TMT-inspired studies found threats to individuals' worldviews to elicit worldview defenses similar to those elicited by MS: namely, such threats increase hostility towards anyone who threatens their worldview (e.g., Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008; Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006). Nevertheless, the desire to protect the group and the validity of its cultural meaning system does not necessitate the salience of group-based threats. Insofar as individuals strive to avoid existential anxiety even when they are not consciously reminded of their fragility (Becker, 1962; Greenberg et al., 1990), individuals constantly seek opportunities to bolster their worldviews and preserve their absolute validity. Indeed, activism research has shown that individuals engage in collective action in the absence of group-based threats (e.g., Miller, 2000). Thus, any activity aimed at advancing the goals and interests of one's social group, and convincing others of the validity of the worldview it represents, strengthens its anxiety-buffering function even in the absence of mortality salience or group-based threats.

To summarize, insofar as attempts to bolster and protect one's cultural meaning system from threat are considered heroic acts that are cherished by one's group members, they will provide individuals with a rare shot at embarking on the kind of immortality project described by Becker: to satisfy the need for self-distinction by acting heroically, and to satisfy the need for inclusion by advancing, protecting and bolstering the values prescribed by one's cultural worldview.

An Integrative Model of Activism

The contribution of the existential framework to the existing collective action literature is two-fold. First, the existential perspective on activism complements social-psychological models of activism by assigning an important role to the human quest for symbolic immortality, and the existential needs stemming from it, in motivating collective action. Second, the existential perception points towards specific contexts in which needs for inclusion and self-distinction become particularly salient, through increased existential anxiety. Importantly, although group-based threats and mortality salience stimuli such as reminders of death and exposure to terrorism can elicit explicit and measurable death-related cognitions (for a review, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), existential anxiety does not necessarily express itself through death-awareness or death-anxiety per se, but rather as a subjective perception that one's sense of meaning and significance are compromised, and that his or her quest for symbolic immortality is undermined. Existential anxiety, in the broader sense, is thus conceptualized as the anxiety from insignificance and meaninglessness inherent in the human condition (Pyszczynski, 2004).

Although existential anxiety is always in the background and individuals constantly seek to bolster and validate their cultural meaning system, when group members' shared cultural meaning system is perceived as directly threatened, its anxiety-buffering function is put at risk. As shown in Figure 1, perceived threats to the in-group's goals, status and identity, including direct challenges to the group's worldviews (i.e., worldview threats), destabilize the anxiety-buffering function of the meaning system and thus create a sense of existential anxiety. Similarly, continuous or traumatic exposure to events that increase mortality salience, particularly collective crises (e.g., exposure to terrorism and natural disasters), may trigger profound existential anxiety, whether in the form of death-awareness or a more generalized sense of existential meaninglessness.

Existential anxiety, in turn, increases the desire to gain a sense of symbolic immortality by satisfying two, seemingly contradicting existential needs simultaneously (Simon et al., 1997): On the one hand, it increases the desire to satisfy the need for self-distinction, which in turn encourages the individual to seek opportunities to stand out from others as heroic and unique (i.e., personal identity concerns). On the other hand, it increases the desire to satisfy the need for inclusion, which in turn encourages the individual to preserve and maintain the positive image and status of the group in relation to other groups (i.e., in-group identity concerns). Importantly, joining and belonging to activist movements that stand against evil, wrongdoing, or injustice against other disadvantaged groups may serve a similar function: insofar as such actions are valued by its members, and preferably by the broader community, it provides individuals a cultural context in which they can pursue their heroism projects.

Although most models inspired by the social identity perspective do not associate personal identity concerns with collective action, the existential perspective suggests that concerns for the uniqueness of the individual in relation to other individuals can also facilitate concerns for the image of the group and thus function as an indirect motivator of collective action. According to the existential view, individuals may fulfill their need for self-distinction by acting heroically to advance and protect the group's values and interests. Put differently, protecting the group's worldview and values and defending its interests ensure group members a context in which their heroic projects can serve their existential function.

Central to this argument, however, is that personal identity concerns alone are not likely to mobilize collective action directly. Although solo actors do exist in the realm of collective action, solitary political action always operates within, or vis-à-vis, a group context: one's engagement in risky activities to advance certain worldviews or group-based goals is to be appreciated or praised by others to provide a sense of meaning and existential security. Thus, in line with the extant collective action literature, the existential perspective on activism identifies the salience of group identity concerns as a proximal motivator for collective action. Nevertheless, as personal identity concerns complement and facilitate group identity concerns, the existential perspective considers personal identity concerns as indirect motivators for collective action.

To summarize, by identifying existential anxiety and existential needs for self-distinction and inclusion as distal motivators for collective action, and by discussing the interdependence of personal identity concerns and group identity concerns, the existential perspective on activism adds another tier to dominant social-psychological models of collective action, particularly those that emphasize group identity concerns over personal identity concerns.

This interpretation by no means suggests that activists are acting not to improve society or to eliminate unjust systems, but simply to reduce their own anxiety. The human need to avoid existential insecurity and terror through heroic actions in the public sphere in no way contradicts their genuine interest in solving real social problems or act towards improving society. Quite to the contrary, the existential view of activism suggests that the seemingly "egotistical" motives of self-preservation are precisely those that make group-based behaviors more likely and more rewarding, and thus allows integrating personal existential needs into a broader motivation theory of collective action.

Moreover, the proposed model's focus on the relationship between personal and group identity concerns in motivating collective action is not meant to disregard other motivators of collective action identified by the extant literature. Although other common predictors of collective action are not explicitly included in the model, they are indeed present implicitly. In particular, the strength of in-group identification, which plays a key role in numerous

collective action models inspired by the social identity perspective (Ellemers, 1993; Tajfel, 1978), is of particular relevance to the existential perspective on activism. Individuals must identify with the group and its worldview in order for the group to function as a means to gain a sense of symbolic immortality. If an individual is not emotionally committed to the group or does not consider the group's status as central to his or her personal self-esteem, the group fails to fulfill its anxiety-buffering function. From an existential stand point, minimal group membership (in the absence of a shared worldview) is thus not sufficient to facilitate action, particularly if such action entails substantial personal risks. Therefore, group-based threats will not elicit existential anxiety unless one identifies with the group that is being threatened and sees it as a source of meaning and significance. Similarly, mortality salience is more likely to lead to group identity concerns associated with groups with which one identifies, and from which he or she derives a sense of symbolic immortality.

Applying the Integrative Model to Violent Forms of Activism

So far, this paper has discussed collective action as a general phenomenon, regardless of the different forms such action can take. One specific form of activism, collective violence and terrorism, has been generating increasing interest among activism scholars in the past decades. In this section, I will demonstrate how the integrative model can be applied to understanding violent activism, as a specific form of collective action, and how it can inform us of some challenges involved in convincing, or encouraging, violent activists to adopt more peaceful forms of action to advance their group-based goals and interests.

Like non-violent forms of collective activism, violent collective action is often aimed at challenging group-based threats, such as perceived injustice, discrimination and disadvantage (e.g., Atran, 2004; Bloom, 2005; Wright et al., 1990). From a social identity perspective, attempts to improve the relative status of the in-group through collective action can take violent forms when individuals identify with groups that promote the use of violence to achieve group-based goals which, just like non-violent activists groups, may provide a sense of belonging and social rewards to group members (e.g., Littman & Paluck, 2015). In terms of the integrative model presented in Figure 1, perceived threats to members of such groups will increase concerns for the image and status of the group, which will in turn increase their willingness to engage in violent collective action to restore the group's image and protect it from threat.

Whereas the social identity perspective focuses on the role of group identity concerns in the relationship between group-based threats and collective action, existential theory and research shed light on the role existential anxiety plays in fueling these concerns. Although existential theory has thus far not been directly applied to collective action as a general phenomenon, TMT scholars have extensively studied the link between group-based threats and support for violence against threatening out-groups. From the perspective of TMT, people who would normally condone violence can be motivated to support acts of aggression against threatening out-groups and even engage in such acts themselves when their need for protection from existential anxiety is heightened following challenges to their anxiety-buffering cultural worldview (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Indeed, numerous TMT-inspired studies found that death reminders and threats to one's group or the validity of its worldview increase support for violence against worldview-threatening others, including support for terrorist violence (e.g., Landau et al., 2004;

Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2012; Pyszczynski et al., 2006; Pyszczynski et al., 2009; Pyszczynski, Rothschild, & Abdollahi, 2008; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003; Pyszczynski, Vail, & Motyl, 2010).

In terms of the integrative model presented in Figure 1, existential research provides support for the link between the existential anxiety resulting from death reminders and group-based threats and violent actions against worldview-threatening others. According to existential theory, existential anxiety increases the need for inclusion within a cultural meaning system, which functions as a buffer against such anxiety. This need for inclusion makes concerns associated with the image and status of one's group more salient, which in turn increase individuals' willingness to engage in violence against threatening out-group in an attempt to restore its anxiety-buffering function.

According to the existential tradition, however, participating in violent action is not merely a means to address group-based concerns. Existential theory suggests that alongside the need for inclusion, existential anxiety increases the need for self-distinction, namely, the need to stand out as unique (e.g., Simon et al., 1997). Joining a terrorist movement or engaging in violent collective activity can provide a rare opportunity to fulfill this need for self-distinction by becoming "famous overnight" and acquiring the status of a martyr or hero (Borum, 2004; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009).

To be effective in providing a sense of symbolic immortality, however, individuals must see such heroic action as bearing significant contribution to their cultural worldview (Greenberg et al., 2004). Indeed, terrorist groups often frame their actions as a struggle or triumph over what they perceive to be a great evil (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). According to Becker (1973), worldviews that depict one's group as engaged in a heroic struggle against evil are particularly effective in enhancing the meaningfulness of one's worldview and the value of one's group. In terms of the Integrative model presented in Figure 1, and based on existential theory and research, engaging in violent activism to pursue group-based goals can thus be seen as an effective means to satisfying the need for inclusion by bolstering, advancing and protecting the values represented by one's cultural worldview, and to satisfy the need for self-distinction by acting heroically on its behalf.

In fact, existential theory lends itself particularly well to explaining extreme or radical forms of action: the riskier the action, and the more heroic it is, the more it holds the promise of symbolic immortality. Paradoxically, risking one's life for the sake of the group can be seen as the ultimate expression of the heroic quest for symbolic immortality (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). This is particularly true when the activist group is inspired by religious ideologies that justify the use of violence to achieve the group's goals: some religious worldviews promise literal immortality, via the afterlife beliefs they promote, alongside the sense of symbolic immortality, via the opportunity to become valuable contributors to a social entity greater than themselves (e.g., Vail et al., 2010). Insofar as some religious ideologies address the problem of existential anxiety through both the promise of literal immortality and symbolic immortality, the willingness to die to promote group causes may paradoxically be motivated by the personal desire to be immortal (Kruglanski et al., 2009).

But if, according to the existential tradition, engaging in violent acts is so effective in quelling existential anxiety, how can we encourage individuals to adopt more peaceful forms of action once they have already adopted a violent path? Existential theory may shed more light on the challenges involved in such attempts, and can also inform us of the conditions in which they can be possible. Unfortunately, however, existential theory and research indicate that attempts to redirect activists' resources and motivations towards nonviolent action are likely to be met with strong opposition: Abandoning an in-group once membership has already been established may involve high existential risks: renouncing one's membership in a group, as well as the worldview it adheres to, entails losing

important sources of meaning and significance. As existential theory suggests, people do not reject their in-group or worldview unless the legitimacy of the group and its beliefs are threatened to such an extent that they no longer fulfill their anxiety-buffering function (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2004). Relatedly, worldview changes may follow highly traumatic events that shatter individuals' core assumptions regarding the secure continuity of their existence and thus disrupt their anxiety-buffering mechanisms (Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2012).

Even when violence is not an essential part of the group's ideology but merely an arbitrary norm of the group, rejecting the group's norms amounts to rejecting group membership itself. Thus, to the extent that being a member of a violent activist group entails existential benefits, highly committed members of such groups must feel that the existential risk of rejecting their group and its values or norms is lower than the one involved in preserving their membership. In the context of violent activist movements, rejecting the group's norms or values, which entails rejecting membership in the group itself, can follow severe personal trauma (such as personal injuries and death of relatives and fellow group-members resulting from the group's activities), or severe and persistent interventions of opinion leaders, public officials and government authorities to marginalize and delegitimize the group, its causes or values. However, as the aforementioned studies show, group members must experience such interventions as sufficiently traumatic and extreme in order to facilitate change.

The extent to which such interventions are bound to be effective, however, is moderated by various factors over which policy makers and opinion leaders have little, or no control. First, some individuals find worldview changes more existentially threatening than others, and are thus more likely to resist such attempts (Anson, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2009). Second, and most importantly, interventions aimed at convincing group members to abandon their worldview or rebel against the group's norms will not be effective if members' self-esteem is strongly invested in the activist group, and if they do not have access to other sources of meaning and symbolic immortality outside of his or her involvement in the group (Elad-Strenger, 2013).

In terms of the Integrative model presented in Figure 1, the effectiveness of such interventions strongly depends on the path linking the "group-based threats", "existential anxiety" and "in-group identity concerns" components of the model. More specifically, it depends on whether the individual sees the relevant group as a central source of meaning and significance relative to other groups with which he or she identifies. As self-categorization theory suggests, individuals' self-concept is based on membership in various social categories or groups (Stets & Burke, 2000; Turner et al., 1987). In existential terms, individuals are most likely to resist giving up those social groups or cultural worldviews from which they derive the strongest sense of meaning and significance, to which they feel they can contribute the most, and on which they can leave a substantial mark.

Put differently, if individuals' activities as social activists are central to their identity or are experienced as a primary source of self-esteem, particularly if their career and reputation are largely based on their activities within a violent activist group, abandoning the group would entail the risk of losing an important source of meaning and self-esteem. If, on the other hand, individuals have not yet built a reputation as activists in a certain community, and are not yet publicly committed to a certain form of collective action, starting anew within an alternative activist group, which supports a different form of action, would seem to entail smaller risks in existential terms. When activists have alternative sources of self-esteem and meaning from which they can derive a sense of symbolic immortality, they may resort to them when their worldview is under threat, whether permanently or temporarily, until they can find a satisfying alternative. In fact, standing out in a group of violent activists by rebelling against the group's

dominant worldview or plan of action may even be rewarding in and of itself, as it entails the potential of gaining a heroic status within a community supporting an alternative form of action.

Naturally, efforts to reduce violent action may be different for leaders vs. members of violent groups. On the one hand, leaders' self-esteem may be more strongly invested in the group, and may thus experience the group-abandonment costs of leaving the group more strongly than group members. On the other hand, leaders have the opportunity to alter the group's worldview or norms rather than abandoning the group itself, and may thus have another "way out" of the violent cascade, granted that they are capable of, and have an opportunity to, impose or convince group members of alternative worldviews or norms.

To summarize, existential theory suggests that existential needs and concerns play an important role in motivating violent collective action. Based on the suggestions outlined in this section, future studies should examine the hypothesized multi-mediator model linking group-based threats and mortality to the willingness to engage in violent collective action, through heightened self-distinction and inclusion needs and increased personal and group identity concerns.

Furthermore, the proposed model specifies potential conditions under which activists might be willing to abandon violent forms of collective action after being exposed to interventions aimed at marginalizing and delegitimizing the group, its causes or values. According to the existential perspective, such interventions constitute a severe group-based threat as they might undermine the anxiety-buffering function of the group for its members. Such threats elicit existential anxiety, which may increase individuals' need for inclusion within a social group that provides them with a sense of meaning, significance and self-esteem. The extent to which individuals perceive the violent activist group as central to their sense of self-esteem, meaning and significance, relative to other group memberships, will therefore moderate the relationship between this heightened need for inclusion and concerns with the image and interests of the threatened group: Individuals for whom membership in the violent activist group is a main source of meaning, significance and self-esteem, anxiety-induced need for inclusion will increase their concerns with the goals and image of this meaning-providing group, and will consequently motivate them to fight on its behalf with ever more vigor. Individuals who do not consider membership in the violent activist group their central source of self-esteem and meaning, will be more likely disengage from the violent activist group and shift their focus to protecting and advocating the image, status and interests of another group, whose anxiety-buffering function has not been compromised. Put differently, they will seek alternative reference groups within which they can effectively pursue their heroism projects. In brief, the more individuals' sources of meaning and self-esteem are intimately tied to violent activism, the less likely they are to leave this form of activism behind following extreme group-based threats.

Conclusion

The social identity perspective has made an invaluable contribution to activism research by emphasizing the role of group identity, and individuals' concern for the positive image of their social group, in mobilizing their willingness to advance and protect its goals and interests through collective action. The present paper has made the case that the existential tradition provides additional tools for understanding the motivations underlying such actions. The present paper introduces the notion of the "twin ontological motives" as a concept integrating the social identity perspective with insights from existential theory and research to uncover the deep motivations underlying

individuals' willingness to engage in collective action. More specifically, the existential perspective on activism suggests that the human desire to gain what Becker (1973) called a sense of "symbolic immortality" – the sense the one is a significant contributor to a cultural system likely to outlive the individual – has an important role in propelling collective action. Based on theory and research inspired by existential thought, the integrative model of collective action presented in this paper suggests that acting heroically to advance group-based goals and interests provides an opportunity to satisfy two seemingly contradictory existential needs: the need for self-distinction and the need for inclusion into a larger whole. This model is particularly helpful in explaining some of the more extreme and risky forms of activism, such as violent collective action, and sheds light on the existential prices entailed in renouncing such paths for action once they have been adopted.

An important question thus arises: if the quest for symbolic immortality is indeed universal, and the quest for heroism and worldview bolstering are inherent in all human beings, how can we explain public apathy and political disengagement? Moreover, insofar as collective action is an effective means to satisfy both inclusion and self-distinction needs, why do only some people choose to engage in collective action whereas others do not? In introducing the concept of heroism, Becker (1973) himself offered an explanation for collective inaction, as a cultural phenomenon, arguing that it is the result of disillusionment with heroism, or a "heroism crisis". In other words, according to Becker, an ambiguity towards society's hero-systems might indeed account for the political and social alienations some researchers have described. The answer to the individual-level question is, however, more complex. Like all motivational models of human behavior, the existential perspective can only identify the structural mechanisms underlying the choice in collective action, rather than identify strictly sufficient conditions that allow for prediction on the individual level. Furthermore, the quest for symbolic immortality assumed to underlie the choice in collective action is obviously not unique to this particular phenomenon. As Frankl (2000) and Becker (1962) themselves noted, the quest for symbolic immortality is a fundamental human striving, accounting for a broad preponderance of human activities, from developing a successful professional career to pursuing celebrity status.

Nevertheless, this paper offers a few testable hypotheses that may further clarify the existential underpinnings of the choice in collective action. Future research should examine the hypothesized direct and indirect effects of mortality salience and group-based threats on the willingness to engage in collective action in both violent and non-violent forms, and in both naturalistic and experimental contexts. More specifically, the role of existential anxiety in mediating the relationship between group-based threats and mortality salience on the one hand, and increased needs for self-distinction and inclusion on the other, should be systematically examined. As existential anxiety can be expressed in the form of death-related thoughts, but also as a more generalized sense of insignificance and meaninglessness, using different operationalizations of this construct and examining their relative effects should also be considered.

Furthermore, empirical work should be done to establish the causal path leading from personal identity concerns (i.e., concerns for the uniqueness of the individual in relation to other individuals) to collective action through increased group identity concerns (i.e., concerns for the positive image and relative status of the group in relation to other groups). Likewise, the proposed path leading from existential anxiety to group identity concerns on the one hand and personal identity concerns on the other, through increased needs for self-distinction and inclusion, should be established empirically.

Finally, future studies should examine whether the strength of identification with a given group and the extent to which one sees it as an important source of meaning and self-esteem moderate one's existential anxiety following perceived threats to the group, and eventually one's willingness to engage in collective action on its behalf. Individual differences in the strength of self-distinction and/or inclusion needs can also be considered as possible moderators of the choice in collective action versus in inaction or individual mobility, which can lead to alternative paths for heroic status, such as seeking personal fame.

It is important to note that the purpose of this paper was not to argue that a model integrating insights from the social identity perspective and the existential perspective is the only, or the best, explanation for activism, whether peaceful or violent. Psychology obviously never reaches mono-causal explanations, and the many antecedents uncovered by other theories are certainly of great importance. However, in proposing an existential theory of the motivations underlying activism, this paper broadens the applications of existential theory to human actions in the social sphere, and sheds new light on activism as a phenomenon rooted in the universal search for symbolic immortality.

Notes

i) Other death-awareness manipulations were also developed, most notably the death-reflection (DR) manipulation in which participants imagine a near-death experience (Cozzolino, Staples, Meyers, & Samboceti, 2004).

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